The Role of Literary Prizes in Inciting Change: The Women's Prize for Fiction and The Man Booker Prize

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Abstract

Originally, literary prizes were restricted to the world of academia but since the 19th century, they have grown to become commercial events in the publishing calendar. This article looks at the role of the literary prize as an agent of change by focusing on two prominent prizes in the United Kingdom: the Man Booker Prize and the Women's Prize for Fiction. By analysing data from archive material held at Oxford Brookes University, this article argues that the founding of the Women's Prize highlighted an issue with the Booker, promoted discussion around that issue, and as a result, the Booker reacted positively in the years after the introduction of a competing literary prize.

Key Words

Literary prizes, Bourdieu, Booker Prize, Women's Prize for Fiction

Introduction

According to James F. English (2005), the literary prize has its beginnings in the 19th century, in the shift from awarding academic essays in educational institutions to the annual Gold medals from the Royal Society of Literature. Since then, the number of literary prizes has grown to the point where a room full of authors is unlikely to contain somebody who has

not won a prize (English 2005). Arguably, the literary prize has lost its prestige due to this proliferation of the phenomenon and the institution becoming redundant as a result (Horowitz 1987). However, this article will argue that this is not the case, and instead that the literary prize is a vital agent of change within the publishing industry. First, an outline of Bourdieu's theory of the field of production in relation to the literary prize phenomenon is given. A discussion about the proliferation of literary prizes follows, and then an analysis of the Man Booker Prize in light of its competitor and imitator, the Women's Prize for Fiction, to investigate whether the latter has affected the former and to discuss the current role of the literary prize in the British publishing industry.

The Field of Production and Literary Prizes

Before going into the specifics of the Booker and the Women's Prize, it is worth applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of production to the literary prize phenomenon. According to Bourdieu (1993), there are three main types of capital: economic, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital is the monetary power you command, and cultural capital "concerns forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions" which give the agent "an appreciation for [...] cultural artefacts" (Bourdieu 1993, 7). Finally, symbolic capital is a form of value that comes from others believing in it. In the case of literary prizes, the award is seen as prestigious because people within the publishing industry believe it to be.

Within the literary prize mechanism, there are agents working to gain and convert different types of capital to further their own interests. Firstly, there are the sponsors of the prize, who look to gain economic capital by broadening the audience to their brand and capitalising on the advertising opportunities a literary prize provides. Secondly, there are the judges. Each judge should come to the panel with a certain amount of cultural capital in the form of education and knowledge, which "qualifies" them to judge literature and to have their opinions respected. Through participating in the judging process, members of the panel convert their cultural capital into symbolic capital, gaining prestige within the literary field. The judge becomes part of the publicity surrounding the prize, gaining exposure as

well as symbolic capital, which in turn has the potential to lead to a conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital, in the form of sales of their own books or an increase in bookings at public speaking events for example. Next, there are the publishers, who enter their authors' books into literary prizes in the hope of converting the symbolic capital of the book into book sales. Publishers also stand to gain more symbolic capital should they build a reputation for publishing several prize-winning authors. For example, Faber & Faber pride themselves on being home to "thirteen Nobel Laureates and six Booker Prize-winners" (Faber & Faber 2018). Finally, there are the authors, arguably the most important agents in the literary prize mechanism, who stand to gain more symbolic capital from winning a prize and also economic capital. This economic capital comes in the form of book sales and public speaking event opportunities, but also in the cash sum that often accompanies a literary prize win.

English (2005) argues for an additional type of capital, "journalistic capital", which will prove useful later in this article when considering the current role of literary prizes. Journalistic capital is thought of in terms of "visibility, scandal, and celebrity" (English 2005, 10). The most successful literary prizes since the turn of the century have exploited this journalistic capital and turned it into economic capital that supports the continued running of the prize. As we shall see, this journalistic capital becomes vital when literary prizes are set up to promote discussion and "to effect rapid conversations of cultural scandal" (English 2005, 164).

Aside from this "intraconversion" of capital (English 2005, 10) and rewarding literary merit, what a literary prize does is create a functional library of literature easily accessible by consumers, or as Richard Todd (1996) describes it, a "commercial canon". This is where consumers' spending habits decide what is to be widely read, compared to previously when what entered the canon was decided by academics. This article argues that literary prizes also have a role in inciting change; they arise to fill niches that are unoccupied and promote

discussion within the industry around a certain topic and thus have an effect on the wider literary prize culture by changing what is deemed "worthy" of literary merit.

The Proliferation of Literary Prizes

According to English (2002, 109), there are "literally tens of thousands of [cultural prizes] vying for our notice" and yet the aim of a literary prize is to single-out a book/author/publisher as being uniquely deserving of merit, which begs the question as to why so many literary prizes now exist. Horowitz (1987, 19) argues that literary prizes "plague" the American industry and have made "the entire system of professional bestowals suspect". Under this view, literary prizes do very little and the sheer quantity of them makes them redundant, as it is no longer "special" to win such a prize. However, this article takes the stance of English (2005) and Best (2008), seeing prize proliferation as a positive sign that the industry is changing.

Best (2008, 13) argues that prizes are established "as a solution to a claimed problem", whereby new "social worlds" form because of a shared perception of being disadvantaged, and the prizes legitimise the existence of these new social worlds. Within these worlds, a new order is created which does not suit everyone, and so the process begins again. This explains, then, why there are so many literary prizes: because they seek to represent and legitimise many different groups of people who feel disadvantaged by the status quo for many different reasons.

In line with Best, English (2005) argues that prizes grow exponentially in number because by filling a niche, they paradoxically create another one. This article takes the view of Best and English, arguing that the proliferation of literary prizes is a positive aspect of the publishing industry because each prize occupies a different niche within the market and caters to a specific audience. Not only this, but the journalistic capital that literary prizes possess gives them the "capacity to effect rapid conversations of cultural scandal" (English 2005, 164) and eventually change the issue they sought to highlight. This article will demonstrate this

phenomenon by looking at the breakdown of the shortlists and judging panels of the Man Booker Prize since the establishment of the Women's Prize for Fiction, founded in direct response to the Booker's lack of female representation.

The Booker Prize

The Man Booker Prize was "set up in 1968 as a result of discussion between Booker and the Publishers Association about the need for a significant literary prize in Britain, along the lines of the Prix Goncourt in France, which stimulates huge public interest, controversy and sales" (Booker PLC 1992). Its aim was to "reward merit, raise the stature of the author in the eyes of the public, and increase the sales of books" (Colman Getty 1996a) written in English and originally published in the UK, the Republic of Ireland and the Commonwealth countries. As a result of the large monetary sum of £21,000, the line between culture and commerce has always been blurred for the prize (Todd 1996). However, the Booker has maintained a reputation for emphasising "the most imaginatively powerful, interestingly written novels of the year" (Treglown 1991).

After a rocky start, the prize settled into its niche and exploited its journalistic capital by positioning the prize in the centre of scandal; every year, the Booker Prize announcement sparked - and continues to spark - controversy. For example, *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders won the 2017 prize only to become known in the book industry as the lowest-selling Booker winner in the year of its win (Tivnan 2018) and provoked discussion around whether literary fiction was dead, despite being heralded as "utterly original" by judges and seemingly the perfect Booker winner (Man Booker 2017). Central to all of this is how the Booker embraces the controversy and exploits the journalistic capital to further its economic success in future years. By welcoming and, in fact, provoking scandal, the prize is kept within the public sphere, continuing to generate economic capital, and remaining a prestigious prize to win.

The Women's Prize for Fiction

In 1991, the Booker judging panel failed to shortlist the work of a woman (Colman Getty 1996b). As a result of the ensuing scandal, the judges were required to reinforce their decision. In a letter to Jeremy Treglown, Penelope Fitzgerald comments, she "didn't mind the criticism because I know the result had been absolutely sincerely arrived at" (Fitzgerald 1991). In his after-dinner speech at the Booker award ceremony, Treglown argued that no women writers were included on the shortlist because "that was how the choices went. The judges weren't operating a form of proportional representation, they were trying to choose this year's best novels" (Treglown 1991).

In response to this lack of female representation in the country's most prestigious literary award, the Women's Prize for Fiction appeared in its first guise as the Orange Prize and was first awarded in 1996. Its aim was and continues to be "to celebrate accessibility, readability, originality, and brilliance" (Mosse 1996) in fiction written by women in English throughout the world, thus becoming a literary prize with broader criteria than the Booker and, with its prize money of £30,000, the most lucrative of literary prizes in the UK.

From the start, the Women's Prize was also aware of the need to exploit its journalistic capital. Once the prize was announced along with a sponsorship deal with Mitsubishi, the immediate backlash towards a "sexist" and discriminatory prize in the press led to Mitsubishi withdrawing (Glalster 1996). As with the scandal surrounding the Booker, however, this bad publicity meant that the Women's Prize was immediately in the public sphere and could convert this journalistic capital into both symbolic capital - by positioning itself alongside the Booker Prize - and economic capital, in terms of book sales for the shortlisted books and winner.

The 1991 Booker shortlist highlighted the problem of gender inequality in literary prize culture and the Women's Prize was established primarily to reward those believed to be forgotten by the Booker. However, this is not just a case of the issue being "fixed" with the

founding of the Women's Prize and women's literary merit being rewarded in a separate space because, as we shall see, the discussion surrounding gender inequality provoked by the Women's Prize impacted how the Booker continued to run.

Data

Data to analyse the Booker prize in the years after the first award of the Women's Prize comes from three sources. Firstly, I utilise the internal correspondence archived by the Booker Prize and kept in the Special Collections at Oxford Brookes University. Secondly, I have compiled data on the number of women who make up each shortlist of the Booker Prize before and after the inception of the Women's Prize. Finally, I have compiled data on the number of women who make up the Booker judging panel each year.

Internal Correspondence

From looking at the archive material of the Booker Prize, it is clear that the scandal following the 1991 shortlist was known to the Booker, however, it is not until 1996 when more action is taken to improve the press around the inequality issue.

1992 sees the first inclusion of a short section on the gender breakdown of shortlisted authors and judges in a Booker Aide-Memoir (Book Trust 1992), conceived primarily for use by journalists new to reporting on the Booker. As well as this the chosen chairman of judges, Victoria Glendinning, suggests an all-woman judging panel in a letter to Martyn Goff (Glendinning 1992) as it would be "a good idea, a lark, and good publicity". Apart from this awareness from Glendinning about the press surrounding the gender imbalance of the Booker and the few details given about authors and judges in the cheat-sheet, I found no other internal correspondence referring to the issue. Moreover, Glendinning's suggestion was rejected and the judging panel of 1992 featured just one other woman aside from Glendinning herself (see graph 2).

In 1996 however, the year the first Women's Prize was awarded, more entries can be found in the archive that suggest a change in how the Booker approaches the issue of representation of women. For instance, a "backgrounder" (more extensive than the Aide-Memoire) was included in a press pack as a guide to the Booker (Colman Getty 1996a). In this backgrounder, a section appeared at the end entitled "Women and the Booker", detailing statistics of women's participation in the Booker as both shortlistees and judges, emphasising instances where women were chair of judging panels in particular.

As well as the section in the backgrounder provided by Colman Getty to press, a briefing note was circulated to all members of the judging panel:

> You should also be aware that a new Prize, the Orange Prize for Fiction, was launched in January. This aims to celebrate the best novel of the year written by a woman of any nationality. While some of the publicity for the launch of the Prize was implicitly critical of the Booker as a male-dominated prize, it's interesting to note that over the 28 years of the Prize, 35% of winners have been women. The winners of both the Whitbread and the Booker Prize in the last year have also been female. (Colman Getty 1996c)

This, along with the backgrounder, demonstrates the heavier emphasis on gender equality from the year 1996 onwards and the briefing note, in particular, suggests that the (Orange) Women's Prize for Fiction was a catalyst in provoking this change.

Another interesting decision to consider is the appointment of Carmen Callil, founder of the feminist publisher Virago Press, as chair of the 1996 judging panel (Colman Getty 1996d). Whilst we cannot say for certain that she was appointed chair in the year of the first Women's Prize award *solely* because of her extensive involvement in female-centric publishing - especially considering her prior involvement with the Booker committee (1996d) - it is somewhat suspect. The Booker has shown itself to be self-aware in both the

internal correspondence and the outward-facing publicity, and so a tactical decision such as Callil's appointment is to be expected in the first year of their competitor's life.

Taken as a whole, this internal correspondence demonstrates how a literary prize can promote discussion surrounding an issue: without the gender inequality of the Booker being highlighted by the Women's Prize and without the ensuing media attention, the Booker would not have needed to justify themselves to both judges and press by emphasising women's contribution to the prize in internal correspondence. Next, we shall look at the change in the Booker shortlists and judging panels in the years following 1991.

Shortlisted Authors

Graph 1: the percentage of Booker Prize shortlisted female authors in the years 1969-2017
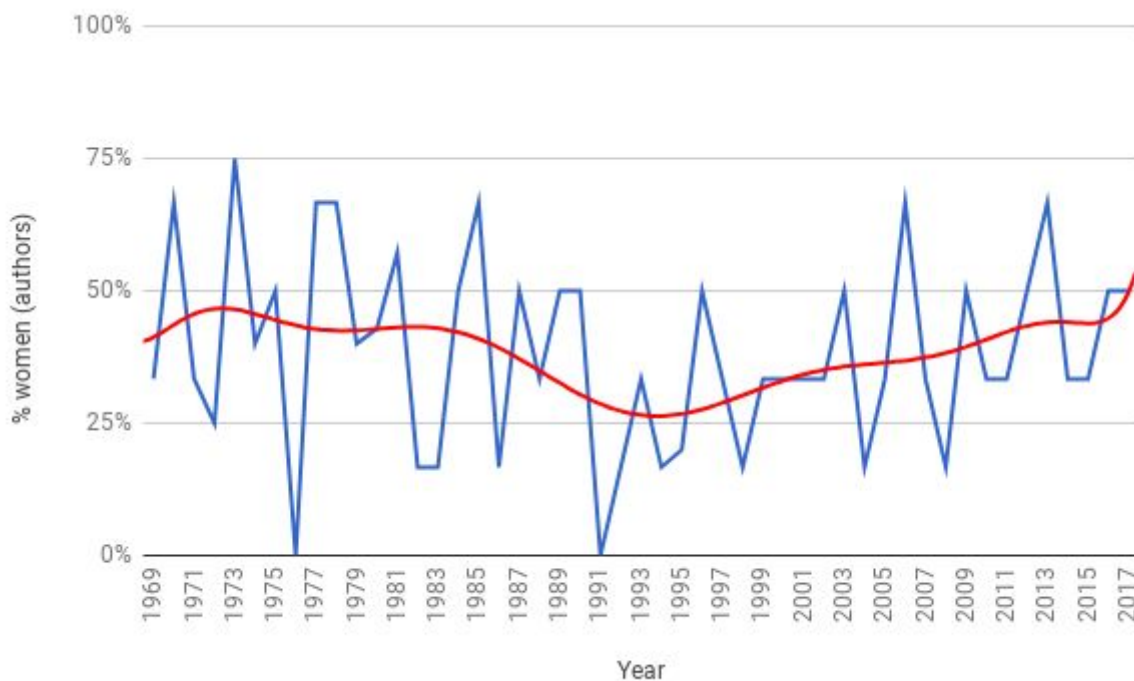

Graph 1 shows the percentage of all shortlists of the Booker to date. The trendline shown in red outlines clearly that not only does 1991 have no women shortlisted for the Booker, but also that it represents the lowest point in an overall downwards trend. Noticeably,

post-1991, and therefore after the journalistic exposure of the gender inequality of the Booker, the data shows an upwards trend. In particular, after 1996 the increase in the number of women shortlisted is clearer. This, and the internal correspondence data, fit with the hypothesis that the Women's Prize brought to attention the issue of gender inequality in the Booker Prize and contributed to a reaction by the Booker to improve the gender imbalance. Also worth mentioning, however, is that the third-wave feminism movement was gaining traction in the mid-1990s (Budgeon 2011), so gender equality was also being discussed in a wider context, and so it is possible the change seen in the Booker Prize was not just the result of the establishment of a competing prize.

Judges

Graph 2: the percentage of Booker Prize female judges in the years 1969-2017
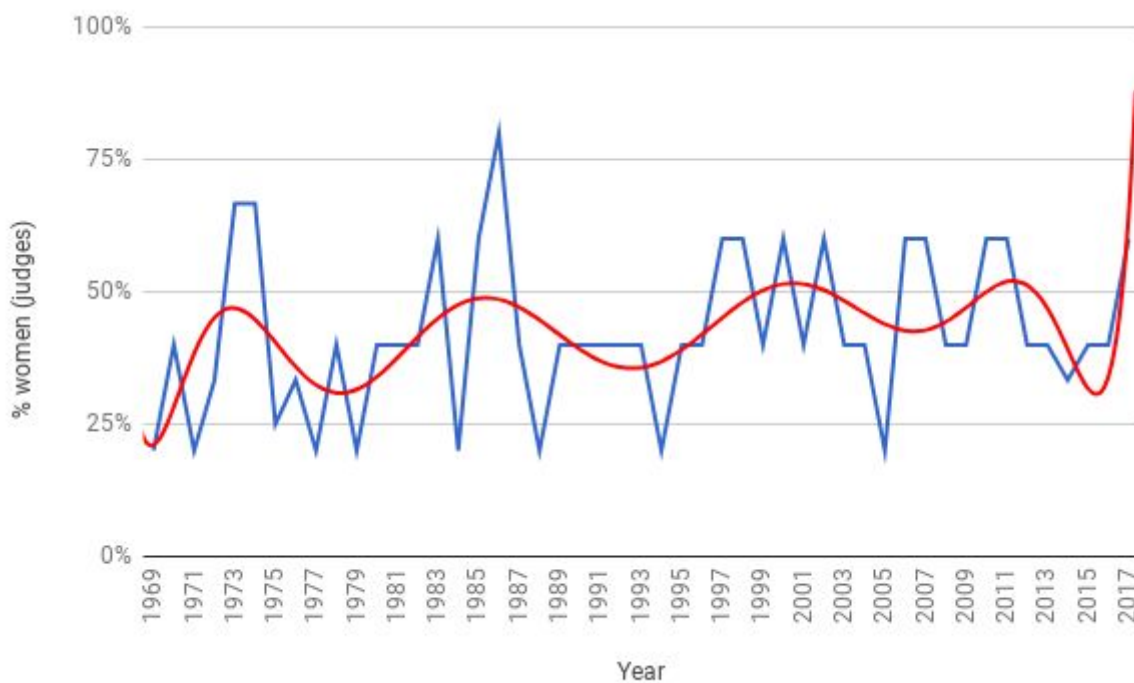
Graph 2 shows the percentage of judging panels made up by women since the Booker Prize was established. Once again, the 1990s represent a trough in the representation of women

and generally, an upwards trend can be seen in this decade, although the turning point is less clear. Noticeably though, in the years immediately following 1996, the percentage of women on the judging panel of the Booker is relatively consistent.

Such a defined change in the shortlisted authors but not in the judging panel is to be expected, as the Women's Prize specifically targeted the issue of representation of women in the shortlists.

Conclusion

The proliferation of literary prizes is not a symptom of an overly-commercialised industry, but rather a signifier of the plethora of issues the publishing industry faces. As Best (2008) argues, new prizes are established when people feel disenfranchised by the status quo and seek validation through a legitimate cultural prize. Taking the example of the Women's Prize for Fiction, a group of women felt underrepresented by the most prestigious literary prize in Britain, and so established a prize with a new order that actively worked to represent them. Journalistic capital owned by literary prizes, as English (2005) argues, pushes the initial issue that spurred the founding of a prize to the fore, and this, I argue, leads to a wider change in the industry. With the establishment of the Women's Prize for Fiction, the issue of gender equality in publishing, particularly in literary prize culture, became increasingly prevalent in the press. As a response to this, data from the Booker prize archive shows that both the shortlisted authors and judging panels of the Booker Prize increased in terms of female representation, however only the shortlisted authors data showed a prominent turning point in relation to the Women's Prize for Fiction. Whilst this change could have been due to the wider discussion of third-wave feminism happening at the same time in the 90s, it would not be far-fetched to think that the Women's Prize had a role to play. With more literary prizes being established even more recently, this comparative research could be widened to assess the effect of other literary prizes, for instance, the Jhalak Prize for British Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic authors, on the larger publishing industry.

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