

Nobel Prizes honor a record 5 women in 2009

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(AP) -- A record five women were among the 13 people awarded Nobel Prizes on Thursday, including a writer who depicted life behind the Iron Curtain and researchers who showed how chromosomes protect themselves from degrading.

Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf handed out the prestigious 10 million kronor (\$1.4 million) awards in chemistry, physics, medicine, literature and economics during a glitzy ceremony at Stockholm concert hall. Hour earlier, President Barack Obama received the peace prize in Oslo.

The Stockholm ceremony is topped off by a lavish banquet in the capital's city hall - where laureates are served a succulent three-course gala dinner whose menu is kept top secret.

The awards were created by the 1895 will of prize founder Alfred Nobel, which stipulates that the prizes be given to those who "have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." The prizes were first awarded in 1901.

In total, only 40 women have won the prestigious prizes, including Marie Curie who took the 1903 physics prize and the 1911 chemistry prize.

Romanian-born author Herta Mueller accepted the Nobel literature award for her critical depiction of life behind the Iron Curtain - work drawn largely from her personal experiences. Mueller's mother spent five years in a communist gulag, and the writer herself was tormented by the Securitate secret police because she refused to become their

informant.

At the prize ceremony, Professor Anders Olsson of the Swedish Academy praised Mueller for her "great courage in uncompromisingly repudiating provincial repression and political terror."

"It is for the artistic value in that opposition that you merit this prize," he said. "Even though you have said that silence and suppression taught you to write, you have given us words that grip us deeply and directly."

Elinor Ostrom, 76, made history by being the first woman to receive the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, sharing it with fellow American Oliver Williamson for their work in economic governance. That prize is not one of the original Nobels, but was created in 1968 in Nobel's memory by the Swedish central bank.

Americans Elizabeth H. Blackburn, 61, and Carol W. Greider, 48, shared the 2009 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine with countryman Jack W. Szostak for their work in solving the mystery of how chromosomes protect themselves from degrading when cells divide.

Professor Rune Toftgard, a member of the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute, said the trio's work has raised hope that new therapies can be developed to fight cancer.

"You have solved a long-standing and fundamental problem in biology," he said.

The chemistry award was shared by 70-year-old Ada Yonath of Israel and Americans Venkatraman Ramakrishnan and Thomas Steitz for their atom-by-atom description of ribosomes, the protein-making machinery within cells. Their research is being used to develop new antibiotics.

American George E. Smith shared half of the physics award with countryman Willard S. Boyle for inventing a sensor used in digital cameras. The other half of the prize went to Charles K. Kao, also from the U.S., for discovering how to transmit light signals long distances through hair-thin glass fibers.

The prizes also include a a diploma and a gold medal. They are always handed out on Dec. 10, the anniversary of Nobel's death in 1896. The Swedish industrialist and inventor of dynamite died in San Remo, a link that the Italian city marks by sending flowers to decorate the ceremony in Stockholm.

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