

Chapter 6

Book Marketing and the Booker Prize

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One night every year, in the month of October, printers and binders stand at the ready. They are awaiting a verdict from the literary establishment, which is gathered together for the evening in London. As the printer Clays writes of this nail-biting moment:

‘Tension is as high in Bungay [the Suffolk town where Clays is based] as it is in the Guildhall on the night The Booker Prize winner is announced. Traditionally, the publisher of the winning book immediately rings the printer to arrange an instant reprint. In 1997, for example, the Clays Account Controller watched The Booker Prize presentation on television and at 9.59 pm saw that *The God of Small Things* had won. By 10 pm a 20,000 copy reprint had been confirmed and Clays went into overnight production. Within 24 hours the books were printed and on their way into bookshops all over the country. Sales were so strong that, three days later, HarperCollins placed an order for a second reprint of yet another 20,000 copies, this time with ‘Booker Prize Winner’ emblazoned on the cover’ (Clays 1998, 58).

Winning the Booker Prize is big business for publishing companies, as the rush to extra production referred to in this account, and the ensuing extra sales, makes evident. For not only do printers receive an instant mandate to produce more copies, but they will also be asked to put through amended reprints. These reprints will – like the example of *The God of Small Things* mentioned here – include an additional strapline on the cover: ‘Booker Prize Winner’.

This chapter explores the impact of the award of literary prizes, and particularly the Booker Prize, on the production and reception of books. The strapline on the cover becomes part of the marketing mix of the award winner. It also leads to these books’ commodification and – as is frequently the case with Booker Prize winners – canonisation. Using the examples of Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2002) and John Banville’s *The Sea* (2005), the chapter investigates the signification of the ‘Booker Prize Winner’ strapline. It examines the role of literary prizes both in popularising ‘literary’ fiction and in defining which books become ‘popular’, as well as investigating the impact of marketing in situating books in the literary marketplace and in creating cultural value via the medium of the book cover. It addresses the central question of what, in a publishing environment where a Booker winner equates with both literary and commercial success, is the influence

of book awards on the notion of ‘popular’ fiction, and finally considers the reflection back to the Booker Prize from the cover straplines it sanctions.

The Impact of the Booker Prize

Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* won the Booker Prize – or rather the Man Booker Prize, as it had been renamed to reflect its new sponsor – in 2002¹. Looking back on his October night, Martel writes about the impact of the Prize on his career:

Life of Pi is coming out in close to forty countries and territories, representing over thirty languages and counting. I now have the attention of the book-reading world. My creative act, conceived like a whisper, is ringing across the world. (Martel 2003: 32)

As the biographical note for Martel adds, *Life of Pi* ‘became an instant bestseller’ on winning the Prize, and its author set off on ‘a worldwide author tour’ (Martel 2003, 33). Evidence shows that winning the Booker Prize has an undoubted commercial impact, meriting the extra reprints put through by Clays and its fellow printers. In the first week after the announcement of its Booker win, *Life of Pi* sold 7,150 copies in the UK, making it the bestselling hardback fiction title in that week. The following week, it sold 9,336 copies. Previously, it had sold only 6,287 copies in total since its May publication, about half of which had been after its shortlisting (Bookseller 2002a; 2002b; 2002c). Not all Booker titles undergo quite such spectacular sales, but nonetheless every year a marked increase can be noted. D B C Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* (2003), which won the Prize in 2003, went from a sale of 373 copies in the week before the announcement to 7,977 in the week after, although its ongoing sales were lower than those of *Life of Pi* (Book Sales Yearbook 2004: 93). In 2000, sales of Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000) also jumped, from fewer than 200 a week to more than 3,000 (Book Sales Yearbook 2001: 91). The strapline ‘Booker Prize Winner’ – and its associated promotional activity – has a marked impact on book sales and production.

In his book-length study of the *Booker Prize*, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996), Richard Todd not only emphasises the role of the Booker in making commercial successes of its winners, but also assesses its impact in commodifying and canonising them. Todd’s thesis is that the post-Booker period (i.e. from 1969, when the Prize was first awarded) has seen a growing commercialisation of literature, commenting that literary novelists have ‘worked in an increasingly intensified atmosphere, one in which both the promotion and the reception of serious literary fiction have become steadily more consumer-oriented’ (Todd 1996, 128). He does not see the Booker Prize as the sole factor in this changing environment: other elements including the promotional

¹This chapter refers to the award as the Booker Prize, except in the case of specific post-2002 instances.

activities of trade publishers and the retail chains have also contributed. However, statistical evidence clearly demonstrates the impact of the Booker Prize on sales and figures of Booker winners and also shortlisted titles. Moreover, as others have argued, the Prize has had a role in the formation of a canon of contemporary English-language fiction, which has been as pertinent a force in overseas markets, and particularly in the US, as it has in the UK. It has also made a concerted contribution to the promotion of postcolonial fiction, by bringing to prominence writers including Salman Rushdie in 1981, Ben Okri in 1991 and Michael Ondaatje in 1992 (Niven 1998).

The Booker Prize has also been taken as an indicator of the continuing health of the literary marketplace. In *British Book Publishing as a Business Since the 1960s* (2004), Eric de Bellaigue takes the Booker Prize judges as 'arbiters of excellence in the matter of fiction' in order to provide a seemingly objective way of assessing the impact of conglomeration on the ten or so foremost literary imprints. These imprints, de Bellaigue concludes, have consistently produced works of quality throughout the Booker's existence and their own change of corporate ownership (2004 18, 185). Jonathan Cape is a particular case in point: its company history has been a series of corporate takeovers, latterly by the global conglomerate Bertelsmann, and yet throughout it has continued to have a high tally of winners. De Bellaigue's argument is therefore that corporate takeover does not necessarily affect the quality of literary output. Whether the Booker Prize can really be taken as an objective gold standard is debatable, and the often negative commentary that greets the judges' decisions are assessed later in this chapter. What is worth taking from de Bellaigue's argument, however, is the way in which the Booker Prize is perceived by many to be an indicator of quality, and hence the Prize's aim of awarding the 'very best in contemporary fiction' is seen to be a sign of the health of the literary marketplace (The Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2005a).

The award of the Booker Prize, then, holds the key to both commercial and critical success, and is hence an effective weapon in the book marketer's armoury. Alison Baverstock, in her practical guide to book marketing, advises that, 'If one of your titles is a front runner for a forthcoming prize you will be required to put together a plan of action to support and sustain media interest, and further capitalise on it if the book[...] wins' (Baverstock 2000, 224). If the book does win, Baverstock continues, the publisher could produce stickers for book covers announcing the win, and also prepare point of sale material for retailers' use in bookshops. The strapline 'Booker Prize Winner' thus becomes part of a wider marketing mix set to build on the book's achievements in the eyes of the judges. Hence, particularly with the bigger literary awards and certainly with the Booker, floor and window space is given over to displays of the shortlist and to the eventual winner.

The organisers of the Booker Prize stress the importance of marketing the Prize and its chosen titles. The conditions for the award stipulate that publishers must comply with co-promotional activity if one of their books should be shortlisted. In 2005, this included a contribution of £3,000 to 'general publicity' for any book

reaching the shortlist, and an undertaking to ‘spend not less than £1,000 on direct, paid for media advertising of the winning book, including a winning poster or showcard, within three months of the announcement of the award’ (The Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2005b). In 2005, the Man Booker Prize website also offered public libraries free promotional packs consisting of 100 bookmarks, 5 A3 posters, 100 stickers and a wallchart in order to create displays to attract borrowers to the shortlisted and prize-winning books (The Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2005c). This promotional material is in addition to anything the publisher would create themselves, bookshops’ own branded marketing, and the media coverage that the Booker Prize always generates.

On a grand scale, then, and on the scale of practical marketing activity, the Booker Prize has had an important impact on the production and reception of literary fiction in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, an impact that has been analysed in a variety of critical and academic arenas. Book-length academic analyses include Todd (1996), Huggan (2001), Strongman (2002), and English (2005). There also exists a host of shorter academic, trade and general media commentary. This chapter, however, aims to look specifically at the role of the strapline ‘Booker Prize Winner’ on the cover, and it is to this element of ‘judging on the cover’ that the chapter now turns.

‘Booker Prize Winner’: the uses of a strapline

Copies of *Life of Pi* printed subsequent to winning the Prize feature the strapline ‘Winner of The Man Booker Prize 2002’ in both hardback and paperback editions. Moreover, all the other titles on the shortlist in 2002 incorporate a strapline into their covers to indicate their shortlisting (paperback editions of Mistry 2002, Shields 2002, Trevor 2002, Waters 2002 and Winton 2002). These straplines demonstrate the marketing value of being on the shortlist of big literary prizes, let alone winning them (Shields’ and Waters’ novels mention their additional shortlisting for the Orange Prize). The Edinburgh publisher Canongate, who had lured Yann Martel away from his original UK publisher Faber & Faber to publish *Life of Pi*, have used the Booker win to market later publications by Martel. *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (1993; 2004), a short story collection which was originally published by Faber & Faber but reissued in 2004 by Canongate subsequent to *Life of Pi*’s Booker success, appends to Martel’s name on the cover the strapline ‘Winner of The Man Booker Prize’ as well as ‘The Author of *Life of Pi*’. The two Canongate covers use the same artist, and have a similarity of subject matter and perspective, thus contributing to the author’s visual branding. Faber & Faber’s edition of Martel’s first novel, *Self* (1996), also has the strapline ‘Author of *Life of Pi*, Man Booker Prize Winner 2002’ in post-2002 print runs. The Booker association is hence used to market the winning author and his or her book, shortlisted authors and their books, and future and reissues of other works in

winning authors' oeuvres. The Booker strapline, and the design decisions made after the Booker win, become key elements in the branding of the author.

Paperback reprints of *Life of Pi* now feature two straplines. One, at the bottom of the book, indicates that the book is 'Winner of The Man Booker Prize 2002', while at the top of the cover are the words 'The Number One Bestseller'. These joint straplines are – as the chapter has already argued – closely interrelated, as *Life of Pi's* Booker win undoubtedly contributed to making it into an international bestseller. The literary 'excellence' perceived by de Bellaigue thus transfers into economic excellence.

By so clearly conjoining elements of critical and commercial success, the cover of *Life of Pi* encapsulates James F English's development of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field of cultural production. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Bourdieu posited the concepts of 'economic capital' and 'cultural capital', in which the economic stands for success in the marketplace: sales, box office takings, mass popularity. Cultural capital, on the other hand, is conferred by those 'who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize', even if the award of such capital is still 'affected by the laws [...] of economic and political profit' (Bourdieu 1993, 38-9). In Bourdieu's theory, this creates a principle of inversion. This principle runs into problems when encountering commercially successful art works. As Bourdieu continues, 'some box-office successes may be recognized, at least in some sectors of the field, as genuine art' (Bourdieu 1993, 39). Bourdieu does not resolve this statement, which is particularly problematic for the late twentieth and early twenty-first century field of literature in Britain. Indeed, the construction of value enacted by literary prizes is a prominent example of how, in this period, cultural and economic capital combine.

James F English, in his essay 'Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art' (2002), contemplates how Bourdieu's work might be applied to a study of artistic prizes in the latter half of the twentieth century through a consideration of the Booker and Turner Prizes (the latter for art rather than books). English introduces the concept of 'journalistic capital (visibility, celebrity, scandal)' as the mediating – and transforming – force between economic and cultural capital in the late twentieth century. He contends that the 'rules [...] no longer apply', and that the 'two discreet zones' of cultural and economic capital 'must be set aside' as a means of understanding the production of value (English 2002, 123, 125-126). As the cover straplines of *Life of Pi* so briskly enunciate, cultural and economic capital come together with the award of the Booker Prize. That Martel went on to become embroiled in an argument about whether he had based his novel too closely – close to the point of plagiarism, some suggested – on the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar's *Max and the Cats* (1981) only goes to confirm English's addition of 'journalistic capital', and its attendant 'scandal', to economic and cultural principles (Blackstock 2002).

Cover straplines mentioning literary awards, then, signify the conferral of popular and literary success on books, and the particular combination of economic

and cultural capital that prizes such as the Booker are capable of bestowing on their winning and shortlisted titles. This combination also generates substantial journalistic capital. For a book such as *Life of Pi*, whose place in the market had not been assured, despite the validation of positive reviews (for example Atwood 2002, Jordan 2002 and Massie 2002), the Booker Prize performs a situational role. It ushers in a book's commercial and cultural success, and states that it is a possibly paradoxical entity: a popular literary title. It also physically places it in the marketplace: in Booker Prize displays, for example, and in 3 for 2 promotions. By the book's placement within such prominent promotions, its marketplace visibility is increased yet further, assuring further sales and a Booker book's centrality to debates about literary value. The Booker strapline is one that lifts the title above the mass of other books in an extremely crowded marketplace, one that in the 2000s in the UK produces over 100,000 titles every year (Book Facts 2001: 17). The judgement delivered by the Prize panel and heralded on the cover is a prime piece of marketing, and plays a role in defining cultural value that should not be underestimated.

'Pop Goes the Booker'

And yet, despite the literary gold standard that the Booker represents to many, it is apparent that the Prize is not without its critics. Every year, there are those who think the wrong title has won, and its place as prime arbiter of literary excellence questioned. Some think that the wrong title inevitably wins every year, as a correspondent to the newspaper *The Sun* wrote the day after *Life of Pi*'s win:

'The great thing about the Booker Prize is it gives us a list of books we would NOT want to read, as the Turner Prize gives us a list of art we wouldn't want to see'.

It's a pity the arty establishment is so out of touch with reality. (Brown 2002)

It is entirely possible that this letter, and its placement within the largely conservative, jocular tabloid *The Sun*, is a knee-jerk reaction. The correspondent quite probably had not had the time to read *Life of Pi* so swiftly after the announcement of the win. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate point being made here, beyond the supposition that the accolade of the Booker Prize may turn some people against reading a particular title as well as towards it. No large-scale consumer surveys currently exist to clarify the attitudes of book buyers to prizewinning books, although evidence from the increased sales of titles certainly suggests that they, and their associated marketing activity, have a much stronger positive than negative impact on sales.

The debate that this letter enters is one to do with the Booker's negotiation with the concept of the 'popular', and its evident yet non-formalised role in popularising the literary. This is the argument of Todd's work on the Booker in Consuming

Fictions, investigating the way that ‘serious literary fiction’, as he terms it, has been commercialised, and hence popularised, in recent decades, with the Booker Prize as central to that process. Todd’s thesis tracks the same period as that of English’s article, in which the dissolution of the opposition between cultural and economic capital is discerned. English’s argument concentrates on the media and publicity impact of prizes, whereas Todd’s looks more broadly at the marketing environment in which literary fiction is published. Both these studies, though, refer to an environment in which literary fiction has intersected with concepts of the ‘popular’, be it either as having popular appeal, receiving popular acclaim or being widely known, or, in other words, subject to popular knowledge.

In *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (1996), Steven Connor provides a preliminary definition of literary fiction in the post-war period, which is useful in trying to articulate the negotiation between the literary and the popular:

Literary fiction is usually defined by negation – it is not formula fiction or genre fiction, not mass-market or best-selling fiction – and by subtraction, it is what it is left once most of the conditions that obtain in contemporary publishing are removed. Typically, though, the question of whether the literary novel will survive, or can be protected, tends to obscure questions about the relations between the literary (with its customary or conventional meanings, values and powers) and the commercial. (Connor 1996, 19)

Connor’s explanation of literary fiction as ‘negation’ provides a series of synonyms of what the literary is not: formula, genre, mass-market, bestselling or commercial. ‘Popular’ could be added to this list. One of the roles that the Booker Prize has taken on during its history, then, is to disrupt this opposition between the literary and the commercial. The Prize, through its contribution to the marketing mix of literary fiction, and its media-worthy aspects, has both made literary fiction more ‘popular’, but has also negotiated with the category of the popular and, as the final part of this chapter discusses, is itself subject to changing perceptions of its populism.

The timing of the letter to *The Sun* was ironic, given that the Prize judges in 2002 had set out explicitly to popularise the Prize. This coincided with the change of sponsor, and the Prize’s consequent renaming. The judges, headed by their chair Lisa Jardine, declared that their agenda was to award books that they deemed to be readable and popular, as the press reports following the announcement of the shortlist in September 2002 make evident. *The Times*’ report was entitled ‘Booker judges attack “pretension and pomposity”’ (Alberge 2002), and *The Daily Telegraph* repeated the comedian and 2002 judge David Baddiel’s comments that some of the books entered by publishers “were big and serious, with gravitas, not very funny books. Some of them had a vulgar and obvious seriousness” (Reynolds 2002). In the same article, Salley Vickers, another judge, was quoted as saying that some of the entries were “pompous”. An Observer commentary from Literary Editor Robert McCrum later in the week mentioned Jardine’s ‘claim that this year’s short-list marked “the beginning of a new era”’, a claim that went on to

‘ignite[...] a debate about “literary fiction”’ (McCrum 2002). Martel’s *Life of Pi* was the title that the judges then decided would best represent this “new era”, and – at least in terms of sales figures – the panel was vindicated. The following year, the literary critic James Wood picked up on this debate in his London Review of Books review of the 2003 winner, Pierre’s *Vernon God Little*:

There used to be something thought of as ‘a Booker novel’ – a big, ambitious balloon sent up to signify seriousness and loftiness of purpose. Such books were not always very attractive or even very interesting, though we may learn to miss them just because their elevation already seems old-fashioned. Last year, the prize’s new sponsors let it be known that it was time for a shiny new populism, and so far the judges have concurred. Neither prize-winner, under the new regime, has been a crowd-displeaser, nor a crowd-puzzler.

John Carey [...] chaired this year’s jury, and announced that he was in favour of ‘widening what might be looked on as the Booker’s scope’. He and his judges had, he thought, a preference for ‘books with a strong storyline, a strong plot, a compulsion to go on turning the pages’. (Wood 2003a)

Wood’s comments proved to be controversial, not least because of the implication that the new sponsors (a financial investment group) had intervened in the judging process. John Carey and Martyn Goff, the Prize’s Administrator, speedily responded in the Letters pages of the London Review of Books. Carey wrote that Wood’s accusation of meddling was ‘serious, defamatory and false’, and that the sponsors did not influence the judges’ deliberations in any way. The decisions made ‘reflected our estimate of literary quality and nothing else’. Goff added that Wood’s implication was ‘completely false and damaging’, and that the Man Group’s sponsorship was one of ‘unconditional generosity’ (Carey 2003, Goff 2003). Carey and Goff were quick, in other words, to assert their belief in primacy of autonomous cultural capital over the laws of the literary marketplace and the world of global finance.

Wood replied in the same issue, clarifying his comment that the judges “concluded” with the new sponsors by saying that he ‘was being idly figurative’. He went on to write that he was ‘happy to retract any imputation that the sponsors influence in any way the outcome of the prize’. However, he reasserted his belief that:

The juries of the last two years seem to have fallen in – unconsciously, of course – with a perceived new zeitgeist. When Man plc took over sponsorship last year, there was a good deal of speculation that what Lisa Jardine [...] called ‘a new era’ had begun [...] At the time, journalists wrote of ‘a very British coup on behalf of Booker’s new sponsors’ [...] and that ‘the administrators want to control the prize’s image, and any debate about changing its constitution.’ [...]

Most of this was probably just journalistic hot air. Still, both this year's and last year's judges laid new emphasis on the importance of choosing accessible, plot-driven novels, and the two books chosen would seem to comport with that emphasis. Next year a rebarbative Maori epic as winner? We shall see. (Wood 2003b)

The 'journalistic hot air' of which Wood makes mention is precisely the kind of journalistic capital that the Booker Prize has thrived on, making its decisions media-worthy and hence with a forceful impact in the marketplace, combining cultural and economic capital. With regards to the issue of populism, it is evident that whatever the influence of the new sponsors, conscious or unconscious, the judges, and particularly Jardine's 2002 panel, set out to choose a winner that could not be accused of being pompous, portentous or pretentious – as they claimed some of the entries from publishers were. As it can only be assumed that these submissions were made by publishers reacting to earlier winners celebrated by the Prize, there is also an implicit criticism of previous winners and judging panels. Jardine and her panel wanted to shift the Prize into a populist framework, and with *Life of Pi* found a suitable winner. Indeed, even before the addition of the cover strapline, the novel's packaging reflected this new era of the Man Booker: an unimposing design featuring a simple, colourful, even childlike painting of a boat, the sea, a tiger, a boy and some fish².

Wood's clash with the Booker Prize authorities signals the ongoing debate about literary seriousness and populism, and the role of the Prize in creating and defining those terms. Inherent in this debate is the question of whether the Booker, either in its pre- or post- Man incarnation, can be really be seen as an objective arbiter of literary value (as de Bellaigue would have it), setting aside its undoubted impact on sales and reputation. To assess this question fully would necessitate a more comprehensive history of the Booker Prize than space allows for here. Nevertheless, the negotiation between the literary and the popular continues with regard to the Prize, and this chapter will conclude with one further example: that of the 2005 Man Booker Prize winner.

'Not the Normal Kind of Booker Book'

In 2005, media analysis would seem to suggest that the Prize had turned back to seriousness by choosing John Banville's *The Sea*. From a shortlist of novels by Julian Barnes, Sebastian Barry, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ali Smith and Zadie Smith, the judges picked Banville's, the fourteenth in a career of complex, serious and unpopular works – if popularity is calculated in terms of sales (Brookes 2005, Fay 2005). This choice prompted an vehement reaction from Boyd Tonkin, *The*

² The chapter is not concerned specifically with the cover *design* of Booker winners. For two brief assessments of the 2005 Prize from this perspective see Hyland (2005) and Thorpe (2005)

Independent's Literary Editor, who wrote that the choice was 'a travesty of a result from a travesty of a judging process', and 'the worst, certainly the most perverse, and perhaps the most indefensible choice in the 36-year history of the contest' (Tonkin 2005). The report in *The Guardian* was more moderate, but still proclaimed Banville's win 'one of the biggest literary coups', taken from 'under the noses of the bookies and the literary insiders'. The novel is described as 'a victory of style over a melancholy content which makes his book one of the least commercial on the [...] shortlist' (Ezard 2005). Seriousness rather than popularity would seem to have risen to the fore once more.

John Sutherland, the chair of the 2005 panel, wrote about the media's reaction to his team's decision, which he clearly knew would be unexpected, and even, possibly, provocative:

What, one wondered, would the epithet be? 'Controversial'? 'Safe'? 'Eccentric'? 'Grotesque'? In the event the papers next morning settled on 'surprising'. Surprising not just because it was a turn up for the book, but because this particular novel had been preferred over shortlist rivals that, on the face of it, had more reader appeal, more energy, more human interest, more punters' cash riding on them – more everything, except, possibly, art (Sutherland 2005).

Sutherland defends his panel's decision to choose the 'best' novel in terms of 'art' against any other claim that may be made for the Prize, including that of popularity, or 'reader appeal'. This is an explicit refutation of the combination of cultural, economic and journalistic capital that the Prize has come to develop, although ironically, and inescapably, this refutation would be of interest to the media. In an interview after being given the award, Banville himself addressed the question of the 'literary' nature of his text, the popularity of winners, and Booker's interaction between these two terms:

The Sea, says Banville, 'is not the normal kind of Booker book', and he hopes its success will send a long-overdue message to publishers that 'literary fiction can make money. That's very important in this image-obsessed age.'

Surely, I suggest, all Man Booker prize winners are literary fiction?

Banville grimaces. 'Yeeees, the Booker winner will be a literary book. But I feel over the past 15 years, there has been a steady move towards more populist work. I do feel – and of course I'm completely biased – that this year was a return to the better days of the 80s and early 90s. It was a very good short list and a decent jury; it didn't have any stand-up comedians or media celebs on it, and I think that's what the Man Booker prize should be. There are plenty of other rewards for middle-brow fiction. There should be one decent prize for ...' he pauses, '... real books.' (Brookes 2005)

Banville's comments contribute to the ongoing debate between concepts of the literary and the popular generated by the Booker, but also to a struggle for

definition of the Booker itself, in which various different interest groups (including the judges, the sponsors, the book trade industry, journalists, critics, writers and readers) vie for control over the direction taken by the Prize. This reflects back to James Wood's response to Carey and Goff's letters, in which he also observed a 'new emphasis on the importance of choosing accessible, plot-driven novels', and 'a shiny new populism'.

To reinforce his point, Wood glancingly refers to an earlier, much less 'populist' Booker winner in the shape of 'a rebarbative Maori epic': Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1985). This novel is frequently cited as one of the more controversial choices made by the Booker judges. In *Consuming Fictions*, Todd quotes the *Evening Standard's* description of the book as "the most commercially disastrous winner ever", although he then interrogates this claim because the newspaper failed to take into account New Zealand and Australasian sales (Todd 1996, 76). Nevertheless, *The Bone People* tends to stand in Booker mythology for a type of difficult, non-commercial literature that is an aberration from the more typically successful blend of the cultural and the commercial chosen by the judges and celebrated by the book trade.

In his negative commentary on the 2005 award, Tonkin states that, 'For the reputation of the Man Booker Prize, it may count as nothing less than a disaster' (Tonkin 2005). This line may seem extreme, but the principle was echoed in less excitable language by the author Tibor Fischer in *The Guardian*:

No one can dispute Banville has earned the right to the award; he has sweated nobly in the engine room of fiction. His first book was published in 1970 and he has written a string of highly-regarded and highly-decorated novels since. He is an intelligent, gifted writer and an astute critic, and perhaps his win is for lifetime achievement. Yet his selection surprises me because *The Sea* is a book, I fear, that won't do the Man Booker's reputation too much good. Of course the Man Booker prize shouldn't be allotted to a work on the basis of its probable readership, it should be awarded on quality, but nevertheless the Booker winner is one of the few titles that readers will pick up this year. (Fischer 2005)

Fischer rightly identifies the strategic difficulties of the judging panel of a prize as influential as the Booker. Ostensibly the panel makes its award to the 'very best in contemporary fiction', within eligibility requirements, published that year. Yet such a criterion is nebulous, and inevitably leads commentators, and judges, to query and then construct their own concepts of quality and readership, as Fischer does in his article. In addition, because of its position as the UK's prime literary award, the Booker does play a role in heavily influencing book sales, and quite what the impact of this on the judges during their deliberations is unclear, and perhaps may never be fully discovered (Information on this may be promised in the memoirs currently being written by Martyn Goff and, it may be supposed, via the archives of the Booker Prize at Oxford Brookes University, but the extent to which either of these will fully reveal the intricacies of the judging process remains

to be seen). But the judges must, even on an unconscious level, at least consider the extent to which readers will appreciate their choices, as well as thinking about how their choices reflect back on Booker tradition.

For the Prize is caught in a paradox: in order to be able to fulfil a mission of rewarding and promoting the ‘very best in contemporary fiction’, it must sustain its place in the public eye and – even when choices are sometimes unexpected or even controversial – it must, over the years, retain its aura of the pre-eminent arbiter of literary value. Journalistic capital must be created alongside economic and cultural capital. Booker thus has an investment in popularity, in order to maintain itself as the highest profile literary prize in the British marketplace. The choices of winning books reflect not only on the books themselves, then, but also back on the Prize, affecting its reputation and creating journalistic capital which is vital for the Prize to achieve its prominence and impact.

All this may seem some way from the question of covers and the use of the ‘Booker Prize Winner’ strapline in the marketing of Booker winners. And yet this debate over the role and direction of the Booker Prize, and its intervention in definitions of the popular and the literary, is one that reflects and is reflected by book covers and their influential role in positioning literary products in the marketplace. The strapline ‘Booker Prize Winner’, as well as meaning that the book will be heavily marketed and prominently placed in bookshop displays, sends out signals to a potential readership. How those signals are received is open to the normal interference of marketing communications: for some, the strapline may be an attraction to buy and read the book, but for others such as *The Sun*’s correspondent, it may be a warning to avoid. The journalistic controversies that accrue to the Prize, and its negotiations with concepts of the popular, contribute to the interference of these signals so that, for example, the strapline ‘Booker Prize Winner’ on *The Sea* or *The Bone People* is received differently to ‘Booker Prize Winner’ on *Life of Pi*. There is, moreover, a way in which Booker-winning book covers reflect back, through their straplines, to the Booker Prize itself and thus come to have a role in defining the Prize. As a visual illustration of this, in the volume put together to commemorate thirty years of the Booker Prize, *Booker 30* (1998), the endpapers are decorated with thumbnail front covers of past winners. This offers the most instant, and also long-lasting definition of the Prize. This is that the Prize is most emphatically constituted by the decisions it makes, via the books that have won it. For what else, in the end, is the Booker but a composite of its winners, and the book trade activity and media and critical analyses which have surrounded them?

In conclusion, the signs of judging on book covers, play a variety of roles in the literary marketplace. With a prize as influential as the Booker, they strongly affect sales and contribute to the marketing and promotion of literary titles. Through the Prize’s construction of literary titles as ‘popular’ books, these signs of judging also position their award-winning and shortlisted titles, situating them as popular literary books. Finally, in the annual negotiations with questions of value carried out by the judges of the Prize, the eventual straplines on Booker books

reflect back on the Prize itself, each year altering its own image, marketing impact, and literary credentials. 'Booker Prize Winner', therefore, is a signifier of marketplace success, a definition of literary value, and a self-reflexive act in which the books Booker chooses actively construct what is meant by Booker.