

ESSAY

The Short, Unsuccessful Life of the American Book Awards

By CRAIG FEHRMAN

On Nov. 16, literary types will put on their evening wear, gather in a Manhattan ballroom and clap politely for the presentation of this year's National Book Awards. It's the publishing industry's biggest awards ceremony — and its best excuse to party — but it remains a subdued affair. Last year's jolt of celebrity came from a jeans-wearing Patti Smith, whose "Just Kids" won the nonfiction award. Far more typical was the fiction prize, which went to the little-known "Lord of Misrule," by Jaimy Gordon. It would have been a shocking choice if the National Book Awards weren't known for this sort of thing. They're awards for insiders. Except for the one time they weren't. In 1980, publishing's awards went Hollywood — with results disastrous enough to ensure it would never happen again.

Before we get to the plot, though, some exposition. From its first year in 1950 into the 1970s, the National Book Awards resembled the event we know today: a small number of awards, each selected by a jury of writers, imbued with lots of prestige and provoking reliable bursts of intramural controversy. In the weeks before the 1978 awards, for example, word got out that Edmund Wilson's "Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972," published posthumously by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, had been ruled ineligible. Roger Straus began an epistolary crusade against the awards, complaining that they were "an outrageous mess."

Meanwhile, the more commercial players in publishing were growing unhappy with the awards' emphasis on a few elite titles at a time when the chain bookstores and paperback houses were helping democratize the book business. In a letter to an aggrieved novelist, one awards staff member admitted there was "not broad-based industry support for the National Book Awards." If publishers were going to spend upward of \$100,000 a year running the prizes — not to mention the costs of transporting and feting authors — they wanted something that would give them a better return on their investment.

So, in the summer of 1979, the Association of American Publishers made a stunning announcement: The National Book Awards were no more. In their place would rise the American Book Awards, offering some 30 prizes, in hardcover and paperback, in categories like "religion and inspiration," "general reference," even "best jacket design." Technical awards were one of many ideas lifted from the Academy Awards. In fact, publishing would get its own "academy" of 2,000 people — writers and critics, but also librarians, editors and booksellers — to vote on all those categories, with the winners revealed in an extravagant, TV-friendly ceremony. "A lot of people outside the industry know nothing about the awards," Franklyn Rodgers, president of Scribner's and a co-chairman of the new awards, said. "We ought to have a program that is more visible to the public."

The new awards seemed to satisfy publishing's many factions — the other chairman was

the paperback magnate Ronald Busch — except one: the literary. Roger Straus sent another angry letter (written with Aaron Asher, Farrar, Straus's editor in chief), lamenting that the National Book Awards had been "silently liquidated," and vowed that his house would not participate. More than 40 former winners and judges, including Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, Joyce Carol Oates and Donald Barthelme, signed a petition accusing the awards of putting profits first. "Evidently, writers and critics are undependable types who cannot be trusted to know that the best book is that which sells the most copies," the petition declared. The writers and critics of PEN voted by a 91 percent majority not to participate. (They founded their own award instead, the PEN/Faulkner.)

Still, the American Book Awards lumbered toward their 1980 debut. The first batch of 147 nominees included plenty of best sellers. (For your consideration in "current interest": "The Pritikin Program for Diet and Exercise.") But the fiction category saw nominations for the same high-profile literary writers who had dominated the old awards, including Roth ("The Ghost Writer"), Norman Mailer ("The Executioner's Song") and William Styron ("Sophie's Choice"). Those three sent a telegram requesting that their books be withdrawn, but publishers kept their eye on the coming ceremony. "It will be run almost exactly the way the Academy Awards are run," a spokesman told reporters. Indeed, the industry tripled the awards' budget, hiring an "official accounting agency," securing a Broadway producer to design the set, even pushing the idea of office betting pools.

The awards were scheduled for Thursday, May 1, at 7 p.m., with William F. Buckley Jr. and the NBC anchor John Chancellor serving as hosts. The Seventh Regiment Armory in Manhattan was transformed into a literary amphitheater, with a small stage flanked by three screens projecting images from the New York Public Library's reading room. (Someone nixed the plan for huge foam lions outside the armory's doors.) The awards couldn't secure a commitment from network TV, but Buckley agreed to run a condensed version on his public television program, "Firing Line."

It was the television cameras that created the ceremony's first major snag. No one had thought about the lighting problems posed by the armory's windows, and Buckley's crew refused to begin until sunset, which meant the proceedings started an hour late and suffered from a wine shortage.

"This being a literary evening," Chancellor told the 1,600 attendees once he and Buckley had finally taken the stage, "we have chosen a theme." The theme was firsts: the new "first novel" category (short videos of each nominee played on the screens), presenters' reminiscences of their first publications and, of course, the first American Book Awards. With so much scripted material (a lot of it painfully corny), there was no time for acceptance speeches, or even for the winners to appear onstage.

That was probably for the best, as most presenters seemed extremely uncomfortable. The sound system also acted up, cutting out completely during the evening's one speech,

when Eudora Welty accepted the National Medal for Literature. Between the squealing feedback and the folding chairs, it felt less like publishing's Oscars than like a high school dance.

The media pilloried the event — “bloated and blighted,” *The Washington Post* said. Buckley came back for a second year (joined this time by John Kenneth Galbraith), but there was a slow reining in of ambition. The academy was disbanded, the number of prizes slowly contracted and, in 1987, the National Book Awards finally returned.

That year, everyone expected Toni Morrison's “*Beloved*” to take the fiction prize. (In anticipation, Morrison brought three tables' worth of supporters.) Instead, it went to Larry Heinemann's “*Paco's Story*,” prompting some to speculate about the motives of the jury. “If the award was not predictable,” one of the jurors, the novelist Gloria Naylor, said in self-defense, “that's because literature isn't predictable.”

What has become predictable, in the years since, is the awards' annual shortlist and the grumbling it provokes. In *Salon* earlier this month, Laura Miller called this year's nominees — which include Téa Obreht's acclaimed best seller, “*The Tiger's Wife*,” alongside four more typically obscure works — further proof that the National Book Awards have become “a Hail Mary pass on behalf of ‘writer's writers’ ” rather than a useful guide for the general public. The awards have flirted with populist appeal, as in 2003, when the medal for lifetime achievement went to Stephen King. (A surprised King told a reporter that 10 years earlier he and John Grisham bought tickets to the ceremony, since “that was the only way we were going to get in the door.”) But there's been far more of what happened the year after, when only one of the five books nominated for the fiction award had sold as many as 1,000 copies, according to Nielsen BookScan. Ultimately, it may be picking obscure books, more than getting on TV, that makes people notice.