



The Bigelow Prize

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In January 2021 the newly-founded Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies launched a competition, inviting researchers and scholars to submit essays that summarised in no more than 25,000 words the best evidence for the “Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death”.

The person behind the competition is Robert Bigelow, an American billionaire who made his money in property (he owns the extended-stay apartment chain, Budget Suites of America) and aerospace technology (particularly expandable space station modules based on intellectual property developed by NASA).

He has a longstanding interest in anomalous phenomena, and in 1995 founded the National Institute for Discovery Science to research and advance study of various topics, including ufology. In 1996, he bought the Skinwalker Ranch, a 480-acre cattle ranch located in Utah that has been the location for a range of unusual paranormal experiences. He had also provided funding to establish a Chair at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas to help legitimise research in parapsychology, a position that has been held by influential figures such as Charles Tart and Raymond Moody.



In interviews following the competition launch, he attributed his interest in the evidence-base for personal survival to the sudden and tragic losses of his father, one of his sons and his grandson, and to the death of his wife from leukaemia. The essay competition attracted significant attention from academics with an interest in survival research and among the media (Bigelow was interviewed by the *New York Times*), most obviously because of the magnitude of the prizes that were offered. The overall winner was to be awarded \$500,000, second prize was \$300,000, and third prize \$150,000, with an additional 11 Runner-Up prizes of \$50,000 each, for a total prize fund of \$1.5 million.

The initial launch listed the members of judging panel (Bigelow himself had no part in evaluating the essays), and comprised academics and investigators with a reputation for rigour and fairness, which was essential given how parapsychological research is often mistreated by gatekeepers of science. The response was overwhelming, with over 1,300 applicants to an initial expression of interest stage for which they had to submit details of their experience and credentials that qualified them to write with any authority on the topic. No information has been made public as to how many passed this stage but 204 completed essays from 38 countries were received by the final deadline.

First place was awarded to parapsychologist Dr Jeffrey Mishlove, who ingeniously embedded his essay with excerpts of interviews he had conducted with many of the key figures in consciousness research for his *New Thinking Allowed* YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFk448YbGITLnpIK7jwNcw>). In second place was cardiologist Dr Pim van Lommel, an expert on near-death experiences, and in third was Dr Leo Ruickbie, a historian and sociologist of religion who cleverly incorporated

Ebenezer Scrooge’s visitations from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come as an organising device. In addition to nominating eleven runners up, the panel felt sufficiently impressed by the quality of submitted essays to create an additional award category, and a further 15 essays received an “honourable mention” and a prize of \$20,000, so that in total 29 essays were recognised. Many of the winning authors are affiliated with the Network and the Galileo Commission.

Although there are plans to produce hardbound volumes that include all the winning essays (to be distributed gratis to university and college libraries), all the winning essays have been made available to the public to download from https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/contest_winners3.php. An awards ceremony was held in the dramatic environs of the Bigelow Aerospace campus in Las Vegas on December 4, 2021, hosted by Bigelow and Colm Kelleher, a BICS director who managed the competition. It was clear that the BICS organisation had been impressed by the calibre of those who had entered the competition and the quality of the evidence they marshalled, were keen to explore ways in which they could continue to support primary research and encourage dissemination of findings in a balanced yet confident fashion. The increased public exposure of survival research that has resulted from the competition itself, and the decision to make that scholarship freely available to the general public, is certainly a good start.

Professor Chris Roe is Professor of Psychology at the University of Northampton and a former President of the SPR. Dr Callum A. Cooper also lectures in psychology at Northampton. They are part of a research team on after-death communications with Evelyn Elsaesser and David Lorimer – see the research website at <https://www.adcrp.org>
