How to Win the Nobel Prize In Literature

A Handbook for the Would-be Laureate
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by

David Carter
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Introduction

If anyone is foolish enough to set him- or herself the goal of winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, then this book will provide some insight into the trials, tribulations and the pitfalls likely to be encountered in pursuit of that dream. The reader will also find an account of the qualities that have made for a successful laureate, and of what the writers themselves as well as the Nobel Committee members have considered to be the primary qualities of good writing. If, after reading this book, the would-be laureate should relinquish his or her dream, then at least they may have gained some useful insights along the way.

It is now beginning to seem more and more likely, among scientists, philosophers and media commentators, that there are mysteries which are beyond the capacity of the human brain to unravel. One such unfathomable mystery is the manner in which the Swedish Academy selects a writer every year whom they have judged worthy of receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. (Let it be noted straightaway that the preferred wording on the official website, nobelprize.org, is ‘in’ and not ‘for’ literature, though the latter might appear more logical to a native English speaker. It is clearly a direct translation of the Swedish ‘Nobelpriset i litteratur’.)

It is possible to come very close to understanding the selection process but there always remains a core of uncertainty, which provides scope year after year for journalists, in particular, to
speculate on the presence of political, moral and aesthetic bias in the Nobel Committee and in the Swedish Academy as a whole. Every year it seems that someone objects on some grounds or other. Doubtless sometimes the objections are valid, but when one attempts to trace a journalist’s sources they almost inevitably turn out to be other journalists, who claims to have looked into the archives of the Swedish Academy, but precise quotable sources are rarely given. This core of uncertainty in one’s knowledge regarding the selection process is generated by the policy of the Swedish Academy itself: no information about the Academy’s deliberations is available for fifty years after any given award. This means that absolutely no one can access expert reports, correspondence and official minutes during that period. At present, the official website database provides information on the literature prize only for the period from the first award, in 1901, till 1950. Strictly speaking, and applying the fifty-year rule, information for the period 1951 to 1961 should now also be available on the database, but the Academy doesn’t seem to have got its act together. I am informed by a secretary of the Academy that information for this period is available, but only in Swedish and only if I care to visit Stockholm. It is also clear that some of the more sensitive discussions over the years have been very much off the record. Of course there have been leaks: Academy members speaking carelessly over the akvavit and within the hearing of journalists. But the fifty-year rule has always made it difficult to openly confirm or deny.

Thus the verifiable and reliable sources for information on the Nobel Prize in Literature are few in number: the Nobel website and some publications by present and past members of the Academy and Nobel Committees.

It should also be remembered that the Swedish Academy is very much a closed shop: it has always eighteen members elected for life by existing members. New blood is introduced only when a chair becomes vacant. The actual Nobel Committee to advise on the award for literature consists of, at present, three
to five of the current Academy members. There is also a board of experts in related fields whose help and advice they may call on, and an extensive reference library. The eighteen Academy members do not necessarily have to accept the committee’s recommendations, and there have been many cases, as will be shown, where they have overruled them and made their own selection. It is a wonder therefore that the Nobel Prize in Literature has acquired such a revered status. Can such a self-perpetuating body really be the best forum for the assessment of the best literature of the day? However one answers this question, the Nobel Prizes are very much here to stay and many people throughout the world regard them as crowning achievements to aim for.

Readers should not come to this book with false expectations: it does not provide exhaustive summaries of the lives and works of all the literary laureates; some greatly respected writers are dealt with very cursorily, while several who have since fallen from grace are paid considerable attention. They are dealt with in accordance with the level of insight and advice they provide concerning the winning of the award and the nature of good writing. There are some writers who are scarcely mentioned at all, and this will doubtless lead to disappointment for some readers, but this omission should not be taken as a sign of disrespect for such writers’ accomplishments. The style is occasionally flippant in tone with traces of irony and sarcasm: this is due to the fact that the author has considerable sympathy with the views of Jean-Paul Sartre, who, in his rejection of the prize, made it clear that he believed it impossible to rank writers. On the whole though, it is not such a bad thing to have prizes. Good writers very rarely get paid well, unless they are a dab hand at churning out best-sellers. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but it rarely wins honours and even more rarely brings back any spoils.
Some conventions in the text

There are frequent references to the three different kinds of speeches used at the Nobel Prize Ceremony. The Presentation Speech (sometimes referred to by the Nobel Organisation as Award Ceremony Speech) is one in which a member of the Academy introduces the laureate and his/her work. The Banquet Speech is a short speech given by the laureate on the occasion of the Nobel Banquet. The Nobel lecture is a talk, often of some length, on a topic of the laureate’s choice. Banquet Speeches and Nobel Lectures are not always given, according to the laureate’s circumstances and preferences.

A special convention has been used in the text to aid the reader. On the first occasion in a particular section when a laureate’s name is mentioned, the date of the award is added in square brackets after the name. Also for the convenience of the reader a checklist of all the Nobel laureates in literature to date is provided at the end of the book, with basic information about the date of the award, country of origin/residence and language used. Space is left for the reader to keep the list up to date.
Being able to write well does not, by itself, guarantee consideration for the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature. While this may appear at first surprising, it must be remembered that it is simply assumed that all nominees have this ability. A writer who is not vain enough to believe in the brilliance of his or her own style must abandon all hope on entering the hellish realm of competitive prize-winning. First be sure, therefore, that you can write well: it is the *sine qua non* of everything else. Just as typists should be able to spell, cyclists keep their balance and singers hit the right notes. Having passed this first test of eligibility, there are many more challenging conditions to fulfil, and eventual success in winning the award depends on taking all of them into account. To list just a few examples of such conditions, it depends very much on what you write about; when, where and why you write; how many of the right kind of people support you; the tastes and preferences of the members of the Swedish Academy; which other writers are nominated in the same year; how many compatriots have won it in the recent years; how many times you can tolerate being nominated and rejected; whether you are actually alive or can at least arrange to die at the right moment and, in all probability, what the weather is like in Sweden on the day the Nobel Committee meet to consider your nomination. Above all that nebulous entity, the zeitgeist, has to be in just the right mood to look favourably upon you.
It is worth therefore undertaking some study of the original criteria set up for the award and familiarising oneself with its general history. This will reveal just what the would-be laureate is up against. The quest is not a vain one, but the path to its acquisition is strewn with hazards, pitfalls and misunderstandings. Whoever expects to find a clear set of criteria for judgement and selection, which has been followed with consistency over the years, will be considerably disappointed.

If only Alfred Nobel had pondered over the wording of his will at greater length before committing the details to paper, he could have made the task of interpreting it that much easier for future generations.

What’s in a Word? or Where There’s a Will, There’s Not Necessarily a Way

In his will, Alfred Nobel, after mature deliberation, and claiming in conclusion to have been of sound mind, declared that the realizable estate remaining after he had catered to the needs of various relatives, servants and other dependents, should be used to set up a unique fund, ‘the interest on which shall be annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.’ Thus far the wording would appear to be reasonably unambiguous, though it already raises challenges and questions. It is necessary, for example, to ensure that one’s literary masterpiece appears ‘during the preceding year,’ so that, on the assumption that one’s nomination may not be successful on the first occasion, one must be prepared to produce at least one masterpiece per annum for an indefinite period. And how is one to be sure of having ‘conferred the greatest benefit on mankind’? It would appear that it must be relatively easy to assess such benefit in the fields of natural science and in work carried out ‘for fraternity between nations’, that is for work deserving of the prize for peace. But to
apply this criterion to works of literature begs so many questions about the nature and functions of literature. Nobel also stipulated that the interest on the fund should be divided into five equal parts, to be awarded as prizes, in five different areas of human endeavour. Literature is thus to be regarded as being on a par with the other four fields. It was in his description of the specific conditions for the award of the prize for literature that Nobel really set the cat among the pigeons. It all comes down to the interpretation of one particular Swedish word.

Here it is necessary to indulge in a brief linguistic diversion, delving into a few semantic and morphological mysteries of the Swedish language. Fortunately these mysteries have been clearly explained by a retired Swedish professor of computational linguistics, who has also been a Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy. In an essay published in 1997, entitled ‘Topping Shakespeare? Aspects of the Nobel Prize for Literature’, Professor Sture Allén explained that the word in Nobel’s will which has caused all the problems is ‘idealisk’. In the standard translation of the relevant clause in the will this is rendered as ‘ideal’. Thus the prize in literature should be awarded ‘to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction’ (‘den som inom litteraturen har producerat det utmärktaste i idealisk riktning’).² A close examination of the original handwritten will however reveals that Nobel had originally written a slightly different word, not ‘idealisk’, and then superimposed the ‘sk’ over the last part. Professor Allén has had the handwriting in the original will analysed under a microscope and has come to some intriguing conclusions. The first conclusion that can be drawn is that all the ink in that part of the text is of the same kind, suggesting that the alteration was probably made by Nobel at the time of writing. By enhancing the contrast and comparing the styles of different letters it was possible to conclude that Nobel had originally written ‘idealirad’. It might appear that Nobel’s alteration could be readily explained: the word ‘idealirad’ does not
actually exist in the Swedish language, which Nobel was perfectly aware of, so he altered it to ‘idealisk’. However the situation is complicated by the fact that there is another Swedish word which is very similar to Nobel’s original non-existent word: ‘idealiserad’. This is usually rendered in English as ‘idealized’. Professor Allén provides a convincing interpretation of what may have happened, an explanation fully in accordance with Freud’s theory of ‘parapraxes’ (‘Freudian slips’). Allén suggests that Nobel was thinking of writing ‘idealiserad’, but was not satisfied that it was the right word to express what he meant. His doubt and hesitation caused him to misspell the word. Perhaps, suggests Allén, he ‘wanted to use a word emphasizing loftiness without such an obvious reference to embellishment.’ That is to say that using the Swedish word for ‘idealized’ would imply something made more perfect, which Nobel did not want to stress. Thus, according to Allén’s eyewitness account of the manuscript, Nobel superimposed the letters ‘sk’ over the final letters ‘rad’.

While this interpretation clarifies the problem, narrowing the range of options somewhat, it still does not explain what Nobel meant by ‘ideal direction’. There have been many attempts over the years to answer this question, but they have all been speculative and will doubtless continue to be so. Some are surprisingly extreme. Sture Allén tells us that the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, who was living at about the same time as Nobel, reports in a letter that a close friend of Nobel told him that, as Nobel considered himself to be an anarchist, when he used the word which Brandes took to mean ‘idealistic’, he meant being critical of all social institutions, including marriage, the church and royalty. There are of course few actual laureates who would meet these criteria. The inventor of dynamite an anarchist? If true then it had the potential to become a lethal combination. Perhaps a member of the Swedish Academy, Artur Lundkvist, intended to forestall interpretation in that direction when he provided his own gloss: ‘The prize should have an idealistic
tendency; it should represent humanism. It cannot be awarded to those who advocate violence.’

Probably one of the most famous interpretations of Nobel’s intentions dates from the very beginning of the award and comes from the pen of one of Sweden’s most internationally renowned writers, August Strindberg. He protested vehemently against the award in 1901 of the very first Nobel Prize in Literature to Sully Prudhomme. In his *Addresses to the Swedish Nation* of 1910, Strindberg wrote: ‘...the prizewinner should have written *ideally* (later tampered with to make it *idealistically*, which is something else), but he was a materialist and had translated Lucretius.’

There was thus a clear distinction, in Strindberg’s mind at least, between ‘ideal’ and ‘idealistic’ (and their adverbial forms). After analyzing further the cognates of ‘ideal’, not only in Strindberg’s works but in those of other contemporary writers, Allén comes to the conclusion that for Nobel ‘idealisk’ did not mean ‘having the quality of the ideal’, but ‘referring to an ideal’. But this does nothing to rid Nobel’s words of their vagueness and ambiguity. There is still some justification therefore in criticizing him for indulging in the ill-formulated ramblings of an elderly man in what is a crucial legal document. On the other hand he might be praised for his supreme almost unearthly wisdom. By stipulating that his prize should go to the author of ‘an outstanding work in an ideal direction’, he was making it possible for each succeeding generation to define the terms of the will according to its own priorities of taste, morality and ideals of humanity.

There are also other more general guidelines in the will however, which have aided the Academy in its interpretation of the will and in drawing up its shortlist of candidates. Two of these three general guidelines relate more to matters of formal eligibility: the work should have been produced ‘during the previous year’, and there shall be no consideration of the nationality of the candidate. The third is a crucial stipulation for all the Nobel Prizes: the prizes shall be awarded ‘to those who… shall have con-
ferred the greatest benefit on mankind.’⁶ It would seem therefore that this must be an essential component of the ideal striven for.

### Death and Deconstruction

Alfred Nobel determined that there should be no doubt whatsoever about his eventual demise (10th December 1896). He wanted to be sure of being well and truly dead: ‘Finally, it is my express wish that following my death my veins shall be opened, and when this has been done and competent Doctors have confirmed clear signs of death, my remains shall be cremated in a so-called crematorium.’⁷ Perhaps he feared that if his spirit continued to haunt a body reduced to a vegetative state with all the appearances of death, he would be driven to distraction at having to witness the ways in which others were interpreting his last will and testament.

He would have had to vegetate for quite some time however before perceiving that his wishes had been realised. First the Nobel Foundation had to be set up and finally, in June 1900, its statutes ratified. The Nobel Foundation was established as a private institution to manage the finances and administer the Nobel Prize awards. Only when its statutes had been ratified could the Swedish Academy set to work on preparing to award the first Nobel Prizes. In another example of his vagueness, Nobel had specified in the will only that the prize for literature should be awarded ‘by the Academy in Stockholm’.⁸ The Nobel Foundation decided that he obviously meant by this the Swedish Academy.

The Foundation also took it upon themselves to define more precisely what they considered to be implied by Nobel’s use of the word ‘literature’: ‘not only belles-lettres, but also other writings, which, by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value’.⁹ This enabled them of course to award the prize to virtually anyone whom they deemed worthy of it. Literature was thus, tautologically, that which had ‘literary value’.

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