How to Win the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition

written by Guest Contributor | August 11, 2014


2. Don’t submit your manuscript in 1943.

3. Do submit your manuscript in 1920, 1921, 1922, or 1923.

4. Be a man.

5. Change your name to John.

6. If you don’t like the name John, consider any name that begins with the letter J.

7. Also don’t submit your manuscript in 1950, 1955, 1966.

8. Consider adding the name of a color to your title, but choose wisely.

9. Don’t title your manuscript Poems.

10. Embrace the power of your entire name, maybe.

11. When deciding between beginning your title with the definite or indefinite article, definitely side with the definite.

12. Give nature a chance.

13. Be concise.

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1 There have been 108 winners of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition since 1919.

2 They didn’t award the prize in 1943. There’s a gap between the 1942 winning manuscript, For My People by Margaret Walker, and the 1944 winner, Love Letters from an Impossible Land by William Meredith.

3 In each of these years, four manuscripts were selected.

4 62.9% (68) of the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition have been men.
Four, or 3.7% of the winners of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition have the first name John, a larger percentage than any other same-first-name group. Try to match the following Johns with the titles of their winning manuscripts: John C. Farrar (1919), John Ashbery (1956), John Hollander (1958), John Bensko (1981); A Crackling of Thorns, Some Trees, Green Soldiers, Forgotten Shrines.

A whopping seventeen winners, or 15.6%, have first names that begin with the letter J. In addition to the Johns, other past winners whose first names begin with J include the following: James Agee (1934), Joy Davidman (1938), Jeremy Ingalls (1941), Joan Murray (1947), James Wright (1957), Jack Gilbert (1962), Jean Valentine (1965), James Tate (1967), Judith Johnson (1969), Julie Agoos (1987), Jody Gladding (1993), Jay Hopler (2006), and Jessica Fisher (2007). It’s important to note here also that twice (1965-1967, 2006-2007) first-name-begins-with-J winners have been named in consecutive years. (If 1965 and 1967 don’t sound “consecutive,” see the next item on the list).

The prize weren’t awarded in these years.

The color green has won three times, more than any other color, all three of which wins were also submitted by J’s (James Wright went with The Green Wall, John Bensko Green Soldiers, and Jay Hopler Green Squall), but there are also five other winning colors, including white’s consecutive wins (Thomas Caldecott Chubb for The White God and Other Poems in 1920 and Harold Vinal for White April in 1921), gold’s dual win in 1921 (Hervery Allen Wampum and Old Gold, Oscar Williams Golden Darkness), and silver’s lone win (Marion M. Boyd’s Silver Wands in 1923). This is not to mention that the predominant color of winning titles also serves as current winner’s surname (Eryn Green, 2013).

Unless your name is Joan Murray and you’re submitting your manuscript in 1947 or your name is Alan Dugan and you’re submitting your manuscript in 1961.

The middle name can be embraced through the use of initial or the full name. All said, 22.4% of winners either middle initial or a full middle name; however seventeen of the twenty-three who did won before 1932. After 1932, the prize experiences serious middle-name drought. It goes thirteen years, until Charles E. Butler wins in 1945, without so much as an initial. Then it’s seven years before W.S. Merwin in 1952, seventeen more before Judith Johnson Sherwin (two J’s!) in 1969, an interval of eleven getting to William Virgil Davis in 1980, a shorter span until Brigit Pegeen Kelly in 1988, even shorter until Christiane Jacox Kyle in 1991, and an alarming twenty-two until Eduardo C. Corral revives the practice in 2012.

As the first word of title, “The” has won fourteen times—The Tempting (1919), The Last Lutanist (1923), The Dark Hills Under (1933), The Deer Come Down (1936), The Gardener Mind (1937), The Connecticut River and Other Poems (1939), The Metaphysical Sword (1941), The Grasshopper’s Man and Other Poems (1949), The Green Wall (1957), The Breaking of the Day (1964), The Lost Pilot (1967), Gathering the Tribes (1976), The Difference Between Night and Day (1978), The Evolution of Flightless Birds (1984), The Earth in the Attic (2008)— or 13.1% of total wins, while “a” has won only six times—A Stranger Afraid (1928), A Beginning (1948), A Change of World (1951), A Mask for Janus (1952), A Crackling of Thorns (1958)— or 5.6% of the total wins.

Breaking of the Day (1964), Field Guide (1973), The Difference Between Night and Day (1978), Westerly (2013)—for a total of thirty-nine natural-world-related winners, or 36.4% (over one third!) of the total winners. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should say that I omitted the bizarre Coach into Pumpkin (1925) and Lugging Vegetables o Nantucket (1971) because, despite the inclusion of food, which I suppose is natural, they just didn’t seem to fit here. Although a natural myth, Ultima Thule (2000) was left out here due its being a myth.


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