

Sarah Churchwell, one of six judges of this year's Man Booker Prize, published a piece in the *Guardian* after the winner was announced, sarcastically entitled "The joys of judging the Man Booker Prize". She described the physical and mental travails of reading a book every day for six months; she wrote that she sometimes felt she was losing her mind. Two of the six judges this year were women; when the long list of 13 was published, and only three of the books were by women, the two female judges were singled out for criticism on social media. Churchwell answered these attacks by widening the debate: "If out of those 156 books publishers only submit a fraction of women, then that is a function of systemic institutional sexism in our culture ... we live in a racist, sexist world and the publishing culture reflects that."

It is a fraught business judging books, and a bitter one, if your first choice as winner is not the book that wins. In the end, Churchwell wrote, it came down to two books: Flanagan's novel and Ali Smith's. "We all loved them both but one had to win." Alas, I have it on good authority that the judging panel divided along gender lines: the female judges favouring the book by the woman, the men favouring the book by the man.

Judgements like these have great consequences for the book trade, and individual authors, but also for gender politics in the world of books. A closer analysis of the award's 45-year history shows that the Man Booker itself provides data to support Churchwell's sense of "systemic institutional sexism". The Man Booker is a British prize, but its effects are global. Since it began in 1969, there have been 49 winners, 32 men and 17 women. Women have won 35 percent of the time. Men have won almost twice as often. The prize is aptly named.

Should an author desire to win, and also happen to be a woman, her odds of success increase in two ways. First, it helps if she writes a book predominantly about men, set within a manly world, with male protagonist or narrator. Eleanor Catton did this last year with her wonderful, *Deadwood*-like novel, *The Luminaries*, about 12 men in a New Zealand gold prospecting town. Hilary Mantel did it in 2009 and 2012 with her beautiful, if never-ending, novels about Cromwell and the court of Henry VIII. (Mantel did *not* win for her extraordinary novel about a female medium, *Beyond Black*, nor for her slighter but intriguing novel set in a nunnery, *Fludd*.) Pat Barker did it in 1995 with *The Ghost Road*, one of her novels about shell-shocked soldiers in World War I. And so it goes on. These are the kind of books by women which men can read without feeling unmanly.

Of course there are exceptions, such as Anne Enright's *The Gathering* or Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. But these are rare outbursts. Both Enright and Roy won the prize during years when female judges outweighed male ones. Here is the second factor which may help a woman win. Being judged in a year when there are more women than men on the panel doesn't happen very often. During the Booker's 45-year history there have been 47 judging panels: 32 male-majority and 15 female-majority panels; that is, women dominate less than a third of the time. Anne Enright, Kiran Desai, Margaret

Manly Booker

The Narrow Road to the Deep North

By Richard Flanagan

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ALICE ALBINIA

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Atwood, Arundhati Roy, AS Byatt, Keri Hulme and Nadine Gordimer all won in the years when their books were judged by female-majority panels. Penelope Lively won when the judging panel was chaired by a woman; but there have only been 8 female to 38 male Chairs. Male majority panels have turned up 22 male winners and 10 female winners: they are more than twice as likely to award the prize to a man. Under female-majority panels, the prize has gone 8 times to a man and 7 times to a woman — as equal as it could possibly be.

Why is this? I imagine that, when men and women sit in august judgement on the literature of their peers, they look for a weighty book which will sum up their times; and because sexism is so deeply ingrained in this corner of the literary world, for most people a significant book means a manly one. Do male judges in particular, consciously or not, still regard books by and/or about women as 'books-for-women', instead of just as 'books'?

Every year since 2009, VIDA, a feminist organisation in America, analyses the amount of space dedicated

to reviews of books by male and female authors, by male and female reviewers, in 39 major US and UK publications. The results are shocking. The most important publications, such as the *London Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Yorker*, are what VIDA calls "75%ers": publications which routinely give 75 percent of their review space and bylines to men. Skewed representation like this does its wider work in insidious ways. Given the small amount of space women get in the literary press, you can see how it might come as a surprise to a judge that a woman could write a superior book.

This year two of the three female-authored books in the Booker 13 were about female artists who adopt male personas in order to get on in their profession. Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* is about a modern-day teenage girl calling herself George (her given name is Georgia), and a 15th-century Italian artist whom Smith re-imagines as a woman passing as a man in order to paint. Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* is about a contemporary New

York artist, Harriet Burden, calling herself Harry, who decides that she hasn't prospered in her work because women aren't taken seriously as artists.

To prove it, Harry persuades three male artists to exhibit her work as their own. She stages three exhibitions under male names, not as a hoax, but in order to dramatise to the art world the falseness of its powers of perception. But oh, how powerful that false vision is: what reputations it makes, what careers it launches, what further bodies of art it engenders, for the men it favours. *The Blazing World* is a wonderful, strident, important book. But its unmanliness statistically decreases its chances of winning the Booker.

This year's winning novel, Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, turns out to be the quintessential manly Man Booker book. The bulk of it, the man-only part, is about Australian soldiers in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp — the Burma Death Railway — during World War II. Flanagan, whose father was a survivor of that camp, graphically describes the beatings, the lice, the amputation with a kitchen meat saw, the camp hospital with its engine-steel fashioned into surgical instruments, bamboo as syringe, and pig gut for stitches. There is an unforgettable description of a Japanese surgeon dissecting an American prisoner without anaesthetic:

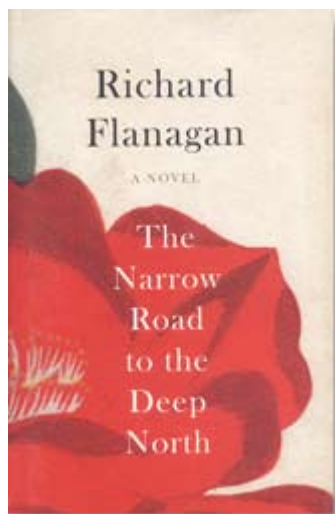
Professor Ishiyama first cut into his abdomen and cut away part of his liver, then sewed the wound up. Next he removed the gall bladder and a section of his stomach... Finally, Professor Ishiyama removed his heart. It was still beating. When he put it on the scales the weights trembled.

The rest of the novel sketches the lives of camp survivors — both Australian and Japanese — in a series of vignettes, some touching, some mundane. The post-war emotional life of Dorrigo ('Dorry') Evans, the novel's Australian protagonist, takes up a good deal of space. Much is made of his worldly success as a surgeon, his womanising, his neglect of his family. Despite his dramatic early life, and his later success, there is a blankness about Dorry which is not endearing. It is a struggle to take more than passing interest in a hero who likes women as lovers but has scant regard for them as intellectual equals. But maybe it is a gratifying, or cautionary, experience for the great, public-facing men of our time to read of other such men.

Dorry is a leader of men, a role that he grows into during his time in the camp:

There were moments when the Big Fella felt far too small for all that they now wanted him to bear. There was Dorrigo Evans and there was this other man with whom he shared looks, habits and ways of speech. But the Big Fella was noble where Dorrigo was not, self-sacrificing where Dorrigo was selfish. It was a part he felt himself feeling his way into, and the longer it went on, the more the men around him confirmed him in his role.

Here Flanagan touches on the central preoccupation of Hustvedt's book, that the gaze and belief of others can make us who we appear to be. The message from the Man Booker Prize seems to be that women who wish to become Big Fellas should begin by calling themselves Dorry, Harry or George. ■



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