

The Women's Prize for Fiction and Book Studies

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BOOK STUDIES AND BOOK AWARDS

In 2005, the controversial novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver was published. It caused a major dispute, especially in the United States of America, since it addressed the sensitive issue of school shootings. Also shattering the last taboo of motherhood, as the British *Telegraph* put it, the novel tells the story of a mother who does not connect emotionally with her son and blames him for her failed career and marriage ("Controversial"). Although provocative in itself, it was the book's winning the "Women's Prize for Fiction" (WPFF)¹ which acted as a catalyst for the controversy. Not only did the novel now reach a bigger audience, but the prize obviously rewarded authors writing about shocking topics. Awarded to women writers since 1996, the prize had already been controversial for years at the time of Shriver's win and once again proved to spark gender debates.

Book Studies seems to be a good point of departure to discuss the WPFF and its controversies in an academic way. This discipline, once famously described as "interdisciplinarity run riot" (Darnton 67) nowadays engages in the production, distribution and reception of books, as well as with all possible influences, be they economic, political, sociocultural, religious or otherwise. In a more recent approach to illustrate the boundaries, but also opportunities, of Book Studies, Leslie Howsam offered a simple diagram, depicting the discipline as a triangle with the cornerstones 'Bibliography' (the primary focus on documents and objects), 'History' (focus on agency, power and experience) and 'Literature' (focus on texts and criticism) (Howsam 17). The diagram

¹ To avoid confusion and for the sake of consistency, this article refers to this prize as WPFF, no matter which sponsor was named in the title.

makes it possible to locate book studies-relevant topics within that triangle. Literary book awards would be accurately located somewhere in the middle. They are, ideally, all about the literary quality of the texts. However, the winners are selected by humans, who are rarely unbiased, objective judges. Consequently, it is not solely literary merit that wins books prizes. Moreover, as every bookshop visitor will have noticed, winning prizes has an almost immediate effect on the appearance of the winning book and sometimes even on the whole oeuvre of the winning author. Stickers or revised cover designs point to the fact that the author is a prize recipient.

BRIEF HISTORY OF PRIZE CULTURE

It is neither a surprise nor a secret that awards are used heavily as a marketing tool and hence influence reception on several levels. In the twenty-first century, prizes have become ubiquitous, and it is hard not to become cynical about them. Award categories can range from vital contributions to world peace to "Outstanding Hairstyling for a Single-Camera Series". Within this prize culture, it can seem like a rarity to not have won an award, making the whole awarding idea feel somewhat pointless. James F. English, however, in his seminal monograph about prize culture, warns about such a cynical view and claims that there is a logic to this proliferation of prizes.

The modern rise of cultural prizes was kicked off in 1901 with the creation of the Nobel Prize for Literature. As English states: "Announced in hundreds of newspapers worldwide, the Nobel seized the collective imagination with sufficient force on us and created a curious logic of proliferation" (28). Just a few years after the first Nobel cer-

emony in Stockholm, both the Goncourt and Femina literary prizes were founded in France. During the same time period, Joseph Pulitzer declared his intention to launch prizes to honour outstanding work in journalism and literature in the USA.

While the Nobel may mark the dawning of a new age in the history of awards, it needs to be stressed that cultural prizes have existed for millennia, dating back to ancient Greece in the late sixth century BC. Apart from that, more modern forms, such as those awarded by universities and royal academies from the seventeenth century onward, have always displayed a tendency to proliferate through imitation and differentiation (English 30). What occurred with the explosion of prizes in the twentieth century is quite remarkable and it involved considerable innovation on the part of sponsors and administrators. However, in their most basic ideas, these developments are consistent with long-standing cultural practices.

The most basic goals of literary prizes are their social, representative and cultural functions. They support the author and the awarding institution with symbolic, economic and cultural capital. At the same time, they promote and support language and literature of a specific region and/or cultivation of specific genres. Obviously, literary prizes vary in prestige and, even though there are no clear-cut categories, the factors that usually influence prestige are tradition, spatial concept, the economic endowment, the award ceremony, prestige of previous winners and the attention of the public and media.

An excellent example is the British (Man) Booker Prize, first of all, because it is one of, if not the most important literary prize in the United Kingdom. More interestingly, though, is that fact that there was no obvious reason why it turned out to become this flagship of prizes. Indeed, its initial years were rocky. Having studied the minutes of committee meetings and private correspondences of people within the sphere of the Booker Prize, English compared his findings with a black-box transcript of a crashed plane:

[P]ublishers were threatening to stop nominating books; people invited to serve as judges were routinely declining to do so; Maschler insisted on acting like the chair of the management committee while the actual chair resigned; the Book Trust was abruptly brought in to assume administrative responsibility (though they had never administered a prize); and the sponsor, though committed to an initial seven years of funding, was already making sounds of an early exit.

(English 112-114)

So why is it that the Booker Prize has become so important despite decades of scandal? According to English, this question is already the answer. He quotes Bourdieu, who stated that “scandal is the instrument par excellence of symbolic action” (qtd. in English 190). One thing that scandals produce is awareness, a necessary condition for sticking out and staying in business in a world filled with prizes. And the Booker Prize has had its scandals: From winners accusing the prize’s main sponsor of having exploited their workers in a postcolonial framework (John Berger), to shortlisted authors demanding guarantees that they will win as a prerequisite that they show up at the ceremony (Anthony Burgess); From former jurors of the judging panel complaining about their fellow judges (A. L. Kennedy et al), to the complaint by media outlets that the shortlist was ‘too readable’ (2011). And only recently it was made public that the winner in 1986 was decided by the flip of a coin.²

² In September 2018, the Man Booker Prize Foundation released a series of archival interviews that revealed that David Storey’s novel *Saville* was chosen this way due to judges being unable to find a compromise (Flood).

HISTORY OF WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

Another scandalous situation occurred in 1991, when the Booker shortlist consisted of Martin Amis, Roddy Doyle, Rohinton Mistry, Timothy Mo, Ben Okri and William Trevor. It was this shortlist that provided the impetus to create one of the most controversially discussed literary book prizes of the last twenty years. By being exclusively male, the above-mentioned list underlined the general pattern that female authors were, at least seemingly, neglected within the literary establishment. It is estimated, for example, that during the year of the infamous shortlist, about 60 per cent of published novels had been written by women. Despite this, not one woman made it to the shortlist of the most important British literary book award.³

A group of women (and men) working in the industry – authors, publishers, journalists, etc. – discussed the issue after the infamous all-male Booker shortlist of 1991. The conclusion was that women's literary achievements were often not acknowledged by the major literary prizes. To correct the situation and at the same time create awareness of it, an award was to be established that would be judged solely by and awarded to women. The entry rules were simple: Any novel written by a woman and originally published in the United Kingdom in English was eligible ("Rules"). The prize was planned to be awarded for the first time in 1994. However, public controversy was huge and criticism about such an undertaking was so fierce that the initial sponsor of the Prize, pen manufacturer *Mitsubishi*, allegedly withdrew its support after a column written by Simon Jenkins, former editor of *the Times*, called the prize sexist (Zangen 282). Two years later, with female but otherwise anonymous sponsorship, the prize was awarded for the first time. Helen Dun-

³ This was not an isolated case where female participation was seemingly neglected in prize culture. The Booker Prize 1992 saw merely one woman on the shortlist, and the eventual winner was not one, but two men (Michael Ondaatje and Barry Unsworth). The first female Whitbread award winner was announced nine years after its inception.

The WPfF seeks to "celebrate excellence, originality and accessibility in women's writing."

more won the prize for her novel *A Spell of Winter* and took home 'Bessie', a bronze sculpture created specifically for the prize, along with the impressive GBP 30,000 prize money. In fact, this endowment made the WPfF the most lucrative prize for literary awards in Britain, with the Booker Prize lagging behind at GBP 20,000 and the Whitbread award at GBP 22,500. Some male authors felt left out and described themselves as victims of sexism, since their gender made them ineligible for such a lucrative award. Sales figures of *A Spell of Winter* quadrupled, and even the shortlisted novel *Spinsters* by Pagan Kennedy witnessed a decisive increase in sales, from 800 to 8,000 copies sold (Zangen 281-282). If the WPfF wanted to raise awareness for women's writing, then it certainly succeeded.

However, it soon became apparent that an anonymous private sponsor would not suffice in the long run. After all, supporting a literary award is more than paying the prize money. In the years to come, the WPfF successfully convinced cellular phone service company *Orange* to sponsor the prize. According to English, *Orange* invested a quarter million pounds annually for the first few years to cover expenses for various sorts of promotions, book club tie-ins and so on. Briefly changing its name to 'Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction' from 2007 to 2008, the prize had *Orange* as a main sponsor for over seventeen years. After that, the prize was solely sponsored by the liqueur brand *Baileys* for four years. Since 2017, the prize has been supported by a family of sponsors including *Baileys*, *NatWest*, *Deloitte*, and, beginning in 2019, global TV production company *Fremantle*. Instead of naming itself after one sponsor, the prize has been known as 'Women's Prize for Fiction' since 2018.

Creating a literary book award and restricting it to one gender, rather than one genre, language or country, was bound to be controversial. Even after the Booker Prize raised their endowment to GBP 50,000, it was still discussed whether the prize was, in essence, sexist, because it disregard-

ed men. In 2008, for example, Tim Lott wrote in *the Telegraph* that the WPFF is a 'sexist con-trick', stating that underrepresented groups among the winners of the two most important British book prizes, like white working class or disabled writers, do not have a prize for themselves. He concluded that the Prize was anachronistic and sexist and "it should be shunned – or, at the very least, mocked mercilessly" (Lott). Even though it might be only a little surprising to hear such a statement from a male perspective in a rather conservative publication, it was much more surprising to hear female voices also uttering fierce criticism about a prize that was established with a feminist agenda. A. S. Byatt, author of the novel *Possession*, made it clear that she would not wish for her works to be considered for the WPFF and stressed that this was her "deepest feminist emotion" since this prize would, in her opinion, ghettoise women. In a similar vein, and probably even more controversial, Germaine Greer, one of the leading voices of the second-wave feminist movement, stated her dismay. She sarcastically commented that soon somebody would found a prize for writers with red hair (Bedell). If the prize for women was being attacked by strong, female, feminist voices, something must have gone wrong.

CRUX OF THE MATTER: ACCESSIBILITY

Statistically speaking, roughly 40 per cent of all shortlisted authors of the Booker Prize from its inception in 1969 until 1991 were female, and 38 per cent of all Booker winners were female despite the fact that 60 per cent of published authors were women. Let us now assume that, rather idealistically, literary prizes are only awarded to truly superior literature (whatever that is). Following those two statements, logic dictates basically two possible explanations: First, women were being discriminated against. If this is true, then the WPFF works as a corrective measure by applying positive discrimination to create affirmative action and rectify a deeply sexist framework within the publishing industry. A second, much more controversial, explanation: Men

are better writers than women. This statement, as misogynistic as it sounds, was the one given by A. S. Byatt.⁴ Even worse, the juries of the first two years of the prize grudgingly had to admit that the overall quality of the novels entered by publishers were far from excellent. Two judges were quoted saying that many, mainly British, entries could be described as "abysmal," "obscene" or "self-obsessed" (Zangen 283). Was the prize proving that female writing was, in fact, inferior to men's writing?

At the core of this controversy about the WPFF seems to be one word: accessibility. Most prizes have a specific claim that sums up their chief goals. Whereas the Booker uses the words "fiction at its finest" to describe its intentions, the WPFF seeks to "celebrate excellence, originality and accessibility in women's writing." Obviously, "accessibility" does not refer to the level of difficulty in obtaining a copy of the novel. Rather, it comments on the readability of the text. Even though it would be a fallacy to assume that a hard, uncomfortable read is a sign for high literary quality, referring to readable, accessible literature was seen synonymously with low- to middlebrow reading that does not challenge the reader and sticks to rather successful formulas for bestsellers that can be enjoyed by a wide audience. It almost seemed like a contradictory claim. How can something be excellent and also accessible? The notion seemed to underline the tendency that women writers were unable to compete with serious male writing. Rather infamously, Dorothea Tanning's novel *Chasm: A Weekend* was allegedly not considered for the prize in its first year because it was not "accessible" enough. It did, however, garner rave reviews in various media outlets (Turner 2). Literary prizes can influence the literary field of cultural production, which is characterized by a highly dynamic structure consisting of processes of interaction and competition for certain positions within the field. The spectrum of literature could be divided into two extreme ranges: from "almost no audience and no economic profit" or "art for art's sake,"

⁴ It may be relevant, though, to state that she did win the Booker Prize before that statement in 1990.

to literature created for the mass market and hence primarily for economic profit (Bourdieu 121-127). Literary prizes can be important processes that act as agents within this field. Every institution that offers literary prizes actively influences the literary field of cultural production. However, in order for a novel to be eligible for a prize, the authors and/or their works must fit into a specific requirements profile: the laureate has to win the attention of the institution through their work. A consensus must be found between the author's work and the values and ideologies of the institution that awards the prize. This is necessary as not only the author is honoured but also the value orientations of the institution and its ideologies at the same time. Authors, literature and prizes do not work in a closed system. Using Darnton's idea of a communications circuit, it becomes clear that authors, publishers and readers are affected by manifold influences. Political and socio-cultural developments not only shape literature but also the way literature is being received by the audience. Literary awards, deliberately or not, react accordingly. Anna Burns winning the Booker Prize in 2018, for example, could be regarded as a prime example. Though Burns predominantly wanted to write about living in Belfast during the times of the Troubles, *Milkman* can also be read as a comment on fake news, rumours, #metoo and Brexit. Whether or not the author had intended this is irrelevant. In the eyes of the judges, the novel is important because it comments on current, vital issues.

If awards are given to good literature, and good literature is supposed to comment on current issues, then the WPfF is an intriguing subject, through which Book Studies and Literary and Cultural Studies should work hand in hand to come to fruitful results. Whereas Book Studies can stress the history and mechanisms of the prize, follow and elaborate on the short- and long-term impacts on the winners, and also locate and distinguish specific frameworks of prize culture in general, Literary and Cultural Studies can shed more light on the literary quality of the awarded novels as well as locate the relevant topics that are discussed in those works.

It is not the intention of this article to answer the pressing questions that arise after having summarized the history of the WPfF. Rather, it aims to achieve two goals: First, to stress the relevance of the questions by (re)stating them clearly: Was or is there still a need for a Women's Prize for Fiction or is it indeed a sexist con-trick? Did or does it achieve what it was supposed to be doing? Does it create awareness without ghettoising women? And more generally: is there such a thing as "women's writing" and if so, what is it? Is the novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* women's writing? Does it deserve an award with strong commercial clout? It seems difficult enough to ask the urgent questions and keep discussions about relevant topics going. In times of the #metoo movement (albeit not strictly a feminist movement) and feminists lamenting the fact that feminism has become too universal and hence inefficient and meaningless (Crispin xi), the discussion about the relevance of such a prize seems more urgent than ever. It would be foolish of Book Studies to claim it could offer enough input without reading the novels, as it would be foolish of Literary and Cultural Studies to ignore the interdisciplinary framework that Book Studies has to offer. It is the second goal of this article to help avoiding this foolishness.

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