

# The Nobel Prize goes to the Wrong Person

by Michael Curtis



Peter Handke

**A haunting, troubling social problem** is whether we, society, should honor people who have achieved fame in some form of intellectual or artistic achievement but have committed an act or acts that are despicable. Can we distinguish between the creator and the creation? Will a potential Immanuel Kant Prize for Perpetual Peace be given to Kim Jong-un, or a United Nations award to Charles Lindbergh, brave aviator but proponent of antisemitism? The issue is made more uncertain by two factors: certain fields, especially science, may be more conducive to separability of the celebrated work and the person than others that are less quantitative and tangible fields; or the act under criticism may be considered in the

context of the times. In any case, the line for acceptability or rejection of Awards is not automatic.

Ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and behavior caused by or related to the Nazi and Fascist regimes have been at the core of this problem of who should be rewarded or rejected. France was troubled by the problem of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, novelist and physician, a literary innovator who adopted a modernized style of writing, with slang and vulgarities, that influenced many literary figures. But if some regarded him as one of France's greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century novelists, he was also the author of antisemitic pamphlets, caustic about the influence of Jews on French society, later a Holocaust denier, and a supporter of the Axis regimes during World War II. After the war, he was convicted in absentia, since he had fled to Denmark, by a French court of collaboration with the Nazis.

Should Celine be honored? He was excluded from the list of 500 French cultural icons to be honored in 2011. More controversial was the attitude of the prestigious publisher Gallimard. It was prepared to publish a 1,000 page edition of Celine's work, including the antisemitic pamphlets, but in 2018 suspended, though it did not "renounce" publication.

Perhaps the most questionable issue was that of Ezra Pound, poet who helped James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and D.H. Lawrence, but was an advocate of Italian fascism, who lived in Italy and during the War broadcast on Italian radio anti American and antisemitic diatribes and propaganda. After the War, he was arrested and put in a mental hospital. While there in 1949, and while he was under indictment for treason for his broadcasts, he was given the Bollingen-Library of Congress Award for his Pisan Cantos. For the donors, Pound's poetic achievement was more significant than his political utterances. Paradoxically, some who were also critical of his poetry such as Robert Frost, called the Award an "unendurable outrage."

The problem of the creator and the creation has visited many organizations giving awards. Nobel officials ducked the question by holding it was not in the mandate of the Nobel Academy to balance literary quality against political considerations.

The Norwegian Knut Hamsun, poet, dramatist, pioneer of psychological literature, was an admirer and advocate of Nazism and Fascism, welcomed the Nazi occupation of Norway, and met Hitler in Bavaria, was also the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1920. He even gave his prize to Joseph Goebbels, Nazi minister for propaganda. Nevertheless, he was honored in October 2019 on the anniversary of his birthday, with musical and theatrical festivities which Queen Sofia opened, and with creation of the Hamsun Center. Hamsun may have written great and highly regarded novels, but he was an associate of Nazis. Again, the essential problem is whether his literary output and his vile behavior receive equal attention or priority.

There has been controversy over whether Nobel Prizes have sometimes been given to the undeserving, such as Pearl Buck, prolific author, the first American woman to win for Literature, given the Award in 1938 for "her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China, and for her biographical masterpieces," or Dario Fo, Italian actor and playwright, anarchic clown of a dramatist, in 1997, or Barack Obama in 2009 who accepted it not as "recognition of my own accomplishments, but rather as affirmation of American leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations." Equally, there has been surprise regarding those who did not receive the Award for Literature: James Joyce, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, and Anton Chekov.

But these cases are different from the dilemma of the unworthy. The latest case is the Nobel Award for Literature in 2019 given to the 76 year-old Austrian writer Peter Handke, and the \$915,000 with it for, according to the awarders, his

“influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience” in the words of the Academy.

Handke is a prolific author, a provocative literary stylist and a cultural icon. As a 23 year old, he was active at the legendary meeting in Princeton in April 1966 of the Gruppe 47, the group of leading West German writers, including Hans Werner Richter, Heinrich Boll, Gunter Grass and Uwe Johnson. Handke broke the rules of the group by declaring that the writings by his contemporaries were meaningless, portraying the descriptive impotence of German prose. He rose rapidly in the literary world and in the media while exhibiting a difficult personality of extreme moods.

In the 1990s he became familiar with Serbian politics, wrote a report on his trip to Serbia, and met Radovan Karadzic, Bosnian Serb president of the autonomous Republika Srpska, and later convicted war criminal. Handke is notorious for his support of the Serbs in the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s in which the Serbs were pitted against the Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Kosovars, and for his denial of the Srebrenica genocide in which more than 8,000 Muslim men and youngsters were massacred by Bosnian Serbs.

Handke's most notorious act was, after he had attended the trial at The Hague, a eulogy at the funeral in March 2006 of Slobodan Milosevic, the “Butcher of the Balkans,” notable for his ethnic hatred and violence, convicted of war crimes. The Butcher died in prison in 2006 before being punished for his crimes. Salman Rushdie humorously remarked that Handke should get the runner up prize for international moron of the year for his series of impassioned apologies for the genocidal region of Milosevic; he would be second to actor, film Moses, and gun lobbyist Charles Heston.

At one point, Handke compared the plight of the Serbs to that of the Jews in the Holocaust. He has been condemned by a

variety of fellow writers, such as French intellectual Alain Finkielkraut who spoke of Handke as "an ideological monster," and Jonathan Littell who commented Handke "might be a fantastic artist, but as a human being he is my enemy." The Pen America president Jennifer Egan stated we are dumbfounded by the selection of a writer who used his public voice for undercutting historical truth, and offering public succor to perpetrators of genocide. "We reject the decision that a writer who has persistently called into question thoroughly documented war crimes deserves to be celebrated for his linguistic ingenuity."

One can ask a simple question for the Nobel committee, why can't it chose an individual who is celebrated as an artist and as a human being, rather than one who is ethical blind or a propagandist for an evil regime? After all Alfred Nobel himself spoke of honoring those whose discoveries created the greatest benefit to mankind.

Admitting that literary personalities may be bohemian, possibly subversive and Dionysian, or are affected as was the Greek warrior Philoctetes by an internal wound that never heals, they glory in free expression, are not marginal in contemporary societies but are privileged and are influential. Nor are Awards always given to those offering the "greatest benefit to mankind." The Nobel Prize committee which gives Awards to those figures like Handke who are irresponsible or malignant must have Van Gogh's ear for music.