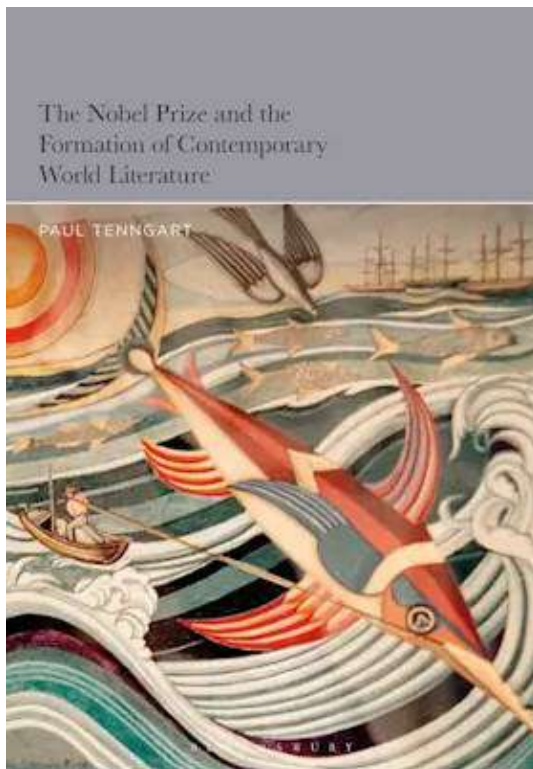
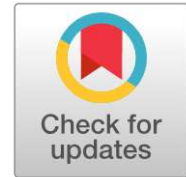


THE NOBEL PRIZE AND THE FORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD LITERATURE – BOOK REVIEW

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Book Details

Title:

The Nobel Prize and the Formation of Contemporary World Literature

Author:

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Publisher:

Bloomsbury Academic, 249 pages

Year of publication:

2024

ISBN:

978-1-5013-8212-3 (hardback),

978-1-5013-8213-0 (eBook),

978-1-5013-8214-7 (PDF)

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Citation: Hoyte-West, A. (2024). The Nobel Prize and the Formation of Contemporary World Literature - Book Review. *English Studies at NBU*, 10(1), 207-211. <https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.24.1.12>

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For over a century, the Nobel Prize in Literature has commonly been regarded as the world's preeminent award in the field of literary production. In his newly-released monograph *The Nobel Prize and the Formation of Contemporary World Literature*, Paul Tenngart, associate professor of comparative literature at Lund University in Sweden, meticulously charts the development, evolution, and importance of the prize since its foundation in 1901. This multifaceted literary and historical analysis is all the more valuable since surprisingly, until the appearance of this excellent volume, a large-scale externally-based analysis of the award had not been conducted, thus underscoring the need for it to be "thoroughly and neutrally scrutinized" (Tenngart, 2024, p. 3). The book's appearance also coincides with growing research over the past couple of decades on factors relating to various extratextual aspects of the literary and publishing industries, of which national and international awards and prizes have become an important component (for example, see Driscoll, 2013; English 2005; Hoyte-West, 2023; Squires 2004, etc.). Running to 249 pages, Tenngart's book comprises six chapters, each exploring a different aspect of the Nobel Prize in Literature, together with an appendix detailing every Nobel literature laureate with the year of their award, a list of over 700 references (mostly in English and French, but also in Swedish and other languages), as well as an index.

The opening chapter (pp. 1-18) opens by outlining the story of the origin of the Nobel Prizes via the will of the Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel which made provision for literature alongside the four other original areas of peace, chemistry, physics, and physiology/medicine. In recognising the apogee of contributions to humankind, the first set of prizes were awarded by the Swedish Academy in 1901, five years' after Nobel's death in 1896. Through detailing the backstory to the Prize in Literature, Tenngart also draws attention to its well-known features, including the classified nature of the nominations and the associated discussions which are embargoed for fifty years, as well as its pioneering status as *the* landmark global literary award. He examines issues relating to finding a "balance between absolute contemporaneity and a longer temporal perspective" (Tenngart, 2024, p. 5), as well as the complex interlinkage of cultural capital and economic capital, together with prestige and scientific knowledge, that the Prize embodies, before linking these aspects to its cosmopolitan aspects as a canonical award recognising world literature. Noting Stockholm's position at the (semi-)periphery of world literature, Tenngart posits, with detailed reference to the relevant viewpoints, that the Nobel Prize in Literature is located in an eccentric (see Shih, 2015) rather than a concentric (see Casanova, 2005) conceptualisation of global literary consecration.

Chapter 2 (pp. 19-58) charts the development of the Prize from its earliest beginnings, and is based on the author's meticulous analysis of newspaper coverage from 1901 to 2022. Noting the pivotal role of London, Paris, and New York as global literary centres, Tenngart examines annual international media responses to the announcement of the Prize decision in three major daily newspapers, one from each city: *The Times* (London); *Le Figaro* (Paris; and which incidentally was also Alfred Nobel's newspaper of choice (see Tenngart, 2024, p. 1)); and the *New York Times*. Noting that the award of the first set of Nobel Prizes were "an immediate success" (Tenngart, 2024, p. 21), the author details the vicissitudes of the literary award during its first decade of existence; in some instances, the announcement or ceremony did not even feature in some of the newspapers selected, whereas in other cases, numerous or lengthy articles were published, with the 1913 honouring of Bengali author Rabindranath Tagore proving a particular draw. Yet, as Tenngart's research outlines, it was not until the 1920s that the Prize began to gather significant steam, gaining in prominence and indeed, at least in terms of press attention, becoming the most talked-about of all of the Nobel prizes. Increased coverage persisted through 1930s and, after a short hiatus during World War Two (no awards were made from 1940 to 1943), this growing wave of interest continued into the 1950 and up to the present day. As the subtitle of "Breaking News (the 1950s and Onward)" (Tenngart, 2024, p. 45) indicates, the immediate postwar year can be said to be the era when the Prize first started to get the high level of media coverage which it still attracts nowadays.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 59-102), Tenngart focuses his analysis on the remit of the Prize, noting how the broader international aspect of it has been crucial since its foundation. As such, bringing together historical and literary analysis, he outlines the central role that the Swedish Academy and its decisions have had in creating a global literary canon, making reference – where possible and relevant – to the various debates and discussions on the deliberations and potential motivations that may have led to the selection of specific prize-winners. With laureates having written their works in two dozen languages (Tenngart, 2024, p. 94), the author also notes the seminal importance that translation (particularly into Swedish) has played in this regard, as well as discussing the nomination process and the international scope of the award in terms of geographical and gender representation.

Building on the discussions of consecration and the global literary system outlined in the first chapter, Chapter 4 (pp. 103-146) concerns itself with analysing the Prize's general impact. Indeed, with the annual choices of the Swedish Academy often

hotly debated and discussed, Tenngart first draws attention to surveys conducted in the 1950s and 1960s which sought to examine these issues, before outlining discussions surrounding some of the overlooked authors who, despite their prestige, prominence, and the quality of their literary oeuvre, were never awarded the Prize. In synthesising these lively and interesting discussions, as well as critiques of how and why these choices appear to have been made, the chapter contributes further insights not only into how the award has significant ramifications for the circulation of global literature via translation and so forth, but also in terms of its broad cosmopolitanism and ensuing political impact (for example, in recognising laureates from marginalised or politically-repressed backgrounds).

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 5 (pp. 147-198), focuses on a totally different facet of the award: its poetics. By “sanction[ing] a definition of what prototypically high-brow literature should look like” (Tenngart, 2024, p. 148), Tenngart observes that the annual decision made by the Swedish Academy is most certainly not straightforward, grounded as it is in the weighing-up and analysis of a multitude of ideological, cultural, epistemological, and other factors, and leading to the formation of what he terms “Nobel Literature” (Tenngart, 2024, p. 148). The author analyses the list of Nobel laureates by genre, noting the predominance of prose fiction novelists among the awardees, before subsequently analysing the Swedish Academy’s annually-published motivations, which each justify the selection of that particular prize-winner for that year. In scrutinising these short texts for the presence of different keywords, he advances that thematic patterns emerge corresponding to different time periods usually corresponding to duration of around two decades. For example, the concept of ‘nobility’ is present from 1901 up to 1920; the notion of ‘mastery’ is highlighted between 1941 and 1960; and the universality of laureates’ oeuvres was highlighted from 1981-2000. These evolving categories are compared and analysed, noting the changing role of the author, the role of poetics in a political context, as well as providing perspectives on the poetics inherent in the Nobel lectures given by selected laureates.

Chapter 6 (pp. 199-213) concludes the volume, and looks ahead to the future of the Prize. Here, Tenngart outlines the scandals and crises which have befallen the Prize during its history, including the most recent one just a few years ago. Noting the dichotomy of tradition vs contemporary relevance, he also discusses on how keeping the “prestige and importance” of the award is “a perpetual act of balance” (Tenngart, 2024, p. 205), including with regard to how the global aims and scope of the Prize and role in the world literary canon will continue to be applicable in our modern age which

is seemingly characterised by increased polarisation and conflict at both the macro and the micro levels.

As detailed by the different foci presented in each of the six chapters, this is a book that will be useful for specialists from literary studies, history, and translation studies, as well as for social scientists and media scholars. It provides an excellently-researched point of departure for comparative studies, and the clear and well-defined structure of the work means that the chapters are both self-contained yet also contribute to the coherence of the book as a whole. Indeed, as the world waits every November for the annual announcement of the new laureate, it is clear that, as the author states, the Nobel Prize in Literature is an award embodying "a very special kind of consecration with its own mechanisms" (p. 18). Therefore, as a multifaceted study which analyses the world's most famous literary prize since its creation, Paul Tenngart's *The Nobel Prize and the Formation of Contemporary World Literature* is a comprehensive, insightful, and well-written volume which represents an important contribution to research on the study of international literary prizes and awards and their role in world literature.

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