
fruits of innovation are deliberately withheld.

In 1930, after outside firms tried to interest it in some form of telephone-answering device, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) had its research arm, the now-renowned Bell Telephone Laboratories, take up the question of magnetic recording. Physicist Clarence Hickman and his colleagues made remarkable progress. By 1934, writes Clark, who has a doctorate in the history of technology from the University of Delaware, "magnetic recording had become a practical method for sound reproduction, one which had a number of potential commercial applications." A prototype telephone-answering machine built that year, although large and complicated, "met all reasonable engineering requirements for performance," Clark says. Similar equipment was used successfully in field tests. Yet AT&T did not offer an answering machine to its customers until the early 1950s—and prohibited the connection of recorders to public phone lines until 1948, when consumer pressure became too great to resist.

Why the delays? Upper-level executives at AT&T, Clark says, feared that if recordings of

conversations were permitted, customers would be less willing to use the phone system. A slip of the tongue recorded during a business negotiation, for example, could be fatal to a deal. Also, some AT&T executives estimated that up to one-third of all phone calls involved matters of an illegal or immoral nature. Even the possibility that recording devices were being used, one manager said, "would change the whole nature of telephone conversations and would in our opinion render the telephone much less satisfactory and useful in the vast majority of cases in which it is employed."

Surprisingly, according to Clark, the managers "paid far more attention to the question of trust and image" than to potential profits. That was a reflection of the public-relations problems AT&T was having as a result of New Deal antitrust investigations.

Having failed to exploit the technological lead it had developed, AT&T lost it after 1940. When the Bell system finally began offering answering machines to its customers in 1951, they were built not by AT&T but by an outside contractor.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Prize for Irrelevance

"The Nobel Prize for Literature" by Renee Winegarten, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1994), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Henry James, James Joyce, Federico Garcia Lorca, Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust, and Leo Tolstoy—all were great writers, yet all were passed over for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Those honored instead include such now largely forgotten writers as French poet Sully Prudhomme (1901) and American novelist Pearl S. Buck (1938).

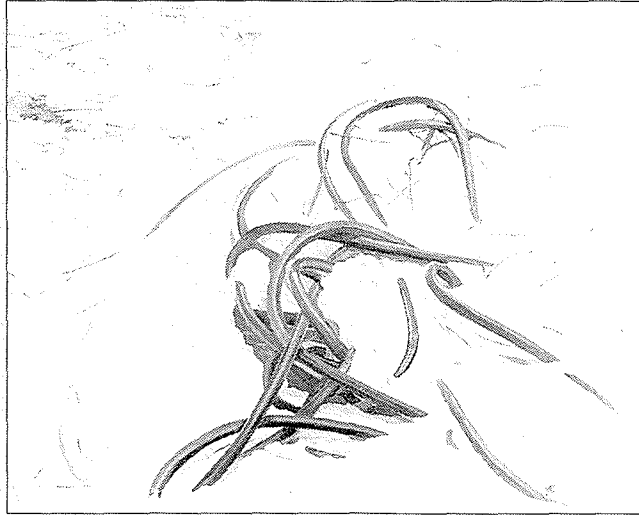
Of course, worthy writers, from T. S. Eliot (1948) and William Faulkner (1949) to Czeslaw Milosz (1980) and Joseph Brodsky (1987), have won the Nobel jackpot—now worth \$12,500. (William Butler Yeats's first question upon learn-

ing he was to receive the award in 1923 was "How much?") Yet on the whole, argues Winegarten, an essayist and literary critic, the award's meaning for literature or writers is greatly overblown. And rarely does the prize go to a struggling writer, enabling him or her to do more work. George Bernard Shaw (the 1925 winner) said the Nobel Prize was "a life belt thrown to a swimmer who has already reached the shore."

"The great merit of the Nobel Prize for Literature," Winegarten says, "is that it is international in scope—even if internationalism . . . is a cultural virtue, not strictly a literary one." While the prize is "honorably universal, embracing writers from India (Rabindranath Tagore [1913]), Japan (Yasunari Kawabata [1968]), Nigeria (Wole Soyinka [1986]), the Caribbean (Derek Walcott [1992]), the citations monotonously discuss literature in terms of ethnic identity and

A Realist's Progress

From the start of her career in the early 1970s, Catherine Murphy has been hailed as a brilliant representational painter, an heir of Edward Hopper, notes critic Gerrit Henry in *Art in America* (Jan. 1994). "She was praised for her aerial views from the window of her Hoboken apartment looking toward the Empire State Building, or her tree-shaded, high-lawned treatments of her childhood home in the woods of Lexington, Mass., all painstakingly painted from life." But, as *Garden Hose in Melting Snow* (1988), right, shows, Murphy has progressively come to grips with aspects of 20th-century modernist abstraction.



From a few feet away, *Garden Hose in Melting Snow* looks exactly like what its title says it is. But from 10 feet away, Henry observes, "it looks like a field of pristine white strewn lightly with pencil markings, with loopy bright-green calligraphy at center." Murphy herself comments: "It's about a line on a piece of paper. The snow is the paper, the line is the garden hose."

"She is unusual among today's realist painters," Henry says, "for she accepts the challenge of incorporating abstraction within—not imposing it on top of—convincing naturalist imagery."

nationality." Latin American writers, for example, are generally praised for writing about their native region, not for literary virtues independent of nationality.

Indeed, contrary to popular perceptions, the prize was not intended to be awarded purely on the basis of literary merit. Alfred Nobel (1833–96), the Swedish inventor and frustrated writer who endowed the prize, declared in his will that it should go to the author of "the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency." It has often gone to writers who have exposed injustice, such as Britain's John Galsworthy, who won in 1932 on the strength of works such as *The Silver Box* (1906), a play about the law's unequal treatment of rich and poor, or to spokesmen for the underdog, such as John Steinbeck, author of *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), who won in 1962.

For all its limitations, the Nobel Prize undeniably has its great moments. When Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn was selected in 1970,

a French writer said the choice by itself justified the existence of the Nobel Prize.

The Age of Corruption

"Edith Wharton's Abuser" by Kenneth S. Lynn, in *The American Spectator* (Dec. 1993), 2020 N. 14th St., Ste. 750, Arlington, Va. 22216.

R. W. B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975) won the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize and is the work upon which other commentators on the author of *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and other famous novels now rely. Lynn, a literary biographer and erstwhile professor, charges that the Yale University professor's work is a scandal—ridden with errors and "profoundly corrupt."

Thanks to Lewis, Lynn contends, today's critics and scholars who write about Edith Wharton (1862–1937) "are working out of the following assumptions: Borne down by her society, her