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Man Booker Prize: Judges back 'innovation' on 2012 longlist

By Tim Masters

Entertainment and arts correspondent, BBC News

The 12-strong longlist for the Man Booker Prize has been announced. What do this year's choices tell us about the literary landscape in 2012?

This year's Booker longlist has its fair share of surprises.

While many expected Hilary Mantel to make the final 12 with *Bring Up The Bodies*, her sequel to 2009 Booker winner *Wolf Hall*, it is the omission of several other big-name writers that has raised eyebrows in literary circles.

Among those who failed to make the longlist were Martin Amis, John Banville, Pat Barker, Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith and Rose Tremain.

Smith's *NW* - her first novel since 2005's *On Beauty* - had been widely expected to make the list after strong advance buzz. It is due to be published in September. However, the 12 nominees do include high-profile authors Will Self (*Umbrella*) and Michael Frayn (*Skios*).

As last year, this year's longlist features four first-time novelists - Rachel Joyce (*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*), Alison Moore (*The Lighthouse*), Jeet Thayil (*Narcopolis*) and Sam Thompson (*Communion Town*).

Tom Tivnan, features editor of *The Bookseller*, told *The Independent*: "It's a nice mix of young gunslingers and some of the old guard. It's a bit more literary than last year." It was last year that the Booker judges were criticised for putting a focus on "readability" in their choice of shortlisted novels.

When the final six novels were announced in 2011, ex-MI5 chief Dame Stella Rimington said: "We wanted people to buy these books and read them, not buy them and admire them."

But critics accused the Booker judges of dumbing down, and one group of literary leading lights announced a rival award.

One of last year's judges, the Telegraph's head of books Gaby Wood, wrote that this year's choices appeared to support "ambition and experiment".

She also saw parallels with last year. "In 2011, we were accused of allowing the Man Booker to 'dumb down' and there was a great deal of fuss over the books by famous authors left off the list.

"I couldn't help being a little amused by the fact that this year's list does some very similar things: it has omitted obvious contenders; it has drawn attention to first novelists; it has raised the profile of small publishers."

Justine Jordan, the Guardian's deputy literary editor, said this year's Booker prize judges should be applauded for favouring eccentricity.

"The titles here demonstrate afresh the value of the longlist stage as a strong yet unstuffy reading list for anyone interested in fiction.

"It's varied, wide-ranging and it feels exciting. The most predictable inclusion is Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*, a worthy sequel to the Booker-winning *Wolf Hall*. But elsewhere the dominating trend is eccentricity and innovation."

Bookmaker William Hill has installed Hilary Mantel as the favourite to take this year's prize at 3/1, with Will Self at 5/1.

Spokesman Graham Sharpe said: "Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* was the best backed Booker Prize winner of all time and we fear that all her fans will be equally convinced that the new one will follow suit - so we're taking no chances by making her follow-up book hot favourite again.

"The list, as ever, is a varied, fascinating one with a mix of styles and genres."

Self's *Umbrella*, which is published at the end of August, features maverick psychiatrist Zack Busner who arrives at Friern Hospital, a vast Victorian mental asylum in north London, and encounters Audrey Dearth, a working-class woman immured there for decades.

Michael Frayn's farce *Skios* is a story of mistaken identity set on a Greek island. Nicola Barker's *The Yips* has been described by *The Guardian* as "a typically riotous saga featuring a washed-up golfer, an agoraphobic tattoo-artist, a Muslim sex therapist and many other Luton luminaries".

The title describes a nervous condition which can cause golfers to miss short putts.

Among the debut novels on the longlist is Rachel Joyce's *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* - about a recently retired man, who sets out to post a letter and on impulse sets off on a walk that takes him hundreds of miles from home.

Jeet Thayil's first novel *Narcopolis* is set around a Bombay opium den in the 1970s and 80s, with a cast of pimps, pushers, poets, gangsters and eunuchs.

The youngest author on the list is Ned Beaman, 27, whose genre-bending *The Teleportation Accident* was described by *The Independent* as "a funny, flashy, over-excited puppy of a novel". Beaman's debut novel, *Boxer, Beetle* was published in 2010.

The shortlist of six authors will be announced on 11 September, with the winner of the £50,000 prize named on 16 October.