

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF PRIZES, PUBLISHING AND WORLD AUTHORSHIP

*The Nobel Symposium in Literature, May 21-24, 2026, Stockholm, Sweden*

Madeline Bedecarre

Nothing evokes “the glorification of ‘great individuals’, unique creators” bemoaned by Pierre Bourdieu quite like the Nobel Prize in Literature, where a singular writer is celebrated for their individual, innate genius- “a divine spark” to quote one member of the Swedish Academy (Bourdieu, p. 29).<sup>1</sup> However, the participants in the Nobel Symposium in Literature did not gather together to further worship this canon of world literature, but instead to interrogate “the role played by literary prizes in the processes of consecration”. They used empirical case studies to “question the impact of international literary prizes on various national and linguistic book markets” and to explore in turn “how the transformation of the publishing

industry impacts international literary prizes.”

The four-day conference entitled “Literary consecration and the transformation of publishing in the era of globalization” was convened by Gisèle Sapiro (CNRS-EHESS), Carlos Spoerhase (University of Munich), Henrik Fürst (Stockholm University), Sandra Richter (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach), Jørgen Sneis (University of Munich) and Bo G. Ekelund (Stockholm University). The international event funded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences brought together sociologists and literary scholars based in ten different countries.

Across the nine different panels and around thirty speakers, four main themes emerged.

Some presentations theorized prizes as “instruments of power” to quote Henrik Fürst. Clayton Childress presented on the way tokenism excludes swaths of writers from the Booker prize and its long-term consequences which echoed Claire Ducournau’s research on the racialized reception of different Black winners of France’s Goncourt Prize. Madeline Bedecarré spoke about the double-bind of accepting politicized awards in the case of French-language African writers and Fürst examined how

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Mattson quoted in “Behind the Scenes of the Nobel Prize in Literature”.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/behind-the-scenes-of-the-nobel-prize-in-literature/>

the Nordic Council Prizes attempt to foster a collective “nordic” identity.

Other papers parsed the relationship between literary prizes and the proliferation of popular genre fiction. Jim English discussed his empirical study of the non-professional “para-consecration” of the Goodreads Choice Awards. Michael Hockx touched on the proliferation of amateur writers, online self-publishing platforms, and prizes in China that have cropped up to recognize these new bodies of textual production. Whereas Bo G. Ekelund’s paper addressed how literary prizes “police” genre boundaries by focusing on international science fiction awards.

Still other presenters explored the role of translation in literary consecration. Jana Rüegg shared data on the Swedish translations of recent Nobel laureates, Anna Baldini analyzed the Italian translation and reception of Nobel winning authors, and Yvonne Lindqvist defended the idea of double consecration in the case of hispanophone caribbean literatures, meaning they must first be recognized in centers like Paris, then secondly in Anglo-American centers before they are translated into Swedish.

Many participants zeroed in on the publishing market. Formerly the head of Fayard publishing house, Sophie de Closets, now the CEO of Flammarion, concentrated on the economic benefits of the Nobel Prize for French publishing

houses which she dubbed “the Nobel miracle”. John Thompson explained the commercial logics of Anglo-American trade publishing as being defined by the phenomena of big books. Starting with the premise that the conglomeration era which he studied in his book won’t last forever, Dan Sinykin introduced new developments in the American literary field such as the Mellon Foundation’s Literary Arts Fund grant. Other scholars focused on the role of publishing intermediaries. Gisèle Sapiro presented new work on literary agents and their role in the international circulation of literature as well as their involvement in “the construction of world authorship”. Sandra Richter’s talk, based on fascinating archival research, centered on scouts as an important yet often ignored actor in the circulation and consecration of world authors leading up to awards.

Two features of the conference contributed to its originality and speak to the thoughtful curation of the event on the part of its organizers: the inclusion of publishing professionals alongside scholars as well as the shared Bourdieusian theoretical framework amongst attendees. A highlight of the conference was the panel discussion on the future of the publishing industry hosted at Stockholm’s Kulturhuset. Boubacar Boris Diop, the prizewinning novelist and founder of the first Senegalese wolofophone publishing

house EJO-Editions, spoke of the importance of linguistic diversity and the need for African-language publishing houses on the continent. Thomas Meaney, the editor of the literary magazine *Granta* weighed in on how mediators in the literary field must now contend with AI. One participant memorably joked in the opening of his talk that Bourdieu was his intellectual “daddy” and this communal father figure indeed informed the majority of the research presented. Many mentioned the pleasure and camaraderie found in the common Bourdieusian vernacular (the production of belief, the literary field, symbolic violence, the space of position takings) and the use of diagrams to map different fields and processes of recognition.

The last paper delivered by Pavithra Narayanan on the final day of the conference gestured at the stakes of teaching and opened up a fruitful, reflexive discussion around how some of these processes studied during the conference such as consecration, tokenisation, or translation play out on a daily basis in the confines of our classrooms.

### **References**

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia: Columbia University Press.