

And the winner is...

Andrew Albanese talks to John Jenkins about the surge in popularity of the AAP's PROSE Awards for Scholarly and Professional Publishing

The Professional and Scholarly Publishing division of the Association of American Publishers Awards for Professional and Scholarly Excellence (PROSE) are now in their 37th year, but like the industry itself, the last few years have seen an amazing amount of change. The awards have seen a massive spike in submissions, and the reach of the awards has never been greater, with an expansion of award categories.

Only one PROSE prizewinner, however, will take home the prestigious R R Hawkins Award, which recognises the best scholarly work in all disciplines of the humanities and sciences. We caught up with PROSE Awards Chairman John Jenkins to talk about the awards.

AA: We talk a lot about “creative destruction” in digital publishing, but when it comes to the AAP's Prose Awards, there seems to be more “creative” happening, than “destruction”. Can you talk about the surge in popularity the awards are experiencing?

JJ: PROSE entries have doubled in the past four years, so the awards programme now is a real promotional force in helping publishers gain recognition for their best work. Creative destruction certainly is an apt way to describe what's happening in the industry right now; the future is digital, business models are changing rapidly, and the savviest publishers among us are riding that trend, seeking to disrupt established markets. But I think that “creative destruction” is much more about how our content is packaged and delivered. Fundamentally, publishers still need to draw attention to the great content they create, and to the innovative ways that their content is packaged—digitally and otherwise. And the PROSE Awards have really become a showcase for publishers. An award from one's peers is just such a huge honour, and we've seen how that can spike sales.

AA: Talk a little about how the Awards changed over the last digital decade, and what hasn't changed. For example, judging, the submissions process, publicity opportunities?

JJ: The big changes have really come in the last four or five years. Probably the only thing that hasn't changed is the way we judge. All the judges gather for two early-January days in New York. We discuss and decide each category as a

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John Jenkins prepares for the filming and webcast of the 2011 PROSE Awards luncheon

group, with the subject experts leading the various discussions. There are 15 of us and it's a grueling but very satisfying two days.

Everything else about PROSE is new and continues to evolve, and the changes really do mirror the creative change in our industry. For example, we now promote the awards and the winners through Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and via our own website (www.proseawards.com). Last year we had our first live webcast of the event, which was watched live all over the world, and for the past four years the entire event has been archived and viewable later on YouTube. Also, for each of the past four years, we've produced a short behind-the-scenes film—each one month in the making—that premieres at the PROSE event in February. Our most recent film featured the winner of the prior year's Hawkins Award (our top prize), Yale University Press, for the *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* by David Eltis and David Richardson. That film is actually making the rounds in various film festivals now.

AA: Any trends you've noticed? For example, are digital products supplanting print in submissions, and are new digital products at an advantage?

JJ: The proportion of digital has been pretty much the same in recent years, about 10 to 20% of total entries. I think the number of digital entries, and the very high quality of most of them, reflects the time it takes for a professional or scholarly publisher to get these sophisticated products out the door.

We expect to see the digital pace accelerate, and that would be a welcome trend for our industry, I think. The digital products are judged in their own categories, but they also compete with the print products in subject-matter categories. A couple of years ago, we awarded the Hawkins Award to a digital

product. We'll no doubt see more such winners as the market continues to evolve.

AA: If the awards are given regardless of format, how do the judges handle comparing digital and print products? Does the format fundamentally influence the way a resource is experienced and judged?

JJ: We're looking for winners that are truly unique, or that break significant new ground, or that represent a life's work. That's true regardless of whether the product is printed or digital.

AA: You mention the Hawkins award, and a few years ago, you did a short film about R R Hawkins and it is a fascinating tale. Who was he, and how did he get his name on the big prize?

JJ: When I became chairman of the PROSE Awards a few years ago, finding out more about R R Hawkins was something I very much wanted to do. But the institutional history had been lost and we actually didn't know much about him at all, except that he had been the Chief of the Science and Technology Division of the New York Public Library. So, we hired an investigator, and now you can go to our website and read all about him (we actually have a section titled “Who is R R Hawkins?”) and, as you note, we made a short film about him.

It turns out he had a dedication and passion for scholarly and professional publishing that makes him the ideal person to have the highest honour in our industry named for him. But, he was also a very private man. Even though he had this great prize named in his honour, he never attended the Awards ceremony. When I came in as Chairman, the first thing I did was to invite his family to attend, and it was a huge reunion for them, a great moment, and very touching. And, you can watch it on YouTube! ■

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