

100 MUST-READ

PRIZE WINNING
NOVELS

...so completely wanting in the face that it could not be that resemblance which had struck me did I know the loftiness and haughtiness of Lady face, at all, in any one. And yet I – I, little Esther, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday I rejoicing – seemed to arise before my own eyes, of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, only entertained no fancy that I had ever seen, but perfectly well knew I had never seen until that hour.

...se tremble so, to be thrown into this unaccountable at I was conscious of being distressed even by the of the French maid, though I knew she had been chivalry here, and there, and everywhere, from the her coming into the church. By degrees, though very ist overcame my strange emotion. After a long time, I ds Lady Dedlock again. It was while they were pre- before the sermon. She took no heed of me, and the heart was gone. Neither did it revive for more than a , when she once or twice afterwards glanced at Ada or i her glass.

...being concluded, Sir Leicester gave his arm with nd gallantry to Lady Dedlock – though he was lk by the help of a thick stick – and escorted her out the pony carriage in which they had come. The dispersed, and so did the congregation; whom Sir ontemplated all along (Mr Skimpole said to Mr Boye delight), as if he were a considerable landed eaven.

...he is!' said Mr Boythorn. 'He firmly believes it. So and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather!' ow,' pursued Mr Skimpole, very unexpectedly to it's agreeable to me to see a man of that sort.'

BLOOMSBURYGOODREADINGGUIDES

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Nick Rennison



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ABOUTTHISBOOK

This book is not intended to provide a list of the one hundred 'best' novels ever to have been awarded a literary prize. Given the sheer range of literary awards, the variety of works of fiction which have won one or more of them and the unpredictability of individual taste, any such list is an impossibility. Instead I have chosen one hundred prize-winning books to read which I think will provide a wide-ranging introduction to the pleasures of contemporary fiction

Some literary prizes date back many decades – the French Prix Goncourt, for instance, is more than a century old and the American Pulitzer Prize for Fiction has been around nearly as long – but the kind of media coverage they now attract is a more recent phenomenon. For this reason I have chosen to make my choice from books that have won prizes in the last thirty years. All one hundred main entries are books that have been published since 1980.

The individual entries in the guide are arranged A to Z by author. They describe the chosen books as concisely as possible (while aiming to avoid too many 'spoilers') and say something briefly about the writer and his or her life and career. Significant film versions of the books (with dates of release) are noted where applicable, followed by *Read on* lists comprising books by the same author, books by stylistically similar

writers or books on a theme relevant to the main entry. Scattered throughout the text there are also *Read on a Theme* menus which list between six and a dozen titles united by a common theme. These *Read on a Theme* lists also include only titles which have won some kind of prize. The *Read on* lists at the end of an author entry do include some titles which have remained unrewarded, although they are all, I hope, worth reading. The symbol » before an author name indicates that the author is one of those covered in the A to Z entries.

Other books in this series cover crime fiction, science fiction and fantasy fiction and, for that reason, I have not included any novels in the main entries in this volume which have won prizes specifically related to those genres. I would have been happy to include more winners of prizes for fiction in languages other than English but too often in my research I discovered that these winners had either never been translated into English or, if they had, they had been allowed to slip out of print.

INTRODUCTION

Literary prizes have been with us for a long time. There is an argument for saying that, as with so many aspects of human endeavour, the ancient Greeks got there first. What were the regular contests in which Greek poets declaimed their verse and competed for accolades but a type of literary prizegiving? Galloping swiftly through two millennia and more of history, it was in the nineteenth century that the literary prize arrived in something like a form we would recognise today. The wealthy patron was a creature of the past and writers were now only too happy to strive for the financial incentives that newspapers and magazines held out in the shape of monetary awards and competitions. Some survived almost exclusively on the money they won. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, when he had no steadier source of income, made a living (although not much of one) out of prizes awarded by publications like the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* and the *Southern Literary Messenger* for poems and short stories.

However, the modern era for literary prizes began with the granddaddy of all such awards – the Nobel Prize. The inventor of dynamite, Alfred Nobel, died in 1896. Perhaps eager to make amends for a life spent creating weapons of death and destruction, Nobel left huge sums of money for the establishment of a series of prizes in different areas, including literature. The Nobel Prize in Literature was first awarded in

1901 to the now largely forgotten French poet René Sully-Prudhomme. Other prizes followed in the next twenty years – the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Femina in France in 1903 and 1905, the Pulitzer Prizes in the USA in 1917. The first major prize in Britain which still survives, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, was instituted in 1919. The first winner was Hugh Walpole, not now a name that would be at the top of anybody's list of great writers of the period, but the winners of the James Tait Black in its first decade did include the likes of D.H. Lawrence, Arnold Bennett and E.M. Forster.

Since the Second World War, and more especially in the last thirty years, there has been an explosion in the numbers of literary prizes awarded. The Booker (now Man Booker) Prize began in the late 1960s and, although it failed to ignite much enthusiasm in its early years, the decision to televise the awards ceremony in 1981, combined with a run of exciting and interesting winners, turned it into the institution it now is. The prize money – now a whopping £50,000 – helped to make it popular with the writers who won it if no one else. So did the increase in sales that winning the Booker could now guarantee. A work of literary fiction that would normally sell fewer than two thousand copies might now easily multiply its sales by a factor of one hundred or more. In Britain, the Booker was followed by the Whitbread (now the Costa) Awards in 1971 and, in the 1990s, by the Orange. Other prizes, smaller in terms of money and publicity, continued to proliferate. By the dawn of the new millennium, there were so many literary prizes that there were handbooks produced just to list them all for weary booksellers and librarians.

All of this begs the difficult questions. Apart from the lucky winners, who do they benefit? What use are literary prizes? Certainly they are not

always handed out to those writers whom posterity later judges to have been most deserving. As critics of the big prizes have often pointed out in the past, judging panels often get it wrong. Take the Nobel as a prime example. Who now has heard of Henrik Pontoppidan or Erik Axel Karlfeldt? Of Frans Eemil Sillanpää or Yasunari Kawabata? Yet all four men won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Which is more than can be said for Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Marcel Proust, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf and Graham Greene who were all nominated for the Prize but failed to come up to the exacting standards of the committee of the Swedish Academy which hands it out. Look back at the list of winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (or the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel as it was until 1948). *The Able McLaughlins* by Margaret Wilson, *The Store* by Thomas Sigismund Stribling and *Journey in the Dark* by Martin Flavin probably don't ring too many bells today.

However, the incompetence of judging panels in the past can be exaggerated. It's a difficult job they undertake. No one has a crystal ball in which they can witness the changing of public taste and the waxing and waning of authorial reputations in the years to come. And many of the decisions that judges made years ago don't seem too bad today. The Nobel committee has undoubtedly made some howlers in days gone by but they have also picked Thomas Mann, Andre Gidé, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett and Saul Bellow. They have often enough made the right call. The same is true of the Pulitzer. Surely no one would dispute that Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are all significant works of American literature. And they all won the Pulitzer.

If nothing else, prizes offer a path through the literary labyrinth. In a

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publishing world where thousands of novels arrive on the bookshop shelves every year, readers need some means of choosing what to buy and what to read. This book is based on the premise that reading books that have won the major prizes is a good way of sampling the vast range of contemporary literary fiction that is available. Not all prize-winners are necessarily worth reading. But I believe that the one hundred books I have chosen for this brief guide all are.

A-Z OF ENTRIES

PETER ACKROYD (b. 1949) UK

HAWKSMOOR (1985)

Guardian Fiction Prize 1985

Much of Peter Ackroyd's very varied work – and he has produced fiction, biographies, poetry, history and criticism in his career – is linked by two preoccupations. One is his fascination with London, the city of his birth. The other is his belief in the intimate connections between past and present. Both these preoccupations are certainly on display in his fiction which includes a story set in the world of the Victorian music-hall (*Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*), the tale of a man who inherits a house in Clerkenwell once owned by a famous Elizabethan magician (*The House of Doctor Dee*) and a novel which reworks the lives of the London essayist Charles Lamb and his sister (*The Lambs of London*). *Hawksmoor*, which won both the Guardian Fiction Prize and the Whitbread Award in the year of its publication, is usually considered his most powerful and original novel. In this dazzlingly inventive and cleverly written book, a contemporary detective (possessed of the same name as the eighteenth-century architect Nicholas Hawksmoor) moves towards a mystical encounter with forces from the past as he

investigates a series of murders in London churches. History reaches out to seize the detective in the shape of Nicholas Dyer, an early eighteenth-century Satanist who, just to add an extra ingredient to Ackroyd's already complicated mix, shares many of the characteristics of the real, historical Nicholas Hawksmoor. Dyer is a man in revolt against the emerging rationalism of his age, believing, in his own words, that 'there is no light without darknesse and no substance without shaddowe'. The churches he designs conceal terrible secrets which echo down the ages and effect the crimes which Hawksmoor the detective investigates in the twentieth century. Written in part in a brilliantly reconstructed version of eighteenth-century prose, Ackroyd's novel is an exhilarating narrative in which two eras meet and intertwine.

 **Read on**

Chatterton; The House of Doctor Dee

John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus*; »» Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (b. 1977)NIGERIA

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN (2006)

Orange Prize 2007

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born in Nigeria and educated there and in the United States, won the Orange Prize with what was only her second book. She had nearly done so with her first (*Purple Hibiscus*), the story of a fifteen-year-old Nigerian girl who leaves her privileged but religiously repressive family life behind her when her father is obliged to send her away to live with her aunt, which was shortlisted for the prestigious, women-only prize. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the novel with which she took the award, is a powerful story set amidst the horrors and upheaval of the civil war in Nigeria in the 1960s and takes its title from the design of the flag of the short-lived Biafran nation. The brutal and bloody events of the war are seen through the eyes of a group of vividly realised characters as they find themselves swept up by historical forces beyond their control. Ugwu is a teenager employed as a houseboy by Odenigbo, a charismatic university professor, who is fired by revolutionary and anti-colonial zeal. Olanna is the beautiful and well-educated Igbo woman who has abandoned her life in the capital Lagos in order to be with Odenigbo. Olanna's twin sister Kainene is involved with an Englishman who is living in Nigeria while he researches a book about the country's tribal art. As Nigerian forces advance, all of them, forced to flee for their lives, find their beliefs and their emotional attachments tested to the limits and beyond. Adichie, a young writer recreating events which her parents' generation endured, has produced

a novel of exceptional depth and quality. As the elder statesman of African literature, Chinua Achebe, has remarked, 'We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers.'

 **Read on**

Purple Hibiscus; *The Thing Around Your Neck* (short stories)

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*; Petina Gappah, *An Elegy for Easterly*; Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*

ARAVIND ADIGA (b. 1974) INDIA

THE WHITE TIGER (2008)

Man Booker Prize 2008

In a series of letters addressed to Wen Jiabao, the Prime Minister of China who is about to pay a state visit to India, Balam Halwai, the anti-hero of first-time novelist Aravind Adiga's savagely satirical book, takes it upon himself to introduce the Chinese visitor to some of the realities of the country. 'In the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse,' Balam sets about educating the premier in the way the new India works. He does this by relating his own story. He is

currently, as he is eager to point out, a successful businessman and entrepreneur in the up-and-coming city of Bangalore but this was not always the case. Balram was the son of a rickshaw-puller and hailed from ‘the Darkness’, his name for the vast areas of the sub-continent still mired in poverty. He describes with the precision of an insider the petty indignities and humiliations of being poor and a servant to others. And he confesses just what he has been prepared to do to escape them. Balram was once driver to Mr. Ashok, wealthy scion of a landowning family, but an act of violence has freed him from his servitude and set him on the path to the prosperity he now enjoys. Deprivation creates monsters among the deprived and Balram reveals the events that turned him into one of them. Written in its narrator’s unforgettable voice – witty, unblinkerred, direct and, in the last analysis, utterly amoral – *The White Tiger* is a book that provides a new perspective on the extremes of Indian life as the country races to become one of the world’s great economies. It’s a book that throws a terrible light on ‘the Darkness’ and the creatures it produces.

Read on

Between the Assassinations

Mohammed Hanif, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*; Vikas Swarup, *Q & A*

KATE ATKINSON (b. 1951) UK

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM (1995)

Whitbread Book of the Year 1995

Born in York in 1951, Kate Atkinson only began to publish her fiction in the 1990s but she immediately showed an originality and individual style that marked her out as a significant talent. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* was her first novel and it won the Whitbread Book of the Year award. Set in the 1950s and 1960s, it is the story of Ruby Lennox, growing up in the family home above a pet shop in the shadow of York Minster. Opening, like a kind of welfare state *Tristram Shandy*, with the moment of Ruby's conception, heralded by a few grunts and groans from her father while her mother feigns sleep, this is a family saga with a difference. Told in the funny and quirky voice of its central character, it darts back and forth in time. Interwoven with Ruby's story (in a series of footnotes) are those of her great-grandmother, her grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins as they struggle through two world wars. But there are small gaps in the narrative, hints of something amiss. Family secrets, long hidden, begin to surface – one so devastating that it overwhelms Ruby even as it explains so much that has been puzzling in her life. Atkinson finally ties together all the loose ends of her meandering tale and illuminates the meanings of the hints, clues and allusions she has strewn through the text. In the years since the publication of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Kate Atkinson has written half-a dozen other novels including *Human Croquet*, the extravagantly told story of a family whose glory days are in the past, and several offbeat but engaging works of crime fiction featuring an Edinburgh

private investigator named Jackson Brodie. All of them have embodied the same darkly comic sensibility that pervaded *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* but there is a case to be made that her debut novel remains her most characteristic.

Read on

Human Croquet; Case Histories (the first of the Jackson Brodie books)
Liz Jensen, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*; Maggie O'Farrell, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*

MARGARET ATWOOD (b. 1939) CANADA

THE BLIND ASSASSIN (2000)

Booker Prize 2000

Poet and short story-writer as well as novelist, Margaret Atwood is one of the most gifted of contemporary writers and her fiction has ranged from the dazzling SF dystopias of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* to *Alias Grace*, an exploration of women's sexuality and social roles wrapped up in a gripping and enigmatic story of a nineteenth-century housemaid who may or may not have been a murderess. Her novels have won many prizes in her native Canada and she has been shortlisted five times for the Man Booker Prize, going on to win it in 2000 with *The Blind Assassin*. In this remarkable novel an elderly woman attempts to understand the secret history of her family and to

unravel the enigma of her sister's death many decades before. The book opens with the simple, declarative words of the octogenarian Iris Chase Griffen: 'Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge.' It continues with Iris looking back on the lives she and her sister led in the 1920s and the 1930s and the events and relationships that shaped them. Interwoven with Iris's account are extracts from a novel, entitled *The Blind Assassin*, which was published after Laura's death as her posthumous work and became a cult success. This novel seems to be a *roman à clef* in which the story of Laura's romance with a radical agitator is hidden beneath a thin veneer of fiction. Within the novel within a novel another story emerges when the two lovers invent a pulp fantasy adventure which echoes their own lives. As the different narratives intertwine, Margaret Atwood gradually leads her readers towards a startling revelation which overturns all assumptions they may have made about the relationship between the 'truth' of her memoir and the 'fiction' of her sister's novel.

 **Read on**

Alias Grace; Oryx and Crake; The Robber Bride

Alison Lurie, *Imaginary Friends*; » Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

BERYL BAINBRIDGE (b. 1932) UK

MASTER GEORGIE (1998)

W.H. Smith Literary Award 1999

In her earlier career Beryl Bainbridge wrote novels that ranged from the story of two Liverpudlian women on a works outing interrupted by death and black farce (*The Bottle Factory Outing*) to a laconic tale which takes as its starting point the possibility that Hitler spent a brief period in Liverpool before the First World War (*Young Adolf*). Her fiction in the last twenty years has been all set in the past. *The Birthday Boys* took a sidelong look at the legendary heroics of Captain Scott and his men; *Every Man for Himself* is set on the Titanic during its first and fatal voyage. Of these historical novels the most memorable is probably *Master Georgie* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize as well as winning a number of other awards. The novel takes place in the 1850s during the Crimean War but this is not the familiar war of Florence Nightingale and the Charge of the Light Brigade. Bainbridge focuses not on grand events and famous people but on the smaller scale, individual tragedies of her characters. George Hardy is a prosperous surgeon and enthusiast for the new art of photography who volunteers his medical services to the war effort. Accompanying him to the Crimea are his adoring adopted sister, Myrtle, his brother-in-law Dr Potter and an ex-street urchin called Pompey Jones who has a mysterious hold over Georgie. Structured around the notion of six photographic plates, *Master Georgie* chronicles the party's disintegration in the face of the death and disease they find in the Crimea and the gradual emergence of hidden truths about their personal and erotic entanglements. Told in a