

Booker Prize Goes To Author in Spain

By Rebecca Reich

A Russian resident of Madrid was named winner of the 2003 Open Russia Booker Prize for his novel, "White on Black," published last year by Limbus Press. Paralyzed from birth, Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego did not attend the ceremony Thursday night, but the \$15,000 award guarantees him the publicity of Russia's most prestigious literary honor. Grandson of a general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, Gallego grew up in a series of Soviet homes for the permanently disabled -- a harrowing experience scrupulously detailed in the pages of his novel.

The award ceremony came two months after the shortlist of six finalists was announced. Founded in 1991 by the prestigious British Booker Prize, the Russian Booker was hailed as the first independent award since 1917. Worldwide attention zeroed in on the winners, who include singer Bulat Okudzhava, Ludmila Ulitskaya and, last year, Oleg Pavlov.

However, with the proliferation of literary prizes, many readers now look elsewhere for Russia's avant-garde. In 1997, the prize lost its British backing when it was taken over by a branch of the Smirnoff vodka company. In 2002, it was turned over to the Open Russia Foundation, a fund of Yukos shareholders headed by jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Of the six novels that made it to this year's shortlist, only two -- Gonzalez Gallego's novel and Leonid Yuzefovich's "Kazarozha" -- initially appeared as books. The others -- Yelena Chizhova's "Monastery," Afanasy Mamedov's "Frau Shram," Leonid Zorin's "Jupiter" and Natalia Galkina's "Villa Renault" -- were printed in journals, a vestige of the Soviet literary industry that has not fared well since publishing took off in the 1990s.

At a press conference Nov. 27, critic Igor Shaitanov, who heads the Booker Prize, argued that the number of nominees drawn from the literary journals is proof that the magazines still cater to the public's taste.

But the question of what exactly the public wants to read seemed far from settled. Given a choice of topics, all attending finalists -- Chizhova, Yuzefovich and Mamedov -- focused on the question of where "popular" literature ends and "high" literature begins.

Yuzefovich, whose "Prince of the Wind" won the 2001 National Bestseller prize, was reluctant to box in any kind of writing, but he ventured to associate "popular" literature with demand, and "high" literature with quality of delivery. However, even these categories are up to debate, as the Booker Prize has never shortlisted Victor Pelevin, a writer both read and acclaimed in Russia and abroad.

Shaitanov has veered away from this debate by emphasizing the Booker's role in publicizing serious literature Russia-wide. "They tell me that serious literature can only market from 5,000 to 15,000 copies [throughout Russia]," he said. "Books don't go past the border of the Garden Ring Road."

Despite the popularity of detective thrillers and bodice-rippers, however, Shaitanov is convinced that Russians would read better books if they could find them in their bookstores. One of Gonzalez Gallego's responsibilities over the next year will be to promote this vision. The Booker Prize "is an attempt to open Russia like a door, to satisfy an existing demand for literature," Shaitanov said.