

The Dublin Literary Award: Advice to Nominating Libraries

In nominating a novel for the Dublin International Literary Award, your library is taking part in a process that brings together librarians and readers from around the globe to find a winner for the world's richest prize for a single novel in English. The Dublin Literary Award is also the only literary prize in English that allocates part of that award to the translator, should the winner be a work in translation. The task of finding a suitable winner begins with you; but the final task of sifting through all of the nominations, and coming up with a final winner falls to the judging panel. So: what are the judges looking for? When considering a nomination, a few points are worth keeping in mind.

Words on the Page

The first thing that strikes any reader in a novel is the quality of the writing. While this may mean many different things, in a great novel there will always be a sense that there is not a word out of place. This does not necessarily mean that the writing has a poetic quality, although it can mean precisely this: the judges on the 2015 panel, commenting on that year's winner, Jim Crace's *Harvest*, remarked that "it reads like a long prose poem; it plays on the ear like a river of words." Likewise, Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* (winner, 2005) had "passages of intense lyricism." But it can also mean the opposite: that the writing is stripped back to its essentials, as was the case with Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* (winner, 2004), which the judges wrote was "told with searing simplicity and the sparest of language;" Gerbrand Bakker's *The Twin* (winner, 2010), was "sparely written", while Herta Müller's *The Land of Green Plums* (winner, 1998) had "a spartan eloquence". In whichever way it is written, a novel nominated for the Dublin Literary Award should establish a style that is distinctive, and is much, much more than simply serviceable prose. There should always be that moment when the reader pauses, and says to themselves: "Now *that* is memorable writing."

A Few Comments about Genre

In libraries all over the world, millions of readers of all kinds enjoy genre fiction: crime, romance, horror, or science fiction all deliver for their readers precisely what the reader is expecting, whether it is a pang of fear or a discreet sob. But where does genre fiction fit into a literary award? Someone once said that there are works of literature that conform to the rules of genre and those that break them; the novels that break the rules are the ones in which new or unexpected things happen with the form of the novel. That is what a literary award is looking for. So, for instance, a novel like Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *The Sound of Things Falling* (winner, 2014) uses the form of the crime novel, in which the narrator is drawn into a criminal underworld by random act of violence; but what follows takes the reader far beyond even the most extraordinary ordinary crime novel. Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* (winner, 2013) is a like a kind of surrealist Western; but no one would mistake it for Zane Grey. If a novel provides readers with a stomping good read, we applaud that. The really good works of genre fiction will go on to win an Edgar, or a Hugo or a Silver Dagger; but they are less likely

to win the Dublin Literary Award. The simple rule of thumb with genre fiction is: if you have to ask if it is genre fiction, it probably isn't.

The Local and the International

The nominating process is one of the things that makes the Dublin Literary Award truly *international*. Dozens of libraries like yours all around the world are the eyes and the ears of the judging panel, and part of the thrill of the process is in never quite knowing from which part of the world a distinctive new literary voice will emerge. Over the years, libraries have been very good at promoting their own local writers through their nominations. However, there is a useful distinction to keep in mind here. There are some novels that show readers their local community in a way that is new and fresh – so much so that readers from that community will overlook what might be a bit of undigested historical detail, too much dialect for its own sake, some routine plotting or clunky writing. But such a novel is unlikely to travel very well. For the novel that is deeply rooted in a particular locality to have that same impact on an international readership, it must also be a great novel in its own right, with that distinctive quality of writing and sense of wonder at what a novel can do. Over the years, there have been a number of winners that have been deeply rooted in the local world of the writer, but which have also spoken to readers spread far and wide. Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischiefs* (winner, 2001) is in some ways the epitome of the local novel of place, but it was able to make Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, part of the imaginary geography of thousands of readers around the world because of the beauty of its writing. The same could be said of Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses* (winner 2007) in relation to rural Norway, or Gerbrand Bakker's *The Twin*, (winner 2010), with its evocation of the Platteland of the Netherlands. It is also worth keeping in mind that the nominations for novels embedded in a very particular local world sometimes come from libraries on the other side of the planet – which may be the real test of a book's ability to reach beyond its home turf. For instance, Emily Ruskovich's *Idaho* (winner, 2019) is, as its title suggests, a rich evocation of the Idaho Panhandle where the author grew up: it was nominated by a library in Belgium.

Translation and Being International

The Dublin Literary Award is the only major prize for a novel in English that splits the prize between the author and the translator if the winning novel happens to be in translation. This does not make things easy when it comes to organising the judging process, because it takes time for a novel to be translated; but we think it is worth it. If the Award is to be truly *International*, it needs to be open to voices beyond the English-speaking world, and translation is the way in which those voices are heard by our English-speaking readers, so we make a point of welcoming novels in translation. It particularly opens the process to libraries in communities where there is a multi-lingual readership; exciting things happen where cultures cross. Having said that, the judges do not give any priority to novels written in translation, nor do they make allowances for what might be a translation that does not do full justice to the original novel. "It was better in Spanish/Hungarian/Urdu, etc." is a comment that we do not allow in the judging process. We acknowledge the translator in the prize because for us, the translated novel is considered a work of literature in English in its own right.

And the Winner Is (Again...)

There are some novels that simply seem to attract awards. Sometimes this is because a novel is so marvellous that a number of different judging panels independently come to the same conclusion. But sometimes there is a sense that awards can beget awards. The Dublin Literary Award jury takes no account of whether a nominated novel or its author has won an award previously or not. This is particularly important for us. Because we allow works in translations, we work on a longer timeline than many other literary prizes, so by the time a novel is being considered for the Dublin Literary Award, it may come trailing other honours awarded earlier. We take pride in the fact that the first-time novelist and the Nobel Laureate have the same chance of winning. And, indeed, Emily Ruskovich (winner for *Idaho*, 2019) and Rawi Hage (winner for *De Niro's Game*, 2008) were both first-time novelists, while the 2023 winner, Katja Oskamp, won with only her second novel, *Marzahn, Mon Amour*. We also exclude any discussion of reviews. While the judges are all people who are involved in literature in some way, and will have inevitably come across reviews of some of the nominated novels, these play no role in the judging process. Another comment that we do not allow is: "X wrote in the *London Review of Books* that this was a masterpiece." The response is: "How nice for X. But she/he is not a member of this judging panel."

Wonder

Underlying all of these considerations is the recognition that the Dublin Literary Award is a *literary* award. If there is a single quality the judges are looking for, it is that moment when a novel produces a sense of wonder that we all recognise, but can rarely define. If we could define it, we would bottle it and sell it. Sometimes, it comes from reading a novel that does something that you have never seen before. Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (winner, 2018), for instance, manages to produce a deeply human, very readable novel without any sentence breaks. José Eduardo Agualusa's *A General Theory of Oblivion* (winner, 2017) mixes narrative with bits of poetry and fragments of text to weave a novel not shaped like any other. In other cases, the wonder is a creation of narrative voice so compelling that it as if a complete new human being has come to life on the page. Colm Toibin's *The Master* (winner 2006), for instance, reads like a novel about Henry James written by Henry James, while Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2021) speaks with a voice that is utterly original. In Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (winner, 2003), the reader finds themselves inside the mind a miniaturist painter in the utterly foreign world of sixteenth-century Istanbul. In a very different way, the wonder of what might be called "world creation" is what makes Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* (winner, 2013) such a delight; and the same would be true in a completely different way of Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (winner, 2012), set among a group of homeless addicts, of which the judges wrote: "It fills the reader with a vivid sense of how the novel accommodates new techniques and idioms." Ultimately, part of what makes the Dublin Literary Award such a joy is that there is no magic formula. And yet, every year for twenty-eight years now we have been finding, once again, confirmation that the novel as a literary form is capable of doing new things, or of doing the old things in ways we had never imagined. The judging panel of the 2004 award put it well, when writing of that year's winner, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*: "It reiterates, as only once in a while a book does, the true purpose of literature."

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