

Literary Prize Culture in the Nordic Countries Prizes as Engines of Comparison

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The world’s most recognizable and prestigious literary prize happens to be Swedish. Once a year, when the Nobel Prize is awarded, Stockholm becomes capital of the literary world. The Nobel is certainly a prime example of what literary prizes can be: signifiers, or even arbiters, of literary value and taste, which not only affect the reception of individual authors and their works, but also co-structure the very cultural and socio-economic space in which literature circulates and literary value is produced, negotiated, and institutionalized. Yet the Nobel Prize is also, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. Over the last decades, as a global trend, there has been a massive increase in the number of literary prizes and a growing impact of prizes on field dynamics. This very much includes the Nordic countries. Still, the “literary prize phenomenon” (James F. English) in this region remains under-explored by scholars. What characterizes the ecology of literary prizes and prize culture in the Nordic countries?

The Nordic countries make an interesting case for literary prize scholarship and lend themselves to comparison for several reasons. They have in fact already been regularly compared (with each other as well as other, mostly European countries) in terms of economic, social, and cultural policies, and despite certain differences, it is common to speak of a “Nordic model”. This “Nordic model” includes a number of tools for direct and indirect funding of the arts, making the state a stakeholder and an important agent in the field of cultural production. To what extent does the “Nordic model” also have bearing on the workings of literary prizes, literary prize culture, and more generally on modes of consecration in the field of literature? It is also worth noting that there is a rich tradition for cultural cooperation between the Nordic countries. Incidentally, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the region (apart from international big-hitters like the Nobel, the Booker, etc.) is the Nordic Council Literature Prize, awarded for a work of fiction written in one of the Nordic languages.

In recent times, sophisticated research has developed in different fields of study that are relevant to scholarship on literary prizes, e.g. Literary Studies, Book History and

Publishing Studies, and the Sociology of Culture, including the sociology of cultural prizes and the sociology of (e)valuation. Taken together, such lines of research have prepared the ground for a critical reexamination both of the workings and specificity of individual prizes and prize culture more generally.

This conference aims to bring into sharper focus the functioning and functions of literary prizes in the Nordic countries. To what extent and in what ways are prizes considered signposts of quality and markers of distinction? How do juries and prize administrators operate, and to what degree do they respond to social or political circumstances? To what extent do the prizes, prize-winners, or even short-listed authors acquire visibility in the media? To what degree do prizes – individual ones or “the literary prize” as a cultural phenomenon – have the ability to shape discourses and attitudes towards literature? And in what ways do prizes become “actionable”, in the sense that they influence the behavior of authors, publishers, booksellers, agents, translators, journalists, academia, or the reading public?

Please send your abstract (max. 300 words) for a 25-minute paper presentation to Jørgen Sneis (J.Sneis@lmu.de) by **March 1, 2023**. The conference language will be English. Travel expenses and accommodation during the conference will be covered.