

If there's a Steve on the short list, the other scientists

THE WORLD OF BOOKS



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HERE IS a handy tip for those aspiring to write science bestsellers. Change your name to Stephen. Then scribble out your manuscript and relax. Very shortly, you should find yourself joining an elite that includes Steve Jones, Steve Rose, Stephen Jay Gould and Stephen Hawking, all four being past recipients of the Aventis Prize, science's answer to the Booker.

And if the bookies are correct, this strange list is about to be enlarged again – to include the name of Steven Pinker. According to William Hill, 'the Man with the Answers', as Pinker's publisher, Penguin, describes the extravagantly quiffed psychology pro-

fessor, is the clear favourite to scoop the £10,000 prize at Wednesday's award ceremony. His book, *The Blank Slate*, is rated a 2-1 dead cert.

The continued growth of this regiment of Steves therefore makes for an intriguing publishing phenomenon. Only one other forename has appeared more than once in the prize's 15-year history (Roger Lewin won with *Bones of Contention* in 1989 and Roger Penrose for *The Emperor's New Mind* in 1990), although you must also take into account the name of Jared Diamond, the Aventis's only double winner (for *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* in 1992, and for *Guns, Germs and Steel* in 1998). Apart from that, it's been a walkover for the Steves.

Of course, there is more going for *The Blank Slate* than the author's moniker. The book, a powerful espousal of the idea that human nature is hard-wired and not acquired from society, is elegantly written, is the handiwork of a highly experienced author (Pinker's

previous books, *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*, have both made Aventis short lists) and, most importantly, covers a field that is a clear Aventis favourite – evolution and the shaping of mankind.

Other winners in this genre include Diamond's pair of masterpieces, probably the best two books ever to grace the Aventis awards; Steve Jones's *Language of the Genes*; Lewin's *Bones of Contention*; and Alan Walker and Pat Shipman's *The Wisdom of the Bones*, an account of palaeontologists' search for humanity's origins.

Indeed, apart from a few books on oceanography, astronomy and neurology, evolution has monopolised the Aventis. Nor is there anything particularly wrong with this state of affairs. Given our species' constant urge to bloat its own importance, anything

that puts us in our proper place should be welcomed, particularly something as witty as Pinker's book.

However, the prize is by no means a foregone conclusion, for Pinker faces powerful opposition. Indeed, this year's Aventis short list, created by judges Margaret Drabble (chairman), Oxford physiologist Prof Frances Ashcroft, author Kate Mosse, journalist

Matthew Parris and Oxford mathematician Dr Marcus du Sautoy, is one of the strongest of recent years and includes physicist Stephen Webb's intriguing study of the search for alien intelligences, *Where is Everybody?*; a couple of highly accessible accounts of two very arcane fields of scientific endeavour – Mark Buchanan's *Small World*, on networks in



Steven Pinker: monsterring opponents.

short list, the other scientists might as well give up

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nature, and Robert Kirshner's *Extravagant Universe*, on our expanding cosmos; while Gerd Gigerenzer's *Reckoning with Risk* is even blessed with a cover puff from no less a figure than Steven 'Itma' Pinker.

But most impressive of all his competitors is *Right Hand, Left Hand*, in which psychologist Chris McManus takes an intriguing look at the asymmetry of our bodies and societies. Why are most people right-handed but have hearts on the left? Why are men's testicles unbalanced? And why are Muppets left-handed? Good questions and, in providing answers, McManus has produced a joyous, entertaining book that is my outside tip (at 3-1) for the Aventis.

Of course, defeat for Pinker would be rather unfair given that his *Language Instinct* should have won in 1995. Unfortunately, *The Blank Slate* is not nearly as good, despite its author's intense, almost obsessive belief in it.

In my *Observer* review last year, I praised the book's erudition and style,

but questioned Pinker's monsterring of so many opponents, from behaviourists to feminists, from Karl Marx to Walt Disney, and just about anyone who has ever criticised him (usually one of the Steves, as it happens). I also queried his tendency to make wild assertions – women's taste in men varies with their menstrual cycle, that sort of thing – without adequate supporting data.

In emails of rapidly escalating rage, Pinker hotly denied these charges and accused me of damaging his career, although the idea of a Harvard professor, particularly one of his reputation, being downed by a mildly disapproving UK book review seems unlikely.

Indeed, I have since formed the view that this is a man, desperate for renown, who has spent too long in front of a mirror with his curling tongs. Nothing is to be allowed to get in his way, it would seem. I just hope the Aventis judges realise this.

Robin McKie picks his top 10 science books of the last decade www.observer.co.uk/review



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