

**Abstracts:****PANEL ONE: Prizeworthiness and Kinship Beyond Literary Nationalism****Alexandra Dane**

U of Melbourne

**Fluctuating Prestige' and the Temporality of Circulation**

Since 1989, the Lambda Literary Awards (The Lammys) have worked to construct a canon of queer writing with the express mission of preserving queer culture and affirming queer lived experiences. This practice is reminiscent of the establishment of national literary canons that reflect constructed national identities. Like national literatures, articulating the queer literary canon is ultimately a process of community building.

This presentation will employ the theoretical framework of nationalism and literature established by Sarah M Corse (1997) to explore the role of prized literature in the formation of a queer literary identity. Using a sample of Lesbian Fiction Award Winners, I will argue that The Lammys afford the Lambda Literary organisation the opportunity to shape the identity and character of contemporary queer literary production. The Lammys offer us the ability to interrogate questions about how communities form around books, how books can knit together communities, and what prizes can do when there is a clear community-driven mission. However, like all literary prizes, the symbolic violence inherent in the determination of prizeworthiness has the potential to introduce disunity into the delicate publishing ecosystem.

**Julie Rak**

U of Alberta

**Heavy Industry: Kate Beaton's *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, Class Politics and Awards Culture**

In 2023, Kate Beaton's *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, won a prestigious Eisner award for best graphic memoir. In her acceptance speech, Beaton highlighted the importance of working-class and industrial comics, and asked for more recognition for comics by working-class creators, rather than focusing on her position as a female and Canadian comics creator, which was the subject of much of the coverage of *Ducks* after it won the 2023 CBC Canada Reads contest. Beaton's intervention marks the subject and prize worthiness of *Ducks* as a deliberate attempt to highlight what multinational capitalism is doing to the people and the environment, and disrupt the "business as usual" ignorance of class within Canadian awards culture.

**Victoria Wirtz**

FU Berlin

**Literary Prizes and Queer Working-Class Kinship**

In 2023, Édouard Louis said in a Guardian interview "we didn't reject literature, literature rejected us." "We" is referring to his biological family, symbolizing the French working-class. At the International Literature Festival Berlin 2024, Tash Aw stated that "literature is not a place for people like my family". Using these examples as starting-off points, this paper examines narratives of class transfer and queer kinship in tension with notions of prestige and prizeworthiness within the literary sphere. Both authors open up controversies about queerness, migration and/or social conditions in a declassed milieu, questioning the concept of the linear life course and the temporal framing of the Western narrative of social mobility.

**PANEL TWO: Prizeworthiness and Cultures of Recommendation****Corrina Norrick-Rühl**

U of Münster

**Building Reading Communities, Shaping Genres? The Goodreads Choice Awards**

Since 2009, Goodreads has offered readers the opportunity to participate in voting for the annual Goodreads Choice Awards across a wide set of genres. By 2011, 638.6k votes were cast overall; in 2023, 5.87 million votes were cast. The awards have thus become a major driver of traffic to the website; they can be considered as a sort of loyalty tool for the website, but also empower readers to curate their own awards outside of the more top-down literary prize culture that readers are accustomed to. By looking at the role of Goodreads in reading and recommendation culture today, this talk will explore the way that the awards frame prizeworthiness and (seem to) elevate readers' choices. Using the data on the Goodreads website, the talk will also reflect on the genre distribution of the awards and how new and trending genres have made their way into the awards while other genres have fallen by the wayside. How do Goodreads and members of the Goodreads community profit from the awards, and how do the awards help shape genre recognition and trends?

**Danielle Fuller**

U of Alberta

**Practices of Value/Valued Practices: Readers and Recommendation Cultures**

What do readers "prize" about contemporary cultures of recommendation? Or, in other words, what is valuable to readers who engage with reading recommendation cultures on- and offline? Readers' online activities on platforms such as Bookstagram, BookTok and BookTube are always entangled with the repetitions produced by algorithms. Additionally, the involvement of publishers, retailers, and sponsored influencers in the promotion of books (and prizes) in online spaces, appears to invite an easy equation of literary value with commodification. However, I propose that specific types of sociality and activism are among the values generated by readers' practices alongside the contours of platform capitalism. To demonstrate this, I will draw upon empirical data from two reader-centred research projects undertaken in collaboration with other scholars – one focusing on reading bestselling fiction and the other on memoir reading.

**Chiara Bullen**

Postdoctoral researcher in English Literature and Book Studies

University of Münster

**Pre-Publication Literary Award Culture, Corporate Social Responsibility and Cultural Production**

Participation in literary award culture in the pre-publication space is a way for writers aiming for traditional publication to gain recognition from agents in the publishing field and career development opportunities. This paper explores pre-publication literary award culture and its function in cultures of recommendation before entry into the traditional publishing field. It specifically focuses on awards run by publishers as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives to seek marginalised writers and the ways these initiatives impact cultural production.

**PANEL THREE: Prizeworthiness and Forums of Cohesion/Diversion****Christine Emmett**

University of Warwick

**The Nobel, 'political awards', and the vicissitudes of prizeworthiness: Nadine Gordimer**

In 1991 South African author, Nadine Gordimer, won the Nobel prize for literature. While the award was celebrated by some, it was derided by many reviewers as a 'political' decision, with her patchy oeuvre including work of 'scant artistic value' (John Banville, *NYRB*). By analysing these claims, this paper considers how prizeworthiness has been constructed by reviewers and literary journalists in the print press and how these constructions engage with the position of African literatures within world literature. Reading Gordimer's case against more recent political controversies surrounding the Nobel Prize, it argues that contestations over the place of politics for prizeworthiness trace shifts both in conceptions of the relationship between aesthetic and political value, as well as expectations about the wider social and political 'work' that literary prizes, such as the Nobel, are expected to perform.

**Stevie Marsden**

Edinburgh Napier U

**Levelling Up: Class[ifying] prizeworthiness**

Earlier this year, Claire Malcolm, the founder and chief executive of New Writing North, based in Newcastle upon Tyne in the northeast of England, argued that there is not a 'level playing field for the north' when it comes to opportunities for writers and those working in the publishing industry. Malcolm's comments came days before the announcement of the winners of the 25<sup>th</sup> Northern Writers' Awards, which were established to 'support new writing talent in the north of England, tackling disadvantages faced by writers who felt shut out by the publishing industry' ([Healy, 2024](#)). Given their status as instruments of cultural, social, economic and political capital (intra)conversion, literary prizes are demonstrative of a hierarchising of cultural value(s) which inevitably falls along classed understandings of prestige and worth. This paper will consider how prize culture reaffirms class difference through the communities they may attempt to foster and appeal to, and explore if prizes like the Northern Writers' Awards that are established to reduce boundaries to industry access and recognition are an effective means of responding to the issue.

**Alexander Starre**

FU Berlin

**Paradoxes of Prestige: Debunking and Endorsing the Literary Prize Economy in US Book Club Fiction**

Based on recent interdisciplinary research at the intersection of book studies, literary sociology, and cultural studies, my talk aims to explore a selection of US-American literary texts that engage reflexively with the economy of prestige in the contemporary literary field. Novels such as Tia Williams's *Seven Days in June* (2021), R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023), and Xochitl Gonzalez's *Anita De Monte Laughs Last* (2024) directly or indirectly reference, satirize, debunk, and sometimes endorse the currency of prizeworthiness, with a special investment in the complexities of race and gender in the fiction marketplace. Instead of reading these novels as

independently authored works, I will explore them in their meso-level institutional embedding within Reese's Book Club—Reese Witherspoon's female-centered digital reading forum. Using the critical concept of the "publishing imaginary" (Starre/Norrick-Rühl), I argue that recent book club fiction indexes an evolving middlebrow engagement with literariness characterized by paradoxical, but highly suggestive framings of symbolic and economic capital. The paper concludes with an intermedial reading centered on the theme of racial commodification in *American Fiction*, Cord Jefferson's 2023 film adaptation of Percival Everett's publishing satire *Erasure* (2001).

#### **PANEL FOUR: Prizeworthiness and Dis/Affection**

**Elisa Haf**

FU Berlin

#### **"Come and Get Me": Prizeworthiness as Mechanism of Affective Investment in the Novels of Sally Rooney**

This paper understands "prizeworthiness" in two ways: worthiness of receiving prize, and worthiness of being prize. It argues that Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* sets up a repeating pattern in her novels, where both these forms of worthiness are understood in reproductive terms – the novels prize the desire to reproduce (specifically within a heteronormative framework), and this desire, or the desire to be deemed prizeworthy for it, in turn operates as the novels' affective engine, driving not only their character and plot development, but readers' investment in these. The paper also notes, however, that the "middle child" of Rooney's novels, *Normal People*, does deviate from this pattern, and has been deemed at least as "prizeworthy" as those which stick to it by the literary establishment (for example being longlisted for the Man Booker prize, awarded the Best Novel prize by the Costa Book Awards, and winning Book of the Year in the British Book Awards). It closes by asking, not only why Rooney should nonetheless have returned to the pattern in her third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* but whether in doing so, she depletes its affective power. It will seek to answer these questions in light of a close reading of the novels themselves, as well as critical responses to them.

**Beth Driscoll**

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#### **Intense moments, varied responses: The emotional ecosystem of prizes**

Literary prizes are central events in book culture (Squires 2013), with effects on both book sales and processes of consecration. These effects rely largely on prizes being reported on in the media, and increasingly it is the emotions that a prize mobilises that are the centrepiece of media attention. In this paper, I present an account of the emotional ecosystem of literary prizes that recognises their varying intensities and valence. I begin with the emotions at the centre of a prize's structure: those at the moment of announcement. The structure of contemporary prizes, especially the progressive release of longlists, shortlists and winners, maximises opportunities for emotional response. For authors, emotions may be intense, especially when a ceremony is televised or when the announcement is a surprise. While the expectation is for a winner to be shocked and

delighted, in some cases, this is subverted – as with Doris Lessing’s notoriously muted reaction to winning the Nobel Prize in 2007. Awkward emotional displays from authors highlight the mismatch between the symbolic capital sought in the literary field (Bourdieu 1996) and the spectacle of prizes.

My account then turns to the rippling emotional responses from readers, booksellers and others involved in book culture. Sometimes emotions flare into activism, as when there is anger about an all-male shortlist (see Dane 2020). In other cases, feelings are attenuated and mixed. I present a case study of responses to Alexis Wright’s *Praiseworthy* (2023), a 700-page allegorical, satirical epic that has so far won three major Australian prizes. Analysis of judges’ remarks, media articles and reader comments online demonstrates their admiration and enthusiasm, as well as hesitancy, dauntedness and confusion. This case study highlights the complexity of emotional experience in relation to prizes and prize-worthy literature, beyond the media-friendly narratives of happy winners and disappointed losers.