Award Culture: Accessibility and Success among Literary Prizes in Austria

**Background and Motivation**

As literature becomes more democratized, its criticism seems to centralize. Throughout the 20th and 21st century, the vast growth of published books has led to a corresponding interest in distinguishment. The prevalence of reviews, critiques, and, most notably, literary awards, has ballooned in order to match the higher volume. In the United States alone, the number of major prizes—with a monetary award of at least $10,000— given has gone from exactly one in 1918 to over 60 in 2018.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the German Sprachraum and its markets, encompassing authors primarily from Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, Professor Kristin Rebien estimates there are about thirteen hundred literary awards per year. With about 90,000 new titles published annually since 2007 and still growing, the interconnectedness between authors and these receptive institutions is perceived to grow ever more vital.[[2]](#footnote-2) For German children's books, nearly 71% of sold books have some sort of award designation on their title to distinguish them, and vendors such as Amazon specifically curate pages of winners that amplify sales.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The exact nature of these awards varies, of course, and serve to recognize many different aspects of a publication or author besides pure artistic merit. Nevertheless, with such a direct correlation between financial and critical success and winning competitions, understanding how these organizations and juries’ function and furthermore present their work to the public can help explain underlying trends in academia but also receptive judgment in general. For the larger and more well-known competitions in particular, investigating the nuances of their decision-making process shows how their significant influence helps some succeed and others fail. As Jen DeGregorio notes in her magazine piece describing a statistical analysis of prize winners in the United States, to understand competitions is to understand quite literally "who gets to be a writer."[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, as the authors explain, this kind of scholarship is incredibly important to deconstruct narratives and truly see what pathways are actually available to authors. There is sometimes more than pure artistic merit at works —relationships that only become apparent through these critical and often digital analyses. For example, even as authors in the United States may become more diverse "in terms of race and gender" they become more closely linked to a so-called "prestige apparatus," a term coined in the article to describe "elite educational or institutional networks."[[5]](#footnote-5) This kind of quantitative analysis is well-suited to the field of awards, and is frequently used in what is perhaps the highest-profile international prize, the Nobel Prize. One such study used network analysis to understand connections between economics laureates and was able to better understand subgroups of successful scholars by topic and by co-authorship connections.[[6]](#footnote-6) In literature, too, the Nobel Prize is often thought to increase public perception and political influence in winners. But another example of critical digital analysis deconstructed this myth by showing that one metric of global influence—specifically translations from German into other languages—doesn't necessarily increase after an award, and perhaps indicates global prominence to be a precondition rather than aftereffect of the prize.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The focus of Rebien's article—one of the foremost prizes of the German Sprachraum world, the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis—is particularly suited to this rich method because of its unique structure. It receives tremendous critical and public attention during its conference as part of the televised "Tage der deutschsprachigen Literatur," or "Days of German Literature", an extended festival. As Rebien emphasizes, this is the only publicly judged competition, where authors premiere a new excerpt for the first time which is then debated in real time by a panel of jurors.[[8]](#footnote-8) While she goes to investigate the nuance behind the process and analyze the aesthetic philosophy underlying the award, her exposition of the Bachmann Prize shows how interconnected literary critique and reception is with the Austrian literary sphere, here far more than specialized stickers on books. As such, the kind of digital humanities work done by scholars such as Lore de Greve and Gunther Martens to use quantitative methods to analyze the Bachmann Prize strikes directly at the question of "who gets to be a writer." They compared the official jury discussion summaries (publicly accessible for every submitted piece since 1999 online) with reactions on Twitter to see how public criticism compared with professional analysis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Research Question and Dataset Identification**

De Greve and Martens' approach differs from my proposed research topic in method, but not motivation. Even if the individual criteria for the jury's selection are not, as de Greve and Martens themselves suggest, necessarily unique and that commenters on social media still make nuanced aesthetic judgements, the question of how the jurors are appointed still has an outsized impact on who wins because of how the competition works. Authors are invited by individual jurors to come present a work and cannot be entered into consideration without this initial referral. To this end, I propose a network analysis in the style of Molina that would trace the connections between authors, jurors, and institutions, informed by the "prestige apparatus framework described by DeGregorio. Juror descriptions, for example, have references to institutions that they have worked at—often newspapers or universities and institutes—as well as other prizes they themselves have won. The line between author and juror is often blurry, and candidates often could fill either role well. Throughout the German Sprachraum and certainly across world history, artistic and cultural influence has been concentrated in small groups of people. The issue at light now in the 21st century, however, is how although literary awards have grown in number, they still recognize an extremely small subset of published works that then directly leads to dominate their sale at market. Indeed, these works often deserve it and have their awards determined by consensus on literary, social, or political merit. But there are associated factors and correspondences that blur the meritocratic picture. As such, I want to know furthermore how the accepted pieces go on to be received afterwards, both by the other prizes that they may be submitted to, or just in the general public. Because the excerpts evaluated in the Bachmann Prize cannot be published prior to the competition, they often later come out as books that then are separately lauded. One such award citation, the relatively small Christine Lavant Prize, shows this dynamic, in awarding its 2021 prize to Maja Haderlap largely for her novel "Angel of Oblivion'' that was first published in 2011 after its success in the Bachmann Prize.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Collecting the corpus of data for this network analysis starts with the official Bachmann Prize archive. I plan to diverge from De Greve and Martens by focusing on juror and author biographies and invitation connections as well as winning prize citations, rather than the discussion summaries that show how things were chosen. With this data from the website—which would have to be collected, likely by hand, because the dataset does not exist in a currently-usable form—I would then have to annotate the data by separating it into parseable categories. Because most of the information is written up into paragraphs, I would have to separate each piece according to the variables I want to describe. In order to track demographic information and situate authors within the German Sprachraum, I would want to note birth year, birthplace, country of origin, juror invitation, associated institution (if applicable), current associated city, type of writer (poet, prose, or both), number of prior publications, prior publishers, and prior awards. For the jurors, I would want to track length of jury tenure, birth year, birthplace, country of origin, current associated city, whether they are critics, authors, or both, number of prior publications, prior publishers (if applicable), any prior awards, number of years they have served and whether they are a normal juror or a "Vorsitzender," the chairperson for that year. As an example of this kind of data parsing, I have included a screenshot of a webpage for an author in the 2017 competition, Barbi Marković along with a sample table compiling the data from the webpage in the appendix.[[11]](#footnote-11) From this, tools such as OpenRefine would be very useful to make sure that everything is standardized and uniform across the years collected from.

Though network visualizations are, as is frequently discussed, inherently metaphorical, this relation better elucidates the relationship between individual years and works and their greater context and illustrates the way these things may be connected with changing notions of accessibility, canonization, and validity within the literary world. Authors and jurors would not be differentiated from each as nodes, because as digital humanist Scott Weingart notes, bimodal networks do not work well for analytic algorithms that would be used when loaded into Gephi.[[12]](#footnote-12) This nuance can be reintegrated later in explanations and visualizations to make clear, but the lack of difference in Gephi would actually be helpful to convey the fact that authors can become judges and vice versa. The edges should be unidirectional to conform with Weingart's advice, and indicate which authors were invited by which judges—one of the most interesting parts about the Bachmann Prize. Were the technology necessary to make multimodal networks possible and lend itself better to analysis available to me, I would propose to connect authors/judges to the other types of data that I collect, like institutions or associated cities/countries of origin. Given this situation, my network analysis may not be as complexly instantiated as I would like.

Part of the analysis of my project would also be to do topic modeling for the winning prizes, which would give insight into the kinds of themes that find sympathy with the judges. This could be achieved by using the program jsDLA, which would work well with the submitted pieces. Because these are easily accessible in plain text on the archive of the Bachmann Prize and additionally are relatively short, there would be no need to sequence these any further. I propose to run this software on the winners of each of the four different subprizes. These could then be analyzed either with respect to time or to the other winners for that year's competition.

**Analysis and Visualization**

The two main aspects of this digital humanities project—the topic modeling and the network analysis—are both inherently visual. Each reduces the complexity of the corpora by distilling the source material to essential data points, but this also increases analytic potential through increased comparability. With only 24 years of publicly accessible material and many jurors serving for multiple years, the number of unique nodes will not be as high as it could be, especially as the award reduced its numbers of jurors from 10 to 7 and authors from 18 to 14 in 2008. Because of the aforementioned problems of analyzing multimodal networks, I would propose first of all to connect invitee-inviter relationships among the 24 years of data, and, because of the repeat jurors, then associate authors invited by a certain juror together using a secondary edge. If there would be a way to then click on the author's name to find out their own relationships on a secondary screen, I think it would somewhat circumvent the problem. I've attached a hand drawn sketch of a small example of both the former and the latter cases.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The topic modeling would work well in conjunction with some of the features of Voyant Tools. I think that the best way to show these, as mentioned with respect to time and individual year, would be to show word clouds, word associations, trends, or other visualizations. This would easily be accomplished with the plain text taken from the archive website. Though it might lose some nuance as the works are read aloud to the jury, there is no real way to capture the inflection and the change in meaning is probably minimal relative to the written form. I would love for both of these to take place in some sort of interactive viewer. Voyant Tools is great for natively affording this feature, it is hard to do without simultaneously providing the corpus and asking viewers to upload it themselves. As such, I would try to embed some of the viewers on a website. For the network, I would start by constructing a simple timeline of all the jurors across the 24 years and then including the networks. Using Gephi, I would annotate the nodes to have labels of the authors, and then explain how they are connected primarily to jurors by invitation and secondarily to each other because of their common link to a juror. I would not demonstrate degree by centrality since most jurors invite someone every year. Instead, I think it would be good to rank jurors by years served, and authors by the number of accolades they have achieved before that competition.

This kind of information would greatly increase the transparency of the award organization itself. If they hypothetically were to be interested in hosting it on their website, I would first choose to do that. Otherwise, I would try to make my work publicly accessible on the internet myself using my own website. The very point of this project would be to emphasize accessibility in literature by clearly showing the trends among these elite and privileged institutions of award competitions such that authors know what factors are more likely to contribute to success. While this project may deconstruct the prestige of the awards by pointing out correlations between winning and other, non-literary aspects, it seems to be needed in order to redefine the increasingly centralized world of criticism and patronage. The trends and correlations between authors and jurors as well as topics might not help newcomers automatically gain entry into these exclusionary circles. But it would, at the very least, pressure the Bachmann Prize to reflect on its role as a kingmaker within the literary world, and finally make good on its premise of encouraging and, above all else, democratizing culture for Austrians and beyond.

**Appendix A:** Transposition from Bachmann Prize summary to spreadsheet.

A person with curly hair and text

Description automatically generated

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

A paper with writing on it

Description automatically generatedA paper with writing on it

Description automatically generated**Appendix B:** Sample network representation of repeat juror Meike Feßman

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*I pledge this paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*

1. Jen DeGregorio, “Literary Prizes Under Scrutiny.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rebien, “Literary Awards and the Practice of Aesthetic Judgment,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jen DeGregorio, “Literary Prizes Under Scrutiny.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Molina et al., “Leaders among the Leaders in Economics," 584. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Çakir and Richter, “Is There a Nobel Prize Effect?” 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rebien, “Literary Awards and the Practice of Aesthetic Judgment,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. DeGreve and Martens, “Judging a Book by Its Criticism: A Digital Analysis of the Professional and Community

   Driven Literary Criticism of the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis,” 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Der Christine Lavant Preis 2021 geht an Maja Haderlap - Wallstein Verlag.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Barbi Markovic, SRB.” See Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Weingart, “Demystifying Networks, Parts I & II.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Meike Feßmann, Berlin (D).” See Appendix B [↑](#footnote-ref-13)