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Booker Prize judges to turn over new leaf

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Last year's Man Booker Prize was something of a PR disaster but Sir Peter Stothard, chair of this year's judging panel, is intent on rescuing its reputation. "I hand-picked the judges," he admitted for the first time last night at the launch of *All In A Don's Day* by Mary Beard, Cambridge professor, classics editor of the TLS and Londoner's Diary pin-up. "It was important that we got it right after last year."

Which explains why most of his fellow judges are from the sphere of the high-minded Times Literary Supplement, which he edits. The 2011 Man Booker Prize had been trashed by the critics, not just for the limp shortlist but also the judging process after its chairwoman Stella Rimington said she valued "readability" and fellow judge Chris Mullin said he liked books that "zip along".

In the event, the winner was Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, which critic Geoff Dyer said was "excellent in its averageness."

After the debacle, a group of publishing high-ups got together to launch a rival prize, yet to be named, to raise standards again.

The judges this year include academics Dinah Birch and Bharat Tandon and historian Amanda Foreman. Also on the panel is Dan Stevens, the *Downton Abbey* actor, but the TLS editor says he is more than just a pretty face.

"He's impossibly . . .," Sir Peter repeated, without ever finding the adjective he wanted, before finally concluding, "but very learned, and very diligent."