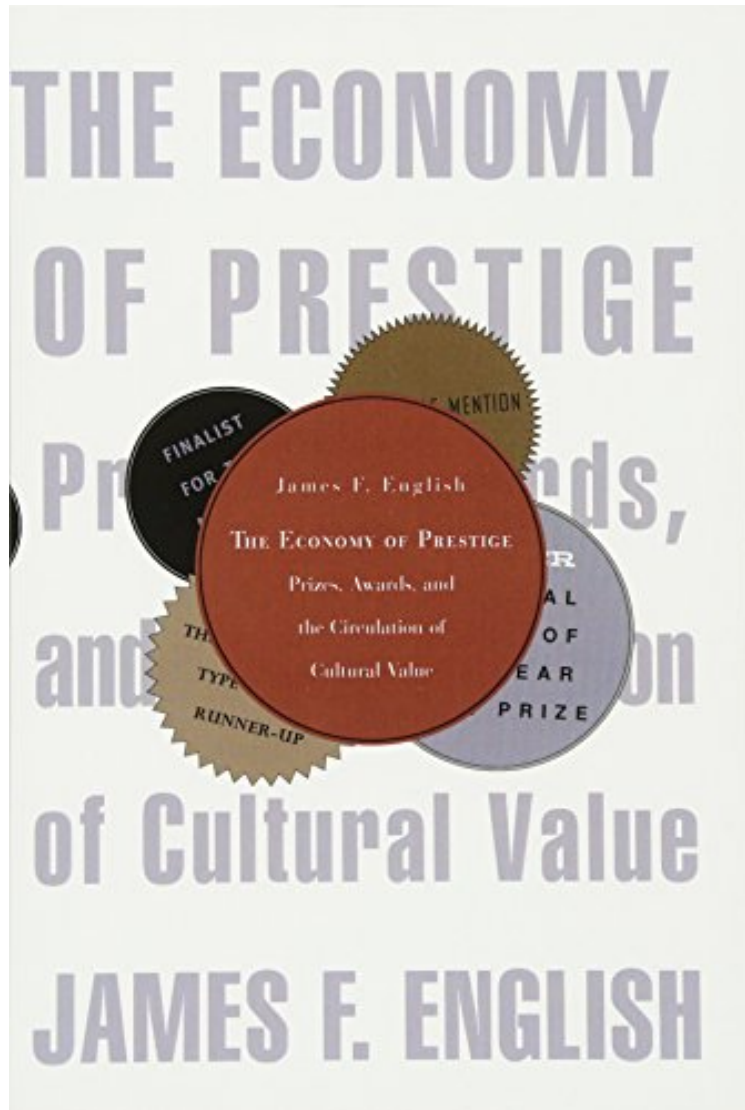


# The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value

James F. English

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**James F. English : The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Should win a prizeBy CharlusThis exceptional book about the culture of prizes is a box of surprises. What appears a limited and straight forward subject at first glance unfolds, under

English's subtle and skillful ministrations, to have far reaching and complex implications on how we use, confer value on and even think about cultural products in our global society. Written with wit, precision and clarity, this book makes one think about the dissemination and propagation of cultural prestige in original and relevant ways. Best of all, it is continually entertaining. Now if there were only a prize for books about prizes...3 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Agonizingly tedious and academic By Sasha Cave A fascinating subject but a painfully slogging read. In fact, almost unreadable. The good: some amusing gossip about feuds and hissy fits among the pretentious, inbred literary elite. Especially Toni Morrison, the world's most overrated writer, who wouldn't even be a trivia question if she weren't black. And about the British Booker [book] prize and some other prizes. And some entertaining trivia about the Nobel prizes, the Olympics and movie festivals. The bad: stupefying bad writing. The author never uses a short word where five long ones will do. This type can never say "use" when he can say "utilize" or "the utilization of." He also apparently has never heard of short sentences or paragraph breaks, since he favors page-long paragraphs. I put some random passages into readability tests like the Gunning Fog Index and they are off the charts; poster children for unreadable writing. Some parts are written at such a high level of abstraction that the book sounds like a parody of academic blather. The subject is intrinsically fascinating. The author makes it dull. The book is also marred in places by the author's leftist bias. For example, he indulges in an intemperate and false tirade against, supposedly, Reagan's and Bush's minion's reaction to imaginary racial bias in favor of minorities. He fails to acknowledge that there was, and is, an actual and pervasive racial spoils system in the "Awards Economy" and elsewhere, especially in academia. Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and many other blacks have been lionized mainly because they were blacks. If they were white, no one would have cared about their books. One very practical aspect of the book, however, although certainly not the one intended. If the reader is organizing a pretentious literary prize or competition, there are lots of ideas here to copy. Even a list of preposterously pretentious organization and prize names to help the reader generate ideas...7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. first rate work of cultural sociology By Gabriel H. Rossman This book is a great work in cultural sociology and addresses one of the key questions of the field, how different works and authors are consecrated and furthermore what consecration means. In addition to a very thorough discussion of the mechanics of awards (including the widely underestimated labor that goes into judging them) and his history of cultural awards -- from their 18th and 19th century academie precursors, through the Nobels, and into the 1970s explosion of televised awards spectacles -- English hammers away at the connection between awards and the romantic ideology of artistic charisma and argues convincingly that awards reinforce this ideology through providing an antagonist for awards bashers and awards refusers. In addition to all that, it's entertaining (for an academic book) as when, for instance he shows how the various greater and lesser awards for pornography precisely ape and parallel the greater and lesser awards for legitimate film. There is a fair amount of theory in the book, but it's not the sort of nihilistic and excessively abstract theory we've come to associate with the humanities since the 1980s. This may still be distracting to lay readers who simply want to read about how awards work, but as an academic (whose biases tend towards empiricism) I found that it not only helped draw connections between awards and broader social trends but the theory is beautifully explicated and much more accessible than in many of the works English is drawing upon. For instance, if you contrast this book with Bourdieu's (excellent but moderately dense) *The Field of Cultural Production*, you'll appreciate that English is actually making these ideas about as clear and accessible as is possible. Seen in this light the book not only describes and theoretically situates awards, but parts of it could serve as a solid introduction to theories like new class, post-industrial society, or cultural capital. Also of possible interest is that similar themes are addressed in *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art* (Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology)

This is a book about one of the great untold stories of modern cultural life: the remarkable ascendancy of prizes in literature and the arts. Such prizes and the competitions they crown are almost as old as the arts themselves, but their number and power--and their consequences for society and culture at large--have expanded to an unprecedented degree in our day. In a wide-ranging overview of this phenomenon, James F. English documents the dramatic rise of the awards industry and its complex role within what he describes as an economy of cultural prestige. Observing that cultural prizes in their modern form originate at the turn of the twentieth century with the institutional convergence of art and competitive spectator sports, English argues that they have in recent decades undergone an important shift--a more genuine and far-reaching globalization than what has occurred in the economy of material goods. Focusing on the cultural prize in its contemporary form, his book addresses itself broadly to the economic dimensions of culture, to the rules or logic of exchange in the market for what has come to be called "cultural capital." In the wild proliferation of prizes, English finds a key to transformations in the cultural field as a whole. And in the specific workings of prizes, their elaborate mechanics of nomination and election, presentation and acceptance, sponsorship, publicity, and scandal, he uncovers evidence of the new arrangements and relationships that have refigured that field.

From Publishers Weekly Examining film and literary prizes' geneses, history and the hoopla that accompanies them, English parses the many ways awards and award ceremonies have become an institutionalized "game" that relies on the condescension and outrage they provoke among critics and contenders alike. He confines his study primarily to

writing and film awards, but these provide more than enough fodder for him to produce a remarkably clear anatomy of the way prizes shape their respective worlds; he sagely notes the approximately 4,500 feature films released annually compete for about 9,000 prizes, and while the number of books published every year still outpace number of awards, literary awards have multiplied exponentially since WWII. Some passages are dense with philosophical references and theoretical jargon, but English tempers them with case studies and pop culture examples, including a lively dissection of the perennially maligned Booker Prize, that make his discussion more accessible. Despite the book's narrow scope-it focuses almost solely on judges and the judged, neglecting the effect on consumers-the book brings a refreshing perspective to a conversation usually dominated by reflexive positions. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. The irony of course is that there ought to be a prize for a book that so beautifully exposes the business and culture of prizes. James English's *The Economy of Prestige* is a smart, sardonic but never cynical, and genuine in its curiosity and mission. A pleasure to read and think about. (Percival Everett, author of *Erasure* and *God's Country*)

In an impressive tour de force, James English has quite brilliantly accomplished what he set out to do: reveal some essential features of our cultural landscape through the systematic analysis of a set of cultural practices that has been commented on ad infinitum, but never really understood. An extraordinary book, it is at once a delight to read and an original contribution to both cultural sociology and the broader interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. I know of no other book that addresses the issues that he takes up so knowledgeably. This is a genuinely innovative piece of work. (Elizabeth Long, author of *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*)

No one has tried to discuss the ins and outs of nonacademic cultural prestige as dispassionately as English does. We have scads of gossip tales of how the game works and is played, but nothing like the nonparticipant-observer account on offer here. This book is truly ground-breaking, as well as informative and entertaining. (John McGowan, author of *Democracy's Children*)

Mr. English knows everything there is to know about the mechanics of prize-giving, from the appointing of judges to the globalizing of cultural prizes to the exploiting of prizes for further self-aggrandizement. As *The Economy of Prestige* makes clear, Mr. English has mastered the subject in little and large, and it is one full of interest about the way cultural life operates in our day. (Joseph Epstein *Wall Street Journal* 2005-10-31)

Ambitious...Reading [*The Economy of Prestige* by James English] feels like being in the company of a cultural code-cracker. His work shows that we hardly know how to think about art outside the rubric of awards...[English] is an astute guide down this dizzy rabbit hole. He reminds us of the Dodo in *Alice in Wonderland*, who cries, 'Everybody has won, and all must have prizes'...English dissects the dishy politics and tawdry tricks, but the author is after much bigger intellectual game. He wants to understand how the awards-biz carries our cultural currency, creating our shared investments in what is art...*The Economy of Prestige* is rich fare for anybody who has ever been trapped at an awards banquet. It ought to win a prize. (Karen R. Long *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 2005-11-13)

Examining film and literary prizes' geneses, history and the hoopla that accompanies them, English parses the many ways awards and award ceremonies have become an institutionalized 'game' that relies on the condescension and outrage they provoke among critics and contenders alike...The book brings a refreshing perspective to a conversation usually dominated by reflexive positions. (Publishers Weekly 2005-11-01)

James F. English's compelling [book] offers a harsh view of the process of giving and receiving special prizes. Anyone who thinks that awards genuinely pay tribute to excellence in achievement should have their naivete shaken away with this often-startling book. (Phil Hall *Hartford Courant* 2005-11-27)

Intellectually shrewd and consistently entertaining. (Jim Holt *New York Magazine* 2005-12-19)

[This is a] frequently hilarious and gripping [book]...An anecdotal delight and an intellectual revelation. (Bryan Appleyard *Sunday Times* 2006-01-08)

[An] ingenious analysis of the history and social function of cultural prizes and awards. (Louis Menand *New Yorker* 2005-12-26)

Did you know that there are more film prizes than there are feature films made every year? I didn't. Similar odd facts abound in this fascinating analysis of the business of prizes and awards: their meaning, their financing, their cultural machinery. English sets off at a brisk trot through the history of gongs, from the tragedy prize at Athens, through the Nobels, the Goncourt and Booker, to the Oscars and the sadly defunct alternative Hubby Awards, which featured 'Best Kung-Fu' and 'Best Mindless Sex Comedy' categories...I hope someone inaugurates a prize for Best Book About Prizes, and gives it to this one. (The *Guardian* 2005-12-31)

[English] has embedded himself in the public history of awards, emerging with a slew of entertaining anecdotes. (Howard Davies *Times Higher Education Supplement* 2006-01-20)

*The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* argues that we've become an awards-crazy culture in a prize-drunk world. (Art Carey *Philadelphia Inquirer* 2006-01-23)

[An] elegant and entertaining book...English positions himself as an objective analyst, whose aim is not to criticize the awards industry but to see it as part of contemporary cultural practice. He is a witty, shrewd, and urbane observer. (Elaine Showalter *Times Literary Supplement* 2006-03-03)

Fascinating...In *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, English argues that scandal and discord are part and parcel of the prize enterprise. This is because at the heart of the literary or cultural prize lies a series of loosely connected ambivalences--between art and commerce; high and popular culture; inspiration and marketing; imagination and materialism; devotion to the muse and a lust for personal reward--that are outrageous by definition. (Imre Salusinszky *Weekend Australian* 2006-03-11)

English's far-ranging examination of the prize phenomenon is able to provide concrete specificity--the history of individual awards, their trophies' value, their administrative costs--as

well as engaging with the most abstract questions of 'cultural capital'...One of the joys of English's project is the way it merges high cultural theory...with an astounding range of newspaper, magazine and television commentary, providing in the process an analysis of the prize 'event' as much as prize outcomes. (Simone Murray Media International Australia)The Economy of Prestige, as James F. English himself is only too aware, is part of the phenomenon it is meant to explain. At the most basic level, English's book is an engaging and readable account of "the rise of the prize," the veritable explosion of global self-congratulation apparently set off by the institution of the Nobel Prize in 1901. Full of information and anecdote as it is, The Economy of Prestige also intends to analyze the larger "cultural field" established by these prizes, including both the interest they inspire and the critical hostility they so increasingly evoke. One of the most striking claims made by the book, in fact, is that there is no escape from "the economy of prestige"-- that, as the common wisdom has it, there is no such thing as bad publicity. Even the most vehement opposition to a particular prize, or, for that matter, to the institution of prizes as a whole, simply cements the prize system all the more firmly in place...A large part of the very real interest of this book comes from the author's unfastidious curiosity about every detail of the awards industry. Not satisfied just to list and describe many of the awards themselves, English digs deeply into what he calls the "peculiarities" surrounding the prizes, including the burdens of administering and judging them, even the cash amounts and the actual physical trophies handed out in addition to the honors. (Michael North Modernity/Modernism 2006-09-01)In this fascinating book, James F. English deftly paints a portrait of the current state of play in the "economy of cultural value." While describing the history of cultural prizes, he offers a compelling explanation for the economic forces that have led to their extraordinary proliferation over the last several decades. (David Figlio Journal of Economic Literature 2007-06-01) The irony of course is that there ought to be a prize for a book that so beautifully exposes the business and culture of prizes. James English's The Economy of Prestige is a smart, sardonic but never cynical, and genuine in its curiosity and mission. A pleasure to read and think about. (Percival Everett, author of Erasure and God's Country)