

Stockholm's Great Absent: no Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018

All of the 2018 Nobel Prizes have been awarded, except for one: Literature.

The Nobel Prizes awardees for 2018 were announced from October 1st to October 8th. First, Medicine and Physiology, then Physics and Chemistry. Lastly, Economics and Peace. Conspicuously absent from this list is Literature. The decision in 2016 to give the award to a songwriter, Bob Dylan, surprised many. Last May an even more peculiar decision was made when the Swedish Academy announced that there would not be a Nobel prize for Literature in 2018, which had not happened since 1943 in the middle of the Second World War.

The reasons for the absence.

Apart from some financial issues, the main reason for such a decision lies in a scandal. In the wake of the Me Too campaign and the Weinstein Affair in the US (November 2017), last autumn eighteen women accused the French-Swedish producer and photographer Jean-Claude Arnault of assault and sexual harassment. This was followed by accusations of harassment against Princess Victoria of Sweden. Consequently, several Academy members resigned in protest. Technically they hold those positions for life, and a discussion has arisen about changing the rules of the Academy to allow such resignations. Monday October 1st Arnault was condemned to 2 years of imprisonment for one of the rapes of which he had been accused.

The Academy's reputation.

The Academy's decision was explained by Anders Olsson, Permanent Secretary ad interim, in press release.

The active members of the Swedish Academy are of course fully aware that the present crisis of confidence places high demands on a long-term and robust work for change. We find it necessary to commit time to recovering public confidence in the Academy before the next laureate can be announced. This, out of respect for previous and future literature laureates, the Nobel Foundation, and the general public.

Something to think about.

A lot of discussion has followed online. Someone claimed that we can do without such a prize, building on well-established criticisms towards awards in general (to name just one, the constant controversies on the Oscars). It goes without saying that after the latest developments of the Asia Argento Affair, polemics are bound to multiply. Whether we agree with the Academy's decision or not, something is beyond doubt: the announcement had a great mediatic impact. The Pandora's box of the Me Too campaign has been opened. One of its prominent aspects is that it spread through a chain reaction from the cinematic industry to other fields such as Academia and, in this case, the Nobel prizes. The point is that maybe we need not to wonder if the decision is reasonable or appropriate. They say that when the finger points to the moon, the fool will stare at the finger. Maybe we should not stare at the finger and instead we should ponder on the phenomenon that concerns us all, literature or not literature.