

The Prize Short Guide

The Prize by Irving Wallace

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Characters

The Prize tells four stories involving seven protagonists. The dynamic in each story is a different human failing or fault. John Garrett, a medical researcher, is bitterly resentful of his co-recipient Carlos Farelli. Denise Marceau, a biologist, avenges herself against her husband and co-winner Claude who has taken a mistress. Andrew Craig, the novelist, is mired in alcohol-drenched guilt over his wife's accidental death. Having built rockets for the Nazis, Max Stratman, an engineer, assuages his conscience by experimenting with solar energy and raising his orphaned niece Emily.

All seven protagonists are developed with complete histories: parents, lovers, childhood, career. Wallace also sketches numerous minor characters with just enough detail to fill the stereotype: expose-hungry journalist, ruthless Communist agent, sensuous Swedish actress.

Although Wallace strives to develop the major characters equally, his heart is obviously with two: Denise Marceau and Andrew Craig. He takes the reader deeper into their minds and hearts than into the other characters. Marceau is a clever, self-reliant, and likeable heroine, a plain woman turned femme fatale to save her marriage. Craig the writer is the real hero to Wallace the author. Craig has the most adventures and undergoes the fullest transformation of any protagonist. Although in terrible physical, mental, and emotional condition as the novel opens, Craig quickly recovers to enjoy seduction by an actress, to reject seduction by his sycophantic sister-in-law, to outwit Communist agents, and to win the love of Emily Stratman. As in other Wallace novels, the writer character is the ultimate hero.

Social Concerns

The Prize is a long, complex novel about six Nobel laureates assembling in Stockholm, Sweden, for the awards ceremony. Through their stories Wallace interweaves four issues of concern for Americans in the 1960s: the Technological Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Holocaust, and the Cold War.

He also describes the nominating process and the complicating balancing act forced upon the Academy by national, ethnic, and political rivalries.

The five scientists among Wallace's Nobel Prize winners are on the cutting edge of experimentation. Wallace attributes to them discoveries in heart transplant techniques, sperm preservation, and solar energy that within a decade became realities. Wallace's anticipation of these developments makes the novel seem, as the cliched blurb puts it, "as exciting as tomorrow's headlines."

The sixth laureate, a writer, discovers the Sexual Revolution in Stockholm. In 1962 Sweden was America's metonymy for sexual liberation and sophistication. In Sweden nudity is casual, premarital sex routine, and out-of-wedlock birth without stigma.

The novelist eventually accepts Swedish sensuality as a rational alternative to native American puritanism.

Even as Wallace teases his readers with scientific and sexual novelty, he reminds them of the worrisome political realities of World war II and the Cold War. Two laureates have mysterious roots in the Holocaust, the unending nightmare of the Nazis' attempt to liquidate the Jewish people. One laureate is also the object of a Cold War intrigue: His ingenious research and newfound fame tempt East German agents to arrange his defection, by lure or by force.

Techniques

The Prize is an excellent example of Wallace's formula for a best seller. The author alternates several plot lines, bringing one to a suspenseful point before turning to another. Wallace learned this technique as a playwright and scriptwriter. As the novel progresses, the plot lines gradually intersect and affect each other. The conclusion brings all the characters together, like buses from different routes at a central station.

Another technique that keeps reader interest is the steady flow of factual information about the city of Stockholm and the Nobel Prize procedures.

The novel is set in a real place that the author renders accurately and with detail. The author puts his characters through the actual rites of the selection process and the awards ceremony.

Punctuating the fictional episodes are historical anecdotes of Alfred Nobel (the founder of the prizes), of previous winners, and of the political pressures affecting the judges.

Themes

Although capitalizing on four social concerns, Wallace pays most attention to the Sexual Revolution embodied in Sweden's liberal morality. The other Revolutions are handled perfunctorily.

The social effects of the laureates' scientific discoveries are ignored. The East German agents threatening one scientist are stereotypical "heavies" and easily thwarted. The two laureates who are victims of the Holocaust have physical and psychological scars that readily earn the reader's sympathy, but neither has a story that offers new insights into the origin or consequences of this historical tragedy.

The personal and social implications of the Sexual Revolution are thoroughly explored. The novel dramatizes the healthiness and healing power of sensuality. Open sexuality heals the emotional and mental wounds of various characters. Adultery restores elan to the dulled marriage of two French biologists; friendly fornication frees the American novelist from guilt and alcoholism; romantic wooing erases the scars of sexual abuse from the psyche of a concentration camp survivor.

The sexual theme predominates because Wallace pays more attention to the private lives than to the professional activities of his characters. He attends so much to their jealousies, lusts, anxieties, and fantasies that readers may wonder how such luminaries ever found time for scientific research or artistic creation.

Adaptations

The Prize was made into a motion picture in 1963. Directed by Mark Robson, it starred Paul Newman, Diane Baker, Edmund G. Robinson, and Elke Sommer. The film was a commercial success, although most critics gave it two-and-a-half stars: not bad but no better than average.

Working in the Alfred Hitchcock tradition of a thriller, the movie departs from the novel in significant ways. It increases the comedy and the adventure. Andrew Craig is no longer alcoholic, guilt-ridden or suffering from writer's block; instead he is the adventurous author of pseudonymous detective fiction who discovers and exposes the East German plot against Max Stratman. In the film the Communists successfully plant a double for the scientist who makes propaganda speeches against the United States until Craig's derring-do exposes the deception.



Key Questions

Since *The Prize* exemplifies the characteristics of many best sellers, it provides an excellent vehicle for discussing the formulas of popular fiction.

1. Some best-selling authors aim primarily for an audience of female readers, others at male readers. A few aspire to please readers regardless of their gender. Does *The Prize* appeal more to one audience than the other?

What elements would attract male readers? What elements would attract female readers?

2. According to John Cawelti, best sellers offer readers both "convention" and "invention; i.e., they meet certain audience expectation for familiar characters or events at the same time they cater to an audience's desire for novelty and surprise. Which elements in *The Prize* are conventional and which are inventional?

3. A perennial motif in American popular fiction takes the hero or heroine from "rags-to-riches." How many of *The Prize*'s seven protagonists embody the motif?

4. Another perennial motif in American fiction is that the hero or heroine will achieve the American Dream only to find it unsatisfactory. Has Andrew Craig discovered that the Dream is inadequate? What has he found to replace it?

5. Although Denise Marceau is presented as French, she seems a familiar American heroine in many ways. Do the motifs of "rags-to-riches" and "pursuing the Dream" apply as equally to her as to Craig?

6. Popular fiction often uses characters that preserve traditional elements of heroism from folklore and fairy tales. How does Andrew Craig recall a folk hero? How does Denise Marceau echo a fairy tale heroine? Are these elements lacking in the other five protagonists?

7. A hero and a heroine need challenging antagonists to overcome. Identify the villains of *The Prize*. Which of them are real threats? Which are perfunctory obstacles?



Literary Precedents

The Prize is a kind of contemporary fiction called a "summer novel" or a "beach book." Its length, topicality, varied plots, and numerous moments of suspense fill a reader's leisure hours with diverting but not difficult material. The book is easy to pick up, put down, and pick up again.

Such novels have an ancient lineage.

Knightly romances of the seventeenth century ran to hundreds of thousands of words, featuring numerous plot lines and multiple characters to divert aristocrats in their inactive hours.

Eighteenth-century Gothic novels spun lengthy tales of terror over several volumes for ladies and gentlemen who patronized lending libraries in search of diversion. In the nineteenth-century "triple deckers" (three-volume novels) depicted the complex tasks of marrying well and getting an inheritance as a complex, time-consuming chore for fictional characters and book-buying readers alike.

In short, Wallace writes the sort of popular fiction that has been the staple of audiences for three centuries.



Related Titles

Wallace has never written a sequel to one of his novels. Each book has a different urgent topic, a different faraway locale, and a different subject for "behind-the-scenes" information.

The Prize exemplifies a group of Wallace's novels that may be called "exotic melodramas." Others in this group include *The Pigeon Project* (1979), *The Almighty* (1982), *The Seventh Secret* (1986), and *The Golden Room* (1989).

Each exotic melodrama places a cast of globe-trotting people in a scenic locale (Zurich, Venice, Berlin, old Chicago) where all are swept up in intrigue.

The Pigeon Project recounts the EastWest battle for a scientist's discovery that lengthens the human life span to 150 years. *The Almighty* tells how the son of a media mogul battles to keep his father's empire. In *The Seventh Secret* a researcher stumbles upon evidence Hitler did not die in a Berlin bunker. *The Golden Room* depicts a fashionable nineteenth-century bordello stalked by a serial killer.



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