Prize Fighters Essay, Research Paper

Prize fightersYou can see what the publicity people at the Man Group, the stockbroking company that now finances what was once the Booker Prize, have been thinking. We have this brand: high recognition, cheap at the price. But isn’t it small beer? Hasn’t the label been used to mean arty-but-little, elegant-but-genteel? Why not be bolder? Why not make the competition a kind of world title? Think of Wimbledon. Think of the Open Golf Championship. Classy, very British, but also the world’s top events. Why not set Roth against Rushdie, Atwood versus Morrison? One imagines some such excited speculation behind the decision that the Man Booker Prize will be open to American novels from 2004. The Man Group, which has committed £2.5m to its sponsorship of the prize over the next five years, wishes to project itself in the US. How much more interested would Americans be if their own big hitters were taking part. Think how much they love the Ryder Cup. Everyone will be able to know it as the World Literary Championship – so everyone, presumably, will be giving Man their money to invest. You can see the match-ups that have been imagined, on the basis of past performance. Setting previous Booker champs against winners of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, you would have had some hot, publicity-generating contests. Plenty of controversy, plenty of publicity, more than a bit of edge. There would have been Roth vs McEwan (1998), Richard Ford vs Graham Swift (1996), Carol Shields vs Pat Barker (1995). In the more distant past there would have been prize fights like Norman Mailer vs William Golding (1981). British academics and literati have already bemoaned the change. This year’s chair of the judging panel, Professor Lisa Jardine, is worried that a rather British institution will become “blandly generic”. And perhaps she too had Henman vs Sampras as a model when she pessimistically predicted that the top American seeds would blast the gallant British and Commonwealth battlers away. “With someone like Roth at his best, I can’t see how an Amis or McEwan would touch them.” “The American novelists paint on a much bigger canvas.” Perhaps she was implying just the contest between scale and precision that the sponsors might be relishing. “If you look at Pulitzer prizewinners, every book there is on a majestic scale.” But is this not mere defeatism. Alison Lurie, Anne Tyler and E Annie Proux have all won the Pulitzer with quite small books, while “epic” winners such as Charles Frazier’s Cold Mountain are as much grandiose as grand. Would our usual literary heroes and heroines stand so little chance? Jardine also points out the practical problem. How to open the competition to another literary continent, yet keep the long list down to manageable proportions? At the moment judges must read about 130 novels in a year, surely as many as an honest intellectual can ever manage. So there will have to be sieving, or pre-judging, especially given the ruthlessness of the big US publishers, hungry for hype. What chance now for those unknowns – the bus-driver with his first novel – making it through to at least temporary fame? Maybe this will not worry the sponsoring fund managers. Having increased the first prize to £50,000 they may consider a loss of eccentricity a price worth paying. They may claim that the response of critics every year to the announcement of the Booker shortlist has even pushed them into this change. Think of all those articles lamenting the limited range of the British novel. Think of that annual yearning for the wide skies of American fiction. “Well,” the sponsors might righteously say, “at least we are pushing the Commonwealth team to pit themselves against ambitious opponents – perhaps we will goad them to expand their horizons.” Yet you do just wonder whether the finance people know what books are about. Why, one might ask, has the Booker Prize been such an extraordinary PR success over the past two decades and more? Perhaps it has something to do with a factor that the sponsors now risk losing. Up until now, the books on each year’s shortlist, and even those notoriously failing to make that list, have looked like members of an extended, rancorous family. The most distant Commonwealth writers have usually been close to Britain in some way. Twice-winner JM Coetzee, who will not leave South Africa to collect his prizes, sets much of his latest novel, Youth, in London. The protagonist of Disgrace, which won in 1999, lives in Capetown but teaches and adores English Romantic poetry. Even in their antagonisms, Booker novels look as though they belong together. For all Martin Amis’s attempts to import the cadences of Nabokov and Bellow, the American novel is foreign – foreign in just the way that often makes it exciting. A list made up of Commonwealth and American novels is likely to look like a mere assortment of preferences. Up to now, the success of the Booker has been the implicit claim of its shortlist to be the index of a shared literary culture – a rivalry within a literary clan. What makes it interesting is also what makes it sometimes seem parochial. The sponsors might not realise it, but perhaps all those publicity-making, sales-achieving arguments that the Booker has produced would never have happened if it had not been as small as it is. · John Mullan is senior lecturer in English at University College LondonDistinguished former winners offer their opinion Kazuo Ishiguro, The Remains of the Day (1989) I’m all in favour of letting in the Americans – the Booker did a terrific job in the 1970s and 80s bringing literary fiction to the public’s attention, but it’s done that job and there is now room for a bigger competition. I don’t think there’s enough exchange between the United States and other English-speaking cultures. We read a lot of each other’s big books, but if there are new interesting authors emerging here, they don’t get read in the States and vice-versa. Just as we have become more alert to South African and Australian voices due to the Booker, so we will with American authors. It was getting to be very artificial to exclude the Americans, and I don’t think that it’s reasonable to separate books by people’s passports. Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children (1981) The strongest reason for opposing the inclusion of US authors is that the flood of extra books to consider would be impossible to judge, but if the prize were limited to any books published in English in the UK, from whatever country of origin, that might keep things manageable. The weakest reason for opposing US authors is that they are better – “Amis and McEwan wouldn’t stand a chance.” What, then the Booker is a second-division prize? Nonsense. On balance I’d be in favour of including the Americans. It’s supposed to be a book of the year prize, and there’s really no logical reason for including Canadians, South Africans, Pakistanis, Indians, Australians, West Indians etc and keeping the Americans out. Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (1997) Prizes are not the central preoccupation of writers so this isn’t an issue I can really debate passionately. I’m certainly not intimidated by American writers. One doesn’t want to be pampered or protected in any way as a writer. You’re pitting your mind against them, not your economy. This is not about any of the things that they [Americans] have an advantage at. If the Booker panel can maintain its integrity and insist on giving the prize to what it thinks is a good book, then why should one be worried? The great thing about a writer is that it’s you and your work; it’s me and my pen or my Mac, or whatever, and it’s Roth or Updike and his pen or Mac, and I don’t want to be worried about that. Basically, I think the prize was fine the way it was but I don’t want to be forced into saying the Americans are the big boys and we need to be protected from the big boys. Ian McEwan, Amsterdam (1998) It may be a judging nightmare, but to argue that we shouldn’t let the Americans in because we can’t measure up to them is pathetically weak-minded. It would be to argue for a form of self-damning literary protectionism. And oddly enough, lately I’ve heard quite a few American writers and critics comparing unfavourably their own literary culture to ours. Win or lose, I’d be happy to be judged alongside the Americans. And behind all this whining that Roth would win all the time lies the feeble assumption that the Booker Prize is bound to go to the best novel. Only fools think that. It’s a committee, and therefore a lottery, a spinning bottle. If it stops at some hard-working guy from New Jersey, that’s fine by me. David Storey, Saville (1976) Awards tend to work better when they’re kept exclusive – after all, there are many awards in the States just for American literature. However, I do think it is a good idea to open up the Booker to all literature written in the English language. The problem comes when you think about who the committee of judges would be – should it remain British or become more Anglo-American? Personally, I think the panel should be kept British, even if some of the entrants are American. In other words, the panel would be exclusive, but the competition would be inclusive. Honestly, I don’t think British literature at the moment could stand up against the Americans. We just can’t compete with authors like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. The reason American literature is stronger is because it comes from a more dynamic society, whereas our literatures come from the Commonwealth, which tends to mean less dynamic, less inventive literature. Penelope Lively, Moon Tiger (1987) I think that it’s very insulting to British authors to protest that we couldn’t compete against them. But I wouldn’t be in favour of opening up the competition to American authors, just because it has a wide enough constituency already. After all, Brit and Commonwealth authors aren’t allowed to enter many American literary competitions, so I don’t think it’s unfair to exclude them. I don’t understand why anyone would be gratuitously mean about British literature and claim that we couldn’t stand up against the Americans. JM Coetzee, Disgrace (1999) and Life and Times of Michael K (1983) I welcome an opening up to all writers working in English – it made no sense to define Americans and only Americans as ineligible. On the other hand, I do think it should remain a British award, reflecting a British standard of what constitutes good fiction. In other words, I think the judging panel should remain British. Ben Okri, The Famished Road (1991) I don’t know who’s making that lazy assumption that British authors can’t stand up against American, but I don’t buy that. I think some of the best books in the world aren’t British or American – they come from all over the world. This is a bold move on the part of the Booker, and it is a sign of confidence. If the Brits are nervous about standing up against American authors that’s a good reason to open it up. There is an increasing movement among literary prizes to transcend nations, because literature is not about nations, it’s about books and the hearts of books. I just hope that American prizes, such as the and the Pulitzer prize open up beyond American authors, too. Book awards need to become more international. This is the way of the future. Bernice Rubens, The Elected Member (1970) It’s true, I don’t think we can compete against the Americans. We’re pygmies in comparison, which doesn’t make us bad, but there’s no one here to touch Roth. But the Americans should include us in competitions. The Booker is a British prize and it becomes something else if the Americans are included. British publishers and writers should boycott it now, but that’s probably a vain hope. American literature is better than British because it is not nagged by tradition. We have the whole of the canon breathing down our necks. If you have Austen sitting at your elbow it’s very hard to write, but the Americans are free of that stronghold, and so they write with more chutzpah. This is especially true of the black American writers who only have an oral tradition. Look at Toni Morrison – you’d never get a black writer like that here, or a Roth or a Bellow. · Interviews by Hadley Freeman, Horatio Clare, Ian Katz