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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — The PROSE Awards

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

It's mid-November, and the parcels of books have been arriving every week. No, they're not from **Amazon**. Instead, they've been shipped by **Kate Kolendo** from **AAP (Association of American Publishers)** offices on Fifth Avenue and Fifteenth Street in New York. **Kate's** the hip **AAP** staffer who keeps the program that was rebranded as the **PROSE Awards** five or six years ago under the leadership of the hard-charging Awards Committee Chairman **John Jenkins**, President and Publisher Emeritus of **CQ Press**, running as smoothly as humanly possible. By the time all is said and done this year, she's told me, she will have sent me 60 books.

Kate's been sending me this boatload of books because I'm one of 14 **PROSE** judges, who collectively will be dealing with well over 500 books, journals, and all manner of electronic products for computers, tablets, and smart phones. The grand total of entries is a record number for the program, which is in its 38th season and has been growing steadily. The only judge with more books this year is my friend **Nigel Fletcher-Jones**, ace photographer and, in his day job, head of **The American University** in **Cairo Press**.

Sixty publishers are participating in the 2013 awards program. Originally, the program was open to only to **AAP's** Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division (**PSP**). But the program is now open to other **AAP** members, as well as to members of the **American Association of University Presses (AAUP)**. During most of its history, the awards program accepted only first editions of monographs and reference works. But now new editions, providing there are substantial changes, as well as textbooks are accepted.

For the program's first ten years or so, only print books or journals were submitted for awards. In the late 1980s, when I was running sci-tech publishing at **Wiley**, I chaired the Awards Committee. Back then there were only five judges, one of whom was an M.D. The rest tended to be retired publishing executives. One year — suddenly, it seems in memory — I found myself having to explain how several new-fangled electronic products worked. Nowadays, publishers can submit print books, eBooks, or print books with companion Websites or other components in over 40 subject categories in five overarching areas — humanities, social sciences, biological and life sciences, physical sciences and mathematics, and reference works (single- and multi-volume). Electronic products and journals can be submitted in any of the five overarching areas. In addition, 2013 featured a best new **APP** category.

Each submission is accompanied by an entry form which should contain a 250-word explanation of why the publisher believes the submission should win a **PROSE** award, as well as reviews and other background information deemed relevant. The entry fee is \$85.

I'm the lead judge responsible for seven categories — Chemistry & Physics, Cosmology & Astronomy, Earth Science, Environmental Science, History of STM, Mathematics, and Popular Math & Science. (I've been a judge for around a decade this time around.) When I've received all my books, I put them into piles by category on the floor of my office. Each pile is a separate contest that I spend time with while I decide which books I'll recommend to the other judges as the winner and possible honorable mentions.

What am I looking for when I make my determinations? It depends on what's in a pile. All the books I get are worthwhile, at least to some extent. Most are very well produced. Some are knock-outs, which does count for something, in my view, but by no means everything. They're well-written, by and large. They tend to address important topics. But some books deal with topics that are trendy or seem to be ones that marketing people think are eye-catching, and if these books don't stand out otherwise, I mark them down. I'm looking for books that make important contributions in new ways, or cover new and emerging fields, or, in the case of an edited work, gather an impressive array of contributors.

Another thing that helps me is that major publishers have publishing programs that focus on particular kinds of titles. Examples are high-level chemistry and mathematics and statistics books from **Wiley** and high-level physics and popular science and mathematics titles from **Princeton**. Such publishers, including **Elsevier/Academic Press**, **Oxford**, and **Cambridge University Presses**, turn out high-quality books in my judging categories year after year.

Of course, some books address topics that I've never heard of. Entry-form essays and even reviews can fail to shed much light on what a highly-specialized book's about, at least enough so I could explain my opinion of the book to my fellow judges. In these cases, I'm driven to the Internet for additional information.

In the end, like the rest of the judges, I rely on experience to make judgments about books — and about journals and what are becoming all manner of electronic products. I believe that my engineering training and long career in publishing on both sides of the desk — on one side as an author and editor (my books have won a couple of these awards), and on the other side as an acquisitions editor, electronic publisher, and publishing executive — help me make sound judgments. As for the qualifications of my fellow judges, some are professors in the fields in which they judge, there's a

collection-development librarian, and the rest have long and relevant involvement in the publishing business. Most of the judges have participated for more than several years. We're a team of knowledgeable veterans.

Recommendations in hand, the judges convene in early January in a conference room in **AAP's** New York offices. Books are arranged by discipline on long tables. Journals cover another table. Electronic machinery stands ready to display Web-based and other digital entries.

I won't lift the curtain on deliberations, which last a full working day-and-a-half. I believe that like the Supreme Court, an air of behind-the-scenes mystery lends greater credence to final judgments than a totally transparent record of discussions and arguments would. Put another, less self-serving way, it's better not to know how that delicious sausage you're eating was actually made. I will say only that as each category comes up for discussion, the lead judge for that category makes initial recommendations and leads the discussion. Getting through the 40-plus categories pretty much takes the entire first day. On day two, judges determine the winners of the five

over-arching areas. The five finalists, which may include a combination of books, journals, and electronic products, although books still predominate, face off against each other to determine the grand prize, which is called the **R.R. Hawkins**

Award, named after the Chief of the **New York Public Library's** Science and Technology Division from 1942 to 1957.

Debate throughout the judging is spirited and can be inventive. I'm particularly fond of the term "intellectual flooziness" that **Beatrice Rehl**, of **Cambridge University Press**, seemed to make up on the spot when she was discussing the text of a large and otherwise impressive art book. In the end, I think that on the whole the judges get things right. In the past two years, for example, a **McGraw-Hill** engineering reference work on the ubiquitous diffusion equation and a **Princeton** book on Western European history in 350-500 AD, both magisterial and single-author works, have won the **Hawkins**.

The **PROSE Awards** season ends about a month after the judging at a luncheon during the middle day of the **PSP Annual Conference**. The ceremony, a multi-media extravaganza, is the brainchild of Awards Committee Chairman **John Jenkins**, who hosts the event. It's a fitting tribute to professional and scholarly publishing, which ultimately is what luncheon attendees, representatives of the industry, are celebrating. 🌿

