

# Reflections by a Nobel Jury Member

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**Abstract** The criteria governing the choices of literary Nobel prize winners are all interpretations of Nobel's will. During my thirty years in the Swedish Academy, I have experienced the interplay of several criteria. One, pointing at great innovators, resulted in laureates like Gabriel García Márquez and Claude Simon. Another, focusing upon unknown masters, gave a world-wide audience to Jaroslav Seifert and Wisława Szymborska. Realizing, in 1991, that these two criteria put prominent women writers in a blind angle, the Academy crowned Nadine Gordimer, thus ending almost half a century of negligence. A third idea, aiming at "global dissemination", picked out a line of writers from Naguib Mahfouz to Gao Xingjian (who were also innovators in their fields). A recent interest in "witness literature" gave the award to Imre Kertész and Herta Müller. The article winds up by some reflexions on political integrity and secrecy. A prize may have a political — and often unforeseeable — *effect* but it must not have a political *intention*.

**Key words** innovators; unknown masters; women candidates; "global dissemination"; witness; literature; politics

The criteria for the Nobel Prize in literature have changed during the thirty years that I have served as a member of the Swedish Academy and of its Nobel Committee (I became a member in 1988; for seventeen years I was its Chairman). The principles and criteria governing the decisions are all interpretations of Alfred Nobel's rather imprecise will.

Since 1946, the "the pioneers" of literature have been favoured. As with the prizes in the sciences, the focus has been on those who have paved the way for new developments; this is in accordance with Nobel's stipulation that the prize be given to those "who have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". The first to be selected on this basis were Hermann Hesse, André Gide, T. S. Eliot, and William Faulkner, all of whom were bold innovators. The first discussion in which I took part resulted in the selection of Gabriel García Márquez, the figure-head of "magical realism" (1982). Other examples include Claude Simon, the principal character of *le nouveau roman* in France, and Naguib Mahfouz, the pioneer of the Arabic novel.

Another criterion also takes into consideration the benefit of the prize. The Academy wishes to draw attention to important but little noticed authors so as to give to the reading public masterpieces that would otherwise remain unknown to them; at the same time, new oeuvres would be given the readership they so richly deserve.

This “pragmatic” policy had a breakthrough with the 1978 prize awarded to the then totally unknown Isaac Bashevis Singer, who soon became one of the world’s most widely read authors. During my time in the Academy, Jaroslav Seifert and Wisława Szymborska have been awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1984 and 1996 respectively. Both are examples of authors who were previously little known.

The two criteria mentioned above may be combined in one and the same author, the best example being William Faulkner, who received the 1949 prize (in 1950). Now recognised to be one of the great innovators of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, a stimulus to *le nouveau roman* as well as to Latin-American “magic realism”, he was little known in 1950. To my mind, this is one of the choices that showed the greatest foresight on the part of the Committee.

1991 was a critical year for the two criteria. They were found to have a blind spot. A number of the most outstanding women writers of our time have nurtured a great artistic heritage but not renewed its paradigms. At the same time, they have often appealed to a large circle of readers and gained considerable appreciation and fame — thereby falling outside the category “great though neglected writers”. The Academy decided to adjust its course accordingly by giving the prize to a master who had been the victim of such injustice — Nadine Gordimer. A later example is Doris Lessing.

In the 1980s, there was a growing ambition to give the prize a “global dissemination”, again in accordance with Nobel’s will. The list was thus extended to include, among others, Naguib Mahfouz, Wole Soyinka, Kenzaburo Oë and Gao Xingjian, all innovators in their fields.

As an expression of recent interest in “witness literature”, it was decided to give the prize to Imre Kertész, who combines strong writing with harrowing testimonies of life in a concentration camp. Another example is Hertha Müller, an exquisite artist, who testifies to the difficult situation of dissidents under Romanian dictatorship.

Drawing attention to such criteria as those outlined above can shed some light on a number of decisions. The Academy remains, however, unpredictable in its decisions.

The Swedish Academy stresses again and again that political arguments have no place in its discussions. A prize can, of course, have a political *effect* but it must not have a political *intention*. Appearances may be misleading; for instance, in 1980, the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz was awarded the prize, just two months after the strike in Danzig in August that year. In fact, Miłosz had been on the short list since May, and was at the top of the list. The question was then reversed: could he be given the prize *in spite of* the strike? The situation illustrates the fact that a *non-choice* can, in fact, be political. The Academy took the only measure possible that would safeguard the integrity of the prize.

As a member of the Committee (five members) and of the Academy (eighteen members), I sometimes find myself in the minority. I might be unsuccessful in convincing the others about the quality of a writer or I may have to give in where I am not convinced myself. This is part of the mission. In either case, I have to stand by the decision of the Committee. You never explain or justify a choice since candidates and

arguments remain classified information for fifty years.

Professional secrecy requires that you keep a straight face and reveal nothing. I recall a symposium in Lisbon in 1988 when the poet and critic Daniel Halpern took me aside to give me a piece of advice. He wanted to suggest a candidate — and here he lowered his voice — the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz. I did not by a wince reveal the fact that Mahfouz had just been shortlisted and was expected to be chosen a couple of months later. I can just imagine Halpern's reaction when he heard that Mahfouz had been awarded the prize: "I fixed it!"

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