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science books



**Right Hand, Left Hand :
The Origins of
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Right Hand, Left Hand scoops science book prize

Author Chris McManus wins £10,000 Aventis award for exploration of asymmetry.
26 June 2003

PHILIP BALL



The winning book explores brains, biology and cultures.

This year's winner of the world's most prestigious science book competition was announced in London last night. Psychologist Chris McManus was awarded the £10,000 Aventis Prize for his work *Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures*.

A panel chaired by British novelist Margaret Drabble picked *Right Hand, Left Hand*, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, from a shortlist of six entries on topics ranging from cosmology to risk perception.

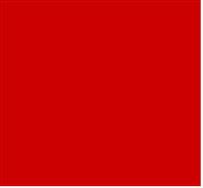
In it, McManus who works at University College in London, explores the phenomenon of handedness from the human to the subatomic level. He discusses why we are predominantly right-handed, why there is an imbalance in other animals too - parrots are southpaws, he reveals - and why amino acids, the building blocks of proteins exist in mirror image forms.

He covers the handedness in fundamental physics, called 'violation of parity conservation'. Chinese physicists Chen Ning Yang and Tsung Dao Lee predicted in 1956 that some subatomic particles might interact in a preferred orientation; the following year the another, Chien-Shiung Wu, observed 'left-handedness' in radioactive beta decay. "God is a weak left-hander", quips McManus.

He draws on sources from the paintings of Rembrandt, to medieval iconography, to his own twin daughters, one of whom is right-handed, the other left-handed. The girls were also celebrating yesterday - their fourth birthdays.

The prize for Junior Books went to marine biologist Frances Dipper for *The Dorling Kindersley Guide to the Oceans*, aimed at 8-10-year-olds. The prize





8-10-year-olds. The prizes are sponsored by the pharmaceuticals company Aventis and managed by the Royal Society in the UK.



Chris McManus is a psychologist at University College London.

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