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## The Scholarly Publishing Scene-- PROSE Awards, Again

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# The Scholarly Publishing Scene — PROSE Awards, Again

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

I'm a **PROSE Awards** judge again this year, as I have been for more than a dozen previous years. The awards, as you probably know, are conducted annually under the auspices of the **Professional and Scholarly Division (PSP)** of the **Association of American Publishers (AAP)**. Publishers submit books, journals, and electronic products (eproducts) in some four-dozen categories, delineated not only by discipline (ranging through science, technology, medicine, law, economics, the arts — including coffee-table-size art exhibition books published by university and museum presses — and the humanities), but also by type of book. There are monographs, single and multi-volume reference works for commercial and academic audiences, plus popular science and textbook categories which were separated from professional and scholarly book categories some years ago because, it seemed to me as the judge responsible for the science and mathematics categories, there was no fair and rigorous way to compare books for different audiences. While nearly all publishers who submit entries specialize in professional and scholarly materials and textbooks, a separate category, championed by **PROSE Awards** chair **John Jenkins**, was introduced recently for trade houses.

Although journals are where the money is for many commercial and not-for-profit publishers, and the future may lie with eproducts, some of them online versions of multi-volume references works and others entirely new departures, much of the emphasis in the **PROSE Awards** is on books. One reason for this emphasis is that there are far more book entries than either journal or electronic-product entries. The main reason is there are far fewer new journals in either the humanities or in STM than there are new books. (In addition, publishers are encouraged to new editions of books if they differ substantially from previous editions.) And given the expense and expertise eproducts require, as well as how few are considered really innovative, the relatively low number of eproduct entries is to be expected.

In the judging process, when it comes down to selecting winners in the five ubercategories — humanities, social sciences, physical sciences and mathematics, biological and life sciences, and reference works — monographs may be pitted against textbooks, journals, eproducts and even trade titles. (The ultimate winner of the **RR Hawkins Award** is selected from among the uberwinners.)

The deadline for entries is November 1, but books can straggle into the **AAP's** New York City offices after that date. **Kate Kolendo**, who runs the awards program, can ship a judge's books out as they come in or altogether in a single shipment, depending on a judge's individual preference. I'm responsible for seven physical science and mathematics

categories, including a textbook category. I like **Kate** to send me books as she receives them (and her back allows.) I receive journal and eproduct entries (and one multi-volume reference work entry this year) electronically. I wind up hefting heavy cartons of books myself throughout November, much to my lanky wife's displeasure.

I've described in past columns the procedure for laying out multi-volume reference works on my garage floor (man, are they heavy) and for making piles of books separated by category on the floor of the my office (where it's much warmer than my unheated garage even during sunny December days in upstate New York, global warming notwithstanding). My purpose in this column isn't to recount my judging procedures. Instead, I want to say a few things about what the books that are shipped to me tell me about the state of science and mathematics book publishing at both the scholarly/professional level and for general readers with an interest in these often intellectually challenging subjects.

Let me take the popular science and mathematics category first. As I mentioned above, I asked that the books in this category be split from those that were clearly written for professionals, whether they be in industry or in academia. The popular science and mathematics books that I received this year covered a wide range of interests. As usual, there are natural science titles (covering bees and fireflies this year), mathematics diversions (which may require pencil and paper aids to reading comprehension), doomsday environmental laments, short books that briskly explain aspects of scientific methodologies, books with biographical hooks (this year, another in the long line of books on **Turing's** role in the birth of computer science and one on the women who worked on military and civilian space programs), at least one book that can characterize as a how-to, and, finally, a totally unexpected title (**How Men Age** is this year's out-of-left-field entry). I surmise that publishers continue to bet that they can sell such books to audiences already soaked by the Internet information deluge (which undoubtedly includes a plethora of fake science sites on Facebook, but that's another matter, I suppose). Perhaps the fame of some authors — in certain quarters, if not in the wide world — helps sales. I don't know the sales expectations for any of the books I get to judge, nor do I have estimates of how many total titles in this popular science and mathematics category were published with 2016 copyrights. In any case, the pile of books on my office floor gives me a glimmer of hope that the general-book-reading public will endure, at least for a while.

The piles of books for academics and practitioners also give me hope, although these books face the same Internet onslaught that books for general readers do. Actually, the problem for high-level books might be even worse. The quality of what I see available for free on the Internet indicates to me that a substantial number of knowledgeable people might rather contribute to a high-level scientific Wikipedia article than get involved with writing, or contributing to, a book for a for-profit publisher, or even for a not-for-profit who nevertheless charges for books. At the same time, I continue to see high-level books written by superstars. A couple of years ago, there was mathematician **Terence Tao**; this year, there is astronomer/physicist **Priyamvada Natarajan**. Here they are, writing books that summarize what they've learned, instead of authoring yet more journal papers that set forth their new discoveries. Frankly, I'm amazed.

It's not all champagne and roses. One university press accustomed to submitting cartons of books every year and winning multiple awards (I recall seeing the press's director some years ago looking contentedly at a table where he'd lined up his press's many award plaques) decided that the \$85 fee for each entry would bust their budget. And a commercial publisher, also a major player, failed to appoint anyone to spearhead their awards effort, left it up to individual editors, and the number of entries is significantly lower than usual.

Only a fool wouldn't acknowledge the headwinds book publishing faces. Still, I wait with great anticipation for the books to arrive every November. Some of the high-level books I eventually see strike me as unexpected and unusual, while others seem more routine. Nevertheless, all of them are infused with a level of quality that testifies to the care and effort that authors and production people put into them. Multi-volume sets and even some large single volumes are particularly noteworthy with regard to high quality. These books, as well as nearly all the others I get to judge every year, testify to the professionalism, expertise, and integrity of a group of publishers, many of whom are reviled for their business practices on the journals side of their houses. As always, things are more complicated than what one might think at first. 🍷

