PALINDROME AESTHETICS AND COMPETITIONS

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The last two years have seen two brand-new competitive events in the field of palindromy, which should continue for many years. Will Shortz sponsored the first World Palindrome Championship in March of 2012, as part of the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. And this March 10 (i.e. 3/10/2013), my Palindromist Magazine announced the first annual Symmys Awards for outstanding palindrome achievement, modeled after the Academy Awards for film.

Shortz has stated that he’s not likely to hold the next WPC until five years have passed, and since I won, I see no reason to try to change his mind. But the Symmys will be an annual award, and anyone interested in competing should know that next year’s competition will be among new, original palindromes published for the first time during 2013 (including a single web posting on Facebook, MockOK.com or, say, The Palindromist’s web site and forums). We also accept direct submissions of new palindromes via the contact form at www.palindromist.org, for a full month into the New Year (i.e. until 1/31/2014).

This year there were four categories of Symmys: short palindromes, long palindromes, word unit palindromes, and poetry. (Next year we will likely add a category for multimedia, including cartoons and videos, and perhaps one for Spanish and a third new one for all other languages.)

Well known palindromists dominated the Symmys nominations and awards, starting with the World Palindrome Championship finalists: Jon Agee, John Connett, MIT Professor Nick Montfort, Barry Duncan (about whom The Believer wrote a much-publicized feature article), Doug Fink, and Martin Clear of Australia. (You won’t find me among the Symmys nominees, since my magazine sponsored the competition.) Another nominee, Dave Morice, might sound familiar to Word Ways readers.

There were also several fresh faces among the nominees. Lori Wike is a bassoonist with the Salt Lake City Orchestra; Ray Stein is a retired engineer and teacher. James Adrian just posted something on our website one day, and we still don’t know much about him. Steven Fraser has a poetry blog in the United Kingdom. Little is known about the mysterious Anne Tenna; Nick Montfort blogged straight out that she is pseudonymous. Her bio states that she is “a direct descendant of Edwin Fitzpatrick, the Victorian master palindromist discussed in Howard Bergerson’s book ‘Palindromes and Anagrams,’ as well as a second cousin of prolific palindromist Nora Baron.” Since Fitzpatrick was one of Bergerson’s many alter egos, and Connett published his palindromes under the name Nora Baron for his first couple of years, Montfort’s supposition seems well founded.

Then there is Aric Maddux, an Indianapolis writer who had more traditional poetry published in a recent anthology. He is a fan of interactive fiction, and followed Nick Montfort (who teaches that subject at MIT) on Twitter. Montfort got on a word-unit palindrome kick in 2012 and tweeted many of his efforts. Young Mr. Maddux saw this, and decided to try his hand. He has, in his entire life, written a single palindrome (of the word-unit variety):
You swallow pills for anxious days and nights, and days, anxious for pills, swallow you.

To make a long story short, this effort not only won the Word Unit Ymmy — yes, the singular of SymmyS is Ymmy — it was the overwhelming choice as Grand Prize Winner as overall best palindrome of the year.

In other categories, Jon Agee won the short palindrome title, Anne Tenna shared the poetry prize in an exact tie, and Connett and Montfort had many excellent word unit palindromes but could not overcome the beginner’s momentum. The biggest winner was Martin Clear, the Sydney computer programmer, who was nominated for 10 out of the 40 total nominations. He took first AND second prize for long palindromes, tied with Tenna for first in poetry, and took second place to Agee in short palindromes.

All of the nominees, winners, contestants and judges are listed at http://www.palindromist.org/symmys.

These competitions raise an interesting question: how does one compare and judge palindromes? It’s not like there are established, fixed criteria. Will Shortz’ World Palindrome Championship was purely based on an audience vote among the 650 or so in attendance. We were given three constraints and 75 minutes; contestants could submit up to 3 palindromes, matching one or more of the constraints as they liked. My winning effort was

“Devil Kay fixes trapeze part; sex if yak lived.”

(That was to fit the constraint, “include an X and a Z in your palindrome.”) I actually preferred my second palindrome (for the constraint “about someone famous in the news during the past year”).

“I tan. I mull. In a way, Obama, I am a boy – a wan Illuminati.”

But the crowd clearly preferred the sex yak.

For the SymmyS, though, we had an amazing pool of 9 celebrity judges, most of whom have written palindromes themselves. They included singer “Weird Al” Yankovic, actor/comedian Demetri Martin, comedian Jackie Kashian, musician John Flansburgh (half of They Might Be Giants), journalists Ben Zimmer and Jack Rosenthal, Will Shortz, Tim Van Ert (aka Timi Imit of MockOK.com), and Jeff Grant.

So how did the judges evaluate their ‘dromes? Some standards are obvious: making sense, proper grammar and spelling, clarity, lack of initials, foreign words and other cheats. With so many strong competitors, originality and not sounding like a palindrome took on increased importance. Conversational efforts were almost always preferred.
No explanations or glossaries were allowed, but each palindrome was allowed to have a title, which served as a sort of explanation or context-setter in many cases. Clearly, this will be an important part of entries going forward.

The judges' collective and more subjective choices were interesting. Dialogues were notably successful. The longest short palindromes, and the shortest long palindromes tended to win. Shorter, content-based poems (such as Tenna's 'Internal Terrorism') did better than longer or more formal verse. (Two of Ray Stein's short efforts rhymed and scanned, but did not place; Barry Duncan had four of the ten long palindrome nominees, but ended up only with third place.) However, Martin Clear tied in poetry with a full-on sonnet; the quality of the poem itself, and the heroic effort to fit two difficult constraints appear to have swayed the judges.

For short palindromes, clarity and vivid visual imagery carried the day. Jon Agee's winning effort was one of the dialogues:

An igloo costs a lot, Ed!
Amen. One made to last! So cool, Gina!

The biggest surprise was the popularity of the word-unit palindrome category, especially among the contestants. Montfort's missionary efforts at reminding the world of the relative ease and understandability of these palindromes convinced many of the WPC contestants to focus almost exclusively on that category. And they drew in Aric Maddux, who ended up taking Montfort's presumptive crown away from him. The rookie's winning palindrome also delivered notice that, especially for the grand prize winner, delivering an actual, serious and important message trumps reputation and cleverness.

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