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Performing Femininity

Storytelling and gender

Flanagan wins the Booker: but will British and Commonwealth writers soon be obscured by Americans?

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Is there still a Commonwealth culture? And, if so, will the “cultural flavour” of the Man Booker Prize,

as two-times Booker winner Peter Carey recently described it, be lost now that Americans are eligible to compete with British, Commonwealth, Irish and Zimbabwean authors?

This year's prize – awarded last night to Australian Richard Flanagan for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* – broke with a 45-year-old tradition: two of the shortlisted authors – Joshua Ferris and Karen Joy Fowler – were American.

Carey is one of several former prize winners who has been critical of the globalising of the prize. He pointed to the unique “flavours” of a number of nation-based awards, including the American Pulitzer and National Book Awards.

The change in the Booker could be another sign of a broader movement toward international literary awards. The Folio Prize was first awarded earlier this year, and is described as “the first major English language book prize open to writers from around the world”. Though the lucrative International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, first presented in 1996, is also open to any works published in English, including in translation.

The shortlist for the Folio Prize included just one British author, and five Americans, out of the total of eight. Almost all of the authors are white. The eventual winner was US author George Saunders.

The Folio shortlist bears out fears that the Booker might lose its defining association with British and Commonwealth writing and become dominated by US authors.

Dr David Brauner, Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Reading, believes this is inevitable given that “the most exciting prose is being written by American writers”. Even historically, Brauner suggests, American authors would have triumphed over the actual prize-winners in almost every instance.

The chairman of the Booker Prize Foundation, Jonathan Taylor, describes the change as “embracing the freedom of English in its versatility, in its vigour, in its vitality and in its glory, wherever it may be”. But will “abandoning the constraints of geography and national boundaries” only feed cultural imperialism and further marginalise writers from outside Britain and the United States?

A.S. Byatt, winner of the Booker in 1990 and former judge, suggests the number of entries from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth be restricted in order to make the judging process manageable with a wider pool of entrants. If this occurs it's possible it will be more difficult for new writers from Africa, India, Australia, and New Zealand to even be in the running.

This year's longlist was considered surprising for its exclusion of African writers, and for the low number of Commonwealth authors featured. Flanagan was the only Commonwealth author to make the longlist, in contrast with the usual inclusion of around four or five.

Literature can transport us into the mind of an Australian soldier working on the Burma railway, or into the home of a young girl raised with a chimp for a sister. There is no reason why we necessarily

need to create ties to novels purely on the basis of the country which an author happened to be born in.

But literary prizes do play a vital role in giving valuable publicity to books that might otherwise have been overlooked. Major prizes can propel a relatively unknown author into the international spotlight, as when Indian-born Salman Rushdie won the Booker in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*.

The nature and scope of literary awards can lead to the systematic exclusion of particular kinds of authors and particular kinds of fiction. The Stella Prize is an example of an award specifically created to give recognition to women's writing, given women are underrepresented as winners of literary prizes.

The widening of the Booker could, despite its aims to open up geographical boundaries, close off opportunities for writers outside the cultural powerhouses of the United States and Britain.

The decision to expand the prize to a global pool is also likely influenced by the mega corporations that now dominate the book publishing industry internationally. Five of the titles on this year's Booker shortlist are published by Penguin Random House.

Many of us don't feel particular ties with our fellow Commonwealth nations. Nevertheless, the potential for more marginal voices to remain as such seems greater now that the Booker has expanded its scope beyond the former British Empire.



Literature Booker prize Books Richard Flanagan Man Booker prize