

# The Aventis Surprise

Professor Chris McManus recounts the torture of a night spent drinking spritzers at the Science Museum

"And the winner of the Aventis Prize is ....". It had been a long, hot evening at the Science Museum, and the result was finally being announced at nearly 11 pm (although subsequently I found that the rest of the UK had known the result for the past half an hour, Radio 4 having broadcast it on the 10 o'clock news).

As refined tortures go, a champagne reception, three courses, various speeches, and constantly refilled wine glasses is extremely sophisticated. The drinks were the main problem, as the short-listed candidates knew that the winner – and only the winner – had to make an acceptance speech; and those of us brought up on Lucky Jim knew the grave risks of using alcohol as an anxiolytic. Quite atypically for me, the evening was spent on spritzers, just in case.

Six books had been shortlisted, and Steven Pinker was the clear favourite to win. He had been shortlisted twice before, and there was a general feeling that he would get it this time because it was about time. I'd thought the same until, a week earlier on an overnight flight back from Canada, I'd read *The Blank Slate*, and felt it wasn't nearly as well written as his first, very good book, *The Language Instinct*. Maybe I was still in with a chance.

The Aventis web-site helpfully provided a list of the bookies' odds for each of the six books, with my *Right Hand, Left Hand* in second position. I even hatched a wild plan based on those odds. The short-listed authors each received £1,000, while the winner received £10,000. Wasn't my optimal strategy to place my £1,000 on Pinker, in effect doing some spread-betting? Probably, but in the end I never had the courage to walk into the bookmaker's shop and do it; fortunately as it happened.

Eventually the announcement did come – "Right Hand, Left Hand, by Chris McManus". Just like in the movies, everything seemed to go into slow motion, and it all still seems seared into my memory. I shook all the hands I was supposed to shake, had the cheesy photographs taken, and then made my acceptance speech – and of course, I did happen to have a few notes in my pocket, "just in case". Did the other authors, I wondered? Thanks to all the people who had made it happen, a topical reference to the right-handed DNA spiral on display in the gallery, a comment on it being my twin daughters' fourth birthday ("Sorry – that is just sooooo Hollywood!"), and a slightly risqué joke, without outstaying my welcome too much. Back to my seat and the BBC journalist next to me let on that he had known all evening but had been sworn to secrecy.

How did it happen though? Needless to say, one cannot set out with the specific aim of winning a prize, as there are just too many imponderables and unpredictables involved. I do remember hoping that I might be shortlisted, but not having any real hope.

In the end the main determinant, as a previous winner Stephen Jay Gould had said in *Wonderful Life* when discussing evolution and history, was contingency; to put it crudely, I got lucky. Not the least of my luck was that I was late finishing my book, so that it was published in 2002 and not 2001, and that meant I didn't have to compete with Stephen Hawking; and I was also lucky not to have



published in 2003 when the big guns of Matt Ridley and Bill Bryson would have been formidable opponents.

I was also extremely fortunate in my judges. The chair was Margaret Drabble, who clearly put a great emphasis on books that not only had good scientific content, but were also well written and embedded in a wider intellectual world. The one-liner on the Aventis website when the short list was announced certainly gave me hope – "a perfect balance between science and culture". That was what I had intended when I was writing the book, because it would make it the sort of book that I myself would like to read.

Finally, of course, I was lucky in the topic of the book. Right and left span pretty well the whole of science, and indeed human life and experience, from the largest to the smallest, *from the cultural to the sub-atomic, and many* people will find something in the topic which

interests them. Laterality is not my only interest in science, and I research into many other topics – multivariate statistics, for instance – but I have often wondered how even the most gifted writer could make structural equation modelling interesting or readable for the general public, despite its deep intrinsic interest.

What difference did winning the book make? It certainly got a reasonable amount of publicity (although not, it must be said, anything like as much as I got from winning an Ig Nobel prize ...). It probably helped sales a bit, but they have hardly been stratospheric.

My publishers don't seem to have capitalised on the opportunity to get the book out where people really buy books in large numbers. Silly me – I had thought they were in the business of making money. Not, though, a single advertisement, not a single pile stacked high in the front of a book shop. My agent warned me, "Don't expect to see it in W H Smiths", and she was right – I haven't, although I could wax lyrical about why that is the case, why the books that are there were chosen, and what the real processes are by which best-sellers are made and promoted. But no doubt all authors without the luxury of a vast advance say the same things, and find themselves off the radar of the publicity machine at their publishers.

My other great stroke of luck was that I didn't need to make a living from sales. I'm a tenured academic, and although the extra income is nice, it is hardly stunning, and as yet I have made less money from sales than from prizes – helped, it must be said by the earlier Wellcome Trust prize, which was heftier than the Aventis.

Undoubtedly, the high point of winning the prize was in the days following the announcement, as I watched my Amazon rank climbing and climbing until, at one heady moment, it reached number 11, with five of those ahead of me being variants on Harry Potter. Unfortunately, my publishers had decided to print only a few extra copies in response to the shortlisting for the prize, and the Amazon high ended with a bump when up came the inevitable message, "This book is currently out of stock. Further copies will be available in 4 to 6 weeks". The rating dropped back down to reality and so did I.