

An insular view of th

By Marco Roth

The Nobel prize for literature doesn't really have much to do with literary excellence — and that's not a bad thing

I feel a little sorry for Horace Engdahl, although not too sorry. His comments to American journalists last week gave us a glimpse into how the mind of at least one Nobel literature prize judge works, and it wasn't pretty. American writers, en masse, he claimed, were "too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture". Then he launched into one of those incoherent anti-American rants that somehow transformed all of American literature into Sarah Palin and George Bush: "The US is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature", he said.

It's unclear who "they" are in all of this. Presumably Engdahl meant US publishers, not US authors. Even so, he forgets that one of the largest of those publishers is now a fief of a multinational corporation based in Germany, where the bottom-line decisions are made. The remarks are so general as to be nonsensical. Where does that big dialogue of lit-

erature take place, actually, and how does one participate in it?

Although he was not acting as a spokesperson for the Nobel academy, Engdahl's opinions have been taken as representative of the academy as a whole, or at least a majority of it. The

actual prestige of winning the award. What kind of a badge of excellence is it when a writer earns the approval of someone like that?

Perhaps it's a good thing if American writers and cultural commentators learn to take the Swedish academy

The history of the prize is tied to Alfred Nobel's own broadly humanitarian aspirations to reward those who 'have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind'. Literature will always suffer from this kind of consequentialist standard, and the Swedes recognised this too

AP story that broke Engdahl's views to the world also printed the predictably outraged and baffled responses of American editors and academicians, but did not bother to get any other members of the "notoriously secretive" prize committee on the record. Still, the prejudices of one man tend to cast doubt on

less seriously and see it for what it is, without hating it. A Nobel is now worth 10m Swedish crowns (somewhere between 1.3m and 100m new Bush bucks, depending on the outcome of the current economic crisis), but it has too long been misunderstood here as a certificate of literary excellence, the ulti-

mate diploma.

Like growing up to be president of the United States or going to Harvard University, winning a Nobel is a staple of America's striving class' dreams of competitive achievement. The promise of Nobel recognition dangles over the heads of American children, a hybrid of motivational carrot and sword of Damocles. The critic Adam Kirsch's impassioned riposte to Engdahl is a perfect illustration that, when it comes to his prize, Americans really are still the naïve and parochial boobs of Engdahl's legend. We want the award to matter as though presented by angels rather than a few, imperfect Swedes with their own biases and tastes.

If we are shocked to discover that politics or some agenda external to mere aesthetics or "excellence", impinges on the judgment of literary work in an international context, we haven't been paying attention. The history of the prize is tied to Alfred Nobel's own broadly humanitarian aspirations to reward those who "have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". Literature will always suffer from this kind of consequentialist standard, and the Swedes

Awards & Rewards -
Nobel Prize

sular view of the Nobel prize

the actual prestige of winning the award. What kind of a badge of excellence is it when a writer earns the approval of someone like that?

Perhaps it's a good thing if American writers and cultural commentators learn to take the Swedish academy

the prize is tied to
own broadly
aspirations to reward
conferred the
on mankind'.
ways suffer from this
entia list standard,
recognised this too

less seriously and see it for what it is, without hating it. A Nobel is now worth 10m Swedish crowns (somewhere between 1.3m and 100m new Bush bucks, depending on the outcome of the current economic crisis), but it has too long been misunderstood here as a certificate of literary excellence, the ulti-

mate diploma.

Like growing up to be president of the United States or going to Harvard University, winning a Nobel is a staple of America's striving class' dreams of competitive achievement. The promise of Nobel recognition dangles over the heads of American children, a hybrid of motivational carrot and sword of Damocles. The critic Adam Kirsch's impassioned riposte to Engdahl is a perfect illustration that, when it comes to his prize, Americans really are still the naïve and parochial boobies of Engdahl's legend. We want the award to matter as though presented by angels rather than a few, imperfect Swedes with their own biases and tastes.

If we are shocked to discover that politics or some agenda external to mere aesthetics or "excellence", impinges on the judgment of literary work in an international context, we haven't been paying attention. The history of the prize is tied to Alfred Nobel's own broadly humanitarian aspirations to reward those who "have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". Literature will always suffer from this kind of consequentialist standard, and the Swedes

recognised this too.

PTA-level Platonism has not always prevailed, but it's hard to escape entirely: the prize has gone to Samuel Beckett, Knut Hamsun, St John Perse, TS Eliot and a number of avant-garde pioneers. The Nobel's website offers browsers an

In the light of "benefit to mankind" rather than an Arnoldian "Best That Has been Thought and Known", Engdahl's weird remarks certainly start to make a bit of sense. The American contenders most often mentioned: Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates are not utopian novel-

In the light of 'benefit to mankind' rather than an Arnoldian 'Best That Has been Thought and Known', Engdahl's remarks about American writers start to make a bit of sense. The American contenders most often mentioned: Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates are not utopian novelists on a par with Doris Lessing (the prize winner in 2007)

article from 1999 asserting the award has now become a truly literary prize, and it seemed true enough when VS Naipaul won in 2001. That award now seems somewhat anomalous out of the last 10. The committee seems to be tacking back toward a more "originalist" interpretation of Nobel's mandate.

ists on a par with Doris Lessing (the prize winner in 2007). Don Delillo and Thomas Pynchon might be considered dystopian novelists. None of them are explicitly interventionist, situational polemicists like Elfriede Jelinek (2004) or late Harold Pinter (2005). It is difficult to imagine a citation for Philip Roth

like the uplifting-sounding summation of Imre Kertész (2002), "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history." So what if this gets Kertész almost exactly backwards.

Reading recent Nobel blurbs, since 1997, the contemporary differences between the Americans and the Swedes become most obvious. We want the award to signify the world's recognition of our particular genius - that is, we want them to acknowledge themselves in the great American writers they read, just as we do. Every award should read "For outstanding literary achievement", with no fancy stuff, because outstanding literary achievement means getting the world right. But the Swedes desperately want that writing to do something - "to force entry into oppression's dark rooms" (Pinter, 2005), for instance.

There should be global prizes for this kind of interventionist, political writing, and apparently there is. It's called the Nobel prize. There should also be global prizes for literary excellence, even if that literature makes nothing happen. If anyone has any leftover money this time next year, maybe we should start one. COURTESY THE GUARDIAN