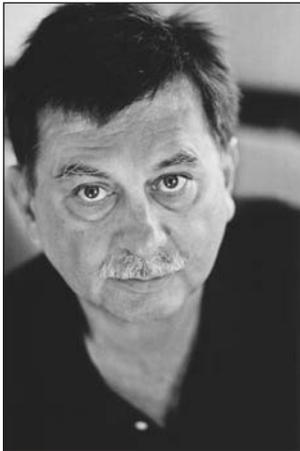


2009 JPBM Communications Award



George Csicsery

The 2009 Communications Award of the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) was presented at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in Washington, DC, in January 2009.

The JPBM Communications Award is presented annually to reward and encourage journalists and other communicators who, on a sustained basis, bring accurate mathematical information to nonmathematical audiences. JPBM represents the AMS, the American Statistical Association, the Mathematical Association of America, and the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics. The award carries a cash prize of US\$1,000.

Previous recipients of the JPBM Communications Award are: James Gleick (1988), Hugh Whitehead (1990), Ivars Peterson (1991), Joel Schneider (1993), Martin Gardner (1994), Gina Kolata (1996), Philip J. Davis (1997), Constance Reid (1998), Ian Stewart (1999), John Lynch and Simon Singh (special award, 1999), Sylvia Nasar (2000), Keith J. Devlin (2001), Claire and Helaman Ferguson (2002), Robert Osserman (2003), Barry Cipra (2005), Roger Penrose (2006), Steven H. Strogatz (2007), and Carl Bialik (2008).

The 2009 JPBM Communications Award was presented to GEORGE CSICSERY. The text that follows presents the selection committee's citation, a brief biographical sketch, and the recipient's response upon receiving the award.

Citation

The 2009 JPBM Communications Award is awarded to George Csicsery for his extraordinary body of work showing the process of mathematical thinking through the medium of film.

George Csicsery is an artist who has employed his talents to communicate the beauty and fascination of mathematics and the passion of those who pursue it. This began with the film *N is a Number: A Portrait of Paul Erdős* (1993), which has been broadcast in Hungary, Australia, The Netherlands, Japan, and the United States. In 2008 he completed the biographical documentary *Julia Robinson and Hilbert's Tenth Problem*, and *Hard Problems: The Road to the World's Toughest Math Contest*, a documentary on the preparations and competition of the U.S. International Mathematical Olympiad team in 2006. Other recent works include *Invitation to Discover* (2002), made for the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, and *porridge pulleys and Pi* (2003), a 30-minute piece on mathematicians Hendrik Lenstra and Vaughan Jones which premiered at Télésience in Montreal, Canada, in November 2003. Through his films, George Csicsery expresses the excitement experienced by mathematically gifted individuals, and he has delighted mathematicians, students, and the public with his intriguing stories told through the media of film.

Biographical Sketch

George Paul Csicsery, a writer and independent filmmaker since 1968, was born in Germany in 1948 and immigrated to the United States in 1951. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1969, he made three short experimental films, and these led to a masters degree in cinema from San Francisco State College. He has directed 26 films, including dramatic shorts, performance films, and documentaries.

His screenplay, *Alderman's Story*, a period epic set during King Philip's War in New England in 1675, was awarded first prize at the Rhode Island International Film Festival Screenplay

Competition in 2005. His articles, reviews, and interviews have appeared in film journals, newspapers, and many other publications. He has taught cinema at the Film Arts Foundation, San Francisco State University, and at the University of California, Davis. Csicsery's films on historical, ethnographic, and cultural subjects include works on pirates, prostitutes, romance novel writers, policemen, scouts, and Transylvanian folk musicians.

In 1988 Csicsery's career took a dramatic turn when he began work on a biographical film about Paul Erdős. *N is a Number: A Portrait of Paul Erdős*, is still his best known and most popular work, with broadcasts, screenings, and DVD copies in constant demand worldwide. That film led to more projects on mathematical subjects. *Invitation to Discover* about MSRI, and *porridge pulleys and Pi*, about Hendrik Lenstra and Vaughan Jones, were both completed in 2003. *The Right Spin* (2005), the story of astronaut Michael Foale's role in saving the Mir space station in 1997, was made for Mathematics Awareness Month. *Julia Robinson and Hilbert's Tenth Problem*, a one-hour biographical documentary, premiered in January 2008 at the Joint Mathematics Meetings. *Hard Problems: The Road to the World's Toughest Math Contest* also premiered there in January 2008. The feature documentary about American students at the 2006 International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO) was produced with the Mathematical Association of America. Csicsery is currently completing a new project for MSRI and a film of interviews with mathematician Paul Halmos for the MAA. Both are scheduled for 2009 release on DVD. Future projects include films about Ronald Graham and coincidence.

Response

It is a great honor to receive this award, especially when I look at the list of previous recipients—Martin Gardner, Constance Reid. Wow! I am hardly in their league.

It is tremendously satisfying to be recognized in this fashion, especially because making films about mathematicians has often been such an uphill and lonely battle. The most frequent question I get when I try to explain what I do is, "Who will be interested in a film about mathematicians?" Believe it or not, the first person to ask me that question was Paul Erdős. And I had no acceptable answer for him until after *N is a Number* was broadcast in five countries and had sold 4,000 copies in VHS.

Why did I start making films about mathematicians? My standard explanation was that I was a refugee from the social sciences looking for terra firma, and mathematicians seemed interested in actually finding out if something is true or not. More recently, I've developed another theory. There are more people in mathematics than in any other field who claim that they don't know anything. And

to someone who really doesn't know anything, that is almost like having a community.

The task of explaining mathematics and mathematicians on film would be impossible without the patience and passion for the subject that I've encountered. Mathematicians are the most enthusiastic expositors of their subject, helping me look for ways to translate complex ideas under the severe time limitations imposed by the medium of film.

The list of people behind the successful completion of the films being recognized is a long one, starting with Charles L. Silver, Ronald Graham, Paul Erdős, Hyman Field, and includes Don Albers of MAA publications, and Klaus Peters, who both provided early opportunities for distribution of my films. David Eisenbud and Bob Osserman at MSRI became key advocates. Jim Carlson and the Clay Mathematics Institute, along with Will Hearst, provided financial support for the film about Julia Robinson and Hilbert's Tenth Problem. I wish to thank Constance Reid, Martin Davis, and Yuri Matiyasevich for their heroic efforts as protagonists in that film. *Hard Problems* was a dream project brought to me by Joe Gallian, who then raised the funding. It was supported by everyone at MAA and AMC, especially Steve Dunbar and Tina Straley. There are many others, including all of the people on the film production teams—cinematographers, editors, sound engineers, composers, and assistants. They all deserve this recognition and my thanks.