



fiction at its finest

Judges Perspective: Amanda Foreman

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There is nothing quite like being invited to become a Man Booker judge for the year. To begin with, an invitation to join the panel is a highly coveted prize itself. It is a role that brings congratulations and sometimes even a little envy, in stark contrast to the usual commiserations and groans that accompany such news.



It is a role that brings congratulations and sometimes even a little envy, in stark contrast to the usual commiserations and groans that accompany such news. All prize judging is hard work, generally thankless, and excessively time-consuming. Literary critics take it on out of a sense of duty and commonality with one's fellow authors. The Man Booker is one of the very few exceptions to this state of affairs.

The most obvious difference between the Man Booker and other prizes is the enormous attention it receives from the media. Every aspect of the prize is picked over and everything is subject to debate. The selection of each judge is questioned: is he or she truly qualified; is the panel socially balanced; are there any obvious biases? Then, as the judging gets underway, there is constant speculation over which famous author will fail to make the long-list. When the announcement does appear, a fresh wave of forensic reporting takes place, usually in the hope of predicting the shortlist and eventual winner. Such press scrutiny is a tribute to the prize, but the attention is a double-edge sword, and in any case has no bearing on the judges' deliberations.

For a judge, the difference starts with the generous time allotted to the reading process. The books begin arriving in November, eleven months before the winner is decided. The first meeting does not take place until the judges have had the opportunity to read at least fifteen or twenty entries. From then on, there are monthly meetings usually lasting somewhere between four and five hours, until the list of 146 titles is whittled down to sixty, then forty, then twenty, and finally twelve. After each stage of winnowing, the surviving books are re-read and re-evaluated. Some prizes allow for video conferencing, but there is a special alchemy that happens when all the participants are in the same room, sharing eye contact and reacting to body language. The Man Booker takes cognizance of this and makes every

effort to bring the judges together. That can mean a twenty-four hour turn around for a judge flying in from overseas. But it is worth it.

A Man Booker session is intellectually intense, rather like a graduate seminar; sometimes adversarial in the way two lawyers might argue over the merits of a case; and exhilarating in a way that has no comparison. The five judges know they have come together in the pursuit of artistic truth. But since each of us possesses a slightly different road map for reaching this goal, strong leadership by the chairman is absolutely vital. He or she must ensure that the panel agrees to a single set of criteria. Taste is not the same as aesthetic judgment. A literary critic doesn't deserve the title if she can't differentiate between the two. For this reason, the words like and dislike were roundly discouraged from the 2012 discussions. The chairman also demanded a high degree of commitment and discussion to each book, even when it was obvious from the first page that the criteria for remaining in the competition would not be met. This was partly in deference to the Man Booker itself, and partly in recognition of the fact that the book under consideration was deemed particularly prize-worthy by its publisher. The general assumption is always to give a novel the benefit of the doubt.

It is not easy to say goodbye to books. Any title that makes it to the last forty will be a stand-out. Some will remain favourites with the judges long after the prize has been decided. But a condition of being on the panel is accepting the collegiate nature of the decision-making process. The Man Booker is a group endeavour, not an individual sprint to the finish line or a tug-of-war. Although the actual deliberations do not see the light of day; the path to selection is open to inspection by the public. The strength of conviction behind the eventual winner is one of the main reasons why the prize is among the most respected in the world.

I can speak for the entire panel in saying that the experience of judging the Man Booker is unforgettable and unrepeatable. The challenges are considerable, but to be immersed in such a broad range of fiction for a year is a great privilege. Even greater though, is the opportunity to share and celebrate with the public the very best that literature has to offer.

- Amanda Foreman