



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Student Winners Follow the Famous

By: Julie Salamon

In 1932, a senior at Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn won second prize in a writing contest for a story called "Life - From Behind a Counter," about working in his father's grocery store.

The story ends with a salesman telling the boy, "vat you see in vun day, und vat you hear in vun day from dese people - you can write a leetle book about."

"I nodded--only I thought, 'I could write a big book,' "wrote the 18-year-old author.

The storyteller was Bernard Malamud, who would write many big books and win many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for "The Fixer."

That early notice for the future literary star came from the Scholastic Awards, begun in 1923, when the contest sponsor, the Scholastic Publishing Company, received seven original writing submissions. This year, 200,000 middle school and high school students entered, along with an additional 50,000 competitors in the photography and art categories, for the national prizes now known as the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

This year's 12 winners of the top prize, \$10,000 in cash for a portfolio of work, were announced yesterday by Scholastic Inc., still the biggest sponsor of the awards (The New York Times is another corporate sponsor), which total more than \$1.5 million in tuition scholarships annually.

Move over, "American Idol," at least a little. There is a serious contingent of youthful contenders who would rather be Sylvia Plath (a winner for drawing and writing in 1947) or Richard Avedon (a poetry winner in 1941) than Kelly Clarkson, and they aren't all cosseted in elite schools in the Northeast (though some are). The high achievers this year, chosen from participants in all 50 states, included students from Owings Mills, Md., and Wauwatosa, Wis., as well as Tulsa, Okla., and Harrisburg, Pa. New York had winners from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn and the Trinity School in Manhattan.

While these artistic outpourings by ambitious and talented young people should not be confused with a Rorschach test of today's youth, certain trends emerge. After Sept. 11, 2001, for example, "We spent two or three years seeing depression, malaise, pictures of angels - mainly in the artwork," said B. J. Adler, executive director of the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers, which administers the contest. "This year that's almost gone. Teenagers have moved on. The work is more optimistic, more can-do."

Some subjects have remained constant. "The teenage angst thing," Ms. Adler said. "Early death, early tragedy, love found, love lost. But what has changed is the availability of information, through the Internet and television." There are references today to sitcoms, iPods and school trips to China; feelings of angst now may involve anorexia and sexual orientation.

But the entries were also peppered with references to Aristotle and Emerson; students accustomed to multitasking and cyberspace research seem to have little hesitancy about assuming instant expertise on many subjects. Mary Kate Lee of Harrisburg won a gold prize for a portfolio that contained stories and poems on the subjects of Abraham Lincoln, jazz and Barney the purple dinosaur.

At a time when the college application process can feel like training for the Olympics, the Scholastic prizes have taken on additional heft, particularly because of the scholarship money. The prizes have become a way to achieve national recognition, so students are pushed hard.

"We work on breaks from class, we work through the weekends, we work late at night," said Carlos Molina, the photography teacher at Abraham Lincoln High, who won a silver prize a decade ago, when he was a student at the school.

Sara Saylor, now a sophomore at the University of South Carolina, won a gold portfolio prize two years ago for writing. Her public school in Charleston took the awards very seriously - perhaps too seriously. "I think the awards came to mean too much to me after a while," she said. "Whenever Scholastic admissions time rolled around, we began to get very competitive and more concerned about winning the contest than we should have."

The process can be arduous, beginning in many cases in middle school, when students start competing in regional contests, accumulating prizes and finesse as they work their way up the awards ladder. But for students like Ms. Saylor, the intensity paid off, and not just in prize money. The competition gave her passion validation - not easy for serious young writers to come by in a pop culture world.

Craft still matters. "What has been surprising to me is the quality of the writing and the confidence and authority," said Esmeralda Santiago, who has written several books, including the memoir "When I Was Puerto Rican," and a Scholastic juror since 1993. "When I was 18 years old, I was trying to figure out if something is 'on the table' or 'in the table.' "

While a large percentage of the art and photography students tend to stay in those fields as adults, far fewer of the writers follow in the footsteps of Joyce Carol Oates (a 1956 winner for a short story) and turn professional. The awards can become a catalyst for a career, however, sometimes by accident.

Ned Vizzini was a student at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan in 1996, fully expecting to become a computer programmer, when he entered the contest and won an honorable mention. He went to the awards ceremony inappropriately dressed (plaid shorts) and spilled punch all over his shirt before he had to go on stage to accept his prize. On top of that, he was anxious, wondering how he compared with other writers in the room.

His account of the experience ran in the alternative weekly The New York Press. Now, at 24, he is waiting for his third novel to come out. His previous one, "Be More Chill," published last year by Miramax/Hyperion was about the sexual frustrations of a teenage boy. A reviewer in The New York Times Book Review wrote of "Chill": "If it weren't so funny, his first novel might be too painful to read."

Mr. Vizzini, a Scholastic juror this year, said the contest got him started. "There was a poster up in my English class and my teacher said it was a good thing," he said. "I wasn't an awards guy. I didn't want prizes for college. I just wanted to see if my writing was any good."