

DE GUSTIBUS

Presenting the 'Igs'

A different kind of Nobel Prize.

BY BARBARA D. PHILLIPS
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This week the Nobel Prizes showered attention, honor and sizable checks on nine scientists and economists from the U.S., Russia and Britain. Today the Peace Prize will be announced. And on Dec. 10, the Nobel winners will be fêted in chilly Scandinavia at solemn awards ceremonies and sumptuous banquets attended by royals and other dignified dignitaries. They're unlikely to see any staged Sapphic smooches, like those at the last MTV Video Music Awards, though the doings can't possibly be as dull as this year's endlessly enervating Emmy broadcast.

I'll take the Igs over the Nobels, VMAs and Emmys anytime, even if only via a video feed on the Internet. While the Igs are not without their growing legion of fans and press clippings, the 13th First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony, held last week at Harvard's Sanders Theater, must be the only U.S. awards show not to make it to TV.

It should be there, if only to publicize an innovation, introduced in 1999, that has helped wrestle the annual festivities down to a manageable 90 minutes or so. That innovation, pretty in a party dress, is Miss Sweetie Poo, a determined little girl who keeps the acceptance speeches blessedly short with her insistent cries of "Please stop. I'm bored. Please stop. I'm bored."

Actually, the Igs are never dull (for long)--and very funny. In his entertaining new book, "The Ig Nobel Prizes: The Annals of Improbable Research" (Dutton), Marc Abrahams, father and master of ceremonies of the Igs, lays out the philosophy behind them: "Everything that has won an Ig Nobel Prize shares this quality: it first makes people LAUGH, then makes them THINK. *What* people think is up to them." In short, these are prizes given out to actual scientists and researchers whose efforts, in one way or another, amuse as much as enlighten.

Take the 1993 Prize for Literature, which went to the "approximately" 976 co-authors of a brief research paper in the New England Journal of Medicine. Or the 2001 prize that went to two economists who concluded that "some people will themselves to survive a bit longer if it will enrich their heirs." Or the 1998 award that went to a study that measured the happiness of clams on Prozac. Or the 1998 recognition of the researchers who wanted to see if the long-rumored correlation between height, penile length and foot size measured up.

Last week, as is the case every year, Igs were handed out by honest-to-goodness Nobel Laureates to men and women whose "achievements," as a top-hatted Mr. Abrahams put it, "speak for themselves all too eloquently." The attending winners, who traveled to Cambridge, Mass., at their own expense, included one of the Australian scientists who conducted "An Analysis of the Forces Required to Drag Sheep Over Various Surfaces." Another, from London, co-wrote a study showing that the city's taxi drivers have more highly developed brains than non-cabbies, due to their navigation skills. From Stockholm came all three co-authors of a paper titled, in all seriousness, "Chickens Prefer Beautiful Humans."

The winners gave their acceptance speeches in front of "ignitaries" that included members of the North American Man-Bird Love Association, the Vicious Townies and the Mad Scientists Local 2.20222 x 10⁻⁹. A crowd of 1,200 greeted the honorees with a raucous reception and blizzard of paper airplanes.

The Ig traditions are many, and include the "Welcome, Welcome Speech" (consisting entirely of "Welcome, welcome") and the Win-a-Date-With-a-Nobel-Laureate Contest. This year's dating laureate was Richard Roberts, co-winner of the 1993 Nobel for Medicine and, as it happens, Dr. December in the 1997 Studmuffins of Science calendar. A portion of the ceremony was simultaneously translated into German, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese and that most daunting language of all, Administrative Jargon.

In keeping with this year's theme, "Nano," there was a nano-opera, "Atom and Eve"--about a romance between an oxygen atom and a dishy scientist. In the cast were real singers and distinguished scientists. And there were nano-lectures, in which the speakers had to provide a technical description of their subject in 24 seconds and then give a clear summary in seven words. "Genome: Bought the book. Hard to read," was Dr. Eric Lander's lapidary contribution.

The proceedings were remarkably clean, thanks not only to folks with brooms but to the swift action of the human V-Chip Monitor. He put a quick end to a Moment of Science illustrating the study of one of the winners, the Dutchman who documented "the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck."

Mr. Abrahams, who has a Harvard degree in applied mathematics, has found the formula for zany braininess. He and his Igs are ready for primetime. Is primetime ready for them?

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