

Independent Studies: The Booker Prize – Reading New Literary Publications

Introduction: Book Reviews

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Books are at the center of our studies. We read them, we analyze them, and some even write them. But what tells you that a book is a good book? You are right, literary prizes. At least according to the organizations who award them. *The Booker Prize*, for example, describes itself as “the leading literary award in the English speaking world” (“About the Booker Prize”) and claims to point “readers towards the best of the best” (“The Booker Prize”). But this is only one side of the story. Media and communications scholar Alexandra Dane argues that “the proliferation of prizes throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century has resulted in a cultural industry where prizes make significant contributions to literary tastemaking and national canon formation” (123). In their self-proclaimed evaluation, literary prizes “define notions of literary merit around which the field can coalesce, and identif[y] the authors who fit within these parameters and who are, therefore, worthy of celebration” (126). In other words, prizes have developed a defining cultural authority in the literary field and have become an economic signifier for the careers of authors, both award-winning and not. This critique, however, does not necessarily mean to devalue award-winning novels. Instead, it calls for a more critical engagement with the prizes awarded by the culture industry, as well as for a questioning of their role in taste-making and canon formation. Arguably, the majority of good books have not even won a prize (yet). It is therefore all the more important to read and share books that may not fit into the categories of literary prizes and that perhaps even challenge them.

Another form of book evaluation, and perhaps a more democratic one, is the book review. Usually published in a feature article, on websites, or in scholarly journals, book reviews discuss and assess publications of fiction and nonfiction extensively. Informed by reviews, readers can get a first impression whether a book suits their taste in books or has relevance for their current research project. Book reviews are therefore an integral part in the day-to-day business of a North American Studies scholar or student. In the Independent Studies class “The Booker Prize: Reading New Literary Publications,” taught by Janna-Lena Neumann in 2022, students of the North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover critically engaged with literary prizes, in particular the 2021 Booker Prize and four of the six shortlisted novels. In addition, participating students reviewed the novels discussed in the class. Two of these reviews are now published in this issue. Kerem Ak reviews *Pulitzer Prize* winner Richard Powers’ novel *Bewilderment* (2021) as “a science fiction novel telling the story of an astrobiologist father and his neurodivergent son while

cunningly unveiling wrongdoings of mankind in nature.” This is followed by Carolin Wachsmann’s review of Patricia Lockwood’s debut novel *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) in which “a woman’s life is turned upside down as she has to reconsider her priorities in life.” The two reviewers examine and evaluate the narrative strategies and themes of the novels, providing analytical insights into the diegetic worlds they depict. In doing so, they treat the novels as texts, without trying to fit them into specific parameters. As a result, the reviews featured here not only offer well-argued and comprehensive answers to the question of whether the books they discuss are ‘good’ – they also provide contexts and arguments that allow readers to themselves explore this question.

Author Biography

Lukas Fender (he/him) studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his bachelor’s degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, popular culture and politics, as well as political education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

Works Cited

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