

# Letters to the Editor

April 7, 2017

## Letters

### Fighting In The Captain's Tower

To the Editor:

Anyone questioning the Nobel award in literature to Bob Dylan will be convinced that the Swedish Academy did the right thing once they read David Orr's paean of academic and cultural superiority, "The Lyrics Laureate" (On Poetry, March 26). Beginning with references to his hero Robert Frost, a cheap shot at a Swedish poet Nobel Prize winner and vague generalities about "various English-language novelists" who might be annoyed about Dylan's award, Orr goes on to an originalist interpretation of literary awards that would be admired by Antonin Scalia. He further bemoans the widespread use of the word "poetry" in our everyday descriptions of beauty, be it about blancmange or a shovel pass, particularly by those having "limited experience with poems."

Is this essay really about Dylan's poetry or about the critic's own superior language and lofty perspective? The only sample we get of Dylan's writing is a throwaway line under an old photo. Mr. Orr, the times began changing a long time back, and Dylan was there to help us on the way. John Ashbery probably likes his work too.

JOHN AUNE

NYACK, N.Y.



To the Editor:

David Orr makes some excellent points in his wonderful column about Bob Dylan's winning the Nobel Prize in Literature. But the award to Dylan comes down to a technicality: It is not the Nobel Prize in Poetry or the Nobel Prize in Novels; it is for literature. And as Alfred Nobel specifically stated in his will, the prize is intended for the person who, in the literary field, had produced "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction." In addition, the laureate would be determined by "the Academy in Stockholm," which was specified by the statutes of the Nobel Foundation to mean the Swedish Academy. Those statutes defined literature as "not only belles-lettres, but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value."

So, worthy as Orr's analysis of the relationship between song-lyric writing and poetry may be, the bottom line in terms of whether Dylan qualified for the prize is not whether his lyrics are poetry. What is required is that the lyrics possess literary value, and that the author singularly distinguishes himself, in the field of all literature, in their creation. It would be hard to argue with the academy's determination that Dylan succeeded in meeting those criteria.

RICHARD MARGOLIN

CHERRY HILL, N.J.



To the Editor:

David Orr perpetuates the mistaken notion that Dylan is the first songwriter/musician to win the Nobel literature prize. In 1913, the prize was

awarded to the Bengali songwriter/poet/playwright/novelist/artist Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-Western Nobel.

The book that made his reputation in the West, and for which he was awarded the Nobel, was “Gitanjali,” a collection of more than 100 songs composed by Tagore. Since the lyrics were not published with music (though Tagore composed music for over 2,000 songs), they were called poems by Western critics, despite the translated title “Song Offerings” printed on the title page of the English edition of the book.

Tagore wrote so many songs (and yes, he also was a musician) that they became a musical genre in themselves, rabindrasangeet. Two of his songs were chosen as the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. A century after his Nobel, Tagore’s songs are sung throughout the Indian subcontinent by rich and poor alike. I hope Bob Dylan will be humbled by being the second songwriter to win the Nobel Prize.

JOHN MCGUIGAN

BLOOMINGTON, IND.



To the Editor:

Here’s a song for David Orr:  
Yer jealous of Dylan that’s fer sure.  
You say: You, too, could write a  
poem  
But it ain’t no good without  
proper form.  
Well, David, you can criticize.

But Bobby's won the Nobel Prize.

ADAM CHRISTING

LA HABRA, CALIF.

*The writer's forthcoming book is "Bob Dylan Can Change Your Life."*



### **'Lower Ed'**

To the Editor:

Your review of Tressie McMillan Cottom's "Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy" (March 12) missed the book's key flaw: Cottom universalizes the experience of Atlanta-area, mostly African-American, low- and middle-income students to conclude that all students make a "savvy" choice to enroll in high-cost, low-quality colleges, and she glosses over the role consumer fraud plays in these choices.

What we Senate staff members saw in our 2012 investigation, and what we see now resolving complaints and providing legal assistance at the nonprofit Veterans Education Success, are students who have been lied to about the real cost of tuition and loans taken out in their names, the quality of education offered, the school's accreditation, their eventual job prospects and eligibility to work in licensed occupations, and more. These lies are also why state attorneys general and federal agencies are suing for-profit colleges.

Cottom's focus on student choice leads her to discount the importance of the Education Department's job placement data and the gainful employment rule's data-driven limitations on the worst-performing programs.

CARRIE WOFFORD

CHEVY CHASE, MD.



### **Hair in the Age of Trump**

To the Editor:

Nice interview with Chris Hayes (By the Book, March 19). But why draw him with the part in his hair on the right? He's a lefty — 100 percent.

JAMES MORRISON

PORTLAND, ORE.



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*Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that we are unable to acknowledge letters.*

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A picture caption on Feb. 26 with a [review](#) of “Jonathan Swift: The Reluctant Rebel,” by John Stubbs, included an erroneous date with the engraving of Swift. The engraving represents him circa 1740, not circa 1800. (Swift died in