

Skepticism About Single-Winner Prizes

by Richard Kostelanetz (June 2015)

My opinion of the practice of giving a medal to any poet over the age of ten is not high.

– Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (1971)

Randall Jarrell spoke a half-century ago of the Age of Criticism; I've written about the concluding decades of the 20th Century as the Age of Grants. Now that our National Endowment for the Arts is scarcely funding individuals, we have entered the Age of Prizes, with every institution in sight offering them and everyone over the age of ten asked to desire them (especially if the aspirants can pay enough entry fees to finance the reward).

Other prizes don't require applications because their donors want to reward a person entirely of their own choosing, customarily for hewing prominently one or another line. Some competitions have many winners; others a few; most only a single recipient. The last I find more dubious.

Anyone who has ever critically examined the published list of any single-winner writers' competition, even the most famous Nobel Literary Prize, questions the judges' judgment. For sample runs of a strictly American example, let's look at the recipients of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry between 1970 and 1980:

Selected Poems by [Donald Justice](#) , *The Morning of the Poem* by [James Schuyler](#) , *The Collected Poems* by [Sylvia Plath](#) , *Selected Poems* by [Galway Kinnell](#) , *American Primitive* by [Mary Oliver](#) , *Yin* by [Carolyn Kizer](#) , *The Flying Change* by [Henry S. Taylor](#) , *Thomas and Beulah* by [Rita Dove](#) , *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* by [William Meredith](#) 1989, *New and Collected Poems* by [Richard Wilbur](#)

May I venture that most of us seriously interested in Poetry can now identify other books and other poets published within that decade, only three decades ago, who are far more likely to be remembered—to belong to literary history—than these here.

Here are the poetry Pulitzers from the next decade, yet closer to us now:

The World Doesn't End by [Charles Simic](#) , *Near Changes* by [Mona Van Duyn](#) , *Selected Poems* by [James Tate](#) , *The Wild Iris* by [Louise Glück](#) , *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* by [Yusef Komunyakaa](#) , *The Simple Truth* by [Philip Levine](#) , *The Dream of the Unified Field* by [Jorie Graham](#) , *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* by [Lisel Mueller](#) , *Black Zodiac* by [Charles Wright](#) 1999, *Blizzard of One* by [Mark Strand](#)

About these books and these poets too would most of us draw similar skeptical conclusions.

Some years ago, I published the list of another kind of single winner, the current states' poets laureate, and it was even more embarrassing—indeed, so embarrassing that I ventured that were all the poets gathered within a single room, most would walk out disgusted about the others.

About lesser literary prizes, as about single book competitions sponsored nowadays by too many literary magazines, most of us would likewise conclude, simply: These books/poets were not the best.

The problem appears to be intrinsic in the process of needing to choose one and only one from a large pool. Competition sponsors often hire some initial gatekeepers, called “screeners,” to pick finalists from a large pool of applicants, thus circumscribing the pool from which the eventual winner is selected. Ultimate judges have been known to find all these screeners' recommendations unacceptable and thus cast about for a winner who wasn't offered them. Legend has it that W. H. Auden, entirely disliking the finalists offered to him, disregarded their authority and wholly on his own initiative chose John Ashbery to be the Yale Younger Poet in 1956.

Lest anyone rank Auden a superior sole judge, consider that during his reign at the Yale University Press the winners immediately before Ashbery were, in sequence, Daniel Hoffman, Edgar Bogardus, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Rosalie Moore, Robert Horan, and Joan Murray. While their names were public then, what is not known is the names of the other aspiring poets who had applied between 1947 and 1956. The best reason for keeping these names secret, then as well as now, is that they probably include poets whom skeptics might now judge superior to Yale's winners.

On one hand, while those competitions involving a committee might be intrinsically more honest with the majority ruling, they succumb to another problem conducive to mediocrity. One person overseeing many committees told me that a third, less distinguished candidate often wins, because one or another judge objects vehemently to number one or number two. Sharing this intelligence with a veteran of such committees, I got this nugget: “Prize committees have to

choose a consensus candidate, which means one that no one violently objects to. I've seen it happen again and again. And that is why I no longer serve on these things." Though less likely to be invited, I don't either.

For prizes with only a single judge the greater the likelihood of a compromising connection, often easily uncovered, between him or her and the winner, sometimes to an embarrassing degree. In any case the hidden truth is this: With single-winner competitions, always there is "a story" that has only a tangential relationship to quality.

When I first broached this thesis about literary prizes some years ago, I didn't think about any larger truths; but an older musician judged that a similar problem crippled most prizes in classical performance competitions.

Moving out of literature into sports, I then considered the list of winners of the most prestigious award offered to one collegiate football player—the Heisman Prize that is so well publicized that ESPN can produce an hour-long program with the likely candidates who learn their fate live at the 58th minute.