

2000 JPBM Communications Award



Sylvia Nasar

The Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) Communications Award was established in 1988 to reward and encourage those who, on a sustained basis, bring accurate mathematical information to nonmathematical audiences. This lifetime award recognizes a significant contribution or accumulated contributions to public understanding of mathematics.

At the Joint Mathematics Meetings in Washington, DC, in January 2000, the 2000 JPBM Communications Award was presented to SYLVIA NASAR. What follows is the award citation, a biographical sketch, and the recipient's response to receiving the award.

Citation

The Joint Policy Board for Mathematics presents its 2000 Communications Award to Sylvia Nasar for *A Beautiful Mind*, her biography of John Forbes Nash Jr. Based on extensive research, the vivid, beautifully written account of the life of the troubled mathematical genius provides rare insight into the world of academic research in mathematics. By portraying the mathematical culture at several leading institutions and explaining the significance of John Nash's contributions in game theory, geometry, and analysis, Sylvia Nasar has given the general public a glimpse into the world of mathematical research and an understanding of its impact on society.

Biographical Sketch

Sylvia Nasar, who was born in Germany and grew up in the United States and Turkey, was trained as an economist. She studied under William Baumol and Fritz Machlup at New York University and subsequently worked with Wassily Leontief, the 1973 winner of the Nobel Prize in economics for his invention of input-output analysis. Nasar has been writing about economics for many years, first at *Fortune* and *U.S. News & World Report*, and, in

the past decade, at the *New York Times*. She is now working on her second book, about great twentieth-century economic thinkers, which picks up where Robert Heilbroner's classic, *The Worldly Philosophers*, leaves off and which will be published by Simon & Schuster in 2003.

A Beautiful Mind, the biography of John Nash, was Nasar's first book. It grew out of her *New York Times* article "The Lost Years of the Nobel Laureate", written right after Nash won the Nobel Prize in 1994. *A Beautiful Mind* won the 1998 National Book Critic's prize for biography and many other accolades.

Response

When John Forbes Nash Jr. won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1994, "the most remarkable mathematician of the second half century" was known around Princeton as "The Phantom of Fine Hall". He was not affiliated with any university, was not a member of the National Academy, was not listed in *Who's Who*. The "Nash equilibrium", "Nash bargaining solution", "Nash embedding", "Nash-De Giorgi result", "Nash-Moser theorem", and other of Nash's contributions from the 1950s had become famous in fields as disparate as geometry and game theory, but he himself was shrouded in obscurity. Thirty years of devastating mental illness had not only shattered Nash's life, they had also erased his personal history. Without the loyal support of his colleagues in the mathematical community and his wife, Alicia, Nash could not have survived those lost years, much less recovered from his illness and won worldwide acclaim. And without their recollections, letters, and photographs, I could not have reconstructed Nash's profoundly moving and inspiring story. For these gifts—as well as this wonderful award—I am profoundly grateful.

—From JPBM prize announcement