
The Booker Prize: Scandal, Controversy and Marketing Tool

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Abstract

This article concerns itself with literary prize culture and the impact it has had on the publishing industry in Britain since the 1960s. With particular reference to the Booker Prize, later the Man Booker Prize, the article will explore the ways in which the prize has developed since its launch in 1968. Of similar significance when looking at the Man Booker Prize, it is important to explore the growing commercial success of its winners. The article will look into the correlation between those titles listed for the prize and the winning titles and their consequential commercial success. The article will discuss how the influence of the Man Booker Prize has helped shape and develop the publishing industry. Furthermore, this study will explore the controversy surrounding the prize - a controversy that has been present since its launch. The Man Booker Prize has become synonymous with scandal, sparking heated arguments not only between the judging panels but also between authors, readers and the media. With the one criterion for the prize being the “best” original full-length novel, written in the English language, it is obvious how debate can arise.

Key Words

Booker Prize, Scandal, Controversy, Marketing Tool

History

When thinking about literary prizes it is impossible to overlook the Man Booker Prize. Established in 1968 by Booker-McConnell Ltd, a firm “dealing in sugar, rum, mining machinery, and James Bond” (Coleman 1968), it was announced that a £5,000 prize for fiction was to be awarded to a British or Commonwealth author. The prize was to be known as the Booker Prize for Fiction. Despite the existence of other literary prizes around the time of the Booker’s debut, it was evident within the Publishers Association that there was, in Britain, no equivalent to the popular *Prix Goncourt* in France and Italy’s *Premio Strega*. The idea for this fiction prize to rival its European counterparts was, in the most part, the brain-child of British publisher, Tom Maschler. Working at the time for Jonathan Cape, Maschler saw the opportunity for an annual prize in Britain of considerable cultural magnitude. Melvyn Bragg describes the prize as the “Grand National of culture”. (Bragg, 1998, 37)

The Booker Prize was established with the aim of awarding the best piece of fiction from a selection of authors from within Britain, the Commonwealth, the Republic of Ireland and South Africa. This original aim remains the same today with Ion Trewin, Literary Director of the Booker Prize Foundation stating:

“From the very beginning of what was originally called the Booker Prize there was just one criterion - the prize would be for 'the best novel in the opinion of the judges'. And 42 years later that is still a key sentence in the rules” (Trewin 2012)

In an article announcing the award in 1968, Terry Coleman described the aim of the prize was to “encourage and reward authors but... also to get a lot of publicity and to sell a lot of books”. This idea is still of relevance today with another aim of the prize being to establish good quality fiction, targeted at the “intelligent general audience”, in order to assimilate this high quality in to the mainstream. Although the significant increase in sales of Booker related titles took a decade to happen, the roll call of winners and the idea of publishing both a longlist and a shortlist - an original concept when the two lists became part of the prize process - have contributed to its success.

Booker-McConnell

The decision to approach Booker-McConnell Ltd was not the obvious option; it was not simply their ‘bookish’ name, nor was it their desire to improve their public image from their not so favourable nineteenth century colonial past; the Booker-McConnell company was, at the time, a multinational agribusiness conglomerate employing over 20,000 people and generating an annual revenue in excess of \$5 billion. (Huggan 1997, 415) The decision ultimately lay in the fact that Booker-McConnell were already in the book business in a small way and the sponsorship of a book prize seemed a fruitful way for the company to promote this line of their business. James English describes their decision to sponsor the prize as a means to give the company’s “tax shelter specialists more intimate access to publishing

insiders, improve the company's visibility with high-income writers, and perhaps boost overall sales in the segment of the book trade that concerned Booker – namely, fiction" (English 2005, 200).

Despite the financial backing, the Booker Prize was not well positioned to succeed in amongst the already present British literary prizes. It was originally thought that Booker's relatively high prize money set it apart from the others, but as the other prize monies increased, the gap between the Booker and other literary prizes was never so drastic as to be a "significant differentiating marker." (English 2005, 201) Despite its current status as one of the leading literary prizes in the world, the Booker Prize had a rocky ascent to success and was close to caving in altogether very early on. Documents pertaining to the administration of the prize in its early years, housed in the Booker archive of the Book Trust at Oxford Brookes University, describe the full scale of the prize's potentially premature downfall:

"Publishers 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, to the point where the actual chair resigned; the Book Trust was abruptly brought in to assume administrative responsibility, even though it had never administered a prize; and the sponsor, though contracted for the initial seven years of funding, was already making noises as if preparing for an early exit"

Scandal and Controversy

Everything changed for the Booker Prize in 1971; this change was the product of scandal. In 1971 following his win with the novel *G*, novelist John Berger, known for his Marxist beliefs, delivered what can only be described as a cutting and rude acceptance speech. Berger "denounced the Booker corporation as a colonialist enterprise built on the backs of black plantation workers in Guyana, and declared that half his prize money would be donated to the London branch of the Black Panthers." (Guardian, 1972). Berger's beliefs stem from the Booker Brothers Ltd. gaining their wealth through the exploitation of Guyana for their natural resource, and he was denouncing the sources of the wealth behind the prize. An article in the *Guyana Times International* stated that:

"So pervasive was Booker Bros, McConnell & Co. Ltd – commonly called 'Bookers' – in British Guiana, the country was given the nickname 'Bookers Guiana'. Bookers had stakes in almost every marketable avenue at the time, from agriculture to drugs to postcards printed by Bookers Drug Store, and was often viewed as the epitome of colonial oppression."

This idea of colonial oppression links to the thoughts towards cultural imperialism going on within the publishing industry at the time. Cultural Imperialism is described as the creation and maintenance of unequal relationships between civilisations, favouring the more powerful civilisation. Through the domination of Western cultures in colonial and

postcolonial publishing, Western views were imposed upon less developed countries, consequently shadowing their native culture. With this concept of cultural imperialism, it is essential to look at the idea of “otherness”, whereby publishers were always seemingly catering to Western tastes and ignoring the tastes of other nations. (Huggan 1997) Through his scathing acceptance speech, Berger highlighted Booker’s ultimately quite powerful institutional and ideological role in the struggle to define a postcolonial literature subject to domination, and commercial exploitation, by the London metropole. (Huggan 1997) Following Berger’s speech, it can be noted that the nationality of those authors shortlisted changed from a predominantly British selection, to a wider variety of authors from the eligible nations. John Sutherland suggested that Berger’s acceptance speech in 1971, “for all that [it was] mocked, ha[d] had a palpable influence in politically correcting the shortlist” and helped to remove the British-centredness of the Booker Prize. (Todd 1996, 79)

From 1971 began the seemingly endless turnstile of scandal surrounding the Booker Prize, starting with John Berger and continuing right through to the most recent winner Hilary Mantel, with her novel *Bring Up the Bodies* in 2012. Sir Peter Stothard, the current chairman of the Booker judges, highlighted in a statement the deliberation and consequential “arguments” that go into the Booker prize decision: “It was not a unanimous decision in the sense that everyone would have picked it if put to a vote... [but] there was absolute consensus that the most powerful arguments were those deployed for *Bring Up the Bodies*.” (Brown 2012)

From 1971 onwards, the Booker Prize has continued to deliver annual scandals that draw in media attention and it can be argued that the prize, although a credible prize for literary excellence, has become something of a media circus centred around the arguments and scandals of authors, judges, publishers and essentially anyone involved in the prize. In 1994, Mark Lawson, a book review editor at the *Independent*, who had served as a Booker judge and been involved in Booker scandals observed that the prize “is not simply to promote the cause of serious fiction... [but] to provoke rows and scandals, which may, in due course, promote the cause of serious fiction.” The *Daily Telegraph* has, in the past, described the Booker Prize as “an embarrassment to the entire book trade”, with the *Economist* declaring it as a “sad and shoddy farce”. Similarly scathing was journalist Richard Gott who, in 1994, described the prize as “a significant and dangerous iceberg in the sea of British culture that serves as a symbol of its current malaise.” (Gott 1994) Seemingly, the success of the Booker Prize is now bound up with the annual scandal and controversy that circulates around it.

The Booker Prize has become synonymous with controversy, sparking heated arguments not only between the judging panels but also between authors, readers and the media. With the one criterion for the prize being the “best” original full-length novel, written in the English language, it is obvious how debate can arise. The implications of this criterion have proved complex and been subject to heated debate with Richard Todd begging the question “What is best? What is full length?” (Todd 1996, 63) The way in which “best” is defined is where subjectivity and objectivity meet and this meeting is consequently met with debate and controversy.

Marketing Tool

When thinking about the impact and influence of the Booker Prize on the publishing industry since its establishment in 1968, it is impossible not to highlight the correlation between books relevant to the Booker and their consequential increase in sales. The Booker Prize is no longer simply a way of imposing excellence on to a particular novel from a panel of esteemed industry insiders: it is now a valuable marketing tool for the publishing industry. The Booker Prize is a tool with which the nation's reading can be influenced; "we are a novel reading nation but people need a way in", and that way in is with the Booker. (Bragg 1998, 36)

With the growth of the prize comes an increased influence on sales. The influence particularly grew as the ceremony became televised in the 1980s. Television drew the attention of a much wider audience to the prize and the Booker became a media event, consisting of a dinner and award ceremony, televised live in prime time to an audience of now roughly half a million through the BBC. Along with the actual ceremony, audiences are treated to a pre- and post-awards analysis, a concept somewhat similar to the more established televised award ceremonies such as the BAFTAs or the Oscars.

Furthering the idea of the Booker as a media staged event is the time lag between the announcement of the shortlist and the eventual winner. This time lag builds up the suspense and speculation surrounding the prize by waiting several weeks between announcements; the suspense maximises the commercial appeal of the Booker Prize. (Huggan 1997, 415)

Through looking at a number of sales figures of a few winning titles it is clear to see the effect of the Booker Prize on the publishing industry; from 12 weeks prior to winning compared to 12 weeks after winning, DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* had a sales increase of 4895%. Of similar significance were Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*, which saw sales increases of 3320% and 3238%. Through these figures it is undeniably evident that the Booker Prize has a considerable effect on the book market, and this demonstrates the importance of the marketplace in the contemporary book world.

It is arguable that the Booker is the largest and most influential book brand in the world. There is a sense that the Booker Prize has a reputation and that titles nominated for the longlist, shortlist and the eventual winning title receive a sort of "stamp of approval" from the powers that be within the publishing industry which, in turn, influences consumers. The Booker prize can be seen as a kind of lottery that attracts the reading public to new books. (McCrum 2013)

Conclusion

The Booker Prize has become influential beyond the imagination of its founding fathers. The winner of the Booker Prize is generally assured of international renown and success;

therefore, the prize is of great significance for the publishing industry both in Britain and globally. The Booker Prize has been subject to scandal and controversy since its establishment in 1968 and has been both praised and shunned by many within the publishing industry. It can be said that scandal and controversy was the making of the Booker Prize.

What is undeniable about the Booker, despite one's personal opinion on its credibility as a judge of high quality fiction, is that it opens the eyes of the general public to fiction and through its power as a marketing tool has achieved what it originally set out to achieve: to "encourage and reward authors but [...] also to get a lot of publicity and to sell a lot of books." (Coleman 1968) The commercial impact of the Booker Prize and its evident influence on the reader has been a substantial and undeniably valuable component in the publishing industry both in Britain and globally.

Having said this, there is speculation that the Booker Prize is suffering a fall from grace, and has become such an intense marketing tool that the prize has lost all credibility as the decider of the year's best fiction. With a reputation marred by scandal, the Booker Prize is facing a new challenger in the new Literature Prize, which is laying claim to the Booker's status as a standard of excellence. The Literature Prize is a passionate, and pointed, rebuke. The award's aim "is to establish a clear and uncompromising standard of excellence". Supporters of the Literature Prize ruthlessly denounce Bookers fall from grace, referring with contempt to "the administrators'" declared preference for "readability" before artistic achievement. "We believe", they go on, "that the public deserves a prize whose sole aim is to celebrate the very best novels published in our time." (McCrum 2011)

Whether the Booker Prize will be overthrown from the pedestal on which it stands in literary prize culture remains to be seen, however, whatever the outcome, it is impossible to deny the Booker's great impact and influence on the publishing industry since its establishment in 1968.

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