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### Book takes both sides to scoop prize

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NewScientist.com news service

Books are weapons of mass instruction, according to a bookshop window in London. The point was well illustrated at the capital's Science Museum on Wednesday evening, when Chris McManus won the Aventis Science Book Prize for *Left Hand, Right Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures*.

Novelist Margaret Drabble, chair of the judges, said the panel had had their brains seriously exercised by "the pages of knowledge" exhibited by a strong shortlist. Some books had been difficult to understand but rewarding, she said.

Drabble thinks McManus's book will become a classic, while another shortlisted book, Robert Kirshner's *The Extravagant Universe*, caused "an explosion in the mind" with its account of the discovery that the Universe is expanding at an accelerating rate.

*Left Hand, Right Hand* examines not only the science, but also the culture of asymmetry, of which being left or right handed is the most obvious example. Accepting the £10,000 prize, McManus noted that he was standing near the Crick and Watson model of DNA - a right-handed spiral.

The professor of psychology and medical education at University College London added that in researching the book he had been lucky to have twin daughters, one right-handed and one left-handed.

The book is doing exceptionally well for a science hardback, selling better than most novels. It confirms the trend that the life sciences produce more prize winners than the physical sciences. Previous winners of the Aventis prize include biologists Jared Diamond, Steve Jones, Steven Rose and Stephen Jay Gould.

### Six handshakes

The panel of two scientists and three writers or journalists had a shortlist of six from which to choose. This included Steven Pinker's controversial *The Blank Slate*, an examination of human nature and our changing ideas about it.

Mark Buchanan's *Small Worlds* tackles the power laws

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underlying the notion that we are all, as Drabble put it, "six handshakes away from the president of the US". The judges described it as "A perfect example of how to show that science and maths underpin everything."

The judges also praised Gerd Gigerenzer's *Reckoning with Risk* for getting to grips with counterintuitive ideas that can lie under the surface of statistics, which includes showing how poorly most people understand them.

Finally, in *Where is Everybody?*, Stephen Webb provides 50 answers to the question of why, in such a huge Universe, have we not yet met extraterrestrial life.

All the shortlisted books have been reviewed in **New Scientist** print edition:

- *Right Hand, Left Hand: The origins of asymmetry in brains, atoms and cultures* by Chris McManus, Weidenfeld & Nicolson/Harvard, £20, ISBN 0297645978

**New Scientist** print edition [review, 29 June 2002, p 57](#)

- *Calculated Risks: How to know when numbers deceive you* by Gerd Gigerenzer, Simon & Schuster, \$25, ISBN 0743205561

**New Scientist** print edition [review, 25 May 2002, p 52](#)

- *Nexus (Small Worlds in UK)* by Mark Buchanan, W W Norton/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, \$25.95/ £18.99, ISBN 0393041530

**New Scientist** print edition [review, 27 July 2002, p 58](#)

- *Where is Everybody? Fifty solutions to Fermi's paradox* by Stephen Webb, Praxis, £17.50/\$27.50, ISBN 0387955011

**New Scientist** print edition [review, 26 April 2003, p 53](#)

- *The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature* by Steven Pinker, Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, £25, ISBN 0713992565

**New Scientist** print edition [review, 7 September 2002, p 56](#)

- *The Extravagant Universe: Exploding Stars, Dark Energy, and the Accelerating Cosmos* by Robert Kirshner, Princeton University Press, £19.95/\$29.95, ISBN 0691058628

**New Scientist** print edition review, 16 November 2002, p 42

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