



Prize Winners



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Theme Essay

Updated in 2021 by Carlen Donovan

Awards for literature are numerous--almost two hundred larger and smaller prizes are awarded in the US alone-- and diverse. Book prizes are given to works of fiction and nonfiction, books of poetry and books of academic criticism. Writing prizes may be awarded by grants established by donors (like the Pulitzer Prize), or by a nonprofit organization (like the National Book Award or the various PEN America awards). Sometimes, literary awards are created by genre associations; each year, the British Science Fiction Association awards its Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Horror Writers Association bestows its Bram Stoker Award. Publications are also frequently the source of prizes. The Los Angeles Times, The Paris Review, and The Chicago Tribune give yearly book awards. Books may win recognition from the NAACP, GLAAD, or the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education. The Newbery Medal is awarded by the American Library Association to books for children, and the Pushcart Prize is given to a book published by a small or independent press. Some of these many awards come with cash prizes, from the nearly £50,000 payout for the Booker Prize in the UK to the \$10,000 prize for the National Book Award. Some offer only the recognition of the award itself.

Winning a major award, like the Pulitzer Prize, Booker Prize, National Book Award, or one of the PEN awards, can mean not only a monetary payout, but can also bring cultural prestige and commercial success to a book and its author. Lifetime awards, like the Nobel Prize, almost certainly secure an author's place in "the canon." In some cases, even being a finalist for an award can bring a measure of recognition and a subsequent career boost.

These high stakes occasionally bring criticism. Jack Shafer referred to the Pulitzer's "cone of secrecy" in 2015 and suggested that those awards often seem arbitrary. The National Book Awards, according to self-confessed "NBA junkie" Tom LeClair, can sometimes function as a "pay to play" system in which larger publishing houses (who must pay to nominate books) have a better chance of winning than independent or smaller presses. The British Booker Prize, argues Rachel Cooke, "lost its mojo" when it began to accept any book published in the UK—including those by American authors-- for nomination.

Despite the occasional—and possibly fair—critiques, the awards landscape remains. Foundations continue to sponsor the prizes, and universities continue to host awards events.

This theme is necessarily broad. Most granting bodies define the criteria for winning as "excellence" or "achievement," without clearer specifications. The Pulitzer Prize states flatly that "There are no set



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criteria for the judging of the prizes . . . It is left up to the nominating juries and The Pulitzer Prize Board to determine exactly what makes a work 'distinguished.'"

Given this, what can we say about the works in this theme? Since they are fiction and nonfiction, prose, and poetry, and since they have won awards in different countries, different decades, and from different bodies, how can viewing them through the lens of "award winning writing" help us to understand them better?

At the very least, we know that the books in this group have been selected and honored by juries made of people who care deeply about writing itself. They can function as historical artifacts, revealing a society's interests and aspirations at a given moment in time. But more importantly, considering award winners as a class should encourage us to think about how we define literary achievement as a culture, and as individuals.