**Explore the values, successes, and challenges of the Women’s Prize for Fiction**

The Women’s Prize for Fiction celebrates and honours women’s contribution to literature, “shining a spotlight on outstanding and ambitious fiction by women from anywhere in the world, regardless of their age, race, nationality or background” (Women’s Prize for Fiction, 2022). This essay will explore the values, successes and challenges of the Women’s Prize for Fiction (WPfF).

Despite the ratio of books published leans towards women’s favour, there is still inequality in which books are submitted for awards. The WPfF was created in January 1992 when a mixed group of journalists, reviewers, agents, publishers, librarians, and booksellers – both male and female – gathered together in London. The Booker Prize shortlist of 1991 had not included any women at all. The idea of setting up a new kind of literary prize – “one which would celebrate women’s creativity, [...] be truly international (nationality or country [...]), would have a programme of educational, literacy and research initiatives as integral to the Prize – was born.” Books from all genres are encouraged.

As researched by The Guardian (2021), “Overall, black authors made up 6% of shortlisted authors in the UK’s top literary prizes in the past 25 years. Over the same 25-year period, black Britons made up 3.1% of shortlisted nominees.” Though it is possible that book awards can reproduce, or even magnify, existing inequalities, the WPfF actively works at highlighting the outstanding women who have contributed to literature, regardless of background. In 2021, Torrey Peters became the first trans woman nominated for the WPfF with her debut book Detransition, Baby. Reviewed in the Guardian (2021) as “witty, elegant and rigorously plotted”, it follows trans woman Reese, her former partner Amy, now Ames, who has detransitioned, and cis woman Katrina, with whom Ames has been having an affair, and who is now pregnant. Prize judge Elizabeth Day described it as “a modern comedy of manners”. This is a big step for publishing, as giving a voice to minorities has been a slow and recent issue that is being addressed. The representation of the growing LGBTQIA+ community must be brought into the mainstream to provide positive role models and a story for readers to relate to.

In 2022, the shortlist (Women’s Prize for Fiction, 2022) was selected by Chair of Judges Mary Ann Sieghart and her judging panel: Lorraine Candy, Dorothy Koomson, Anita Sethi, and Pandora Sykes, two of the five being women of colour. The six shortlisted books featured four women of non-white origin: Ruth Ozeki, Lisa Allen-Agostini, Elif Shafak, and Louise Erdrich. This show of diversity successfully celebrates writing from across the world, from bold and haunting The Book of Form & Emptiness from Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki, to Trinidadian stand-up comedian and writer Lisa Allen-Agostini with her debut novel The Bread the Devil Knead, written in Trinidadian patois, about a woman being abused by her partner (The Guardian, 2022). By highlighting these books, all from diverse artistic and cultural representations, a new voice and world are spoken of, providing knowledge and awareness of various issues and backgrounds.

The representation of diversity in literary prizes is vital in the publishing industry, as mainstream prizes clearly affect marketing, sales and distribution. As Publishing Studies expert Claire Squires notes, “the most important roles of prizes – ostensibly the most important role – is to recognise and reward quality”. “When a novel appears on the Booker shortlist, the publisher can expect a sales bump (though the effect may be more modest today than it was twenty years ago). Consecration by a prize is also ‘one of the first steps in the canonisation of books,” (Republic of Consciousness, 2021.) The diverse shortlist eliminates gatekeeping of successful published books always being from the same group of authors in similar, privileged situations.

The WPfF strives to overcome the publishing industry's inequalities. Republic of Consciousness (2021) notes, “It costs publishers money to enter books to prizes, and many awards limit each publisher to one submission each. This means, firstly, that the Penguin Random Houses of the world are overrepresented in the more prestigious awards, and secondly that publishers are incentivised to put forward their sure-fire authors – in other words, their established big names.” While Booker and Costa required shortlisted publishers to make a hefty contribution towards marketing (typically £5,000), after years of controversy, the Booker has now abolished this fee, which is a significant step towards widening access to the prize.

The WPfF takes it a step further, as everything they do is about platforming “the widest range of women’s voices.” Although publishers still need to submit the novel to the awards rather than the writer, the submission fee is only £1000 (Women’s Prize for Fiction, 2023). Not only is the submission fee lower than its competitors, but to celebrate their 25th anniversary, they have designed ‘Discoveries’, a writer's development programme to “support the authors of tomorrow, […] the programme requires writers to have written only the opening three chapters or up to 10,000 words – and it is free to enter.”

However, there is an issue that may discourage publishers from taking a chance with newer authors. Publishers may still want only to put forward their sure-fire, established authors because if an entered book should be shortlisted, the publisher must contribute £5,500 for promotional activity, and if it should win, the publisher must contribute a further £6,000. Wanting to submit a novel with more chances to win makes the steep fee more worth it.

Creating awards that only prioritise specific cultures or communities may also be dangerous. Mainstream awards could disregard certain novels as there is already a curated award for them, which reinforces the inequalities.

In conclusion, the Women’s Prize for Fiction is a trailblazer from its origination to the present day, constantly striving to break inequality boundaries and celebrate the literature written by the diverse authors in today’s market. By having representation of ethnicities on the judging panel (who themselves have a wide range of talent and interests), they make a conscious effort to include authors who showcase various genres and backgrounds.

*(Word Count – 1000 words)*

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