

2016

## The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Another Year of PROSE

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### Recommended Citation

Kutz, Myer (2018) "The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Another Year of PROSE," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 30.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7288>

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# The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Another Year of PROSE

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

I've done two stints on the awards program run by the Professional and Scholarly Publishing division (PSP) of the **Association of American Publishers (AAP)**. The first one was years ago, when I was vice-president and general manager of scientific and technical publishing at **Wiley** and also chairman of PSP's executive council. The second stint, still ongoing, started in the early 2000s (I can't remember exactly when).

The awards program, now called the **PROSE Awards**, is a competition for the best publications in disciplines in which PSP member companies publish, although it is open to non-PSP houses, such as members of the **Association of American University Presses (AAUP)** and trade publishers. During my first stint in the latter 1980s, when I was chairman of the awards program, the judges began to see electronic products, in addition to the staples of monographs, single- and multi-volume reference books, and journals. Books still predominate, but the number of electronic entries has grown larger, for obvious reasons. (Most books, available in both print and electronic formats, are submitted in paper form.)

There were just five judges during my first stint — one MD (for the medical titles, of course) and four PSP old boys (retirees from PSP houses that more often than not specialized in scientific and technical areas). They dealt with no more than a couple of hundred entries, if my memory serves me correctly. Nowadays, under the leadership of **PROSE** chairman **John Jenkins** and with the expert work by **AAP** staffer **Kate Kolendo**, the number of entries is well north of 500, and there are 17 judges — one MD, several librarians and academics, and the rest publishing professionals in and around the business. All of the judges are well versed in the disciplines assigned to them.

Due to my years at **Wiley** (and partially due to my being the editor of numerous technical handbooks), I drew the short straw for professional-level books in mathematics and four science areas — chemistry and physics, environmental science, earth science, and astronomy and cosmology — plus science and math textbooks, as well as popular science and math books that can sometimes be found in general bookstores

and are occasionally reviewed in newspapers and general interest magazines. I also weigh in on journals and electronic products in these disciplines. Multi-volume science reference books are in a separate category, also assigned to me.

This year I received 70 entries, more than my fair share, as I reckon. But who's complaining? Not me. I get to review a lot of wonderful stuff is the way I look at the bounty served up to me.

Most of the stuff is in the form of printed books. The distribution among disciplines and types of books varies from one year to the next. Last year, for example, I received twice as many multi-volume scientific and technical reference sets as I did this year. (As I wrote in this column a year ago, the boxes that the sets are shipped in remain in my garage under strict orders from my lanky and on occasion imperious wife, who's willing to put up with the piles of other books in the study, but that's as far as she'll go.) If memory serves, the sets were also larger and heavier last year than this, requiring a lot less heavy lifting; an unusually warm December also contributed to ease of review.

Of the remaining 62 entries, there were a couple of electronic collections and four new journals. Several of the remaining books belonged in disciplines overseen by other judges (these books dealt with public policy aspects of such issues as sustainability and water resources and were not written primarily for scientific and technical audiences); I shipped those back to **Kate Kolendo** for redistribution.

Except for the astronomy and cosmology discipline, in which there were just two books, the remaining 50 or so books started out in six roughly equal piles on my study floor among the four disciplines and the textbook and popular categories mentioned above. Publishers themselves build the piles initially, because in the paperwork accompanying each entry, publishers are the ones who list the discipline or category for which they are submitting each entry.

The textbook and popular book categories have come into being, mainly at my urging, over the past few years, so that books of similar audiences could be judged against one another, rather than, say, having a chemistry monograph competing against a basic undergraduate chemistry textbook

— in my view, an apples and oranges comparison if there ever was one. In fact, before these new categories were invented, I routinely marked down undergraduate textbooks and popular books; the former can sport higher production values and the latter can look sexier than high-level monographs, but those characteristics, in my opinion, should not move such entries to the top of the pile. So neither monographs nor textbooks nor popular books were getting a fair shake.

This year, I found excessive mislabeling on these forms with regard to books that are really undergraduate textbooks or are books for general audiences, but are submitted for professional audiences in math and scientific disciplines. So I had to redistribute so many books among the piles on my study floor that the textbook and popular-book piles grew much taller than the five discipline ones, with 12 in the former pile and 16 in the latter one. In fact, by the time I was finished with this shifting around, there were only three books in the chemistry/physics pile, five each in the mathematics and earth science piles, six in the earth science pile and, as noted above, just two in the astronomy/cosmology pile. Enough for judging, but just barely in some disciplines. Sometimes, I should note, I don't recommend an award for a discipline which has very few entries if none of them stands out.

Publishers in these math and science disciplines who are reading this column should consider submitting more high-level books that have enough originality and meet the needs of their audiences well enough so that they were worthy of the time, effort and money it takes to publish them in the first place. And staffers responsible for submitting entries for **PROSE** awards need to look more carefully at the nature of the books. Properly identifying whether an entry is a textbook or a book for general audiences leaves more room for high-level monographs.

The bottom line, for me, is actually that I wouldn't mind receiving even more books in the future than were delivered to my house this year. There will be more stuff of interest to me. Of course, there is the issue of my wife's reaction to a greater number of deliveries. There may be more books this year than ever, I'll be explaining to her, but the number of piles on the study floor is the same. They're just taller. I'm sure she'll understand. Wish me luck. 🍀

