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The Scholarly Publishing Scene--The PROSE Awards

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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 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.