

# The booker prize

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



The Booker Prize award is considered to be one of the most prestigious recognition of the literary world and it represents one of the most important international rewards for any writer, ne it a famous or a little known one. As any award of its kind, it stands as a full acknowledgement of the efforts and endeavors of writers from different periods of time. Despite the fact that it does not have the same international impact as the Nobel Prize for literature, it is viewed as a major asset in the writing career of its winners.

However, it can be argued that the contribution of the award is two folded, as there are both advantages and disadvantages for winning the prize. Still, it is rather hard to determine the extent to which one of these two elements prevails. It may be that in the career of an already famous writer the role such a prize plays be rather limited as most often this award is solely a different acknowledgement of the literary merits in a series of awards. On the other hand, for emerging new literary talents or for little known fiction authors, it plays a significant role.

This is why, in order to have a better comprehension of the influence the Booker Prize has and the power of the award in itself, first and foremost it is important to take into account the history of the Prize and the tendencies it followed. Secondly, the actual advantages and disadvantages of the prize cannot be determined in general terms, but must be focused on particular examples. In this sense, the present paper aims at discussing “ Vernon God Little” and “ The Inheritance of Loss”, two of the novels which captured this award in 2003 and 2006 respectively.

In this context, a coherent analysis can be made in relation to their state prior to winning the award and afterwards. Finally, some conclusions can be

drawn which may shed some light on the possible advantages and disadvantages of awarding little known authors the Prize, through the experience of the two writers. History and tendencies of the Booker Prize The Booker Prize or the Man Booker Prize as it is known since 2002 was first established in 1968 and “ aims to reward the best novel of the year written by a citizen of the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland” (The Booker Prize Foundation, 2008).

Through a process of astute selection, authors in the English speaking world are rewarded for their literary efforts in the area of fictional work and are given the possibility to claim worldwide recognition. The Prize was established by the Booker Company “ but administered since 1971 by the charitable concern the Book Trust (formerly the National Book League), the Prize, first awarded to P. H. Newby (Something to Answer For) in 1969, soon grew into one of Britain's most recognizable cultural institutions” (Huggan, 2001, 107).

From this point of view, the prize in itself is therefore viewed as one of the most important literary acclaims of the world. The early start of the award was directly related to the historical evolutions taking place especially in the Commonwealth but also throughout the world. The end of the 1960s represented not only a time of an increased literary activity but also a time of great political turmoil. In this sense, the decolonization proves was an important factor in outlining not only the national relations inside the former colonies, but also in determining the future contacts with the former colonial powers.

The issue of colonialism was raised quite often throughout the history of the Prize, taking into account the fact that the company which organizes and sponsors the yearly event was well known for its sugar plantations in areas such as the West Indies. In this sense, there were certain controversies which arose throughout the years in relation to this matter. In one occasion, in 1972 the winner of the Prize, John Berger, declared that he would support the black extremist movement, the “ Black Panther” in defiance of what he labeled as being a colonial rule on the territory (The Book Prize Foundation, 2007).

Therefore, it was important especially for Great Britain to undergo all sorts of programs that would allow it to maintain a good and strong relation with its former colonies. In this sense, the Prize represented a connection between the artistic environments of different countries from the Commonwealth, Ireland, or South Africa. It was yet another element that placed these countries together and defined their common cultural heritage from the past.

Therefore, it can be argued that, aside from its literary value, the Prize played a particular role in forging and rewarding the essence of culture and literature in particular from the Commonwealth countries. Despite constant controversy and discussions over the merits and awards given along the years, there have been some important names which have claimed the award, and at the same time, there were impressive newcomers which burst on the literary scene after winning the award. The first winner of the prize was in 1969 P H Newby for “ Something to answer for”.

Taking into account the fact that it was the first edition of the awards, it raised without a doubt certain controversies. This was largely due to the fact

<https://assignbuster.com/the-booker-prize/>

that the winner was known beforehand and it was considered that a free competition and fairness had not yet been set in place. Still, the author remains in the annals of the Booker Prize as the first winner of the award. There are resounding names which have claimed this literary recognition. Among them, William Golding in 1980 for *Rites of Passage*, in 1982 Thomas Keneally for *Schindler's Ark*, or 1989's Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*.

All these authors and many more considered the prize as being an important asset in their literary careers and remain to this day reference points of the English speaking literature. However, there are little known writers who claimed the prize and soon after, emerged as rising stars of the literary world. Some of the names include 1985 winner Keri Hulme with *The Bone People*. The winner was on his first novel which, following the prize, came to experience incredible success (The Booker Foundation, 2007).

Throughout the history of the prize, there has been a lot of controversy regarding the system of awarding the prize, and even the ceremony in itself. However, as the years went by, the format of the prizes, including the actual event in which the prize was given would adapt to the rigors of an emerging global entertainment society. More precisely, if in the beginning the event did not enjoy the spotlight in the literary and television society, in 1976, “Melvyn Bragg presented the first ever TV broadcast of the Booker Prize, live on BBC2” (The Booker Foundation, 2007).

This came to be an acknowledgement of the importance the prize came to have in the literary world and in the English society as well. At the same time however, due to the fact that the artistic part of the awarding ceremony became more and more important for the audience and the media coverage

the event started to receive, the controversies surrounding the event took an ascending trend. In this sense, “ many have accused the prize committee of catering to either the needs of otherwise unknown authors in the right place at the right time or to the same few authors each year.

Political agendas and profit motives have also received much attention in recent years, further fuelling the controversy surrounding the prize” (Jacobson, 1997). From this point of view, one can argue that the controversies surrounding the prize have in most occasions shifted the focus from the literary event it was meant to be in the beginning to a marketing occasion it is now considered to be. The tendency nowadays is rather hard to determine due to the different points of view shared by analysts.

In this sense, while the organizers and part of the media considers it to be “ the world's most important literary award and has the power to transform the fortunes of authors and even publishers” (The Booker Prize Foundation, 2007), others view it as “ an enormously successful marketing vehicle for nominated authors and their publishers alike” (Jacobson, 1997). Yet, for some of the winners, these two perspectives can find a worthy combination which can acknowledge the quality of their work and promote the sale of their books at the same time. The Booker Prize: young writers and first time novelists

One of the most important aspects of the Booker Prize is given by the possible impact it has on the actual winners. While there is little discussion on the advantages well known authors draw from winning the prestigious prize, a more relevant discussion would be on the effects it has on first time novelists who are awarded the prize. In this context, the effects can be seen

<https://assignbuster.com/the-booker-prize/>

more in the careers of first time novelists due to the fact that it represents the first recognition of their work and therefore its impact can be better assessed. Indeed, the biggest impact the prize has is on the author who actually wins the award.

In this sense, D B C Pierre won the award in 2003 with “Vernon God Little”. His win of the prize is considered to be one of the most interesting surprises of the event. According to the most reviews at the time, the writer was considered to be an underdog in comparison to his rivals, as “It beat a shortlist including the first novel by Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, which was the bookmakers' favorite and has been the biggest seller in the shops, and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, the only established author to make it to the final round of judging” (Jury, 2003).

From this first perspective, it can be seen the fact that in the judging process the focus of the jury tried to be on first time novelists as well as on established ones. This approach tends to give certain equilibrium to the awarding process and to take into account a wide variety of literary submissions. The choice of the jury at the time was unanimous; therefore there was little doubt on the potential winner. The unity of the choice was considered to be justified due to the important message the text tried to convey.

The story of a young teenager from Texas whose life evolves as he tries to face up the challenges of poverty, violence, and family misery was impressive for the panel of the judges who claimed that the book is a “coruscating black comedy reflecting our alarm but also our fascination with modern America” (Jury, 2003). Indeed the emotional touch on the novel came from <https://assignbuster.com/the-booker-prize/>

the author's own personal experiences as a drug addict in search for his own identity and individual recognition of the self.

There are certain objective elements which drew the attention on the novel itself. Firstly, there was indeed the personal affection of the author which transformed the book into an impressionable work. Secondly, there was the subject which dealt with a serious issue affecting America at the time. High school shootings and violence among teenagers were considered, and still are viewed as being an essential challenge facing the society due to the questions it actually raises on the values driving the society forward.

In this sense, critics considered that "the storyline for this book is one that you would as much see played out today on the six o'clock news as read in a novel and has for this reason struck a chord with book lovers" (Jury, 2003). Therefore, the actuality of the story combined with the drama of the personal history of the author made the novel receive the most acclaimed British literary award. The reviews were however split following the award ceremony as not everybody considered such a literary work to be worthy of the prestige of this prize.

In this sense, "picking up on Finlay's notorious past, The Daily Telegraph described his win as "highly embarrassing" for the prize's organizers and sponsor, the Man group. The Guardian called him the "oddest and most controversial character" to have won the award, while The Independent's literary editor, Boyd Tonkin, said he was a "novelist whose background makes the antics of most young writers look tame in the extreme" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2003). Therefore, the cutting edge of the novel was



not fully appreciated by traditional literary reviews who considered it to be a choice too daring for the conservatory nature of the award.

However, despite the criticism that surfaced after the award ceremony, another element was introduced in the justification for rewarding Finlay's artistic effort with the prize. Therefore, it was considered that taking into account such a novel and the fact that the winner was in fact a debutant on the literary scene, the focus of the Booker Prize may have shifted from the well acclaimed authors to the ones that have not been top of the selling lists. In this way, the Booker Prize Foundation would engage itself in an endeavor meant at promoting the new talents and at reintroducing young literature to the public.

Another important presence on the list of the winners of the Booker Prize is the 2006 jury's choice in the person of Kiran Desai and her novel "The Inheritance of Loss". At 35, she was the youngest female writer to receive the award and this element, along with the quality of her work, attracted the attention of both the jury and the public worldwide. She contested the prize with other five writers, including her mother who had been nominated before for the award, yet never won it (BBC, 2006).

Among the other writers from the short list, there were authors with more experience and with more public consideration such as Sarah Waters or Kate Grenville. Still, she became the youngest winner of the award. This was due in part to the new attempt of the Booker Prize Foundation to try to promote new talents and in part to the emotional story Desai's novel portrayed, a story of "globalisation, multiculturalism, inequality and the different forms of love" (Pryor, 2006).

From the perspective of Finlay's experience with the Booker Prize as well as Kiran Desai's, it can be said that there are both advantages and disadvantages in winning the award. Firstly, one of the most important advantages of the award is the financial aspect. On being awarded the prize, the winner receives ? 50, 000 and the tacit commitment of the Foundation to continuously promote the novel. In the case of Finlay's personal history, in the conditions in which he lived a life of poverty following the loss of his family fortune, the financial aspect can be seen as being of considerable importance (Greer, 2003).

Secondly, another advantage of young or debutant writers receiving this prestigious award is the wide recognitions they receive following the ceremony. Before the award, Finlay was far from being an award winning character. His life of drugs, alcohol, and misery would not have presented himself as a possible valuable mind for the literary world. Even more, his past has often been invoked as being unworthy of a Booker Prize winner. Yet, after the recognition he received from the Booker Foundation, many of his critics turned to admit his literary merits in presenting a new face of everyday life in America.

In this way, aside from the fact that he managed to draw the attention on the misery and distress affecting local societies in America, he also succeeded in underlining the effects of an abuse led life. Similarly, in Desai's situation, the award represented both a personal recognition of her young talent, as well as a proof of the the attention the issues addressed by her book received following the award. In this sense, " the judges hailed " The

Inheritance of Loss” as a magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness” (BBC, 2006).

Thus, another advantage of the award received by a young talent is the fact that by recognizing the value of the book, the jury also acknowledges both the new perspective given to certain elements such as cross culture issues and, at the same time, underlines the importance of the issues under discussion for the contemporary society. Probably one of the most important advantages young winners and first time novelists benefit from is the increase in sales of their books. Most winners received not only wide acclaim from the critics, but also from the public.

For instance, “ the 1978 winner, Iris Murdoch's ‘ The Sea, The Sea’ (...) has a rate of continuing popularity which almost all of today's authors would give their eye teeth to equal” (Ezard, 2004). Therefore, most authors do find fame and fortune following the award winner status. Kiran Desai ensured the Penguin fiction division a rise in sales of two percent immediately after winning the Booker Prize award. Thus, the success of her book was also viewed in the choice of the readers. Still, one of the most important elements which drew the attention of the public was precisely the label of Booker Prize winner.

Similarly, Fanley’s story was proposed for a film adaptation as a result of the critics’ acclaim (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). Hence, each in his or hers own way managed to reach success as a result of the Booker Prize. Aside from the various, especially financial advantages, there are also considerable disadvantages of the Prize being given to young or first time novelists. One of the most important however is the eventual

<https://assignbuster.com/the-booker-prize/>

commercialization of the literary content in an attempt to win the prestigious prize.

In this sense, “ because of the marketing potential and the industry-renowned judges, the Booker Prize now is a very high stakes award. Authors, in turn, have more reason to tailor their work to the expectations of the Booker arbiters” (Jacobson, 1997). As a result, the quality of the works may decrease in the attempt to write attractive novels for the judges in the panel rather for the public. Hence, the prize has come to be a goal in itself, rather than an actual recognition. Young artists and first time novelists tend to fall in this trap most often due to the lack of experience and a limited identification of their own personal style.

Moreover, due to the increased media attention on the prize, the entire process becomes more focused on the financial aspect, rather than on the artistic value of the recognition in itself. It is considered thus that “ all in all, there can be little doubt that the Booker, more than any other literary prize in recent history, has blazed a trail in the commercialization of English-language literature” (Huggan, 2001). Overall, it can be said that the Booker Prize has had an important influence on its winners, but also on the new tendencies it rewards through the acknowledgement of certain artists.

However, another true element is the fact that the commercialization of the entire process has led to the dilution of the value of such a prize. This is why it is important that the Booker Prize award new talents or even little known artists, without regard to their personal or ethnical background because it would prove that the most important element the Booker Prize takes into account is talent and literary achievement, rather than fame and public

notoriety. Bibliography BBC. “ Kiran Desai claims Booker title”. BBC News. 2006. 6 January 2008 Desai, Kiran.

The Inheritance of Loss. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005. Ezard, John. “ Booker prize's long-term fame lottery”. The Guardian. 2004. 6 January 2008 Greer, W. R. Book Review - Vernon God Little by DBC Pierre. 2003. 6 January 2008 Huggan, Graham. The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins. Routledge. : New York, 2001. Jacobson, Warren. The Booker Prize. 1997. 6 January 2008 Jury, Louise. “ Debut novelist defies odds to win Booker prize”.

The Independent. 2003. 6 January 2008 Pierre, D. B. C. Vernon God Little. London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Pryor, Fiona. “ Review: The Inheritance of Loss”. BBC News. 2006. 6 January 2008 The Booker Prize Foundation. About the prize. 2007. 6 January 2008 The Booker Prize Foundation. Hitting the headlines. 2007. 6 January 2008 The Booker Prize Foundation. The Booker Prize. 2008. 6 January 2008