

## The Literary Prize: sales and snobbery

Although highly contentious to both those in the book industry and its lay readers, the literary prize is undeniably ubiquitous. In the English speaking (reading) world British literature awards twenty prizes, British/Commonwealth writing four, Australian eight and America awards seventy five (more than one per state). There are twenty five awarded in Austria, one in Botswana, fifteen in 'European languages' (other than English) and 12 'worldwide in scope'. This doesn't include the multitude of local or regional prizes for short-fiction and poetry that are advertised everywhere from lampposts to Craigslist. The contention is that Prizes and TV recommendations (also considered below) create an unfair system that promotes some books over others. Is this fair to the reader, the author and the publisher? Do sales, in an uncertain industry in uncertain financial times, mean more than quality?

In June this year the novelist Martin Amis made his feelings known about prizes in an article in the Telegraph, "There was a great fashion in the last century, and it's still with us, of the unenjoyable novel" and "these are the novels which win prizes, because the committee thinks, 'Well it's not at all enjoyable, and it isn't funny, therefore it must be very serious.'" Amis has a point. It appears that 'serious' is mistakenly synonymous with 'quality' and anything else isn't worth consideration. A quick look at past winners of the Man Booker prize shows an inclination to serious – some might proffer boring or depressing – novels: *Wolf Hall* (2009), *The Gathering* (2007), *Disgrace* (1999), *The English Patient* (1992), *The Sea The Sea* (1978), *Schindler's Ark* (1982) et al. The Prize claims to "promote the finest in fiction by rewarding the very best book of the year." This is the issue with Prizes: what defines the best book of those published in any given year and what makes those qualified to make such a decision? Some would support that seriousness is a criteria of a prize-winning novel. Others, like Amis, would argue that life is so varied that the novels which win prizes should reflect such variety, albeit seriousness included. This preference may also represent the fear amongst critics, bibliophiles and the like that modern literature is fighting against the tide of celebrity biography, written-for-film teen thrillers and the popularity of genre fiction. Prizes represent the last line of defence (and defiance) for the literary novel, the seriousness of literature and its place in the world.

Literature, like everything else, has had to toe the line in the age of celebrity. The obvious proponent (perpetrator?) of this is Oprah Winfrey. Oprah's Book Club started in 1996 and each month Oprah chooses a book that is discussed during a segment on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Some of the chosen few have seen their sales push into the millions of copies and an Oprah recommendation has even paved the way for film adaptation, most notably *The Deep End of the Ocean* and *The Reader*. This phenomenon has been labelled 'the Oprah effect.' In 2007, Winfrey chose Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*; shortly after, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and in 2009 was adapted to film. In 2007 McCarthy gave his first ever TV interview: on Oprah's couch. The author of a Book Club title, Jonathan Franzen, was uneasy that his novel *The Corrections* should be placed alongside other titles in the book club selection. He criticised Winfrey's other choices and claimed that Oprah's audience may find his book difficult reading. Franzen's opinions saw him uninvited to the televised Book Club dinner and despite an apology and an invitation to Winfrey herself to an off-air dinner with Franzen, she refused. Franzen was accused by the American media of literary elitism.

There are two issues here. Firstly, Oprah wields considerable influence over the reading habits of her viewers. Is that necessarily a bad thing? Is it fair that titles chosen by Oprah make sales that those not chosen could ever hope to achieve? Objectively, it isn't fair. But this is what happens with any commodity (the controversial nature of this term is duly noted). It is simply literary Darwinism. Secondly, the Franzen affair shows that authors may not appreciate being selected, most likely when chosen by a TV personality. This is a very dangerous elitism that will continue to ostracise books – of any calibre or merit – as things worth buying. Making a certain book, and hopefully books in general,

relevant, accessible and unthreatening can only be a good thing. Of course, certain titles may achieve success by other means, but surely to feel uncomfortable in the Oprah list is to feel uncomfortable by making it into the charts via word-of-mouth or by winning the Pulitzer. To win the Man Booker and to then scoff that the new readers of your book are all stay-at-home mothers or holiday readers is absurd.

From a commercial point of view then, there is, of course, the issue that literary prizes and high profile recommendations unfairly influence the reading (and buying) habits of customers. However, this has always been the case. The inclusion and exclusion of certain novels from the national curriculum, university reading lists and book reviews in the national and literary press all make a case for certain books over others. Ideally, prizes and recommendations have several beneficial outcomes. Firstly, they highlight new or classic work within a genre that would otherwise be overlooked by the majority of the book buying public (a look at Oprah's recommendations are on the whole, impressive). Secondly, a prize winning novel, regardless of its quality, becomes so much more accessible. It is easier for someone who otherwise may not be inclined to purchase and read books to do just that. Thirdly, prizes drive sales. The general public buy books reluctantly. It is the hope that reading one book begets the reading and buying of another. Once encouraged to read, the reader may investigate any given author's backlist or may go on to widen their choices, something they might not do had they not been recommended something in the first place. If the one book they read in a given year is a Booker Prize winning novel or is recommended by a media mogul, it is still one book read. I see this as no bad thing.