

# The politics of literary prize-giving: why book awards seem to ‘drive people mad’

NOVEMBER 4, 2016 | Jonathan Derbyshire | Adapted from *The Financial Times*



On a warm evening this summer, I bumped into a couple of acquaintances sitting outside a London pub. One of them was a judge for this year’s Man Booker Prize. As I’m fulfilling the same role for Britain’s leading non-fiction equivalent (the Baillie Gifford Prize), he and I compared notes — on the gigantic amount of reading involved, the likely media reaction to our respective longlists, and the quality of discussions with our fellow judges.

This scene would probably not surprise those who believe that literary prizes are an establishment, or cosy conspiracies among metropolitan elite. This is a view that was once vividly expressed by the novelist AL Kennedy, who judged the Booker in 1996, the year the prize was awarded to Graham Swift’s *Last Orders*. It’s all about “who knows who”, she said, “who’s with who, who’s selling drugs to who, who’s married to who, whose turn it is”. Jonathan Coe, another novelist who also served on the judging panel the same year, suggested a fairly simple reason for her discontent. “She was aggrieved because she didn’t feel we had chosen the right book, but frustration is not corruption,” he said.

This strikes me as plausible — the deliberations of a panel I served on a few years ago ended with one judge close to tears when the book they liked best fell at the last hurdle on a majority verdict. But that reaction was not about petulance but more because of a deep emotional attachment to the work in question. Indeed, I found the intensity of it all very impressive. In any case, writers, even those who temporarily wear the judge’s robes, are not necessarily disinterested observers of the prize system. As Julian Barnes once noted, literary prizes, and the Man Booker in particular, “drive people mad”. The key, Barnes thought, was to get the whole business into “some sane perspective” — hard, admittedly, when the financial stakes can be so high (the winner of the Man Booker, for instance, gets £50,000, plus a significant boost to his or her sales).

The prize was first run in 1969, and has now has an international version for books in English translation. Originally open to authors from the British Commonwealth and Ireland, in 2014 eligibility was extended to anyone writing fiction in English. “The only sensible attitude to the Booker,” Barnes concluded, “is to treat it as posh bingo.” In other words, easy when you don’t win, but less so if you do.

Few writers, surely, would happily attribute their victory to mere luck, or to the sort of “polite compromise” that Barnes thought had delivered the prize in 1987 to Penelope Lively. The capriciousness of judges is a frequent theme of discussion: after the 1979 Booker prize, for instance, one of the judges, Hilary Spurling, revealed that the winner, Penelope Fitzgerald’s novel *Offshore*, had been “everybody’s second choice”. And on the night the prize was awarded, Fitzgerald was made to endure an appearance on a special edition of the BBC Book Programme during which the presenter proposed that the “Booker judges had made the wrong choice” and that “the best book didn’t win”.

It is worth saying that although the pressure for judges to seek compromise or premature consensus can be considerable, there are ways of resisting it. One solution is to do what I and my fellow judges on the Baillie Gifford have done this year: rather than choosing five or six books as in previous years, we settled on four, thereby avoiding, as Stephanie Flanders, the chair of the panel, put it, “the need for messy compromise”. What we’ve ended up with are four books that each of us would be happy to see win.

The line about posh bingo was widely quoted when Barnes finally won the Man Booker in 2011 for his novel *The Sense of an Ending*. This was the fourth time he had been shortlisted. Barnes suggests that it’s a mistake to focus too closely on the books themselves. Better, he says, to study the “psychology and qualifications of the judges”. But this raises more questions than it answers, especially where judges’ “qualifications” are concerned. It’s not obvious that there are any settled criteria for measuring qualifications. One could imagine, for example, only accepting tenured members of university literature departments on to judging panels, though that risks diverting prizes from what one assumes is one of their core purposes — namely, to reward books that are aimed at an educated general audience, rather than a specialised guild. Or you might consider only allowing published authors to serve, which would of course carry other hazards.

When Barnes won the Man Booker, there was some controversy about the judges, particularly the chair, Stella Rimington, the former director-general of MI5, who made some unfortunate remarks about valuing “readability” above other qualities in the books under consideration. This is one reason that literary prizes arouse such intense interest and debate: they hold out the promise that it remains possible for reasonable people to arrive at well-argued judgments about literary artefacts — even in a culture that is supposed to have a lot of problems with making definitive judgments about anything. The significance we give to the business of judging and awarding prizes suggests that we might have to the relativist free-for-all attitude of our age, in which we have lost all ability to discriminate between cultural products of different kinds.

Maybe the old 18th-century question, posed by philosophers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant, about the “grounds” or “conditions” of what used to be called “judgments of taste” is still with us, however in its cheap and vulgar form of controversies about who is and isn’t qualified to give away the prizes. Even still, I have agreed to judge another prize next year.

*Jonathan Derbyshire is the Financial Times’ executive comment editor and a judge of the Baillie Gifford Prize*

## **Follow-up questions:**

It is said that the Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded to someone “who has done outstanding work in an idealistic direction that adds the greatest benefit to humankind”, an ideal that most consider to be particularly vague. **Can you think of any concrete criteria that could guide the selection of a literary prizewinner?**