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Commentary

Books

George Walden

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It may be less lucrative than its British counterpart and its sponsor may be languishing in jail. But, writes **George Walden**, the Russian Booker Prize is still dedicated to serious literature

The press conference was held at the five-star Golden Ring Hotel in Moscow, formerly the lugubrious Belgrade Two. Now groups of businessmen stand about clinching deals, ear-wired heavies a step or two away, while expensive-looking ladies sit singly in the bar, coalescing into a sulky circle when the European Cup on TV monopolises male attention. Though this is only the longlist announcement for the Russian Booker Prize, there is a good turnout of journalists. I am introduced as the new chairman of the prize foundation, and make my little speech in an attempt to pre-empt questions about why the Russians continue to need a British chairman for a prize whose judging panel was fully Russianised some years ago. The reason is that the Russians, in a country obsessed with *krysha* (literally "roof", ie, cover), see the link with the English Booker organisation, which set up the prize in 1991, as both a friendly tradition and a symbol of independence.

The other question we are grateful not to be asked concerns the future of the prize's sponsor, a charitable organisation called Open Russia run by a Mr Khodorkovsky, currently residing at President Putin's pleasure in the Matrosskaya Tishina ("sailor's rest") prison. We have no wish to politicise an award whose whole point is to get away from the state-sponsored prizes of the *ancien regime*. Until now, there has been no censorship or interference from above, for good and bad reasons: Russia remains a far freer country than it was, though sadly, serious writing has lost both sales and prestige as commercial stuff has flooded in and more direct forms of self-expression have blossomed. As one novelist complained to me shortly after the collapse of communism, freedom was all very well, but now, if he felt strongly about something, he could simply write an article.

The influx of popular reading is of course a reaction against the xenophobia and puritanism of the past. If you are a little sentimental about Russian literature, as I am (at the age of 17, I was made to stumble through *Anna Karenina* in the original, and was hooked), the gaudy covers on vendors' stalls in the underpasses are a doleful sight. Igor Shaitanov, a Shakespeare scholar and the indefatigable spirit behind the prize, alarms me with tales of the collapse of bookselling in the provinces, along with the Russian habit of subscription buying. All the more reason to keep the Booker as a focus of their best traditions.

The changing sponsorship of the prize reflects the course of recent events. Sir Michael Caine and Jonathan Taylor of Booker



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plc set it up 13 years ago, for philanthropic reasons and because Booker looked forward to a stake in modernising Russian farming and food distribution. When hopes of that faded, Smirnoff stepped in - booze once again taking over, as in many a Russian novel, from good intentions - and did good work in keeping things going. Then came Open Russia, with its liberalising, internationalist agenda. And now we have Mikhail Khodorkovsky's arrest and trial.

Meanwhile, the Booker has established itself as the country's top literary prize. I have a hunch that it will throw up a kind of Nabokov in reverse, who will return to his country after journeying the globe and give us the latest word on the state of humanity, seen through those peculiarly Russian, universalist eyes. It has not happened yet. In the first years the authors understandably tended to concentrate on the legacy of communism, the war, the camps. More contemporary works have won, such as a book of short stories by Victor Pelevin, an absurdist in the Bulgakov tradition and the name best known in the west.

Given the state of Russian publishing, some of the books on the shortlist of six may not even

be available in print, and the overall benefits to the

authors, as well as the prize - \$15,000 - are slighter

than in Britain. Last year's laureate, *White on Black* by Ruben Gonzalez Gallego, has notched up sales of about 30,000 to date, good but not enormous in a country of 150 million. Gallego is one of the most remarkable winners, and deserves translation. His name is explained by his being the grandson of a secretary general of one of

Spain's communist parties. Born in Moscow with cerebral palsy,

he wrote the book with the two fingers that he can move, and lying on his back. The secretary general had him put in a home and then told Ruben's mother that he was dead. The novel is an account of his years in Soviet homes, of varying horror, for severely disabled children. Yet it is neither sentimental nor overtly political. An uncomplaining account of the harshest imaginable upbringing, it is a tribute to the resilience of the individual will. The symbolism of the Soviet Union as a country full of morally disabled people in which the human spirit nevertheless survived is as potent as it is understated.

At the press conference the panel, led by the writer Vladimir Voinovich, answered queries about the trend of the novels submitted - this year, for some reason, a number of books feature Chekists, officers of the first Soviet state security and intelligence agency - or the admissibility of this or that genre; as Gallego's autobiographical work shows, the Russian prize is more accommodating than the British. Not a single question was not about books. An encouraging sign, we agreed over a boisterous, vodka-laden lunch, in these uneasy times.

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