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It's Genius: The Stranger Genius Awards Literature Showcase



Stranger Book Editor, Paul Constant (far right) speaks to the Genius nominees, (right to left) Neal Stephenson, Maged Zaher and APRIL directors, Tara Atkinson and Willie Fitzgerald at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle August 14, 2013.

"A poet, a novelist and a festival; it sounds like the set up for a joke," said Christopher Frizzelle, editor of Seattle's alternative weekly, *the Stranger*. What the poet, Maged Zaher; the novelist, Neal Stephenson and the festival, APRIL (Authors, Publishers, and Readers of Independent Literature) have in common and what brought each on stage before the standing-room only audience at the Frye Art Museum last Wednesday was their candidacy for the 2013 Stranger Genius Award for Literature.

Each year, the Stranger staff selects genius nominees in five disciplines, Film, Music, Visual Art, Performance, and Literature, to compete for five awards of \$5,000 and a slathering of community respect. Over several months of rigorous scrutiny and argumentation among the Stranger staff, eight to twelve candidates in each discipline are narrowed down to three finalists. These potential Geniuses, introduced in five consecutive weekly showcase events at the Frye, make up a rich shortlist of Seattle's artistic community that balks all standardized selection rubric.

Please compare, if you can, an electrifying performance of the intelligent and passionate verse by engineer cum poet, Maged Zaher (*Thank You for the Window Office, Portrait of the Poet as an Engineer*), with an intensely thoughtful meditation on David Foster Wallace from bestselling Science Fiction novelist Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash, Cryptonomicon*), whose presence as a Seattle writer is tragically under-acknowledged. Now, compare this vibrant poet and this sophisticated novelist with a entire festival,

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Tara Atkinson explains the diorama model of the APRIL Festival's programming.

represented by APRIL's Managing Director, Tara Atkinson and Creative Director, Willie Fitzgerald, who demonstrated the festival scope by introducing a reading by local poet Rich Smith and a diorama portraying the span of clever literary events APRIL hosts in Seattle, including literary bar crawl, writer and drag queen show-down, and small press book fair.

"I think the literature shortlist this year a nice representation of what the awards can do," says Stranger book editor, Paul Constant. Nominating such a disparate trio makes choosing a challenge, but it is also an important nod to Seattle's diverse literary community. Constant notes that connecting nominees to one another is another asset of the Genius Awards and that watching Neal Stephenson connect to the young management crew of APRIL at the showcase event after party was reminder of the good Genius work: "We brought a hugely intelligent, universally known science fiction author together with a bunch of excited young literary writers who are just starting out, and they met over drinks, as equals, to admire each others' work and compare their experiences. There's no universe in which that would have happened without the Genius Awards."

To select the winners, the Stranger staff won't be locked away in a room, sending out smoke signals. Instead, each staff member and any former Genius Award winners who attended this year's showcase events will be given a single vote for each of the five creative disciplines. Votes will be tallied by the Stranger Office Manager and the results will be kept sealed and secret until revealed at the public award ceremony on September 28 at the Moore Theatre. Only then will we know how a Genius face-off between a poet, a novelist and a festival will end.

Kristianne Huntsberger is a writer, performer and educator who, when not roaming the world, makes her home in Seattle. She has worked with the Elliott Bay Book Company in various capacities over the past ten years.

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