Quest for the Best
by Albert R. Vogeler

Good. Better. Best. Universal categories of human judgment, or petty private preferences? Both, of course. Our need to classify and evaluate, to establish and assert our values, makes ranking a natural activity, and when we do it collectively through institutions, ranking becomes a social fact and a means of influence. Hence “we” decide what is best and in some way reward it. Whether it is beauty, athleticism, or courage, whether it is art, science, or saintliness, the impulse to identify and acknowledge exceptional qualities or attainments is a notable feature of our culture.

Granted, evaluating implies listing and ranking, but these activities need to be clarified. Lists can be infinitely diverse in subject matter, yet there are only two kinds: random lists and sorted lists. The first are planless enumerations; the second are organized for a purpose. But these sorted lists are also infinite—an infinity within an infinity. They comprise dictionaries, reigns of monarchs, cities by population, universities by endowments, nations by exports, stars by brightness, books by sales, ships by tonnage, populations by age, buildings by height, libraries by holdings, maps by region, stock quotes for investors, checklists for pilots, manifests for cargoes, commonly misspelled words, rarely seen birds, major earthquakes—that is, all the subject matters that can possibly be imagined.

Many, but not all sorted lists are graded lists running from the larger to the smaller, the most frequent to the least frequent, the fastest to the slowest, and so forth. Yet the sorted lists I have just mentioned are of one kind only: they are statistical, factual, and impersonal. The other kind of sorted list is based on judgment, taste, and emotion. This is a valuative list, the kind involved in the “Quest for the Best” in literature and the arts.

Though the “Quest for the Best” seems self-evidently to honor excellence, it may also reward the worst, namely, the best in the category of the bad—which is Bad, Worse, Worst. This little logical inversion has an inevitable appeal that has made negative lists endlessly popular. Who does not relish a list of the worst opening sentences of any novel (“It was a dark and stormy night…”), a list of the worst puns, of the most over praised books, the least justified prizes, the most embarrassing moments, the nastiest rejoinders, the worst-dressed celebrities, the most mistaken predictions? It’s the extremes that fascinate, whether good or bad—especially, we must confess, the bad.

Lists of the best anything are never permanent. They may be controverted from their inception, fade from attention, crumble into obsolescence, and change as tastes and values change. The history of the Great Books is a case in point. Some books have always been centerpieces of their cultures: the Tao-te-Ching, the Ramayana, the Iliad and Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Old and New Testaments, the Koran, the Divine Comedy. But when lists are extended beyond a few seminal works—when ten or twenty or a hundred titles are claimed to be the greatest—the lists are bound to come under attack by critics—and by time. When in late Victorian England Lord Avebury drew up his list of the Hundred Best Books based on the pleasure they gave readers, in no time at all Frederic Harrison, the Positivist, countered with The Choice of Books, a parallel list that made education and idealism the hallmarks of greatness. Other lists proliferated and the cultural elite took sides in print for years.
In America, the Quest for the Best in literature started in 1909 at Harvard when its President, Charles W. Eliot, published his “Five Foot Shelf of Books,” the Harvard Classics, a fifty-volume set of the most important non-fiction books of western civilization. It sold 350,000 copies in its first twenty years and was followed by his Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction in twenty volumes. The ultimate objective was acquisition of a liberal education through systematic reading of seminal works, the Best in the West. (It would be a long time before such lists included classics of the East).

The movement Eliot started bore more fruit at Columbia and Chicago than it did at Harvard. John Erskine began teaching and advocating a much shorter selection of Great Books at Columbia in the 1920s. In the next decade the Great Books core curriculum was established, and has ever since been a demanding class for all freshmen (of which I was one). The list of some twenty books (ten per semester) changed over time, with one revision after another exercising students and faculty.

When Mortimer Adler, one of the founders at Columbia, moved to the University of Chicago, he carried his own version of Great Books education with him. There, with the chancellor, Robert Hutchens, the idea moved from teaching to publishing, the enormous project of the “Great Books of the Western World” was born. (For more about the career of Adler’s Great Books, see “Wisdom, Inc.” in the Patrons Post, Spring 2007.) In Chicago, the Quest for the Best was, for a time, an engine of profit as well as a source of enlightenment.

By the early 1970s those who followed current British literature were puzzled by the sudden publicity given a new literary award—the Booker Prize. Awarded for the best original novel by a citizen of Great Britain, Ireland, the Commonwealth, or—of all places—Zimbabwe—it was worth £21,000 (now £50,000). Many of the forty winners so far are apparently quite distinguished, but the fanfare accompanying the awarding of the prize every May has become a cultural phenomenon. To make the Booker shortlist of five books is itself a mark of distinction, and both the shortlist and the longlist finalists are the talk of literary circles during the spring. Booker (now Man Booker) has eclipsed all forty other British literary prizes and spawned imitations, including a Russian Booker.

America is probably more prize-happy than any other nation, with nearly a hundred different nation-wide awards for literature alone (not to mention the Academy Awards, Grammys, Golden Globes, top tunes, all kinds of top tens, World Series, halls of fame, American Idols, Men of the Year, Fortune Five Hundreds, outstanding professors, Miss Americas, and the like). In literature the most familiar status achievement is The New York Times bestseller list, a recognition of popularity but not necessarily excellence. The high-prestige awards are the four given annually by the American
Academy of Arts and Letters, the Bollingen and the Poetry Society’s awards for poetry, the national Medal of Arts, the National Book Award, the Bancroft Prize for history, the Modern Language Association awards, and the Pulitzers for twenty categories of journalism, plus music.

Every genre of literature has its award. The O. Henry Prize goes to short stories, the Hugo and Nebula awards to science fiction, the Edgar Allan Poe to mysteries. Virtually every other genre, like drama, children’s writing, sports writing, science writing, women’s writing, and religious writing has its annual reward for excellence. And then there are the incalculable number of prizes offered by college literary societies, local literary and poetry circles, and publishers’ awards for writing.

The ultimate literary award, the Nobel Prize, has been awarded during 110 years to many authors of undoubted genius, but also to a distressing number of relative mediocrities, and its decisions are commonly anticipated with a certain skepticism. Unlike the Olympic Games, whose Quest for the Best is as public as can be imagined, the Nobel Committee meets in secret, and rumor is all we can expect in understanding its decisions. (See “Prize and Prejudice” in the Fall 2008 Patrons Post.)

The Quest for the Best in literature, as we have seen, takes many forms and yields many results. But of two things we can be certain: the torrent of the Best in everything is getting bigger every year and already exceeds our comprehension. But we are not limited to the Best; and most of us will be quite satisfied to make our own choices.