



How to Win a National Book Award:

A Primer

On the morning of October 12, 2004, the telephone rang. I hadn't been awake for long, but I answered it anyway.

"Hello, this is Harold Awblahblah of the National Book Foundation. Am I speaking to Pete Hautman, the author of *Godless*?"

"I'm afraid so," I said, preparing to hang up the phone. Only mild curiosity as to whether the caller was going to ask for money, free books, or volunteer hours kept me on the line. National Book Foundation? Sounded like something some con man in a boiler room had invented.

"I'm calling to let you know that *Godless* has been selected as a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature."

"Oh. That's nice." National Book Award for Young People's Literature? Right. Was there such a thing? And I suppose I've won a free iPod, too.

As the caller babbled on—something about ten thousand dollars, and my publisher having agreed to fly me to New York, and a black tie ceremony, and a bunch of other stuff I can't remember—I waited for the sales pitch.

"Oh, and I'll need to get your social security number," he said. That was when I knew it was a scam.

Any novelist who tells you he or she is not a gambler by nature is either lying or deluded. Writing a

novel is one of the biggest, craziest, most mathematically unsound bets one can make.

Let me break it down for you: Spend the best part of one to ten years sweating blood in front of a computer (or a notebook with lilac-colored, unlined pages—it doesn't really matter) until you have produced several tens of thousands of words about events that never occurred. That's your stake.

Now you have to find yourself a bookie, aka "publisher," that is willing to take your bet. Maybe you get lucky and find yourself among the roughly one percent¹ of novelists who find a willing publisher. Congratulations.

So you get a little money (probably about 75¢ for every hour you spent writing your novel) and, in time,² your book is published. Thousands of copies are distributed to bookstores all across the country.

Your friends and relatives all buy copies, and they are very impressed by your accomplishment—as are you. So far, so good. You gambled and you won.

But something is missing. What could it be? Money? No, you didn't get into this for the gelt. The rave review on the cover of the New York Times Book

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¹ I invented that number, but I'll bet it's close.

² For those of you who are about to sell your first novel, know that the 12-18 months it will take for your novel to become a book will be the longest 12-18 months of your life.

Review? A call from Stephen Spielberg? An invitation to appear on Oprah? (Have you thought about what you will wear? Of course you have!)

Your book sells a few thousand copies, and so your publisher (assuming they have managed to stay in business) buys another. This time you earn something like 97¢ per hour. Much better. But where is the Big Movie Deal, the Japanese sale, the MacArthur Fellowship? Where is the Nobel Prize? The Edgar Award? The Newbery, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Caldecott, the Printz, or—while we’re dreaming here—how about a freaking National Book Award!?

I suppose you could wager one or more of your children on a horse named Lotsa Luck. But aside from that, writing a novel and putting it out there hoping for the big recognition/money/validation payoff is about the biggest and worst bet you can make. Novelists are not just gamblers; they are wild-eyed, foaming-at-the-mouth, utterly irrational gamblers. Waiting for the mail, or an email, or a phone call, is the writer’s version of taking a daily spin of the roulette wheel. The bad news is that nothing ever seems to happen. The good news is that sometimes it does.

Godless is the story of a teen who invents his own religion, and who then must deal with the monster he has created. It’s an old story. I mean a *really* old story. Think *Frankenstein*. Think *Pygmalion*. Think *Genesis*. *Godless* is not about God anymore than *Frankenstein* is about the soul, or than *Pygmalion* is about class. *Godless* is about hubris, ambition, responsibility, and consequences. As is *Frankenstein*. As is *Genesis*.

But *Godless* is funnier.

Is that blasphemous? I never know. When I was a kid I had a problem with giggling during mass. It didn’t take much. Something about those big themes—you know: LIFE, DEATH, TRUTH—makes me need to laugh. So I’m never sure when I’m being blasphemous, but blasphemy aside, I believed that *Godless*, by whining and pawing at the parapets of organized religion, had pretty much disqualified itself from consideration as a literary award recipient. After all, as our ruling party keeps reminding us, we are a “Christian nation.” And while we may as a people tolerate dissension, we try not to encourage it.

The National Book Award nomination was therefore surprising on multiple levels. *Godless* had

somehow wound its way through the obstacle course of literary taste, religious convictions, current politics, and luck, and had landed on the shortlist.

Harold Augenbraun, whose name I have now learned to spell without looking it up, quickly convinced me that he was, in fact, the Executive Director of the National Book Foundation, a real organization. The National Book Award for Young People’s Literature is real, too. And so far, they haven’t asked me for any money, nor have they used my Social Security number in an identity theft scam.

After Harold’s call it took me a good 24 hours to absorb the fact that the roulette wheel had paid off.

It doesn’t get any better than this, I thought as I read through a spate of congratulatory emails. Checking my Amazon.com sales ranking, I found it had dropped to 20,000. Remarkable! I had never seen a ranking so good. Only 19,999 other titles were selling better than *Godless*! Much better than my pre-NBA-finalist-ranking of somewhat over 150,000.

The phone rang constantly. Even my non-literary friends (who are, sadly, in the majority) called:

“Pete, this is Bill! Congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

“This is so great. I mean, I don’t know what the hell the American Book Prize is, but I guess it’s some kind of a big deal. I’m proud of ya, man. You rock.”

Okay, I was on top of the world. “I don’t even care if I win,” I said to myself and anyone else who would listen. “Just being a finalist is enough!”

Over the next three weeks I found myself repeat-

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ing that mantra often. But about one week before I was to leave for the awards ceremony in New York, something happened.

I realized that I wanted, desperately, to win the thing. Even worse, I was terrified that I would *not* win.

To paraphrase Garrison Keillor, I used to think that literary awards were a bunch of hooey. Then I was nominated for one.

I had never before paid much attention to the big national and international literary awards. I assumed that they were only for writers who lived in New York or London and who specialized in odd sentence constructions, obscure words, and secret etymological handshakes. The big literary awards, I came to believe, had much to do with politics, snobbery, and taste, and were no guarantee of quality.

Needless to say, opinion on this matter changed rather abruptly with that call from Harold Augenbraum.

As I was telling people what an honor it was to be a finalist, and how lucky I felt, and that winning would be “just icing on the cake,” there was this other thing going on inside me. Every now and then I would catch a glimpse of it. A pointy-tailed, grinning imp would poke his head up and say, “Lucky, schmucky. You deserve it!”

“Down boy,” I would say.

“Up yours, dude. This false modesty don’t cut it with me.”

“Fine! Just keep it down, would you?”

“What do you think are your odds of winning?” asks my brother Jim, an avid poker player.

“There are four other finalists,” I say. “I make it twenty percent.”

“Do you know what you’re up against?”

“Yes and no.” I had looked at the other books named as finalists. They were all quite good, and as different from each other as mine was from theirs.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, the books are all good, but I don’t know what the judges are thinking.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Jim asks, by which he means, is there anything I can do to influence the judges.

“I could pray,” I say.

“Didn’t you just write a book called *Godless*? “Good point.”

As D-Day approached I became a zombie, all distant stares and unresponsive grunts. I was working hard to keep my imp at bay, with little success.

“You have to win, dude. If you don’t win it’ll be all over for you.”

“No, it won’t. I’ll always be a finalist. It’s a great honor to be a finalist.”

“Honor? Don’t make me laugh. What are you gonna do if you lose?”

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly! You’ll probably make a scene. You’ll start sobbing or something.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll smile and congratulate the winner. It’ll be fine.”

“It’ll be barbaric, dude.”

I flew to New York with my partner, Mary Logue. The ever-shifting elation/terror ratio made me uneasy company, but Mary is a writer, too. She seemed to understand what I was going through. Or at least found it tolerable. In either case, it was very nice to have someone beside me to whom I could turn and ask, “Am I acting okay?”

We arrived in Manhattan two days before the ceremony for some readings and other promotional

appearances. I met the other four finalists in the Young People’s Literature category: Deb Caletti, Laban Hill, Shelia P. Moses, and Julie Peters. Alas, they were all charming, bright, talented, and deserving. I liked them all. I performed a mental exercise: I imagined myself shaking hands with each of them, congratulating them on winning the NBA.

It felt something like rehearsing a visit to the dentist.

I fear that I am making myself look small. And shallow and petty and fearful and neurotic. These are qualities no one wants to see in a writer. But if you can show me one novelist who does not possess these qualities in generous doses, I will . . . well, I will refuse to believe it. Inside every writer—I make no

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exceptions—is a three-year-old kid shouting, “Look at me!”

The winners of the National Book Awards are not decided upon until the afternoon of November 17th, the day of the awards ceremony. The five judges in each of the four categories are sequestered in the back room of different Manhattan restaurants and asked to choose one winner from among the finalists. Legend has it that the choosing can be a brutal and emotional affair, like that dramatized in the movie *Twelve Angry Men*. I don’t know; I wasn’t there.

The National Book Awards Ceremony and Dinner at the Marriott Marquis was a swanky, black-tie, red-carpet affair attended by several hundred writers, editors, publishers, agents, and reporters. (I had bought a tuxedo with all the trimmings, which cost considerably more than the \$1000 I would receive from the NBF if *Godless* did not win.) Rather to my surprise, I was not at all nervous about finding myself in such exalted company. By the evening of the ceremony, I was buried so deep inside my own head, you could have introduced me to Moses and I would not have blinked. No, this was all about Pete. Poker players have a saying: the player you need to worry about most is the one sitting in your chair. I was doing plenty of worrying. Mostly, I was rehearsing my loss.

I was also more than a little worried about winning. If *Godless* was announced as a winner, I would have to walk about a mile to the stage, without tripping, and deliver a short acceptance speech. This prospect was only slightly less terrifying than was losing.

After a short press conference, I was seated at a table with Mary Logue, Jennifer Flannery (my literary agent), David Gale (my editor), and several other illustrious folks from Simon & Schuster. Seated next to the redoubtable Alice Mayhew, I was well supplied with stimulating conversation, mostly concerning the sorry state of Minnesota politics. The first courses were served with astonishing speed and efficiency. The food was not at all bad, although you could probably do better in New York at \$ 1,000 a plate. I got through the meal without drinking too much or insulting anyone or sticking a fork in my eye (you never know what these writers from the prairie will do), and I may even have fooled Alice Mayhew into thinking that I had some insight into the soul of a state that in the past ten years had elected Jesse Ventura, Paul Wellstone, and Norm Coleman to public

office. I challenge you to name three politicians with less in common.

Flash forward: Garrison Keillor is talking. Damn, but he’s good! You meet him in person (I skipped that part) and he comes off like a doofus, but shine a light on him and give him a *real* audience, and the man is pure gold.

We listen to Keillor and Harold Augenbraum and Judy Blume, the guest of honor. A very courageous young girl gets up on stage and reads a passage from *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret*. It is all very nice, but I am feeling as though my blood has turned to polenta. The air is thick, too. I am caught in a universe of sludge—time has interrupted its usual workmanlike march to illustrate Zeno’s paradox.

Finally the winners are announced, each by the chair of the judging panel in each category, beginning with the nonfiction finalists. The winner is *Arc of Justice* by Kevin Boyle, who gets up and talks *forever*. He can’t help himself. I don’t mind, because I’ve written a three-minute bit that I was afraid will be too long by half. Boyle has paved the way. When I get up there . . .

I give myself a mental pinch. There is no *when*, I tell myself. It’s *if*.

Kevin Boyle is still talking. The next category will be Young People’s Literature. I am both numb and in pain. I think my heart and liver switched places midway through Boyle’s peroration, and someone has hammered a steel spike into the top of my skull and down through my spine. That’s okay, as long as I remain conscious. After about seven or eight eternal minutes, Boyle leaves the stage and Lois Ruby, the chair of the Young People’s Literature category judging panel, is introduced.

The way it works is that the panel chair goes on at some length about what they were looking for, and what they found in their search for the best books of the category, and what qualities were exemplified by the as-yet-unnamed winning book. Of course, everyone in the audience is listening for clues as to which book is about to be named, and Lois Ruby, in keeping with the amped-up dramatic structure of the Awards Ceremony, packs her talk with vague hints, red herrings, and generalities. Her words enter and exit my head like ghost bullets. I try to imagine myself congratulating Deb Caletti, Laban Hill, Shelia P. Moses, and Julie Peters. I can’t do it. If *Godless* doesn’t

win, I know I am going to die.

Suddenly I remember an episode of “Frasier.” Frasier is attending an awards ceremony. He has been nominated for Best Talk Show Host. He expects to win. His expectations are so profound that when one of his rivals is named the winner, Frasier stands up and walks to the podium and launches into his thank-you speech. Humiliation? Utter.

Lois Ruby stops talking.

There is a moment of disconnect.

And then everyone at our table is standing and looking at me, and David is shaking my hand, and then I am walking through the maze of tables toward the stage.

“How did you feel?” I am later asked.

I felt as if someone had lifted a great weight from my shoulders. The air was clear and bright, and I could breathe for the first time in weeks. Above all I

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felt, as I climbed without tripping onto the stage at the Marriott Marquis, a divine sense of relief.

When I tell this part of the story—and I have told it many times over the past few months—I can always tell whether the person I’m talking to is a gambler. Non-gamblers will usually express some surprise.

“But . . . weren’t you excited? Weren’t you nervous? Weren’t you scared? Weren’t you exhilarated?”

They think that the moment of victory should manifest itself as some sort of emotional overload. The hardcore gamblers, however, understand. When the roulette ball falls into its proper slot, when the

long shot draw to a straight flush comes in, when the horse Lotsa Luck wins by a nose . . . the gambler understands that the universe has surmounted the curse of chaos, and he finds himself at peace.