The 'Nobel Prize' for mathematics

On Wednesday the 26th of March the President of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Nils Chr. Stenseth, will announce the winner of this year's Abel Prize for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics. The prize will be awarded by the King of Norway and there will be a state banquet at Akershus Castle hosted by the Norwegian Government in honour of the Abel Laureate.

The Abel Prize is worth about €750,000 (or £580,000) to the winners. It has been awarded annually since 2003 by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics, giving mathematics for the first time an international prize of the same scale and importance as the Nobel Prize. But why is there no Nobel Prize for mathematics?

There are two prevailing 'theories'. Intriguingly one is that the leading mathematician of the time, Magnus Gustaf (Gösta) Mittag-Leffler, had an affair with Alfred Nobel's wife and in a fit of pique Nobel excluded mathematics from the list of prizes. The other is that if there was a mathematics prize Mittag-Leffler would have used his influence to be the inaugural winner, which Nobel did not want.

These stories continue to be the subject of conversations for mathematicians who think it is unfair that physics has a prize but mathematics doesn't. In fact Nobel never married but he did have a long term partner, a Sophie Hess.

Commentators have put forward more mundane explanations: that Mittag-Leffler and Nobel had almost no relations with each other, or that mathematics wasn't one of Nobel's interests, and the thought of a prize in mathematics simply never entered his mind.

Whatever the explanation the award is named after the 19th century Norwegian mathematician Niels Henrik Abel, he achieved an astonishing amount including the resolution of an outstanding open problem, unresolved for 250 years (that there is no formulae for the solution of a degree 5 polynomial similar to the one learnt at school for quadratic equations). Despite incredible achievements, Abel made his discoveries while living in poverty and died at the age of 26 from tuberculosis. A ceremony will take place on the day before the prize giving at the Gustav Vigeland statue of this young scientist.

Notes for Editors

1. The Niels Henrik Abel Memorial Fund was established in 2002 to award the **Abel Prize** for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics. The prize is awarded by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. The choice of Abel Laureate is based on the recommendation of the Abel Committee, which consists of five internationally recognised mathematicians.

2. For more information about the Abel Prize, visit the Abel Prize website www.abelprisen.no/en/

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