
*How an audacious Oklahoma editor
with vision and a distinctly upstart attitude
helped create the most prestigious literary prize
this side of the Nobel.*



The Neustadt Prize Turns 50

Two philanthropists - one Swedish, the other American - each had a profound belief in the power of the written word. Both used their fortunes to endow international literary prizes to recognize the important voices of their time.

The Nobel Prize in Literature, established by Alfred Nobel in 1901, is awarded annually by the Swedish Academy in Stockholm while the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, endowed by the Walter Neustadt Family of Ardmore, Okla., in 1974, is awarded biennially at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. The Nobel jury serves lifelong appointments while the Neustadt jury renews every two years. Novelists are the primary winners of the Nobel. The Neustadt Prize recognizes writers across the literary spectrum.

For more than five decades, the Nobel and the Neustadt prizes have been intertwined, with 32 shared writers between them. Laureates, finalists or jurors have been awarded the Nobel Prize after their involvement with the Neustadt Prize. Jose Saramago of Portugal was a Nobel recipient before being considered in 2004 for the Neustadt, which went that year instead to the lesser known Adam Zagajewski of Poland.

In 2020, as the Neustadt Prize marks a half century of recognizing both established and emerging literary voices from around the globe, its independent road to a place of global prominence has been filled with more than a few bumps. At one time, the very magazine that created the prize almost ceased to exist.

From *Books Abroad's* beginning in 1929, Roy Temple House, the audacious founding editor of OU's literary journal, dared to poke at the austere Nobel Academy on a regular basis, questioning its choice of writers upon whom to bestow what was then considered the most prestigious literary prize in the world.

To prove his point, House began soliciting proposals for writers not yet on the radar of the venerable Swedish institution, notes Bill Riggan Jr., former editor of the literary magazine now called *World Literature Today*. And just before the beginning of

the Second World War, a poll was conducted by the magazine to choose a "Super Nobel," an all-time winner from previous Swedish prize winners since it was first awarded in 1901.

The poll was sent to *Books Abroad* contributors, editors and writers in Europe and the United States. Ultimately that group selected German author Thomas Mann, who sent a short note of acknowledgment to House after the announcement.

"*Books Abroad* had a long history of commenting on the annual choice of the Nobel Prize in Literature, going all the way back to the 20s and 30s," Riggan says. "So, by the 1960s many editors and writers suggested to the editor that since the publication focused so much on the Nobel Prize, finding fault with the academy's process and some of its selections, why not start a prize of its own and correct some of those things."

Ivar Ivask, then-editor of *Books Abroad*, took on this challenge. He developed a diverse and visionary process still used today to choose a compelling and international voice in the world of literature. First established in 1969, the charter of the *Books Abroad* International Prize for Literature stipulates, among other things, that the prize will be awarded by a constantly renewing set of up to 11 jurors from around the world.

"Ivar wanted to ensure diversity in not just the nominees, but the jury, as well," says Riggan, who joined the journal staff as editor in 1974. "He got away from the permanent jury method of the Nobel committee that tended to work with the same slate of candidates every year. The *Books Abroad* prize jury would be comprised biennially of a new group of writers who would each nominate their choice for the award."

The only permanent member of the jury would be the editor of the magazine. Today, that role is fulfilled by Robert Con Davis-Undiano, executive director of *World Literature Today*. As chair of the Neustadt Prize Committee, he has overseen

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BY SUSAN GROSSMAN



Roy Temple House, founding editor of *Books Abroad*, would have been pleased that Mexican diplomat and poet Octavio Paz was the jurors' choice for the "Oklahoma Nobel" eight years before winning the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature.

New Zealand author Patricia Grace, at right, a foundational figure in the rise and development of Maori fiction, won the Neustadt Prize in 2008. She was nominated by Oklahoma native Joy Harjo, who served as the first Native American United States Poet Laureate in 2019.

“The Neustadt Prize has a great reputation for integrity and transparency, primarily because of its eliminative voting.”



the process of selecting the juries and awarding the prize since his appointment in 1999. As the Neustadt Prize in Literature observes its 50th anniversary this year, Davis attributes the endurance of the prize and its stature in the literary world to the selection process itself.

“The Neustadt Prize has a great reputation for integrity and transparency, primarily because of its eliminative voting,” he says. “It is a very transparent and consensus-building process.”

Jurors nominate their choice, then convene on the OU campus for three days of meetings and deliberations every other October. Each candidate and the merit of their work is vetted. Jurors vote in rounds, continually eliminating nominees until there is consensus on a winner. The committee chair casts the deciding vote throughout the process if there is a tie.

“It’s like a graduate seminar in English,” Davis-Undiano says of the selection process. “The jurors make a case for the work of their nominee based on the quality of the writing. In the beginning years of the prize some jurors would leave the

jury as soon as their candidate was out of the running to win. That never happens now. This is very much about literary merit and each juror is given every opportunity to make their case. What is interesting is watching support build for other writers after a juror’s nominee is no longer in contention.”

True to House’s intent, the Neustadt Prize also distinguishes itself with its reputation for discovering new talent, identifying writers who are on the rise. Ivask ensured this in the prize charter established in 1969.

“The Prize should not necessarily crown a life’s work but should upon occasion direct attention to an important life work *in progress*,” Ivask wrote. “Authors from lesser-known literatures should not be regarded as the least eligible.”

To illustrate the wide-open net cast to recognize the best writing in the world, Daniel Simon, current editor-in-chief of *World Literature Today*, recalls the interesting nomination of the 2002 Neustadt winner. At the time, jurors had one collected set of unpublished novellas to consider by Alvaro Mutis,

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Journalist, literary critic and poet Giuseppe Ungaretti was named the first Neustadt Laureate in 1970. From left are American poet John Ciardi; Ungaretti; Luciano Rebay, the Giuseppe Ungaretti Professor of Italian literature at Columbia University; and *Books Abroad* editor Ivar Ivask after the presentation of the inaugural award certificate.

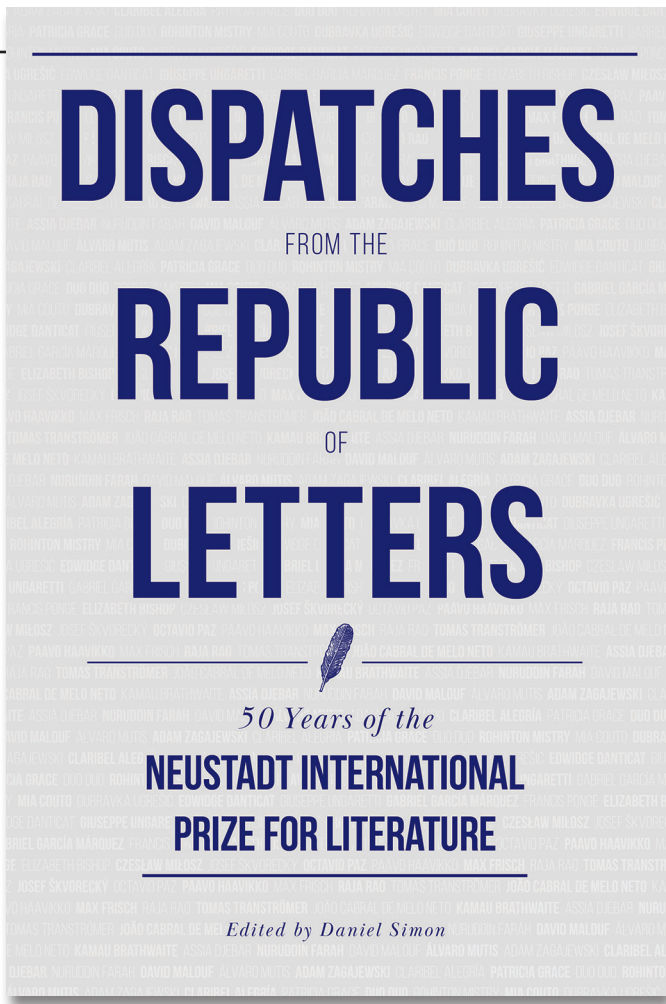
the Colombian poet, novelist and essayist who died in 2013.

“All the jurors had at the time was basically a publisher’s proof of this obscure Colombian writer,” Simon says. “It was so interesting to watch the jury. They fell in love with these stories, the sheer genius of his writing. The prize does not necessarily come down to who has the most publications or prizes but to someone the jury recognizes as an authentic voice.”

In observance of the half-century celebration of the Neustadt Prize, Simon compiled the history of the prize into *Dispatches From the Republic of Letters: 50 Years of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature*. Nearly three years of writing and research through thousands of pages of nominations, speeches and correspondence has resulted in a rich, chronological overview that concisely captures the scope and breadth of the esteemed prize.

The volume contains a short biography of each of the

A recent *Publisher’s Weekly* review of *Dispatches From the Republic of Letters: 50 Years of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature*, states, “Like the prize itself, this volume is a tribute and a testament to literature, and a reward for readers.”



The 2015 Neustadt Festival of International Literature & Culture included a poetry reading by NSK juror Nii Ayikwei Parkes of Ghana. The daughters of Dolores and Walter Neustadt Jr. – Nancy Barcelo, Susan Neustadt Schwartz and Kathy Neustadt Hankin – established the NSK prize for children’s literature in 2003 as a companion to the Neustadt Prize.



25 winners, beginning with the first laureate, Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti in 1970, through the current 2020 recipient, Albanian and French writer Ismail Kadare. The book also features the nominating text of the winner's juror, along with acceptance speeches by the winners.

"Our idea was to take advantage of the archives we have, thanks to the Western History Collections here at OU, to tell the rich history of international literature during the last half century," Simon says. "I spent a lot of time combing through documents, looking for those nuggets of inspiration in the letters of nominees, along with idiosyncratic tales that tell the story of the prize."

From its outset in 1969, the Neustadt Prize served a second, existential purpose aside from correcting the perceived deficiencies of the Nobel. It was to save the *Books Abroad* literary journal itself. Often operating on a shoestring budget, the journal faced elimination by a university administration focused on other priorities. Ivask believed establishing an international literary prize from the center of Oklahoma that dared to challenge the old-world literary establishment was one way of bringing attention and support to the prestigious, but ill-funded, publication.

"In the mid-60s, university administrators were preoccupied with the social events of the time," Simon says. "There was not a lot of interest in funding this journal many people did not realize was so important. They thought of it as a whimsical idea that had run its course. Ivar's idea to give a prize to elevate the reputation of the journal ultimately worked, as presidents came to realize that *Books Abroad*, now *WLT*, is a crown jewel for the university."

Even with the international attention and praise for the inaugural award, there was no assurance that a second prize could be funded. Not only did the prize money itself need to be secured, so too did the expenses of managing a world-wide competition from the center of the United States. After enjoying tremendous success (which included the fortuitous selection of Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* as the second prize laureate) Ivask was scrambling for money.

In keeping with a family tradition of support for the university, the Neustadt family came to the rescue. In 1940, Walter Neustadt Sr. gave the land that would become OU's Max Westheimer Airport. In the 1980s, his four children would provide funding for the Doris W. Neustadt Wing of Bizzell Memorial Library, named for their mother. Walter Neustadt Jr. endowed the Neustadt Professorship in Comparative Literature. And in 1972, the Neustadt family gift, directed by Walter Jr., endowed the *Books Abroad* International Prize for Literature. The award received its present name in 1976.

The endowment ensures the award, which currently consists

of \$50,000 and a replica of an eagle feather cast in silver, will last in perpetuity.

Like so many, Kathy Neustadt did not pay too much attention to the good works of her parents growing up. Not until she was older did she come to appreciate the profound impact that her family's endowment of the original *Books Abroad* International Prize for Literature would mean to the literary world.

Neustadt says she was in her early teens when her parents became involved with the literary prize bearing their name.

"Sometimes they would bring us to the award dinner, but I had no idea of the prestige of the prize until I was in my late 20s and I would attend all the events associated with it," she says. "I never had a good grasp of it until I was well into adulthood."

Her father's intent when he endowed the prize was to carry on something academically and literarily important to OU students as well as to the broader literary community to ensure emerging voices would be heard and be recognized. The ensuing notoriety was not foreseen by the longtime Oklahoma philanthropist.

"My father had absolutely no aspirations for this award to be anything other than a benefit for OU students and the university," Neustadt says. "As the prize became more and more prominent and began being compared to the Nobel, he would beam, but I don't think when my parents decided to endow the prize that was ever the intent."

Neustadt says she appreciates the continuous discovery of new voices the prize unveils each time a laureate is chosen and notes she would love to be a fly on the wall during jury deliberations.

"People recognize it as being a different kind of prize. From my lay point of view, there is not a lot of political deliberation that takes place within jury consideration, rather the award is based on the merit of the writer and the caliber of their writing. The greatest thing that I love about the prize that distinguishes it from everything else is the positive, elimination-voting process. It is such a thoughtful, deliberate method."

A writer for the *New York Times* in 1982 called the Neustadt Prize "the Oklahoma Nobel" and in some circles the prize is dubbed "the American Nobel" for its many intersections with the Swedish Academy. Not bad for a tenacious group of editors in Oklahoma who were determined to save their journal by uncovering and rewarding the best writers from across the globe.

For more on the Neustadt Prize, visit <https://www.neustadt-prize.org>.

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