

Booker Prize: mirror image of Russian literature - 12/10/2003 12:33

This year's winner of the Russian Booker Prize, founded by the British Booker, was announced on December 4

The award went to the novel "White on Black" by Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego, a Russian-born Spaniard who moved to his native country in 2002.

By a curious coincidence, Gallego is the same age as the Booker Prize Foundation, set up in 1968. In infancy, he was diagnosed as suffering from cerebral paralysis and put into an asylum for disabled children. Doctors told his mother that he was dead, and the bed-ridden boy grew up in a boarding school for handicapped children, considering himself an orphan. It is the author's childhood that forms the basis of his novel.

In an effort to convince his colleagues it was Gallego's work that deserved the prize most, a juror put forward the following argument: "I was crying when reading."

Albeit a non-professional, Gallego has a natural gift for writing, and his book was bound to succeed. And then, it would have been insulting not to recognize the author's courage. The hardships he endured as a child overshadow even Job's sufferings.

As he was announcing the jury's decision, Russian Booker Literary Secretary Igor Shaitanov said: "This book isn't merely a fact. Not just a piece of life. It's written masterfully. The author doesn't compel [his readers to feel] pity and compassion for himself. He writes in a rigid, austere style. This is a truly novelistic quality."

The Russian Booker faces much criticism these days. But at least it should be credited with offering a reliable picture of contemporary Russian literature. Sieving through an ocean of new books, it catches ones that reflect the most important trends in humanitarian thought. It proves that in Russian literature (just as well as in the mysterious Russian soul), mutually contradictory things, such as crisis, low demand, and growing output, can co-exist harmoniously.

This paradox can be attributed to the fact that Russia has spent the last decade passing from one socio-political system to another. And the process of transition is not over yet. "Times of troubles don't bring forth masterpieces," argues Alexei Kostanyan, the Vagrius Publishers editor-in-chief and a member of the Booker committee. "The situation changes too rapidly." He maintains that real literature is impossible to create without contemplation and reflection. We usually fall in love with books communicating ideas we recognize as our own unexpressed thoughts. The highest point of such love is harmony, something that takes time and intellectual effort to achieve.

It makes no sense trying to find a contemporary author comparable to literary greats of the past, such as Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekhov, for an artist's true worth cannot be seen up close. "As we read contemporaries, we don't think to ourselves that Aeschylus or Shakespeare would have written more compellingly, do we?" Shaitanov remarks ironically. "Our impression is momentary. At least twenty years shall pass before we are able to say with absolute certainty whether or not some particular book is a fact of literary life."

Nor shall we judge the Soviet-era Nobel laureates Mikhail Sholokhov, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Joseph Brodsky. Their contribution to the world literary heritage is undeniable, but the hype that used to surround their names in the West was about politics just as much as it was about art.

These days, the outside world does not take as much interest in Russia as it did in the Soviet times. On the one hand, there are no more dictators to pacify and, on the other, there is no need to step in and support progressive ideas in the country that has proclaimed itself a democracy. But Russia's democracy is still in the embryonic stage, mind you. A fairy-tale wolf can turn into a human in a matter of seconds, but in real life this process usually drags on for years.

It can be said with a high degree of certainty that the past decade has enriched Russian literature with writers such as Vladimir Makanin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, Dmitri Bykov, and Mikhail Veller. They are known and published both at home and abroad. "But there are surprisingly

few attempts at a profound analysis," Kostanyan laments. "Makanin's 'Undeground' stands out as a book that has got closer than others to creating an epic picture of the epoch."

Kaleidoscopic changes in this country carry away authors and readers alike. One of the latest trends on the local literary scene is the revival of interest in documentary writings, such as memoirs, historical surveys, and essays as lengthy as novels. The Booker-winning "White on Black," too, can be categorized as an intergenre piece. Here is how Shaitanov comments on this point: "Shortly after he wrote 'War and Peace,' Leo Tolstoy was reproached for one-third of his book being memoirs, another one-third, history and just a tiny part, fiction proper. Since Pushkin, Russian classics must have been developing on the border of genres. With our [literature], it's especially difficult to tell where the dividing line lies between fiction and documentary prose."

Our modern life with its syncopated rhythm, its music-video mentality, and its emphasis on entertainment-has enhanced the reading public's interest in what is often called low-brow literature. Russian readers just cannot get enough of it nowadays-the choice was too slim in the Soviet era, with only a few authors contributing.

In the early 1990's, the former Soviet Union saw an inflow of pulp books from abroad, which were hastily translated and put on sale. Western detective stories were selling best. Many local authors took advantage of the brisk demand and got rich by writing, often in an ironic style, about police, thugs, Robin Hoods, and even "honest tycoons."

This tendency, too, has been unwittingly or deliberately reflected by the Russian Booker. Its 2003 short-list finalists include Leonid Yuzefovich's "Kazaroza," a detective story. This is not a high-brow genre, but the author, with an academic background in history, effectively uses it as a medium for communicating serious ideas. "A detective story is the same type of conventionality as a novel in letters; [it's] no more than a form of revealing a person's inner self," Yuzefovich holds.

The Russian Booker is the nation's most prestigious literary honor. The Booker jury is often criticized for quirkiness, but it proves keenly sensitive to the times. Books reflect time and space, so the jury tried to "find a book that may turn out more important than others to modern-day readers, those who seek something to support them in life," explained the man presiding over the jury, Yakov Gordin. He is an author and the editor of the literary magazine Znamya. "The book 'White on Black' is not about how [people] die, but about how they survive," Shaitanov added. Indeed, what can be more topical for Russia today?

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