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THE LONG ESSAY : CULTURAL DEBATES
'THE LITERARY PRIZE AND THE CONTEMPORARY CANON: AESTHETIC AND FORMAL VALUE VERSUS THE "SCANDALS" OF ACCESSIBILITY'

--- By Nick Turner

Abstract

The first decade of the new millennium arguably saw an increasing commercialisation of literary fiction. The year 2011 for example witnessed what amounted to a literary scandal, as several works of genre fiction were shortlisted for the Booker Prize; in 2012, even a short- and long list focussing on innovation resulted in a winner that was in some ways a safe, accessible and highly marketable historical novel, Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies*. This occurrence in one of the world's leading literary prizes can be seen as a culmination of patterns in other prizes in the new millennium, where accessibility is favoured over literariness. Does this mean that the literary prize has questionable value in terms of contemporary literature? Using the Booker and Orange Prizes as examples, I interrogate the points in favour of and against the literary prize, and then argue that these prizes have a close relationship with the contemporary canon. Literary prizes may benefit writers, widen the public's choice of fiction, and challenge the inherent sexism of the literary establishment; they also increasingly privilege literature that is easily marketable, the result being that the contemporary canon, created by literary prizes, is dominated more and more by the 'heteronomous' art of Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production*. Ending the essay with representative examples of texts that have won, or have never been shortlisted for a major prize, as a demonstration of the kind of literature that now passes easily from prize to canon, I conclude

with a reminder that the flexibility, plurality and power of literary prizes means that they can change the pattern they have created.

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Introduction

In the history of contemporary fiction, Britain's Booker Prize in 2011 seems set to be remembered as a disappointing one in terms of its long- and shortlists. Although critical consternation about absent or included novelists is not a new thing, that year witnessed a further 'outrage': genre fiction was finally given the seal of approval by the panel, with the shortlist containing a western, a thriller and a piece of crime fiction.[1] "The Man Booker judges seem to find reading a bit hard" quipped Catherine Bennett in *The Observer*, her view representative of many who found the shortlist one of low literary quality (Bennett 37) . As a result of these developments, and even though in the end the prize was won by Julian Barnes's non-generic *The Sense of an Ending* a new prize, the Literature Prize, was announced. Its goal was to "establish a clear and uncompromising standard of excellence" in the face of a Booker panel promoting a "notion of 'readability' over artistic achievement". [2]

Unsurprisingly, the judging panel for the prize in 2012 chose a longlist whose watchword seemed to be innovation, probably in reaction to the shortlist of the previous year. Omitted were 'safe', easily marketable literary writers such as Rose Tremain, Ian McEwan, Pat Barker and Peter Carey; included were many new writers, some from small publishers, and others such as Will Self and Deborah Levy who until then had evaded prize shortlists. In the end, the prize was won for the second time by Hilary Mantel with *Bring up the Bodies*, the sequel to her commercially successful 2009 win with *Wolf Hall.* A cynic might argue that, despite the initial appearance of innovation, the eventual winner was as 'safe' a one as the Booker had ever chosen. Nicola Barker, Ned Beaumann and Sam Thompson were consigned to the

longlist, while new novels by Martin Amis and James Kelman, as well as Kirsty Gunn's long modernist novel*The Big Music* did not even appear.

It is perhaps inevitable that the Booker, often seen as the world's leading literary prize, can be seen to reflect and follow wider contemporary trends. Judging the 2010 Costa Prize Jonathan Ruppin, web editor at Foyles bookshop, was reported as saying that the four books on the list were "fantastic stories that really gripped you and with characters that really engaged the reader"; and, when considering the omission of Howard Jacobson's Man Booker prize-winner *The Finkler Question* and David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, that "they had both certainly been contenders, but their work was too cerebral to recommend to the masses" (Akbar 16). The assumptions being made here about "the masses" are snobbish but unsurprising.

Examining the shortlists of Britain's major literary prizes since the millennium shows that the claims made about the Booker and the Costa are widespread. Although A.L. Kennedy and Ali Smith have been winners of the Costa (and its forerunner, the Whitbread) since 2000, the prize has also been won by Mark Haddon, Andrea Levy, Michael Frayn and William Boyd, who produced novels that do not foreground stylistic or formal experiment and could be argued to be consciously reader-friendly at the expense of literariness. The parallel Costa (Whitbread) first novel award has been won by Sadie Jones, Catherine O'Flynn and Stef Penney, writers whose work is not innovative or challenging. As Akbar notes, "The prize has veered towards more commercial reads in recent times" (2010: 16). The Orange Prize for Fiction, the second biggest literary prize in the UK has similarly, since its inception in 1996, cited 'accessibility' as one of the terms in its remit.

Bennett's reaction to the 2011 Booker shortlist can be seen as representative of that held by supporters of the Literature Prize, and a culmination of anti-literary prize feeling. The fashion, amongst writers and critics, is to see literary prizes in general as questionable. David Lodge

has observed that "given the large element of chance in the composition and operation of judging panels, the importance now attached to prizes in our literary culture seems excessive. A committee is a blunt instrument of literary criticism "(57); Margaret Drabble is strongly opposed to prizes when she states that:

> I think the whole prize culture is completely out of hand. There are two things that have gone wrong with the marketing of fiction: one of them is big advances, and the other is the prize culture. It's been very bad for the way people write. (Turner 2010).

Hilary Mantel, even after winning the prize herself in 2009 for *Wolf Hall*, has written:

> I'm glad I was a Booker judge relatively early in my career. It stopped me thinking that literary prizes are about literary value. Even the most correct jury goes in for horsetrading and gamesmanship, and what emerges is a compromise (58)

This reflects a large body of opinion that literary prizes are at best dubious, at worst scandalous. The uncomfortable relationship between prizes and academia is indicated by the fact that there is very little critical discourse on them; significantly James English, in an important monograph on the sociological function of literary prizes, has noted that "scandal is the instrument par excellence of symbolic action" and that "…scandal, or the threat and promise of scandal, is constitutive of prizes as we know them" (63). Events such as panellist Rabbi Julia Neuberger's vehement attack on the admirable winning book of 1994, James Kelman's *How Late it was How Late*, and the 'readability' scandal of 2011, thus cement the power of the prize.

English is rare in rightly seeing literary prizes as actually important and influential. My argument involves three questions: firstly, are literary prizes a good or bad thing? ; secondly, why are they important?; and, thirdly, how do they both reflect and create the contemporary canon? English is correct to state that

> Cultural prizes can be, at one and the same time, both more dubious – more of a joke – than they used to be, and more symbolically effectual, more powerfully and intimately intertwined with processes of canonization (2005: 216)

The second part of the statement underlies this paper, and if prizes have this power, it is only right that their operations and choices should be scrutinized. Out of the many current literary prizes I have selected the Booker and Orange as the most important, since it is they that receive the most media coverage in the UK, surely because of the size of the awards: the Booker currently awards £50,000 to the winner, the Orange £30,000. In terms of cash benefits for writers, they are only equalled by the David Cohen Prize, a biannual one that awards £40,000 (and is peculiarly invisible in the media) and the Costa (formerly the Whitbread), where the winner of Best Novel takes only £5,000 but can receive a further £25,000 if their work is chosen as Book of the Year overall. As we shall see later, the large amounts of money being awarded here are not unimportant when interrogating the complicated relationship between current literary fiction and prizes. Both the Booker and the Orange also cover British fiction; given the huge amounts of new fiction being published each year (around 7,000 titles in Britain alone) questions can only be usefully asked by attempting to narrow the field. Analysing patterns shown in the operations of the Booker and Orange Prizes, with a focus on the prizes in 2010 and 2011, can thus demonstrate a culmination of trends in the new millennium.

Are the many critics who position themselves against literary prizes right to do so? In many ways I think they are, for reasons which are partly familiar and partly new. I shall consider these, and then argue that literary prizes are not merely scandalous, but potentially dangerous in literary terms.

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A Defence of Literary Prizes

With many years of judging history behind them respectively, and new panels making diverse choices each year, there are several reasons why the Booker and Orange Prizes are concepts worthy of praise. The first of these is that they financially benefit writers. Linda Grant, who won the Orange Prize in 2000, has observed that

> The significant thing about winning any major literary prize is that first of all there is news coverage and then there are increased sales, and with increased sales and a prizewinning sticker there comes a larger advance for the next novel, and in my case an auction. The more money you have as a writer, unless you lead an extremely abstemious life, the more time you have to devote to writing the work you want to write instead of your day job (Turner, 2011).

This view is supported by Michèle Roberts, who was a panellist for the Booker Prize in 2002 and the Orange in 2010:

> Prizes are good for writers who, in the main, earn very little. Deciding to write means volunteering for poverty: 20 years ago, publishers might offer certain well-known writers six-figure advances on sales and could afford to be reasonably generous to some of the less well known. Those times are over (Turner, 2011).

The literary prize can act as form of sponsorship, then; this is particularly praiseworthy when it rewards new or little-known writers. Although Hilary Mantel had been publishing fiction since the mid 1980s, it was only with her Booker win in 2009 for *Wolf Hall* that she achieved large sales and wide visibility to match the praise she had received from critics and other writers for her earlier novels; similarly, the decision of the Orange panel in 2010 to give the prize to Téa Obreht for her first novel *The Tiger's Wife* should be commended; here were magic realism and

traditions of oral storytelling and fable from the Balkans in a work that showed the author's ability to create a fresh, imagined world. If the fabular and realistic sections do not always cohere, Obreht now has the literary and financial backing to proceed and perfect her work.

A second point is that both Prizes look beyond the United Kingdom and challenge insularity and parochialism, charges that have sometimes dogged contemporary British fiction in the past. The Booker, in its inclusion of Commonwealth countries, means that South African, Indian and Pakistani writers have been shortlisted; the Orange goes beyond this and will consider any novel written in English that is submitted, and is thus truly a 'world' prize. As Kate Mosse, the co-founder and Honorary Director of the Orange Prize, has written:

> … as the domination of English as the international language becomes more entrenched, the problems of publishing and hearing voices from other cultures and countries are becoming more rather than less acute; in the past two years, three novels submitted for the Orange Broadband Award for New Writers have been written by authors in English as a second language rather than first. The internationality of the Orange is essential – particularly for women writing in Africa and Asia (Turner, 2011).

The Orange is therefore a politically important prize; it also helps correct a position where, as Mosse observed, projects such as the BBC Year of Books and World Book Night, continue to discriminate against women writers. It ensures that literary fiction by women is given prominent attention every year. As Sarah Churchwell writes,

> … are prizes for "women writers" not inherently redundant, or at least obsolete? In some ways, they may be, but the sad truth is that they remain a necessary corrective in a world that continues to believe in and market something called "women's fiction", which defines some fiction by the sex of its author, while allowing the books by all the people who are not women to be called, simply, fiction' (2010:69).

It can be argued that the novels these prizes have chosen are aesthetically excellent in terms of style and form. Analysing developments in contemporary fiction over the last twenty years, John Mullan has argued that foregrounding of experiment with form was once " the property of avant-garde fiction; in recent years it has become a tendency in fiction that appeals to a mass readership." His examples of this are David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, and Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*; he argues that the latter has "the kind of narrative sophistication that ordinary readers now take in their stride (45)

This sophistication, an integral part of postmodern fiction, has now become marketable, and the role of the Booker in shortlisting both these novels, as well as other similar examples such Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (which won in 1989) and *When We Were Orphans*, shows the prize both reflecting popular taste and legitimizing postmodern fiction. As Todd has proved, being shortlisted for the Booker Prize can result in a significant sales jump (35).

Jason Cowley has noted that "the Booker encourages evaluation and close reading, something long since abandoned by English university faculties in their rush to embrace post-structuralist theory" (23). Certainly, the Booker has been notable in selecting writers of stylistic excellence. Examples of these are Anne Enright, Graham Swift and Hilary Mantel; the following is from John Banville's *The Sea*, which won the prize in 2005:

> In the midst of the imperial progress that was our life together a grinning losel had stepped out of the cheering crowd, and sketching a parody of a bow had handed my tragic queen the warrant of impeachment (11).

The novel is a meditation on past events by its narrator, whose wife has recently died of a terminal illness; the above is an original extended metaphor in that not only is their life together an "imperial progress", but a progress that can be interrupted by grotesque, unexplainable surprise, an event which cannot be controlled. "Losel" shows Banville's willingness to surprise the reader with a largely unknown noun: this should be praised. This linguistic inventiveness is seen throughout the novel, and its tone matches the character of the narrator as it is presented to us by the implied author.

The literary prize, then, has sponsored literary writers, is democratic in its openness, has raised the standard of fiction that is being disseminated, and can promote linguistically inventive work. However, prizes such as the Booker and the Orange continue to generate controversy and, as I shall argue, this controversy frequently has foundation.

Arguments against Literary Prizes

One charge, which was only dramatically corrected in 2011, is that genre fiction fares badly on literary prize shortlists: examples of crime fiction, often regarded as a superior type of genre fiction, reaching these stages are very rare. P.D. James and Ruth Rendell, the latter writing under her own name or under that of Barbara Vine, have never appeared in these shortlists. This is also the case with other much-praised contemporary crime writers such as Ian Rankin, Louise Welsh and Minette Walters, and even in the face of efforts from Mosse, who has stated that she and her committee wanted the Prize to be open to genre fiction, as a great novel "can use the conventions of genre and rise above them" (Turner, 2011). Mosse is right: works by Rendell and James have been critically praised for their literary qualities, in ways that suggest they go beyond the expectations of crime fiction. An example of this is James's 1997 novel *A Certain Justice*, which John Sutherland argued to be as good as the literary novels that make Booker shortlists (Sutherland, 1997).

An increasingly large problem with both the Booker and the Orange is implicit in the fact that the new Literature Prize will have "experts" as its panellists; this could be read as a comment on other judging panels, given that one would imagine an artistic award would normally be judged by those with knowledge in the area. This is not always the case. Model Sophie Dahl, broadcaster Jenni Murray, businesswoman Martha Lane Fox and actress Helen Lederer are among the many who have judged the Orange who do not fit the conventional image of a literary critic; in recent years Sue Perkins, Michael Portillo, Chris Smith and Imogen Stubbs have judged the Booker. They are intelligent people and may be passionate readers: but does it qualify them to judge a leading literary prize?

English has written that "the most common and generic scandals concern the judges, specifically the judges' dubious aesthetic dispositions, as betrayed by their meagre credentials, their risible lack of *habitus*, or their glaring errors of judgement" (2005:190). Such was the case with the 2011 Booker panel, and its non-literary chair Dame Stella Rimmington; there is arguably here a link between a dubious panel and the dubious choices it makes.

How much does this matter? Alex Clark, a critic and former editor of *Granta* who has judged both the Booker and the Orange New Writers' Award, has stated that

> It has become fairly standard practice for juries to be a mixture of critics and academics, writers and people from outside the literary establishment. Clearly, there are good things about this - it broadens the range of responses, and it is a good way of guarding against contemporary literature becoming a coterie, or a closed shop. But I do think that when the balance tips in favour of celebrity, something is lost - as if we are afraid that the idea of specialist knowledge and critical experience is somehow elitist (Turner, 2010).

And Roberts concurs:

> I don't agree with celebrity judging panels, with non-writers as judges …Many celebrity judges are charming people, but they don't know the field. A judge needs to be able to compare books with a wide range of others (Turner, 2011).

Although Mosse has countered this argument with the view that, in terms of the Orange Prize, "we define a specialist as someone who is a passionate, expert reader" stating that "some non experts (i.e. politicians, businesswomen, lawyers, actors) might be considerably better read than certain academics and have more open minds" (Turner, 2011), and defending Dahl and Fox as judges, I would suggest that Roberts and Clark are right. While there should always be one 'non-expert' in a panel of five, to prevent a discussion from losing focus and their decisions potentially the interest of readers, surely quality can only be truly assessed by those with knowledge; would a contest for fine dining be judged by a panel consisting of people chosen largely because they like eating?

Non-specialist judges then, such as Rimmington and her 2011 panel, could be seen to be ill-equipped to select the 'best' novel of the year, and evidence this by stating that they are looking for 'readability' above all. We find a shared problem in the Booker and Orange, then, for just as the Booker might now be implicitly promoting 'easy' fiction, the Orange Prize has, from its outset, used 'accessibility' as a term of its remit, alongside 'originality' and 'excellence'. Questioned about this, Mosse proposed that, for many people, the Booker Prize during the 80s and early 90s "had sometimes tended to equate inaccessibility with brilliance/quality", and that certain authors had won *because* they were difficult: for example, Keri Hulme or James Kelman." Mosse goes on to say that

> We wanted the Orange Prize to attract new readers to outstanding international fiction, not put people off, and in certain literary novels, the language could be seen as a barrier. After a great deal of discussion … we went for the three equally important criteria of excellence, originality and accessibility … A great novel does demand attention, demands

> to be taken seriously and read seriously. But demanding ideas can be – often are – presented in clean, simple language (Turner, 2011).

But we find opposition to this, implicit or otherwise, from Clark and Roberts. Clark suggests that

> There definitely still exist writers and novelists who set themselves ambitious tasks in terms of subject matter and style and whose work will be complex and require a considerable amount of effort and perhaps also knowledge from the reader. It's not particularly sensible to imagine that such books will ever have a mass appeal - why should they? - but it also seems wrong to me to sideline them from any prize or similar exercise because they aren't 'accessible'. That to me would seem to dilute the culture and to patronize readers (Turner, 2010).

Roberts is in agreement, and I cite her words in full as they are pertinent not only here but in the final section of this paper.

> The term accessibility is part of a political discourse. It has its origins in Thatcherite and even Trotskyist ideas. It's related to the workings of the Arts Council. It suggests the state trying to determine what the arts should do, and watering down culture. The assumption is that 'elitist' ideas must be challenged: there is a fear of difficulty, a fear of experimenting with form. 'Accessibility' is covertly elitist, even snobbish, in fact, suggesting that ordinary people are too stupid to understand great art, high art … Kelman is a brilliant writer who has invented a new vernacular. His work is demanding, but it is not inaccessible. With Keri Hulme we could think of Derrida and *différance*. Hulme's work foregrounds that. I think that Kate's words could be taken to imply a desire to make literature uniform (Turner, 2011).

I shall consider later the uniformity that dogs even shortlisted novels said to be 'experimental'; meanwhile, although 'clean, simple language' does not mean a novel cannot have excellence in terms of style, form and narrative, if a desire for this were widespread among prize panels, the result could be literature that excludes more work like Banville's. Increasingly, standard English dominates shortlists; also, and it is no coincidence, that kind of English is marketable and accessible. Kelman's *How Late it was, How Late*, as noted earlier a 'scandalous' book when it won, and an object of argument between Roberts and Mosse, should be quoted from here:

> Ach who cares, who gives a fuck, who fucking gives a fuck, Sammy was weary. Come on, ye're allowed to get weary, lying in fucking blackness with that fucking stupit radio, all these fucking stupit voices that make ye think of double-helpings of fucking raspberry fucking trifle man with lumps of fresh dairy cream, their voices man telling you, that's what like they sound, fresh fucking dairy cream from the minute they open their eyes to they drop down dead, fucking bastards… (Kelman, 1994:113).

This is a representative example of the first-person narration of Sammy, a blind alcoholic whose stream of consciousness comprises the novel. Like any work that uses this technique, the random associations, and the rapid switches here between occasional third-person narrative ("Sammy was weary") and the first-person demand much from a reader. But the rewards are the creation of a voice that is humorous (illustrated by the comic, bathetic use of "raspberry trifle") as well as evoking sympathy. Its expletives run the risk of alienating some readers; this, combined with its demanding style, explains the 'scandalous' nature of the book, and, as we shall see later, it would be unlikely to win a major prize in the new millennium, as would the work of late modernists Self and Gunn.

A representative example of difficulty becoming a potential barrier to success was seen in the case of Dorothea Tanning's 2004 novel*Chasm*. Alex Clark was a panellist on the Orange Award for New Writers, for which the book was longlisted; it did not make the shortlist. Although Clark

is keen to point out that its difficulty was not the reason for this, her thoughts on the subject are also worth stating:

> Excellent and original though *Chasm* undoubtedly was, accessible simply wasn't a description that readily sprang to the lips. Full of queer modernist echoes and strange symbolism, it's a tough read; some people, many people possibly, just wouldn't like it …"Accessibility", fast becoming a patronising catch-all phrase that can, in the wrong hands, simply mean "Can we pile this book up on a big table at the front of our shop?" doesn't, and shouldn't, come into it (Turner, 2010).

Issues of accessibility are thus intertwined with problems of commercialism, and the most useful model here to illustrate this conflict is Bourdieu's thesis in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), where he argues that artists take up places on a 'field' and work to gain either economic capital (sales) or symbolic capital (esteem of fellow writers). The heteronomous artist 'plays' in the field of the market, while the autonomous artist works away from commercial pressures. The literary prize complicates this by spanning the entire field: the Nobel or Cohen may be felt to be appropriate by writers who (unconsciously) desire symbolic capital; the Booker and Orange are now, with the large sums they award, and the publicity and marketing that accompany them, implicated in economic capital. In short, contemporary writers may be wary of seeming to become artists who write *for* an audience.

There is a connection, then, between the 'readable' Booker shortlisted titles, the 'accessible' Orange Prize choices, and the market. The implication might be that a book will be more likely to win if it is marketable, not as genre fiction, but as literary fiction of the type which Mullan earlier praised: postmodern and/or 'accessible'. If prizes are derided by writers and critics, their often blatant commercialism is one explaining factor. As Clark notes

> By increasing the bankability of individual writers, prizes make themselves a part of the process that equates commercial success with artistic worth, and may also eventually contribute to the decisions about who does or does not get published (Turner, 2010).

Roberts agrees that

> The concept of literary value has become swamped by that of commercial value. This is happening generally in our culture. Aesthetic value is less and less a criterion for many people, as books are seen as commodities just like packets of crisps (Turner, 2011).

Evidently, if writers such as Banville can still win the Booker Prize, then it does not mean that only 'safe' or 'accessible' novels will be shortlisted; the panels change every year, and the Booker panel can create its own remit each time. But, if Clark and Roberts are right, there is now less potential for artistic excellence to succeed than before. In 1991, Nicholas Mosley created a perhaps obligatory Booker scandal by quitting because it was impossible to bring forward novels of ideas; he revealed that

> My choice would have been Allan Massie's *The Sins of the Father*, which confronted the issue of what was possible or impossible if the child of a notorious ex-Nazi and the child of a Jewish victim fell in love after the Second World War. What could be forgiven, and by whom, and what could not. But these are controversial questions, and thus conventionally to be avoided (2010: 46).

As I shall demonstrate later, controversial questions and challenging form are increasingly avoided; I wish now to argue why it is such a cause for concern that they are.

Do the above points not simply build up a case for the Prize being something that critics would do better to ignore, simply because it is flawed as a concept? I do not think so, for the Prize is not merely ubiquitous owing to its media presence. Here is a quotation from the website of Royal Holloway College's course on the Booker Prize: "By presenting Booker Prize-winning novels of

the last decade this course aims to develop a critical awareness of some aesthetic trends in contemporary fiction in English". This would imply that the Prize is a reliable guide to contemporary fiction, and reliable within the academy, and shows English to be right when he states that

> In the book world, prizes have long since supplanted reviews as our primary means of literary transmission, and now they are taking on the task, from the professional critics, of judgment as well … Prizes create cultural hierarchies and canons of value (2002: 110).

There is further evidence for arguing that the literary prize is not innocent but plays an important role in determining which novels gain, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolic as well as economic capital. English demonstrates, elsewhere in his monograph, that

> [Toni] Morrison and her supporters … by treating the major book prizes as the 'keystones to the canon of American literature' … recognize that it is precisely by such embarrassingly social-commercial-cultural mechanisms as these that the canon is formed, cultural capital is allocated, 'greatness' is determined (2005: 244).

Todd's work is significant in that it highlights the fact that the contemporary canon the Booker helps construct is one of a specific type, involving commercial visibility, stating that "In every sense, Booker's role has been integral to the mechanics of (on the one hand) commerce and (on the other) the formation of a particular kind of literary canon (1996: 95)", and that "a successful lead title enters the 'canon' by virtue of a multiplicity of cultural forces that are as commercial as they are 'literary' (1996:100-1)". Stephen Bonnycastle, analysing the factors that lead to the canonisation of post-war fiction, lists "Accreditation of novels by prizes" (1995: 228) as one; finally, Gallagher, mirroring Todd's attention to *types* of canon, suggests that there is something called a "' pedagogical canon': texts that are taught in college and university settings…. The

wider pedagogical canon is made up of the most frequently taught texts, a list that is empirically verifiable" (2001: 56).

It is not merely a case of theory but not practice. Taking as a test case two writers who have won the Orange Prize for Fiction, Lionel Shriver and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the MLA database, which lists published academic work on writers, shows that the former has 3 and the latter 37 entries. Shriver's 3 follow her Orange win; she was not a known writer before the prize brought her to prominence. The same is the case with Adichie; her work has quickly attracted a large amount of critical discourse, and, although she had previously published a novel that was reviewed well and prominently by leading newspapers, winning the Orange Prize must have had a considerable effect. If writers are part of scholarship, it is a quick move from there to syllabuses: Gallagher's 'pedagogical canon'.

The Literary Prize and the Contemporary Canon

The contemporary canon, then, consists of writers who are taught on university syllabuses, are part of scholarship, and often have a high position in the market. Which contemporary British novelists comprise it? As a canon is such a nebulous concept, clarity is hard but, based on evidence from books on contemporary fiction, Ian McEwan, Sarah Waters, Zadie Smith, Pat Barker, David Mitchell, Alan Hollinghurst, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, and A.S. Byatt are part of the canon. Of these some, such as Waters and Mitchell, have never won a major prize but been shortlisted; Smith and Barker are examples of ones whose win consolidated a growing reputation. A prize win can build a novelist, create a reputation, or follow fashion. While it would be too simple to say that Waters and Mitchell were canonised by being shortlisted for the Booker Prize (Waters has also been twice shortlisted for the Orange), the accompanying impact on sales helped solidify their place in a type of canon, and played a part in keeping them as visible, and ripe for selection for syllabuses.

The problem is that literary prizes' endorsement of contemporary taste (for example, in Waters's and Mitchell's postmodernism) can make for a potential uniformity in contemporary literature. Of many possible writers, none of the following have been shortlisted or even longlisted for a major literary prize in the new millennium: Jenny Diski, Margaret Drabble, Elaine Feinstein, Alison Fell, Elizabeth Jane Howard, John Lanchester, David Peace, and Emma Tennant. This list is merely a selection of many writers who are favourably reviewed and produce serious literary fiction, their absence indicating a contemporary canon that is flawed, in that it seems to privilege a particular type of novel over work that is hard to classify and market. Let us consider the contemporary canon and the type of books that have had Booker and Orange success; examples from the Booker shortlist of 2010, and the Orange of 2011, which followed it six months later, illustrate the problem.

Subject matter that is controversial, harrowing, sensational, that takes the reader far away from their own reading position, is a common feature. Thus, the Orange shortlist of 2011 was composed of the first-person narrative of a mentally handicapped girl, the story of a hermaphrodite in the wilds of Canada, a book comprised of the narratives of four people who have lived through trauma and loss, two novels set against the backdrop of war, in the Balkans and Sierra Leone, and the tale of a child born and growing up as prisoner with his mother in a shed, mirroring the Josef Fritzl case. This novel, Emma Donoghue's *Room*, was also shortlisted for the 2010 Booker. That prize also notably contained Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*, in which an old woman remembers the last days of slavery, as a former slave herself, and Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America*, a historical novel which is a 'duet' between the voices of master and servant.

We hear a great many voices clamouring for our attention, first-person narratives of damaged, alienated, suffering or at best eccentric and unreliable personae, reflective of a contemporary world where the promotion of the self is now the norm. Of course, these voices are often those

from minority groups, but this takes us to another example of uniformity: what John Carey calls the 'moral indignation novel'. He describes it as follows:

> Its characteristic is to dwell on past atrocities and injustices. The iniquities of the slave trade, or the extermination of native peoples – the Red Indians, the Australian aborigines – are the kind of subject that it relishes. Floggings, brandings, rapes, massacres, and women giving birth far from medical aid are among the customary set pieces. The native victims are portrayed as eco-friendly and endowed with delicate modes of consciousness beyond the scope of depraved Europeans. The villains, on the other hand, are always white and usually English. From the viewpoint of origin, class and education they closely resemble the readers whom the author can most realistically expect to buy his or her wares (2003: 57-58)

The Long Song is an example of this, the latest in a line of many that have been favoured by the Booker such as Barry Unsworth's*Sacred Hunger* (1992) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Levy's novel is also infected by another familiar pattern: suffering or injustice is enveloped by a message of love, survival and hope, narrated by a voice that is often humorous and always works for comfortable complicity with the reader. Such was the case in Yann Martel's Booker-winning *Life of Pi* (2002), the Booker-shortlisted*Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones (2007), and Rose Tremain's Orange Prize-winning *The Road Home* (2008). "Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink", writes the narrator of *The Long Song* (2010: 7). The voice charms and engages, to ensure that we 'like' the character; violence is related from a safe distance, in comfortable, 'accessible' language that does not convince as the style of an elderly former slave.

Although this is a historical novel, and the narrator is at times unreliable, the novel is confidently realist in that it works for linearity, is interested in an external rather than an interior world, and

concentrates on one point of view. Most crucially, it aims for overall textual coherence via accessible language, which is the case in Mullan's choices of narrative experimentation, Waters and Mitchell; in spite of the narrative play, the individual sections within each novel he cites are coherent, linear and tend towards standard, non-experimental English, more reader-friendly than Banville's prose. They present what Dominic Head calls "a reworking of realism, rather than a rejection of it … a distinctly British postmodernism" (2002: 68). Head does not imply that this is a bad thing, but I would argue that the desire to rework the narrative and linguistic conventions of realism, rather than fully exploit the possibilities of postmodernism or late modernism, is indicative of a lingering conservative tendency in British fiction within its apparently playful exterior. Self's shortlisting for *Umbrella* in 2012 is an exception.

I wish to end this argument with two examples from contemporary fiction, to illustrate the tendencies that major literary prizes reject or endorse. Here is a representative passage from Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, which won the Booker Prize in 2004.

> After lunch they strolled through several large rooms that had the residual hush, the rich refined dry smell of a country house on a hot summer day. The sensations were familiar to Nick from visits he made with his father to wind the clocks in several of the great houses round Barwick – they went back to childhood, though in those much older and remoter houses the smells were generally mixed up with dogs and damp. (2004:51).

This shows a writer interested in externals, who uses a third-person narrator to describe rather than show the workings of the protagonist's consciousness. There is an element of nostalgia and a mood of serenity, only a little disturbed by the effective, alliterative and deliberately unmusical-sounding "dogs and damp". Throughout the novel, we are expected to empathise if not always sympathise with the character; the luxuries he seeks, although they are criticised, are implicitly sought for by the reader in addition. Flowing clauses and narrative coherence match the careful description of exterior worlds to give a reading experience that, if elegiac and

sometimes bitter, is nonetheless ultimately satisfying to a reader of literary realism. The same mood, the same use of safe language, pervades the work of McEwan and Ishiguro, whom the literary prize has so often favoured.

No writer could be more different from this than Deborah Levy. Levy is still a little-known novelist, often described as 'experimental'; most of her fiction is out of print and until 2012 she had never been long- or shortlisted for a literary prize. The following extract comes from her 1993 novel *Swallowing Geography*.

> X and Y make love in her hotel room, the shutter open, a breeze on her left thigh. Someone is jangling keys in the corridor outside, and upstairs someone is singing a pop song. X says, I have to go now. His head is resting on a pillow inscribed with the name of the hotel; blue thread sewn into white cotton.
>
> Is the settler X privileged and the wanderer Y deprived? For X and his partner Z, settled in the country of each other, there is something called a future.
>
> For the deprived there is no word called future.
> For the privileged there is only the future.
> For the deprived the present is full of the absence of privilege.
> For the privileged the present is full of the absence of deprivation (1993: 71-72).

Up until this point, towards the end of the short novel, we have followed a character called J.K.; at this point, J.K disappears, and the continuing use of letters for character names indicates the meaningless of the use of J.K. *Swallowing Geography* becomes not only an example of late modernism or postmodernism in its eschewing of meaning and coherence, but post-humanist in its refusal to endorse the human subject. The extract is ripe with theoretical possibilities: X and Y are used as signifiers with no clear signified; other human figures are not identified but are

only 'someone'; the name of the hotel is not given; sounds are fragmented and destinies uncertain. A passage of prose is here followed by four lines of anaphoric poetry, in effect; the move between forms here, the rejection of character, and the final denial of meaning is far more experimental than anything in the work of Waters and Mitchell.

The novel was published in the early 1990s; one year later, Kelman's novel won the Booker. Since then, Levy's work, while retaining its mood, has become more conventional in form; nonetheless, she remained invisible until the Booker longlist of 2012 and is not part of the contemporary canon literary prizes create. As Roberts has stated:

> There are many writers who are undervalued: they experiment, and are literary. But they are out of kilter with the market. They may get to longlists but not to shortlists … Literary prizes inevitably form part of the commercial world, where the main interest is how many books can be sold (Turner, 2011).

The 'British postmodernism' we have cited, the moral indignation novels, the historical fiction and the many other works that crowd bookshelves after the Booker and Orange shortlists are announced are not bad books. They are sometimes good, and occasionally excellent; it is just that, on the whole, they are not good enough, and show patterns of convention and uniformity. With thousands of novels being published every year, it is the duty of prize panels to be expert readers who can call in truly experimental voices that keep the novel fresh and alive. Increasingly, literary prizes have ignored the most noteworthy literary fiction, as they notably did in 2011. 'As readers and scholars we must hope that the Folio Prize will spawn a critical climate that will continue to welcome the likes of Nicola Barker, Will Self and Deborah Levy, continue the precedent the Booker Prize set in 2012, and prove that literary prizes are fit creators of canons. The Booker Prize long list and shortlist of 2013 was seen by some as the strongest for

years, a true reflector of innovation, showing how the novel can still be 'novel'. Perhaps this shows that 2011 was the end of a fallow period and that, once again, the art of the novel at its best can be brought triumphantly into the market.

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[1] These were, respectively, *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick deWitt by, *Snowdrops* by A.D. Miller, and *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman.

[2] http://www.thebookseller.com/news/new-literature-prize-establish-standard-excellence.html. The first award is scheduled to be in March 2014.

Bio:

Nick Turner--- a British critic, researcher, academic and editor--- discusses literature, philosophy, postcolonialism and Indian writing in English in this e-mail interview. He teaches at the Universities of *Edge* Hill and Salford, UK. Nick is the author of *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (2010), and articles on Iris Murdoch and realism in contemporary fiction. He has reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* and is currently working on projects on the literary prize, and Barbara Pym.