



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Literary Prizes and Contemporary Women's Writing: An Investigation through Interviews

Nick Turner

In 2011, I conducted research on the Orange Prize for Fiction. Now called the Baileys Prize, it was first awarded in 1996, the first literary prize run and judged solely by women and open only to women writers. It was in part a response to the seemingly male bias of Booker Prize judging panels – in their awards and their gender balance in panels.

I was particularly interested in the prize's remit, which includes the words 'originality', 'excellence' and 'accessibility'. The research was stimulated by a (female) academic and novelist I know who felt that the last word potentially dumbed down women's writing, criticising the non-specialist nature of some of the panels and the inclusion of 'lighter' fiction on the longlists. In short, the prize was not doing the question of women's writing being taken seriously any favours – in fact the reverse.

I discussed the prize, what it was felt to have achieved, and the contentious issue of accessibility being equated with dumbing down with many novelists, critics and former judges. Sir Simon Jenkins remained against the Prize, seeing it as form of sexism that was unnecessary in a field where women led; Kate Mosse, bestselling novelist and co-founder of the Prize naturally defended it, quoting the remaining need for the Prize in a culture that still worked against women writers' success. Her passion was infectious, and convinced me the Prize has helped advance women's writing. Margaret Drabble expressed uneasiness about an all-woman prize; A.S. Byatt felt it ghettoized women writers. Anne Fine said she had moved from an argument against the prize to doubting her earlier views.

*Interestingly, then, some leading women writers and critics are uncomfortable with the prize. There again, as the interviews below show, it rightly has a great deal of support. It has now been running for twenty years; its 2014 winner, Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, a stream-of-consciousness novel reflecting on abuse and rape in parts, is hardly 'accessible'. In 2015, the prize was won by Ali Smith for her 'experimental' novel *How to be Both*. Smith is often called one of Britain's leading novelists: with Hilary Mantel shortlisted previously, the Prize is certainly spotlighting the most important contemporary women writers.*

*The three most substantial interviews are below. Louise Doughty's novel *Whatever You Love* was short-listed for the Costa award for fiction in 2010 and long-listed for the Orange Prize 2011. The highly successful *Apple Tree Yard* was selected as a Richard & Judy Book Choice in the spring of 2014. She judged; Alex Clark is a journalist who was the first female editor of *Granta*, who judged the Orange Award for New Writers in 2005. Doughty and Clark were both judges of the Booker Prize in 2008. Linda Grant is a British novelist whose book *When I Lived in Modern Times* won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2000. These interviews were conducted via email.*

Louise Doughty

Q: The Orange Prize, as well as the words 'excellence' and 'originality', uses 'accessibility' in its remit. What do you think of this? There was rather interesting evidence from Alex Clark, judging the Orange New Writers Award in its first year – that a brilliant novel by Dorothea Tanning called *Chasm* had not made the shortlist because it *wasn't* 'accessible'.

A: I'm not familiar with Alex Clark's remarks and you'd have to ask her for clarification of what she meant. Having sat on a Man Booker jury, though, I found her a highly astute, intelligent and wide-ranging judge and I doubt very much that she thought a book too brilliant to win the Orange Award for New Writers.

I'm also not a representative of the Orange Prize and you would have to ask them for the reasoning behind their inclusion of the word accessibility. As you're asking my opinion, though, I am happy to say my impression is that the Orange Prize including the word 'accessibility' in its criteria is simply a nod toward the fact that readability shouldn't not *exclude* a book. The idea that a book being readable somehow, *of itself*, disqualifies a novel from being 'great' or 'literary' is risible nonsense. Were that rule to be applied throughout literary history, we could discount most of our famous nineteenth-century novelists.

Q: If you could use three words to sum up what the *Booker* Prize looks for in its winners, what would they be?

A: I think it's daft to talk about what the Man Booker prize looks for when the judging panel changes every year. Judges are instructed to choose the 'best' work. That's it. How they define 'best' can vary widely from year to year. It's very difficult to define general trends in a prize that can go to Anne Enright one year and Howard Jacobson three years later.

Q: Does winning a prize such as the Orange automatically place value on a text? Or is it just something pleasant but meaningless?

A: Winning any prize is about bringing a book to the attention of readers. No prize accords 'value', or it certainly shouldn't. All prizes are, in Julian Barnes' memorable phrase, 'posh bingo'.

Q: Is literary value now perhaps swamped with commercial value, owing to the prize culture? Perhaps the latter infects the former? On a glib level, I'm thinking of some of the rather curious longlisted books for the Orange – Philippa Gregory, Alice Sebold, and Joanne Harris, among others.

A: I'm not sure what you mean by 'literary value', which is a somewhat subjective judgement. Books considered potboilers in the past are now hailed as masterpieces and many authors who are lionised now will sink into utter obscurity. Our prize culture has brought a lot of books to the attention of readers who might never have otherwise discovered them. (Longlists are meaningless to anyone outside the book industry, and in the case of the Orange Prize may well include books that only have one enthusiast amongst the judging panel, as initially the entries are divided between the judges. The Costa also operates this way, which means with both prizes, all entrants are at the mercy of a single individual before they can progress to being judged by a panel. This makes it even harder to generalise about the results.)

Q: Is it fair to say that the Orange (and the Booker?) are marketing gimmicks above all?

A: Of course they are! Thank heavens for marketing gimmicks. How else are readers supposed to discover books? By osmosis?

Q: Is there a possibility that 'accessibility' as a term might cancel out 'literary value' as a concept? Patricia Duncker has suggested that the accessibility term in the Orange remit implies that 'high art is now no longer women's business'. What do you think?

A: As I've said, I think 'literary value' is a highly subjective term. Those who like slow, elegaic, poetic novels will consider a fast-paced tale less 'good' – those who are interested in narratives or character studies will consider a meandering or stylistic novel less 'good'. This pitting of 'accessibility' against 'literary' is a nonsense, in my opinion. It's a bit like saying, here's a giraffe and here's a tiger, now which is the best animal? Depends whether you like eating meat or leaves.

Q: Maya Jaggi once stated that, in terms of a prize, 'The ultimate aim is to serve not just writers, but readers.' What is your reaction?

A: Yes, I agree with Maya Jaggi. The financial support a prize can give a writer is of course important but ultimately a prize should put interesting books in the hands of readers – I use the word 'interesting' rather than 'good' advisedly.

Q: Can you suggest any great books that have won the Orange? By this I mean works of linguistic invention, narrative flair, complexity, ambiguity ...

A: Your definition of 'great' would, to my mind, apply to most of the winners of the Orange Prize since its inception. You seem to be implying that because they've won a prize that has an accessibility criteria, that makes them less 'great'. I'm baffled. Did Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* become greater when it was shortlisted for the Man Booker and less great when it won the Orange? Is Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* 'greater' because it won the Man Booker but was only shortlisted for the Orange?

Q: Do you have any feelings for or against the concept of the Orange Prize? Its judging, panels, decisions? Is there still a political need for it? How seriously do you think the prize is taken by the literary world? To my mind, its winners are far less visible than the Bookers ... Why is this?

A: I'm not sure where you've been looking the last few years if you think winners of the Orange Prize are less visible than the Man Booker. The latter prize has been going longer, of course, but I would be willing to bet that in terms of media coverage and sales (in this country at least) it is more or less neck and neck with the Man Booker now. The Orange Prize was set up in response to a Booker year where not a single woman writer was shortlisted despite many publishing that year (Nadine Gordimer, Angela Carter...) The majority of Man Booker winners have been men because the majority of judges have been men and the majority of books entered are by men. The Orange prize is, like any form of positive discrimination, simply a necessary evil aimed at redressing an unjust imbalance.

Q: Margaret Drabble recently said that she feels that the prize culture has had an adverse effect on contemporary literature. Do you agree? Are the wrong things sometimes trumpeted for the wrong reasons (i.e. often sales), with good writing becoming more invisible? Is the literary prize culture overhyped and overvalued? Are there too many literary prizes around?

A: I think there is an interesting discussion to be had about whether our prize culture has a distorting effect on the 'value' judgments we make, and whether it leads to a sort of 'winner takes all' approach within our literary culture. Certainly the rise of the 3-for-2 offers and heavy books discounting has led

to retailers selling more of fewer books, which is great for those authors but arguably bad for diversity. How the industry supports good writers who are not necessarily headline acts is an interesting question and requires nerves of steel on the part of those authors, their agents and publishers. The Arts Council has recently launched a new initiative in conjunction with Waterstones, Fiction Uncovered, to support authors who have not yet won a major prize or received significant promotion – some would say it's long overdue.

Q: Would you like to comment on the judging process, and the books, the year you judged the Orange New Writers Prize, and the Booker (or any others)? Were you aware of any gender 'issues' anywhere?

A: I wasn't aware of gender issues in any of the many prizes I have judged – there was a male/female imbalance in the longlist the year I judged the Man Booker but that was roughly proportionate to the male/female imbalance in the books entered by publishers. I have certainly been on the receiving end of a significant amount of sexism in person in the literary world and in the press, but I have never observed it in action openly on any prize panel I have sat on. I do believe that the vast majority of people who judge literary prizes do it in the right spirit and take the task very seriously – it is inevitable that personal prejudice enters any subjective judging process but I don't believe that there is routine malice behind those prejudices – a far more likely explanation is simple ignorance.

Q: What do you think of recent Booker winner Howard Jacobson's work?

A: Jacobson is a man, of course, and goes to all the right dinner parties in London, so his lightweight, middle-brow relationship dramas will always be accorded more gravitas than the female equivalent. It has reminded me exactly why the Orange Prize was created in the first place and why it is so necessary.

Alex Clark

Q: The Baileys Prize, as well as the words 'excellence' and 'originality', uses 'accessibility' in its remit. What do you think of this?

A: I think the most obvious problem is that all three words are value judgments; but of the three, 'accessibility' has the most problematically vague associations. Clearly, books are accessible to the vast majority of people: they are easy to get hold of and generally less expensive than other forms of entertainment. So what we actually mean is are they or do they feel educationally and culturally accessible to a wide range of people; and this is less to do with the texts themselves than the way fiction – 'literary fiction', as it has a little nonsensically come to be called – has been written about in the culture, and the way that it has occupied a particular class position. This might at various points have been related to the subject matter and style of novels – for example, when the Hampstead novel was in its heyday, one can imagine people who had very little interest in its preoccupations – but I don't think that could be said these days. Whether or not the Orange coincided historically with this change, or whether it also partly created it, is difficult to say – but there has certainly been a collapsing of categories and genres in the fiction of the last couple of decades – it's harder to apply labels such as 'literary fiction', 'commercial fiction', 'chicklit' etc these days.

That said, there definitely still exist writers and novelists who set themselves ambitious tasks in terms of subject matter and style and whose work will be complex and require a considerable amount of effort and perhaps also knowledge from the reader. It's not particularly sensible to imagine that such books will ever have a mass appeal – why should they? – but it also seems wrong to me to sideline

them from any prize or similar exercise because they aren't 'accessible'. That to me would seem to dilute the culture and to patronise readers.

Q: Does winning a prize such as the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction automatically place value on a text? Or is it just something pleasant but meaningless?

A: Its primary value is probably to enhance profile and sales for the winner and, to a lesser extent, for short-listed and long-listed authors. Of course it is also an accolade, and I think we are also somewhat conditioned to respond positively to anyone who has an award for anything. I guess the answer is also determined by what you actually think about prizes in general – if you take the view that they are a lottery, then you wouldn't feel that a text was automatically valuable for having won one.

Q: Is literary value now perhaps swamped with commercial value, owing to the prize culture? Perhaps the latter infects the former? On a glib level, I'm thinking of some of the rather curious longlisted books for the Orange – Philippa Gregory, Alice Sebold, and Joanne Harris, among others.

A: I actually think this is too complicated an issue to disentangle without writing a PhD about it! I don't really think that prize culture has itself pushed out any idea of literary value – what I think is that the position literature occupies in the culture has altered dramatically, and that prize culture is a manifestation of that. And then you can't really think about that without thinking of how similar things have happened in other branches of the culture – in modern art or popular music, for example. I guess the broadest point to make is that, across the culture, attention and commercial success has tended to concentrate more intensely around a fewer number of things. Prize culture seems to have the biggest effect some rungs below the truly commercially huge (e.g. I don't imagine it has much effect on Dan Brown or J.K. Rowling whether they win prizes) – in other words, for the kind of writers you mention; below that, what you get in music and film and literature is small groups of artists and enthusiasts happily doing their own thing.

Q: Is it fair to say that the Baileys (and the Booker?) are marketing gimmicks above all?

A: Not quite fair! I think they have more noble ambitions than that – I do think that their founders and those who continue to organise them genuinely feel it is important to put writers and their work into the hands of the public.

Q: Is there a possibility that 'accessibility' as a term might cancel out 'literary value' as a concept? Patricia Duncker has suggested that the accessibility term in the Orange remit implies that 'high art is now no longer women's business'. What do you think?

A: I guess I've kind of addressed this a bit higher up – I think we can't really reach a sensible answer until we define the terms. I would add, though – with the caveat that I don't know the context of her remarks – that I don't agree with Patricia Duncker. Nobody is excluding women from high art, if that's what she means; they have more opportunity to be involved in artistic practice and consumption than they have had at any point in history. Women's business will be precisely what they want it to be.

Q: Maya Jaggi once stated that, in terms of a prize, 'The ultimate aim is to serve not just writers, but readers.' What is your reaction?

A: I'd react positively – if you're going to take up readers' time and attention with a prize – if you're going to attempt to convey value to them by your choice of winner – then it had better be valuable to them too. Otherwise, aren't we just wasting people's time?

Q: Can you suggest any great books that have won the Baileys/Orange? By this I mean works of linguistic invention, narrative flair, complexity, ambiguity ...

A: Plenty of these attributes, but I would especially point to *Fugitive Pieces*, *Larry's Party*, *When I Lived in Modern Times* and *On Beauty* (interesting that some of these are very early winners!)

Q: Do you have any feelings for or against the initial concept of the Orange Prize? Its judging, panels, decisions? Is there still a political need for it? (Byatt and Jenkins still see it as sexist ...)

A: It is interesting to note that the OP always attracts this kind of criticism, although there is no prize that doesn't have entry criteria. Although I understand the reservations, I find it difficult to see what harm the prize does – it is hardly an assault on male writers or literature written by men. And, again in a wider context, women writers still seem to me to operate in a critical framework that places men above women – particularly in the sense that generations of writers (e.g. Bellow, Roth, Updike in the States, Barnes, Amis, McEwan here) rarely include women.

Q: How seriously do you think the prize is taken by the literary world? To my mind, its winners are less visible than the Bookers ... Why is this?

A: I think it's been successful enough – both in terms of the writers it has rewarded, and the profile it has achieved – to be pretty visible. I think it's just that, in terms of pre-eminence, the Booker got there first, has been going longer and (obviously) has a bigger pool of writers to draw on.

Q: Margaret Drabble recently said that she feels that the prize culture has had an adverse effect on contemporary literature. Do you agree? Are the wrong things sometimes trumpeted for the wrong reasons (i.e. often sales), with good writing becoming more invisible? Is the literary prize culture overhyped and overvalued? Are there too many literary prizes around?

A: In terms of whether there are too many prizes – I think you have to draw a distinction between the 'big' prizes – Booker, Costa, Orange, Samuel Johnson – and the smaller ones that often carry modest prize funds and exist – to good effect – to provide writers with additional income. And yes, I do think books are sometimes hyped and trumpeted for the wrong reasons – but I wouldn't connect this particularly with prize culture; I'd say it was a more general issue to do with marketability (e.g. does a writer have an interesting personal story that will make a good magazine feature? Are they attractive? Do they seem to chime with whatever a newspaper or TV program has decided is the zeitgeist this week?).

Q: Would you like to comment on the judging process, and the books, the year you judged the Orange New Writers Prize, and the Booker (or any others)? Were you aware of any gender 'issues' anywhere?

A: I'm aware that when you were first in touch with me you were interested in something I'd written at the time of the OANW – I think I should make it clear that Dorothea Tanning's *Chasm* wasn't ruled out of contention because it wasn't accessible – at least not in my memory. I think in the end we preferred other novels for the shortlist and the winner. I recall a very in-depth and rewarding debate. The Booker is a slightly different kettle of fish – there is a really huge reading load (it was 112 books in my year), which means there is limited time to go back to things (i.e. very little re-reading until the final rounds). It is bound to be an imperfect process. I don't think, during the Booker, that I felt any gender issues, exactly, but I do think I was struck by people's different conceptions of what a novel should do, and what it is for. This wasn't really about accessibility, but I remember the view being advanced, by more than one person, that the novel should bring us news about the world and the culture. Obviously, I

don't think it *shouldn't*, but it isn't quite how I would characterise what I think is most important in a novel, which would always begin and end with the writer's use of language.

Q: Any final thoughts on literary prizes and contemporary British literature, and visible literary fiction by women?

A: I just had something to add about the nature of prize juries these days. It has become fairly standard practice for juries to be a mixture of critics and academics, writers and people from outside the literary establishment. Clearly, there are good things about this – it broadens the range of responses, and it is a good way of guarding against contemporary literature becoming a coterie, or a closed shop. But I do think that when the balance tips in favour of celebrity, something is lost – as if we are afraid that idea of specialist knowledge and critical experience is somehow elitist. Whereas in other walks of life, we have respect for experience – nobody, for example, is about to ask me to go and manage the England football team.

Linda Grant

Q: Do you feel winning the Orange affected you much as a writer, in terms of sales and critical/serious reputation? How?

A: The significant thing about winning any major literary prize is that first of all there is news coverage and then there are increased sales, and with increased sales and a prizewinning sticker there comes a larger advance for the next novel, and in my case an auction. The more money you have as a writer, unless you lead an extremely abstemious life, the more time you have to devote to writing the work you want to write instead of your day job.

Q: Would you say your support the Prize and what it stands for? Do we (still) need a separate prize for women?

A: Of course I support it. Literary prizes are a horrendous beauty contest for the poor shortlisted writers. We don't belong in or like the public spotlight, don't enjoy being written about and snarked about, but at the end of the day, a literary prize gets your books into the hands of readers, which is a major part of the point of writing them. As for the canard about a separate prize for women, I'm still waiting for anyone to tell me about a literary prize, apart from the Nobel, which has absolutely no restrictions. Why don't we hear outrage about the Pulitzer only being open to Americans?

Q: What do you think of the term 'accessibility' in the remit? Some find it a problem. Patricia Duncker has suggested the term implies that 'high art is no longer women's business' – dumbing down, etc.

A: Yes, I do wish that were not that, because it isn't as if the winners are in any dumbed down. There have been some difficult novels in the past few years, and Orange has not flinched from awarding them the prize.

Q: Maya Jaggi once stated that, in terms of a prize, 'The ultimate aim is to serve not just writers, but readers?' What is your reaction?

A: Secretly, of course, literary prizes really serve the book trade, publishers and bookshops, not writers or readers. It's quite difficult to sell literary fiction at the moment, and prizes serve that aim.

Q: Do you regard a literary prize such as the Orange as something nice but innocent? Or as a serious indicator of value?

A: I don't think any literary prize is a serious indicator of value. It indicates how a particular panel of judges in one year felt about the books they read.

Q: Do you have any views on the relationship between the Orange and the Booker?

A: It's seen as the poor relation, and has far less publicity abroad, indeed is not well known in America. Slightly worryingly, novels by women can not make the Booker shortlist on the grounds that they'll have a second crack at the Orange

Q: Margaret Drabble recently said that she feels that the prize culture has had an adverse effect on contemporary literature. Do you agree? This goes with the idea that literary prizes are commercial devices – some say.

A: Of course they are commercial devices. I feel that with fewer and fewer people reading literary fiction, or indeed reading, the publicity that Orange and the Booker give to fiction can only be a good thing. Writers loathe competing against each other, it's hostile to who we are and what we do, but there seems to be no way round it. I notice that it's writers who have securely established their reputations, like AS Byatt and Anita Brooker, who refuse to allow their novels to be entered for the Orange. For younger writers, literary prizes are the differences between having a publisher at all, or self-publishing.

Q: At the outset, Kate Mosse talked about wanting genre fiction to be part of the Orange. Is this appropriate? (It's not happened much)

A: Yes, very much so. But having judged a prize in which I was open to genre, surprisingly the general standard wasn't as high as I'd hoped.

Q: Are there any women you are surprised have not appeared as winners/shortlistings?

A: Aminatta Forna, but I hope that will change in this year's award.¹

Q: Any final thoughts about the current state of contemporary fiction by women and its marketing?

A: I do worry about the relentless preoccupation with book groups, which seems to me to produce a very shallow way of talking about literature – focussing an awful lot on plot development and 'liking' the characters.

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¹ Forna subsequently was shortlisted for Orange Prize for Fiction for *The Memory of Love* (2010)