

And the Nobel for cowardliness goes to... the Nobel committee!



Annie Ernaux, winner of the Nobel prize for literature, 2022

by Lev Tsitrin

I think I was not the only one assuming that this years' Nobel in literature would go to Salman Rushdie. Unlike Nobels in science, the criteria for the award in literature is completely subjective; I bet that the Nobel committee could easily justify giving it to anyone writing for NER if they wanted to. That Rushdie's writing is sufficiently meritorious is obvious; that he is particularly deserving of this award given his courage in the face of Khomeini's death-threatening fatwa, and the recent stabbing attack inspired by it, is clear. That awarding a Nobel to him would have broadcasted,

far and wide, the West's much-needed clarion call for the freedom of speech – and that it would be heard, loud and clear, in the very un-free Middle East, China, Russia and suchlike places, would be a huge added bonus. That it would come in the midst of the current unrest in Iran that is fueled by the brutal and deadly excesses of the regime's "morality police," putting sharp focus on ayatollahs' denial of freedom to Iranians, would be a huge cherry on the cake.

Would that taint the Nobel with politics? Of course, but so what? So was awarding the Nobel to Boris Pasternak in 1958 for a novel he smuggled to the West to be published there – his Nobel was more of a statement in support of free speech than anything else.

Would giving a Nobel to Rushdie be a kind of consolation to a badly wounded person for his suffering? Yes indeed, but so it was in 1962 when a physics Nobel went to a Soviet scientist Lev Davidovich Landau who was frightfully mauled in a car crash earlier in that year, and spent the remaining years of his life in terrible pain, unable to do physics. The award was richly deserved – Landau did some top-notch work in theoretical physics making him one of the towering figures of 20th century science – and yet under different circumstances his Nobel could wait, or go elsewhere. Being awarded in a hospital to a badly wounded person, it was clearly understood by all that it was, first and foremost, a human and humane gesture, and only secondarily a scientific award.

Rushdie undoubtedly deserved the Nobel for the very same reasons; yet to my surprise and disappointment, the Nobel for him was not to be: it went to some Frenchwoman for pouring out on the pages of her books her experiences with "abortion, love and infidelity" – as the title of the [New York Times' announcement](#) put it – I guess hers were the memories of Casanova of sorts.

So why not Rushdie? The only reason that I can see, is

cowardliness. For all the sympathy for Rushdie which the Nobel committee would be inhumane to not feel, and for all his work that richly deserved the Nobel, giving it to him would have indeed shed bright light of publicity on inhumanity of the ayatollahs – and, apparently, this is exactly that the Nobel deciders deliberately decided to avoid, so as not to roil the Islamist crowd. As they say in construction industry, “safety first.”

I don't know what the literary world's reaction will be; but it is perfectly clear that if there was a Nobel in the category of cowardliness, the Nobel committee should have award it to itself. A Nobel in literature may be meaningless as a sign of staying power of an author – books by the great majority of its winners are not read anymore, and such superb writers as Czech Karel Capek or Argentine's Jorge Luis Borges never got one – but still, awarding it to Rushdie would carry a great deal of meaning. But the Nobel committee has, along with so many other institutions, been cowered into political correctness, and resulting meaninglessness. That's too sad – for all of us, and not just for Rushdie...