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The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Partial History

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There is a moment at each Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony when the audience is silent. There will have been various speeches of thanks and the proceedings have been passed over to the person with the envelope. Then there is a moment of tension.

The award is announced.

And then there is that silence – sometimes broken by tumultuous applause, sometimes a more measured response. I suspect that silence feels far longer than clock hands would measure. And then the response – celebrations or recriminations – continue, having rumbled since the announcement of the shortlist.

The origins of the Arthur C. Clarke Award lay in plans for a magazine. Maurice Goldsmith ran the International Science Policy Foundation, an independent non-profit making company and educational charity. Noting the success of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, Goldsmith suggested to Clarke he might want to fund a British science-fiction magazine. Clarke had been part of early British fandom and the fanzine that became the magazine *New Worlds*. This had long since ceased publication, the vacuum most recently being filled by *InterZone*. But the market would not sustain a second magazine. So what about sponsoring an award instead?

Goldsmith talked to Foundation – established by space advocate George Hay with Clarke as patron – to engage their help and they pointed to the British Science Fiction Association

Awards, given more or less annually since 1969 by an organisation of which Clarke was president. Could the ecosystem of British science fiction support a second prize?

A meeting chaired by Professor John Radford from the North East London Polytechnic (then the home to the Science Fiction Foundation Collection) brought Hay and Goldsmith, Mike Moir and Paul Kincaid of the BSFA and John Clute and Edward James of Foundation together to consider the possible purposes of such an award. The two most prominent sf prizes were largely American-based: the Hugo for members of the World Science Fiction Convention and the Nebula for members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. One is a readers' award, the other a peers'. But the Clarke could be a juried award, on the model of The Booker and Whitbread Prizes, or, more to the point, on the Philip K. Dick Award.

Kincaid claims that Clarke wanted the award to 'encourage British science fiction' (Kincaid 2006: 12) and James argues that 'it was intended to bring sf to the attention of the public and point them in the direction of the best science fiction' (James 2002: 69). These are not incompatible aims. The aims could be met by making it an award for British writers – especially as the major existing ones were then dominated by American writers. There had been a rowing back from the high watermark of professional British sf writers in 1979 and the generation of writers nurtured by *InterZone* were yet to fully emerge. There was a worry that the talent pool was not big enough to create a credible shortlist. The three organisations were to supply two judges each – in fact the six people at the meeting aside from Radford – to judge the best sf novel published in Britain. Clarke put up £1000 as prize money.

As Kincaid notes, 'At no point did we decide what was meant by "best", by "science fiction", or even by "novel"' (Kincaid 2006: 12). These days, the rules of the award make it explicit that we have no official definition of the terms. Publishers do submit fantasy and horror, although clearly these are cognate genres that have much in common with sf; they sometimes send volumes that appear to be collections of short stories rather than 'novels'. And the varied noises of those silences at the announcement testify to the slippery nature of 'best'.

It was arguably only with the fourth and fifth winners that the award hit its stride. The first two winners in 1987 and 1988, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and George Turner's *The Sea and the Summer* (1987), were controversial and the third, Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire* (1988), was a challenging read. *The Handmaid's Tale* was a dystopia about the oppression of women, by a feminist Canadian novelist from outside of the genre. James claims that this was the wrong book to win: it 'did nothing to present science fiction to the British public because they did not recognize it to be science fiction' (James 2002: 70). Kincaid argues that to some it felt like the 'award was deliberately turning its back on the core of the genre' (Kincaid 2006: 12). This exposes a tension that remains at the heart of the award. When it privileges the literary, it is perceived as making grand claims for the genre as more than just gosh-wow escapism. Claims of maturity for the genre may do more to reassure insiders than to persuade outsiders.

The apparent standoffish reaction of Atwood, who apparently did not see her novel as sf, did not help. There was a suspicion, perhaps, that Atwood did not *need* the award and thus did not *deserve* it. Atwood's publisher, Jonathan Cape – who had published sf – had not marketed her novel as sf and were not to use the award as a means of marketing it. This was read as a slap in the face. I suspect we were talking past each other; Atwood,

when young, had clearly enjoyed pulp sf, but had moved on before the New Wave had made its impact. Her sf was not the bug-eyed monster type hence she did not write it – but little sf was like that anymore anyway.

The following year George Turner won. Turner was arguably then Australia's leading sf writer, albeit one who had been critical of much genre work in the past. Jonathan Cape had not published this novel as sf, but, even if they were not to use the award in publicity, they had consented to submit it to an sf award. James suspects it 'might be the best sf novel ever produced by an Australian' (James 2006: 31). It has not remained in print, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* (1989) and Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* (1990) were popular winners by major talents who were integral to the British sf scene. The latter novel was a variation on space opera, post-Iain M. Banks and, indeed, Lewis Carroll. It was also a popular book – one of the few Clarke winners to have a spaceship on the cover – clearly of and in the genre as it also won the BSFA Award. The following year, Pat Cadigan, then one of the few female cyberpunk writers, took the award for her complex *Synners* (1991). And then controversy struck again in 1993 with Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* (1991). Piercy had written sf previously, but it was felt by many that Kim Stanley Robinson's ambitious *Red Mars* (1992) was the more appropriate winner, especially as it had a cover quote by Clarke. By that logic perhaps he should have been shoo-in as winner for *3001: The Final Odyssey* (1997). Clarke later admitted to liking what he had read of the Piercy. On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a distinctly outsider choice, seemed to cause little fuss. The community seemed pleased to be introduced to a book that might otherwise have passed them by. Indeed, I get the sense that it has become one of the award's more successful choices, whereas there has been a

backlash against the following year's at the time popular choice of Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996).

The award had become a gathering of the fleets, bringing together publishers, authors, readers, critics, fans, scientists and academics – the stakeholders of British sf. There was a sense of a collective ownership of the award. Tricia Sullivan, who won for *Dreaming in Smoke* (1998), says that she 'was one of those winners nobody expects; my work hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of being noticed for a big popular award. My novels have never sold well, but having the Clarke on my CV has given me confidence to persist with publishing' (Personal Communication). She remains deserving of our attention. Similarly, Pat Cadigan feels elated by her two awards: 'For me, personally, the Clarke Award is my pride and joy — or maybe that should be *are* my prides and joys. My Clarkes were awarded by two completely different juries — that meant a great deal to me each time, and it still does' (Personal Communication). The winners – and the shortlists – offer a sounding of the state of the current field of sf for each year.

But if the award was generating less controversy within the community, it now faced structural problems. The International Science Policy Foundation was struggling to provide judges – Lord Mark Birdwood was the last and, despite my being a judge for the 1997 award, I have no memory of Goldsmith's involvement. The ceremony had moved to the Science Museum – whose attendances apparently had been damaged by having to charge entrance fees – and between the 2000 and 2003 awards Doug Millard, who worked for the Science Museum, acted as judge. Clarke had increased the prize money to £2001 in honour of his most famous work, and by another pound each year after that, but it was not clear that the money would continue. It had been channelled through Rocket

Publishing, but resources were finite and Clarke was aging. Meanwhile, the Science Museum wanted to charge for use of the venue.

In 2003, a council of war was convened, with then chair of the award Paul Kincaid, Maureen Kincaid Speller, Paul Billinger, Elizabeth Billinger and myself. (Angie Edwards, the niece of Clarke, was also involved but did not make every meeting.) We set up a company to give the award a legal existence – I suggested Serendip Foundation as a nod to Clarke's adopted country of Sri Lanka. Maureen formalised her role as awards assistant and Elizabeth Billinger took over the accounting. Thanks to the generosity of the BSFA and the (renamed and reconstituted) Science Fiction Foundation in lending money, we made it through. To mark two decades of the Clarkes, Kincaid edited a collection of essays on the twenty winners with myself as junior editor and Kincaid Speller as excellent copy editor and proof reader.

When Kincaid decided to step down, having been chair since the 1996 award, Paul Billinger took over dealing with the judging, whilst Tom Hunter, editor of *Matrix*, the then news magazine of the BSFA, came in as the Director of the Award. The financing could be kept at arm's length from the judging. We began an association with Louis Savvy and Sci Fi London, a film festival; the ceremony was held at a Piccadilly cinema and the organisation also started to provide a fifth judge from 2012.

Paul Billinger stood down in 2012 after five awards, in my favour. At first things were quiet – a *Guardian* journalist tried to manufacture a story out of the fact that Terry Pratchett had not been shortlisted – but then Christopher Priest wrote a blog attacking the award: 'Of the six shortlisted novels, I can find only one which I think is something we should be proud of' (Priest 2012). The rest he dismissed, along with a crime writer

(although Priest rapidly deleted this material from the blog). He asserted that this was ‘a set of judges who were not fit for purpose’ and ‘Andrew Butler [sic] [...] reveals himself as incompetent as the others.’ When I had been a judge in the mid-1990s we had all had email, but almost all of the deliberation was held in person; feedback was at conventions and in print. By 2012 we had the echo chamber of Twitter, broadband and blogs, and it felt rather like being at the eye of a storm for the judges. Priest has since made his peace with the authors, if not necessarily with the judges, and Jane Rogers won for *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011) to her obvious pleasure.

The following year there was further controversy – for the first time since 1988 there were no women on the shortlist. As four of the five judges were women, it was hard to accuse them of sexism. It was obvious when tallying up the judges’ votes prior to the shortlisting meeting that the shortlist was going to be all male and we discussed the implications. There was no novel by a woman that they felt would take a fifth or sixth place – the titles were either too far into the realms of fantasy or horror, or parts of series or not good enough. The jury stood by their literary judgement on quality alone, as is perfectly within the rules. Former judges Niall Harrison and Farah Mendlesohn observed that few female sf writers had British book contracts; Mendlesohn read the sf submissions by women and averred that there were none that she would have shortlisted. But the important thing is people were talking about sf in Britain.

In 2013 we released the submissions list of books written by women before that of the men – this unfortunately had the impact of making some commentators believe we had split the award into two, one for women, one for men. We have not had another all-male shortlist; indeed the last two awards have been made to women. Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013) subverted the subgenre of space opera in the tradition of Banks, Greenland

and Anne McCaffrey. Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) is again from outside the genre family, but she was more than happy to win the award.

After twenty-five years of the award being criticised for privileging the literary over the genre, some of the shortlisted books have been felt to be too old fashioned. Some even have spaceships on their covers. Almost a decade after stepping down from chairing the award, Kincaid still notes the importance of the Clarkes: 'It seems to me that the Clarke award is now firmly established as one of the major genre awards, the only one of the top flight awards that isn't primarily American (I count the Hugo as an American award). The BSFA Award, and other Australian and Canadian awards get noticed, but don't get the same degree of respect. So, again, the Clarke Award puts British sf on the top table for an international audience' (Personal Communication).

Positive promotion and publicity both for the award and the genre has been very important over the most recent decade, with shortlists and winners and authors now consistently featured in UK and international news. In the Internet age, the discussion can involve more people than ever before and everyone has their opinion. It should be no surprise that winners of the Clarke Award in recent years have reported sales increases of over 200%. Gwyneth Jones observed 'I think it's changed, in the past few years and is still changing: becoming more competitive in the global sf awards calendar, so to speak, & this is no bad thing. But I hope the prestige element survives the new approach. It's good for the field to have an award that's regarded as being for quality rather than for popularity' (Personal communication). We hope that through promotion we can make quality titles become popular. Outside the award itself we have worked to positively promote sf literature, organising writer events, conferences and publications as well as working directly on audience engagement projects with other prestigious institutions such as the

Royal Society, the British Library, Tate Britain and Birkbeck, University of London, perhaps most notably on the Geek Pound project.

And what of the future? In 2015 we moved to an events space at Foyle's after two years at the Royal Society; it is likely that our thirtieth will be there as well. Nothing lasts forever, of course, but Tom Hunter and I are committed to the award, with Steph Holman joining us and working largely (for now) behind the scenes. We are no closer to defining 'best', 'sf' or 'novel', but the increasing significance of ePublishing questions the notion of 'published in Britain'. So far we have allowed eBooks that are to get paper editions; currently we are unable to provide eReaders for the judges. Do electronic texts feel as substantial as paper books? At the moment we do not accept self-published novels, but the ecosystem of ePublishing may shift – although in recent year our judges have dealt with over a hundred print volumes. We've discussed a return to six judges, perhaps from a fourth organisation. The role is an honour, but is of course unpaid and takes thousands of hours.

Pat Cadigan told me that 'I get the idea that the Clarke Award is very well thought of by the rest of the field. [... Y]ou could accuse me of bias, wishful thinking, or both. Still, I feel that I'm more visible than I would have been if I hadn't won' (Personal Communication). I think it is those positive feelings that mean people across the broad church of the sf communities care enough about the award to have opinions – it *matters* to them if their favourite doesn't win, and they are ready to argue their case. Authors such as Lauren Beukes and Chris Beckett have seen spikes in their sales in the month after their award; Leckie was also riding high in the charts but she was also winning the other genre awards. 'If you look at the list of all the nominees and winners since the beginning (other than my own books),' Cadigan suggests modestly, 'I think you'd have to admit that more often than not, it shows off the best of our field' (Personal Communication). And in the years to

come, it will be such books we reach for to recommend to friends, relatives or co-workers who want to try that sf stuff.

So long may that silence at the announcement be unpredictable and the discussion that follows rich.

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