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Judges hand it to asymmetry

By Jonathan Amos
BBC News Online science staff

A book about asymmetry has won the prestigious Aventis Prize for the best popular science publication in 2003.

Right Hand, Left Hand by Chris McManus was honoured in a gala dinner at London's Science Museum on Wednesday.



Drabble congratulates McManus on his win
(Image by Donovan Whyte)

The book is an exploration of the uneven Universe. It covers topics such as the nature of handedness in people and the direction across the page different cultures write. Even the bent of sub-atomic particles is subjected to analysis.

The Professor of Psychology and Medical Education at University College London received a £10,000 cheque for his success.

The chair of the judging panel, the novelist Margaret Drabble, told BBC News Online: "His book answers some of the deepest questions in biology, physics and chemistry.

"It is an excellent mix of hard science and engaging games and tricks. It's got a treasury of anecdotes and things you didn't know."

Even-handed

McManus is one of the world's leading authorities on handedness - and he has a very personal interest: he has twin daughters, one of whom is left-handed and the other right-handed.

He said: "We want to know why it is that most people are one way - but there is this minority that's the other way round. We think it has to be because there's an advantage to being left-handed.

"We think they're a bit more creative - a bit more unusual. We say right-handers are 'off-the-peg' and left-handers are 'designer'.

"I'm right-handed and that's why I can speak for the left-handers with some authority. I haven't got any biases."

This year's junior prize went to The DK Guide To The Oceans, by Dr Frances Dipper. The junior winner also collected a £10,000 cheque.

Dr Dipper is an independent marine consultant, photographer and author. She has written numerous books and articles on marine biology and ocean

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environments for both children and adults.

She said: "I've always loved the oceans and the things I've seen have amazed me.

"I've shaken hands with giant cuttlefish; I've dived with sharks in a cave in Australia; and I've watched huge turtles drag themselves up a beach to lay their eggs. I just hope some children have been as stimulated as I have."

Treat yourself

It was the fourth year running that publisher Dorling Kindersley has walked away with the junior prize. Its full-colour illustrated books are proving to be a huge hit, not just with child readers but with judging panels as well.

Children's Publisher at DK, Miriam Farbey, told BBC News Online: "You have to be visually stunning in a world that is visual. Your book has to be accessible in different ways.

"If you don't want the words, there are the pictures; but if you want the detail, the text is also there. And we like to be lavish because a book should be a treat."

The Aventis Prizes for Science Books is now in its 15th year.

They are managed by the UK's academy of sciences, the Royal Society, and sponsored by pharmaceutical giant Aventis.



Dipper (m) won for her lavish look at ocean life (Image by Donavan Whyte)

Although the awards are perhaps not as well known as, say, the Booker or Orange prizes for popular fiction, the Aventis winners will usually outsell their much hyped cousins.

Previous Aventis winners have included the late Stephen J Gould, Roger Penrose, and Stephen Hawking who won last year with *The Universe In A Nutshell*.

The full shortlist for the 2003 general prize:

- **Right Hand, Left Hand**, by Chris McManus (*Weidenfeld & Nicolson*)
- **Small World**, by Mark Buchanan (*Weidenfeld & Nicolson*)
- **Reckoning With Risk**, by Gerd Gigerenzer (*Allen Lane*)
- **The Extravagant Universe**, by Robert P Kirshner (*Princeton University Press*)
- **The Blank Slate**, by Steven Pinker (*Allen Lane*)
- **Where Is Everybody?** by Stephen Webb (*Copernicus Books*)

The shortlisted books for the 2003 junior prize:

- **The DK Guide to the Oceans**, by Dr Frances Dipper (*Dorling Kindersley*)
- **Horrible Science: The Terrible Truth About Time**, by Nick Arnold (*Scholastic*)
- **Get In Gear**, by Sholly Fisch (*Innovative Kids*)
- **Leap Through Time: Dinosaur**, by Nicholas Harris (*Orpheus Books*)
- **Why Can't I..? Series**, by Sally Hewitt (*Belitha Press*)
- **The Way Science Works**, by Robin Kerrod & Dr Sharon Ann Holgate (*Dorling Kindersley*)

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