

A Comparison of the 2014 and 2015 Winners for the Man Booker Prize and the Folio Prize



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Abstract

This thesis is focused on how the Folio Prize was created in 2014 to challenge the Man Booker Prize, as the Folio Prize's focus lies solely on literary fiction, while the Booker Prize is accused of being awarded to popular fiction. The winners of the 2014 and 2015 Man Booker Prize, Richard Flanagan with *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Marlon James with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* respectively, and the 2014 and 2015 Folio Prize winners, George Saunders with *Tenth of December* and Akhil Sharma with *Family Life*, are analysed and compared to each other. Furthermore, Ali Smith's novel *How to Be Both* was shortlisted for both the Booker and the Folio Prize and thus offers a glimpse of how a novel can be considered both popular and literary. These analyses chart some contemporary literary criteria, but do not offer a template for what a literary fiction novel is nowadays.

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1. Introduction

When walking into a bookstore the recommendations are hard to miss. Books are introduced as the winner of the Booker Prize; authors are praised as award-winning writers; books are shortlisted and given every other praise available from reviews. Only printing the title and author on the cover of the book does not suffice anymore. Furthermore, award-winning books are presented on lists as well: lists that include a hundred or so must-read novels for readers, lists of classics, lists of the best novels ever written. Nowadays, the hallmark of a good novel is to win a literary prize. In recent years the influence of these prizes, notably the Man Booker Prize (in the UK) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (international scope), has risen and contributed to the sales of novels.

Richard Todd analyses how award-winning novels quickly become best-sellers, especially in countries outside these novels' country of publication, in his book *Consuming Fictions*. He observes how the book publishing industry utilises these prizes, but also how readers consume novels that come with such award-winning labels. There is no question about "the important role of the marketplace in the contemporary book world" (McCrum). In recent years, however, the Booker Prize has been accused of "leaning toward popular fiction rather than literary fiction" (Kellogg). This resulted in the formation of the Literature Prize in 2014, dubbed the Folio Prize for its sponsor: The Folio Society. The Folio Society has retracted its sponsorship after two years, so the Folio Prize is currently searching for a new sponsor and has decided not to award the prize in 2016 due to insufficient funds (Lucas). The main reason for creating the Folio Prize was the general feeling among "a group of British intellectuals" that the standard of the Booker Prize was being lowered towards popular fiction (Kellogg). Thus, the Folio Prize is meant to focus more on literary fiction than popular fiction. Interestingly, many judges of the Folio Prize are former Booker Prize winners ("The

Academy”).

What then, is the difference between popular fiction and literary fiction? Or at least, the definition according to the Booker Prize and the Folio Prize. What are the criteria for literary fiction in the present day? This thesis will first describe the role of literary prizes in influencing the literary canon and the book publishing industry; how the role of academics and intellectuals in forming a literary canon has slowly been replaced by the marketing of fiction through literary prizes (Ponzanesi 88). Nowadays, these prizes seem to be the prominent guide in leading readers towards interesting and thought-provoking novels. Furthermore, I will analyse the winners and shortlist of the Booker Prize and the Folio Prize for the years 2014 and 2015. The novel *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith will be analysed as well, because it appears on both the Booker Prize and the Folio Prize shortlists (albeit in consecutive years, which can be accounted for by the different rules of eligibility for both prizes). The goal of this analysis is to examine in what way the Folio Prize tries to distinguish itself from the Booker Prize by concentrating on literary fiction instead of popular fiction, as it accuses the Booker Prize of doing. This comparison will chart what some of the criteria for literary fiction are nowadays in Great Britain.

The next chapter will discuss research already done in the field of literary prizes and especially the Booker Prize. The third chapter will then focus on the Booker Prize winners of 2014 and 2015, Richard Flanagan with *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Marlon James with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* respectively. The fourth chapter will examine the Folio Prize winner of 2014, *Tenth of December* by George Saunders, and 2015, *Family Life* by Akhil Sharma. The purpose of this examination is to observe whether the Folio Prize winners contain different styles or themes than the Booker Prize winners, because the Folio Prize was created as a response to the Booker Prize. The fifth chapter will then consist of an analysis of *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, appropriately named as it appears on the shortlist of

both the Booker Prize and the Folio Prize. The question is whether Smith's novel can be seen as an example of a mix between popular and literary fiction.

2. The Legacy of Literary Awards

Literary prizes have changed the publishing industry and the status of the novel. Nowadays, the novel is seen as a commodity and this is because of “how the literary product is marketed and consumed” (Todd 42). The popularity of literary prizes increased through the marketing possibilities related to the prizes. Literature, and other cultural products, are still seen as an art form, but the commercial aspect has become increasingly important. The theories of Bourdieu have been significant in the discussion about the commercialisation of art. Norris states that “at the core of Bourdieu’s resistance to corporate sponsorship is his conviction that it compromises artistic and intellectual autonomy” (140). The Man Booker Prize is an example of corporate sponsorship as first Booker McConnell and now the Man Group have provided sponsorship for the literary prize. This sponsorship can be defined as “an exchange of capitals, where the economic capital of the sponsor is exchanged for the symbolic capital of the sponsored” (Norris 141). Literary fiction has a high cultural status, thus, the Man Group gains symbolic profits through the association with the Booker Prize (Norris 142). The company name is attached to a prize that has high media coverage every year. Bourdieu’s concern lies with the loss of intellectual autonomy because writers might be tempted to write a novel that would aesthetically conform to certain criteria to win an award. Distinct features of past Booker winners have been “nostalgia and grief” (Norris 150). This implies that writing about such themes will more likely be awarded than writing about other subjects. Levin also comments that a tension exists between “an ideal of autonomous literary value and aspects of market influence” (481). Intellectual autonomy can be compromised by the desire to sell well.

2.1. From Critic to Jury

Literary critics and academics are considered experts in the field and largely determine the aesthetic literary worth of novels. Furthermore, critics act as guides for consumers and contribute to whether a novel will be viewed in a positive or negative light through reviews. In Ponzanesi's words: "[I]nstead of consumers choosing (for) themselves, it is the cultural industry that selects the appropriate products for the consumers" (13). This has been the case for at least a century. However, the increasing popularity of literary prizes and on the other hand the widespread reach of the internet has contributed to a change in the role of critics. Nowadays, through consumer reviews on websites like Amazon, the notion that "everyone is a critic" becomes more prevalent. Furthermore, the internet enables readers to access more reviews (often for free) instead of relying solely on newspapers or magazines to guide them towards their next book. The review of a critic is not the only source anymore for readers to gather information on writers and novels.

The jury of literary prizes is usually composed out of experts in the field, such as writers, critics and academics. It is their role to read a prescribed number of books and judge them according to certain criteria in order to award the coveted prize to a deserving novel. Besides making observations about a novel, critics now also function as judges of prizes. Furthermore, they determine aesthetic literary values by awarding literary prizes to the novel that best fits that bill. In other words, readers are still guided (and maybe even dependent on) those intellectuals for reading advice, but those intellectuals are more and more connected to literary prizes. Jury panels are composed out of different people every year, but, as said before, novels with grief and nostalgia as themes tend to win the Booker Prize. This might indicate that judges value the same themes in literary fiction, regardless of the passage of time.

The name-recognition attached with the jury and the prize itself helps the promotion of novels, authors and publishers. However, from a Bourdieusian point of view, the prestige that is attached to the jury is “implicitly compromised by their very willingness to participate” (Norris 157). On the one hand, the critic’s role within the world of literature is validated by being placed on a jury panel; on the other hand, this participation makes the jury lose their credibility somewhat, because they are willing to attach their name to a highly public literary prize and the companies behind those prizes. The judges lose some of their integrity by participating in an event that combines art with capitalist goals. Furthermore, judges have been criticised for their choices in shortlists and winners through various media. The role of jury is thus not without risks.

2.2. Media and Diversity

Literary prizes, especially the Booker Prize with its high media coverage, influence the success of a novel, writer and publishing house. The use of media contributes to the branding of novels as a “literary commodity” (Ponzanesi 76). Ironically, even bad publicity tends to boost sales. Media is used to promote novels, but this does not necessarily position books in a positive light. Publishing houses can exert a certain control over what they wish to make public, but in the end the media will act independently of the publishing industry and react in their own way to the announced shortlists and winners. Thus, the commodities, the novels that are promoted, will “spin out of the control of their makers” (Ponzanesi 26). Once a product is on the market the media and the public cannot be controlled anymore. Especially the Booker Prize has featured in many media controversies over the years, mainly about the judges’ decisions regarding the shortlist and/or the winner (Norris 147). Still, the huge amount of media coverage has led to the popularity of the prize, even if the press reacted negatively to decisions made by the judges. The announcement of the shortlist a month before awarding the

actual prize strengthens the hype around the Booker Prize. Todd also observes how there is no such thing as bad press when he remarks that for the novel *The Wasp Factory*, published in 1984, by Iain Banks: “[C]ontroversy was to be the main selling point” (149). On the cover and the first few pages of the novel positive and negative reviews were printed side by side. These reviews contrasted so much that the novel invited the reader to buy the book and decide for him/herself, which was an excellent marketing strategy (Todd 150). Despite these controversies, or exactly because of them, Booker winners are likely to sell more novels. Guillory states that “therein lies the peculiar power of mass culture, since the waning cultural centrality of literary works in the face of new mass cultural forms never entailed a denial of the nominally superior value of literature” (173). Thanks to literary prizes many novels resemble popular fiction, but still retain their literary worth for the consumers. The prizes and the media circus surrounding them contribute to the popularisation of art.

Todd observes that the growing popularity of the Booker Prize has led to more diversity within British fiction as authors have become more aware of fiction from the Commonwealth. The Booker Prize encouraged this diversity by awarding novels written by citizens of the Commonwealth. However, despite the broadening of British fiction with a postcolonial perspective, the main themes of, for example, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, are still grief and nostalgia as the novel looks back on the historical past of India. This might be because literary awards make writers “aware of each other’s work in ways that may well be without precedent in the history of fiction in Britain” (Todd 307).

The popularity of the Booker Prize has contributed to the opening up of the literary canon, especially for postcolonial literature (Ponzanesi 49). This also made British consumers aware that fiction from foreign countries need not only come from the United States, which was a “view that prevailed in the 1960s” (Todd 83). The high media coverage surrounding the prizes made readers across the world more aware of literary fiction in general and foreign

literary fiction in particular. However, there are two sides to that coin. Mixing commerce with art will always have drawbacks. Nowadays, media attention almost seems a currency of its own and the media coverage around literary prizes diverts the consumer's attention from novels that remain obscure as they are not nominated for these prizes.

2.3. Sales and Canon

Literary prizes influence the sales of novels and the way the publishing industry promotes their writers and commodities. Hardback novels used to be the deciding factor in sales: only when hardback sales had proven the popularity of a novel, the publisher would decide to also print it in paperback (Todd 16). However, in recent years paperback sales have dominated the publishing industry and hardback sales are no longer the only indication of a best-selling novel. Furthermore, the Booker Prize has contributed to the rise of paperback sales, which made literary novels available for a wider range of consumers as they are cheaper than hardbacks (Todd 107). The publishing industry utilises literary prizes for an increase in sales. Certain novels are pushed forward as possible Booker Prize winners on the shortlist. The novel awarded for its literary worth then gains a boost in sales, certainly in the first few weeks after the shortlist and prize announcement (Todd 19). Besides sales benefits, writers can use the prize money to devote their time to writing full-time and publishers can use the press coverage of the prize winners to gain more global recognition for their authors (Todd 57). The Booker Prize website states that winning the prize is the “ultimate accolade . . . [and guarantees] international recognition and huge increase in sales” in answer to the question what difference winning the prize will make (“FAQs”). Furthermore, it backs up this statement with sales figures from previous prize winners. This explanation on the Booker Prize website demonstrates that it is the prize's foremost goal to promote literary fiction to a

broader audience; it is clear that the people behind the prize are very much aware of the financial aspects of the industry.

The novels awarded with the Booker Prize gained more sales in the period after the award ceremony, but not all Booker Prize winners have made a lasting impression on the consumer; for example, the 1994 Booker Prize winner *How Late It Was, How Late* by James Kelman was considered a flop in sales compared to previous winners (Todd 20). Ginsburgh measured the success of the Booker Prize by analysing the number of editions published after winning the prize (he chose editions instead of sales as sales numbers are difficult to obtain). He then analysed the data from ten to twenty years after a novel won the prize to see whether the consumers still bought those previous Booker Prize winners. He concluded that Booker winners do not sell more editions than the other novels on the shortlist (Ginsburgh 106). The Booker winner might have a boost in sales in the beginning, but is indistinguishable from the other shortlisted novels after a decade.

Winning the Booker Prize is not a guarantee for long-lasting fame and judges' decisions are often a reflection of the literary aesthetics of that particular time. The main themes in Booker Prize winners might be grief and nostalgia, but the writing style, for example, may differ or there could be other factors that contribute to winning the prize as well. Furthermore, Ponzanesi makes the observation that "literary prizes have an impact on academic reception and canonical recognition, as long as the old is present in the new" (87). The key seems to be to write a novel that is innovative within the old framework (which is already a feat in itself).

The process that makes a novel enter a canon list is complex and coincides with "the shift in aesthetic evaluation through time" (Ponzanesi 82). Modern novels have difficulty in gaining a place in canon lists such as, for example, "the 100 best British fiction novels ever" or other lists of the same nature. The classics written by Austen or Dickens are not easily

dethroned from those lists. Harold Bloom comments that the most pragmatic test for entering a canon would be to see whether a novel is worth rereading again and again (518). In short, whether the novel is still relevant and has a certain timeless aspect. Winning a literary prize does not automatically entail long-lasting fame. The publicity around the Booker Prize might ensure more sales, but after ten years most consumers would have forgotten prize winners from previous decades. Good sales figures are not an indication of lasting attention. However, Squires admits that the Booker Prize “has had a role in the formation of a canon of contemporary English-language fiction” (87). The Booker Prize, and other literary prizes, have thus become a tool to create a new contemporary literary fiction canon, besides the classic canon that is slow to change.

2.4. Literary vs. Popular Fiction

The Booker Prize and other literary prizes were influential in the commercialisation of literary fiction. Squires states that “the Booker Prize is perceived by many to be an indicator of quality” (87). Furthermore, the prize is used as a device to disrupt the “opposition between the literary and the commercial” (Squires 91). The Booker Prize is one of the reasons that literary titles are being sold as “popular” books. Swirski argues that popular fiction is genre literature that “appeals to many by being simplistic, schematic, and repetitive” (6). In other words, easy to understand and categorise for readers. The popularity of Booker Prize winners changes the general opinion that literary fiction is difficult or obscure as readers are more conscious of diversity in subject and style in literary novels. Instead of polar opposites, literary and popular fiction have become more in line with each other.

The popularity of the Booker Prize has shaped the publishing world and changed the way authors and publishers promote books. Todd observes that “the production of fiction as a commodity affects the ways both aspiring and established novelists do business with their

agents and publishers, and the ways in which they aim to attract their readers” (128). The publishing industry shifted their marketing towards promoting possible Booker Prize shortlist or winner candidates. This development demonstrates how “in every sense, Booker’s role has been integral to the mechanics of (on the one hand) commerce and (on the other) the formation of a particular kind of literary canon” (Todd 95). However, these two opposites are not that different at all if one looks at the publishing industry that promotes prize winners as desirable literary commodities. That means that literary fiction can become popular fiction through consumers. The popularity of literary prizes made sure that “the Booker Prize and its shortlist have captured the imagination of the consumer of serious literary fiction in Britain” (Todd 309). The Booker Prize is, thus, a tool that promotes literary fiction as popular fiction in order to increase sales. Furthermore, the manner in which publishers focus their marketing on the consumers signifies that literary fiction and popular fiction are not mutually exclusive. Especially when literary fiction is reduced to fit in genres as “love”, “tragedy” or “war” during sales promotion to make it easier for consumers to recognise and identify with novels. This development adds to the closing distance between literary fiction and popular fiction.

Rushdie’s Booker Prize win with *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 changed the literary field in many ways. The shortlists after that year “[became] a kind of clearing-house for what was new and in some sense definitive in fiction in Britain” (Todd 89). However, in recent years the Booker Prize has been accused of leaning more towards popular fiction instead of literary fiction. This phenomenon has been observed by, for example, Norris, who states that “the fiction the judges reward has moved towards the commercial pole of the literary field, where traditionally literary fiction has been closer to the restricted pole” (154). Thus, the literary fiction awarded with the Booker Prize have become less elite and are slowly losing their prestigious image. Stella Rimington’s speech when she was chair of the 2011 Booker Prize jury panel also sparked controversy when she stated that a good novel should be

entertaining, easily read and “zip along” (Levin 480). Many critics disagreed with Rimington’s views; popular fiction and literary fiction are not mutually exclusive, but to describe literary fiction as Rimington did was not appreciated.

Literary awards, with the help of media, have strengthened the notion that literary fiction can also be popular fiction. However, the development of the Booker Prize that claims to award literary fiction, but is starting to invite juries on the panel that search for zip-along novels, has been frowned upon by a growing group of British intellectuals. The general feeling that the Booker Prize has been lowering its standards to popular fiction led to the creation of a new literary prize: the Folio Prize. As we have seen, Booker Prize winners tend to feature themes such as grief and nostalgia, but at the same time the award has led to a more diverse field for publishers and consumers through accepting novels from Commonwealth citizens all over the world. It becomes clear that literary prizes have had positive and negative effects on the publishing industry, but also on the readers. The Folio Prize was established to counter the Booker Prize’s perceived focus on popular fiction. The following chapters will analyse whether the Booker Prize and the Folio Prize are truly that different from each other and what this then means for literary aesthetics in the present day. Is the Folio Prize the answer to the Booker Prize’s perceived deterioration? Do the Folio Prize winners differ from the Booker Prize winners in any way, or are they similar in style and themes?

3. The Man Booker Prize

The Booker Prize, established in 1969, became prestigious through the high amount of prize money, the restriction that only allowed literary fiction to be eligible and the expressed hope that no more censorship would hinder the publication of novels. Publishers also welcomed the award as the publishing industry was in recession at the end of the sixties (Norris 143). From the beginning only writers from the Commonwealth were eligible for the award, thus, American English novels were excluded from the prize. However, this rule changed in 2014 and the prize is now awarded to a novel published in the UK, written in English and from a writer of any nationality (“Meet”). The award’s longlist is announced in July, the shortlist in September and the award ceremony is in October.

As seen in the previous chapter, Norris considers nostalgia and grief common themes in most Booker Prize winners. The second definition of nostalgia in the online *Oxford English Dictionary* is “sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past” (“Nostalgia”). Grief is described as a kind of hardship or suffering (“Grief”). I will use Norris’ theory as a working hypothesis to examine whether Flanagan and James incorporate grief and nostalgia in their novels as well and, if so, whether this played a part in the judges’ decision to choose the Booker Prize winners. Additionally, similar to Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (Booker Prize winner of 1981), the novels by both Flanagan and James deal with personal aspects of a character’s life within a historical frame. This too is a recurring theme in other Booker Prize winners.

3.1. Richard Flanagan - *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

The Australian novelist Richard Flanagan won the 2014 Man Booker Prize for his novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The shortlist that year also featured two American novelists, Joshua Ferris with *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* and Karen Joy Fowler with *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, and three British writers: Howard Jacobson with *J*, Neel Mukherjee with *The Lives of Others* and Ali Smith with *How To Be Both*. A.C. Grayling, chair of that year's panel of judges, comments that Flanagan won because "the two great themes from the origin of literature are love and war: this is a magnificent novel of love and war . . . written in prose of extraordinary elegance and force, it bridges East and West, past and present, with a story of guilt and heroism" (Masters).

The themes of love and war are intimately connected with grief and nostalgia and Flanagan's novel about the Australian POW camp experience demonstrates this through the lives of several characters that were impacted by WWII. The narrative is nonlinear and consists of third person narration, written from a number of different limited perspectives that show the lives of several characters before, during and after the war. During the Modernist Period of English literature, multiple focalisers and breaks in chronology were forms of literary experimentation that moved away from tradition. Furthermore, Modernism created a distinction between "high" and "low" art (Rahn). Flanagan's prize-winning novel incorporates Modernist literary techniques, which suggests that these methods are more mainstream now, as the Booker Prize aims to sell literary novels to a greater public.

The central theme in the book deals with responsibilities, not only responsibilities in love and war, but also cultural differences regarding responsibilities. Dorrigo Evans, the main character, faces several moral problems and is continuously pressured to do the right thing. He is faced with several choices in his love life, but also during his time in the POW camp.

The consequences of those choices continue to haunt Dorrigo long after the war and his love affair are over.

Flanagan contrasts the hardships of the war with a different kind of suffering closer to home. Shortly before Dorrigo takes off to participate in the war, he begins a love affair with Amy, the wife of his uncle Keith. The marriage between Keith and Amy was the result of Keith's feelings of responsibility towards her after he had forced her through an abortion. The pregnancy was the result of a one-night stand between Amy and Keith. Ironically, Amy wanted to marry so the child would not be a bastard, whereas Keith only wanted to remove the baby and afterwards married Amy out of guilt. Keith was too late in taking responsibility and that resulted in an unhappy marriage. Similarly, Dorrigo is already attached to Ella when he starts an affair with Amy. In unspoken agreement it is understood that Dorrigo and Ella will marry after the war. Both Dorrigo and Amy feel a certain obligation towards Ella and Keith respectively, as they are bound to those two in the eyes of society. Dorrigo is unable to let Ella go while he is in love with Amy and, at the same time, Amy is in an unhappy marriage with Keith, but is reluctant to leave him for Dorrigo.

At one point, Dorrigo tries to understand the bonds that hold people together, sometimes against their will, and he thinks that "it was as if everything that was happening to them could never be decided by them, that they lived in a world of many people and many ties, and that none of it allowed for them to be with each other" (*NRDN* 143). Dorrigo and Amy's grief is the product of their doomed relationship. The moral obligations and expectations of society are holding the two back. However, whether these obligations truly existed, or only consisted of the ideas and perceptions in Dorrigo and Amy's minds is never made clear. Flanagan seems to imply that love is beautiful, but can also be the cause for hardships and deep sorrow. Furthermore, the fact that this relationship begins before and is interrupted by WWII, makes all Dorrigo's subsequent memories of the affair after the war

suffused with the feeling of nostalgia. He is constantly reminded of all that could have been, if not for the war.

The war also provides moments in which characters must choose between personal sacrifice and moral responsibilities. Dorrigo is a medical officer with the rank of colonel. His position as an officer gives him several benefits but also many responsibilities. The Australians that Dorrigo is in charge of are captured by the Japanese and forced to work on a section of the Line, the railway between Burma and Siam, which is known as the Burma Death Railway nowadays. Dorrigo's rank as a colonel saves him from personally working on the Line, but he is responsible for the lives of his men, not only as medical officer, but also because he decides where the prisoners will work every day. This work placement often means the difference between life or death and every day Dorrigo judges which prisoners are capable of the most exhausting tasks. Dorrigo's grief during the war lies not only with his own hardships, but also with the sufferings he sees the other POWs undergo through the result of his decisions.

The novel demonstrates how difficult it can be to handle other people's expectations. The men in the camp observe that Dorrigo acts as a morally responsible man; for example, Dorrigo does not abuse his authority for selfish reasons. For this reason, the POW prisoners start to perceive Dorrigo as The Big Fella: a man who follows a moral compass and places the needs of others before his own. However, Dorrigo struggles with these expectations and feels detached from the image that others conceive of him. Furthermore, after the war Dorrigo is heralded as a war hero, although he believes himself to be nothing special; he only survived while others did not. Dorrigo's responsibilities as war hero force him to revisit his war memories repeatedly. It becomes clear that whenever he reflects on that period of his life, his memories of the grief he endured during the war slowly mix with his nostalgic feelings regarding Amy; those are the two most important events during his time as a young man.

Dorrigo's status as war hero supports the idea that the living have an obligation towards the dead. Flanagan's novel revisits the past and inevitably themes of memory and loss become prominent. Should the war be forgotten as a dark chapter of history, or remembered to avoid a recurrence? Do war heroes (and survivors) have a responsibility towards the fallen to always remember the horrors of the war? The men in the POW camp believe that "to abandon one man was to abandon themselves" (*NRDN* 186) and that "if the living let go of the dead, their own life ceases to matter . . . their own survival somehow demands that they are one, now and forever" (*NRDN* 204). When Dorrigo orders the paintings of Guy "Rabbit" Hendricks to be burned, other soldiers protest and claim that Hendricks believed his paintings would help to remember and that "memory is the true justice" (*NRDN* 243). Hendricks had painted pictures of daily life in the POW camps and wanted his pictures to be a remembrance of that time. In the end, the pictures survive the war and Dorrigo is seen writing a foreword for the publication of the art book when he is 77. On a meta-level Flanagan's novel also functions as a memory of WWII and he describes the impact of the war on the different characters that are featured in the story.

Two Japanese officers also feature in the novel and their (Eastern) attitude towards responsibilities is contrasted with Dorrigo's (Western) take on responsibilities. These officers consider the prisoners to be inferior to the Japanese, because they did not commit suicide before their capture. Honour is everything for the Japanese and the two officers believe that capture is equal to failure. Furthermore, the fact that the Australians aid their captors as POWs is in itself a dishonourable act. For the officers, the actions of the Australians have proven that the Japanese people are superior, as they themselves would choose death over dishonour. However, after the Japanese lose the war, Nakamura, a Japanese officer, does not commit suicide either; instead he goes into hiding. This suggests that when honour dictates death, most people tend to forego honour in order to live.

Furthermore, the novel's title, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, comes from Basho's haibun (a Japanese literary form that combines prose and haiku) that "[sums] up in one book the genius of the Japanese spirit" (*NRDN* 125). The railway is synonymous with the narrow road to the deep north and the huge efforts that were made to build it (*NRDN* 126). Especially for the Japanese, the railway was supposed to be the proof that the Japanese spirit could triumph over everything. The railway project demonstrated that "spirit could triumph where the Europeans, with all their superior technology, had not even dared try" (*NRDN* 390). This is a clash of cultures between the Australians and the Japanese, but also an attempt by the Japanese to go back to their glory days. The officers are nostalgic about their past and try to recreate it through the railway project.

The building of the Line during WWII has impacted many lives. The various focalisers in the novel serve to paint a comprehensive view of past events and Flanagan's neutral observations demonstrate one way in which the characters' lives deal with the consequences of their choices. Dorrigo (and many other characters in the novel that survive the war) has to live with the choices he has made during the war. Flanagan wrote a novel that is full of characters who continually have to choose between what is right and what they want. Furthermore, the novel's title comes from an old Japanese poem and not only refers to the railway, but also to the past which seems better than the present for many characters. Dorrigo is nostalgic about his love affair with Amy, reminiscing about it and thinking about what could have been, had the war not intervened. The Japanese officers want Japan to be a glorious empire yet again and fondly remember the various poets and emperors that made Japan great. Nostalgia and grief are undeniably present in Flanagan's novel and those themes are connected to the themes of love and war.

3.2. Marlon James - *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

The Jamaican writer Marlon James won the 2015 Man Booker Prize with a unanimous vote for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. The other shortlisted novels were: Tom MacCarthy (UK) with *Satin Island*, Chigozie Obioma (Nigeria) with *The Fishermen*, Sunjeev Sahota (UK) with *The Year of the Runaways*, Anne Tyler (US) with *A Spool of Blue Thread* and Hanya Yanagihara (US) with *A Little Life*. The 2015 Booker Prize shortlist was “striking for the grimness of the subject matter and the toughness of the reads” (Brown, “Marlon”). Michael Wood, the chair of judges in 2015, commented that James wrote “a crime novel that moves beyond the world of crime and takes us deep into a recent history we know far too little about . . . [it] will come to be seen as a classic of our times” (“Brief”). The judges also describe the book as a crime novel with a historical backdrop. However, the novel is much more: it is a demonstration of Jamaican culture through the lives of unforgettable characters with distinct voices. James describes the hardships of a variety of characters during the tumultuous period between 1976-1991 in Jamaica.

The Jamaican proverb “if it no go so, it go near so” serves as the novel’s epigraph and this idea is reflected throughout the novel. James gives a fictional account of the attempted real-life assassination of Bob Marley in 1976. The gunmen involved in the shooting were never found and James uses this incident as the backdrop for his novel. Bob Marley is simply the Singer in the novel and he connects the lives of several characters who, at first glance, are unrelated to each other. Furthermore, James goes on to portray how the tension between the Jamaica Labour Party and the People’s National Party in Jamaica contributed to the escalating crack wars in New York in the eighties and nineties. This is all accomplished in a manner similar to William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*, because James’ narrative consists of chapters

narrated by different characters in their own voices. However, James' novel is executed on a grander scale than Faulkner and encompasses various events spanning over several decades.

James states in an interview that he believes that the visceral, especially explicit violence and sex, serves a role in fiction and should not be removed for any puritanical reasons (Akbar). He also applies this principle to this novel set in Jamaica and does not shy away from the darker aspects of gang life. Violence, murder and beatings coloured the lives of many gang members. The raw truth of the Jamaicans' hardships during the political unrest is shown in all its facets. Jamaica was full of conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century and these conflicts are present in James' novel. There is, for example, a juxtaposition between Christianity and the Rastafari religion, the PNP and JLP are polar opposites and the gangs associated with the political parties, Eight Lanes and Copenhagen City respectively, are fighting each other. James demonstrates that Jamaica is inhabited by people separated by class, language/dialect, colour and religion.

Voice is a distinguishing feature between the various characters. Furthermore, language is important because it enables people to identify different social classes. James utilises the Jamaican patois in the novel during chapters from a Jamaican character's point-of-view. Readers need to take care to decode the patois from gang members, but the Jamaicans' language becomes increasingly American English when characters are from higher social classes. Josey Wales, for example, belongs to the Copenhagen City gang, but prides himself on his clean language and he sends his children to a private school so they will learn the language associated with the high social class as well.

Skin colour also corresponds to social class. Blacks are the lowest on the scale, followed by coloureds: people of mixed race. Syrian whites are highest on the scale, but "pure" white people even top that, although white people are usually foreigners like expatriates working in Jamaica. Nina Burgess, a coloured Jamaican and the only female

protagonist who is given a voice in the narration, seems to be very aware of this distinction. Several characters notice that Nina talks in a very neat way, not using the Jamaican patois. Her proficiency in American English enables her to flee Jamaica to go to America. Yet she complains that it is a “hell of a thing when white skin is the ultimate passport” (*BHSK* 50). Furthermore, American money is worth more than the Jamaican dollar and that means that “if you whip out one [green piece of paper] you change the behaviour of a whole room” (*BHSK* 50). All this indicates that Jamaica, the country as a whole, feels inferior to other western powers, notably the USA as it is the closest superpower. Additionally, America is perceived as a country that is better than Jamaica on all accounts by many Jamaicans in the novel.

Christianity is associated with positive connotations and many Christian Jamaicans detest Rastafari people. The parents of Nina Burgess, for example, believe her to be a whore because she slept with the Singer, whom they consider to be Rasta scum (*BHSK* 200). At the same time they continually invoke the name of God during their confrontation with her to emphasize the difference between Christianity and Rastafari. Furthermore, this confrontation is also one of the examples of violence in the novel, as Nina’s father whips her while disregarding her explanations (*BHSK* 203). Frequent miscommunications between various people often lead to violent scenes in James’ novel.

The most important element that divides Jamaicans, regardless of their position in life, is politics. The power struggle between JLP and PNP springs from politicians, but goes right down into the ghetto. When PNP is in power, Eight Lanes is also in power and this means, for example, that the people from Copenhagen City have difficulties in finding employment. Furthermore, the gangs are used by the political parties to enforce their rule through threats and violence. Papa-Lo is the boss in Copenhagen City and Josey Wales is his right-hand man. Wales sets up the ambush in the Singer’s house on Hope Road and he attacks the house with seven other gunmen. The Singer is targeted because he possesses qualities that could unite

people. Wales believes the gangs can only thrive in conflict and, thus, attempts to eliminate the Singer and his mission for peace. Wales is trying to create a new Jamaica, one led by the JLP/Copenhagen City and also a Jamaica that thrives on drugs money, as Wales is a key player in acquiring and distributing drugs in New York and other American cities. The drugs war in New York is fraught with violence as well, as many gang members hire assassins to kill key players in rival gangs.

When the American journalist Alex Pierce¹ is writing an article about the Singer he realises that “even though the Singer is the center of the story, it really isn’t his story . . . there’s a version of this story that’s not really about him, but about the people around him, the ones who come and go that might actually provide a bigger picture” (*BHSK* 221). On a meta-level this is exactly what James did when writing *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. All the characters are connected to the Singer in some way and the impact of the assassination plot and the gang war resonates throughout their lives. Life in Jamaica was not easy and that might explain the lack of nostalgia in the novel: the past is not necessarily better than the present, so there is no desire to return to the former days. James demonstrates his ability to voice different characters and the various lives they lead while Jamaican history figures as the backdrop.

Both Flanagan’s and James’ novels touch upon the hardships of their characters, either through love, war or political unrest. The various characters all experience grief through personal choices and through events that shape their lives. Nostalgia is less prevalent in James’ novel, but does feature in Flanagan’s novel as Dorrigo, the main character, looks back on his love affair with nostalgic feelings. Both novelists utilise historical frameworks and they are brought to life through various personal stories. This demonstrates that it is important to reflect on the way historic events shape the present time, but also how history is made by the

¹ In the novel, Pierce is writing a series of essays about Jamaica, the political unrest and the crack wars, titled *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. This occurs in 1991, 15 years after the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976.

many choices people make. James describes the hardships people face when the political leaders of a country are constantly fighting each other. This might explain the lack of nostalgia, as there is not better past to return to for the Jamaican people. The following chapter will analyse whether the Folio Prize winners use the same themes as the Booker Prize winners or whether they are composed of different themes altogether.

4. The Folio Prize

As said before, the Folio Prize was created because many (British) intellectuals were dissatisfied with the direction the Booker Prize was taking. The focus of the Booker Prize was perceived to be moving away from literary fiction and towards popular fiction. A group of people then started to organise the Literature Prize, which was quickly dubbed the Folio Prize after its sponsor the Folio Society. The jury that awards the Folio Prize is chosen from members of the Academy, a selection of writers and critics from across the globe (“Folio”). This Academy was established specially for the Folio Prize. Ironically, as mentioned before, some writers in the Academy are former Booker Prize winners, such as Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker and Ian McEwan. Sadly the Folio Society has retracted its sponsorship after two years; therefore the Folio Prize is searching for a new sponsor as of 2016.

The Folio Prize is awarded to works of fiction “in which the story being told and the subjects being explored achieve their most perfect and thrilling expression” (“Prize”). There are no restrictions on form for entrants and the 2014 shortlist, for example, surprised many critics with the variety of literary forms. Short stories and poetry were also represented on the list (Wood, “Folio 2014”). The Folio Prize website does not state explicitly that this prize will focus solely on literary fiction, but journalists have marked this statement as one of the main reasons for the prize’s creation (McCrum; Kellogg). The following paragraphs will analyse the Folio Prize winners of 2014 and 2015 to determine whether these novels are similar to the Booker Prize winners in themes and style or whether they have won the prize for different reasons. A comparison between the two analyses might contribute to the discussion of contemporary literary criteria.

4.1. George Saunders - *Tenth of December*

George Saunders won the first Folio Prize in 2014 for his collection of short stories entitled *Tenth of December*. Other shortlisted authors were: Anne Carson for *Red Doc*, Amity Gaige for *Schroder*, Jane Gardam for *Last Friends*, Kent Haruf for *Benediction*, Rachel Kushner for *The Flame Throwers*, Eimear McBride for *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and Sergio de la Pava for *A Naked Singularity*. Lavinia Greenlaw, chair of the judges, states that Saunders' short stories are "darkly playful, they take us to the edge of some of the most difficult questions of our time and force us to consider what lies behind and beyond them . . . [Saunders] is a true original whose work is absolutely of the moment . . . these stories will prove only more essential in years to come" (Brown, "George").

In his acceptance speech Saunders states that "the real goal was to develop our abilities to be more sympathetic to others . . . to recognise the truth that in spite of what it feels like we're not separate from one and other [sic]" (Andrews). This statement portrays Saunders' belief that humans should not lose their ability for compassion. Every story in the collection presents choices and moral decisions. The stories deal with everyday life, some taking place in imaginary worlds, but always relatable for the reader. Mostly, Saunders' stories are about the small everyday decisions that could potentially determine your whole life. Furthermore, although some stories seem dark and pessimistic, there is usually a lighter and optimistic side to be found. That might be the true purpose of this collection of stories: to show readers that life goes on, despite hardships, and that human connectivity can be a bright light in dark times.

Some stories have a few indications that those particular stories are set in America, other stories have a nondescript setting. The overall feeling of all the stories is that they are usually set in a modern Western country. America comes to mind because Saunders is an

American citizen. Saunders does not use a historical setting like Flanagan and James and his stories are much less localised. Furthermore, some stories come close to a dystopian future projection. Saunders uses either a first-person narrator or third-person narrator in his short stories. When the story features a third-person narration, there are multiple focalisers. In “Victory Lap”, for example, three different persons are focalisers and in “Puppy” two mothers alternate as narrator.

When people mature, they lose the childish wonder with which they look at the world. In the story “Sticks” the children describe how they “left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us” (*TD* 30). These seeds of meanness illustrate the loss of innocence and the increasingly pessimistic outlook on life of grown-up people. The harsher realities of life are understood by adults, but not by children. Saunders’ stories all deal with the dark complexity of human society. There is no nostalgia or desire to return to a better past. Instead, the hardships of people living in the present (and some in the near future) are highlighted.

Saunders writes personal stories that offer reflections on society at large. The short story “The Semplica Girl Diaries”, set in the near future, is an example of Saunders’ writing style. The Semplica Girls are women from impoverished countries who receive payment in America to hang in rich people’s gardens as real-life dolls. The main character is barely able to provide for his family, so when he wins 10.000 dollars in a lottery he hires a set of SGs to please his children and to feel less “dopey and inadequate” compared to other richer families (*TD* 118). Although he knows they are not badly off, comparisons with other families still make him feel inferior. One of the daughters, 8-year-old Eva, is described as sensitive and her father worries because “if kid too sensitive, kid goes out in world, world rips kid’s guts out” (*TD* 136). This sensitivity leads Eva to free the SGs and, thus, leave the family with an enormous debt. Eva does not understand the consequences of her actions, but Saunders does

not lay the blame with her. The story is an allegory as the SGs can be compared to work slaves who are lured to the Western world hoping for better opportunities. The system that allows such working conditions, and even punishes those who fight that system (releasing SGs is punishable by law), is at fault. Saunders demonstrates how a middle class family suffers while trying to be a part of this system. In the story the family's grief begins and ends with the SGs, but in a wider context the SGs stand for a faulty system that encourages people to take part in a dehumanising practice.

The Bloomsbury edition of *Tenth of December* published in 2014 (with a Folio Prize Winner sticker on the cover) begins with an introduction by Joel Lovell, an American editor and writer. He states that the George Saunders Experiment is the desire to “have that awareness [for life], to be as open as possible, all the time, to beauty and cruelty and stupid human fallibility and unexpected grace” (*TD* xiv). This awareness grows when death comes close and life becomes more poignant. For Saunders, death exists to make people more aware of life and more aware of other people's suffering as well. In multiple stories within *Tenth of December*, this juxtaposition between life and death is at the core of the narration.

The proximity of death not only leads to an appreciation of life, it can also bring forth what the mother of the eponymous character Al Roosten describes as moral courage: “When you know something is right, you do it, no matter what the cost” (*TD* 101). In “Escape from Spiderhead”, the main character Jeff possesses moral courage because he refuses to torture (and potentially kill) Rachel. Both Jeff and Rachel are part of a government programme that criminals can participate in to test drugs, instead of staying in prison. His experimenters try to persuade him to kill Rachel, even confronting him with her criminal record (she committed triple murder). Furthermore, they state that this small death will benefit the whole of mankind. However, Jeff still refuses to kill Rachel and ultimately commits suicide so he cannot be forced to kill her. He acts selflessly at the end and thinks: “I was happy, so happy, because for

the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would” (*TD* 81). These small choices for good, even when they involve self-sacrifice, can provide the ultimate happiness. Additionally, this act illustrates that the end does not justify the means.

Ultimately, this courage to face death can save people, sometimes at great cost. In the story “Tenth of December”, for which the collection was named, a man dying from cancer decides to freeze to death in the cold to save his family the endless worry and anticipation of his death. However, when he sees a child drowning in a freezing lake, he saves him and afterwards he is saved by the child’s mother in return. When his wife comes to pick him up, he sees her concern and that they are both sorry: the man because he had left the care of his family to die on his own and the woman because her husband had felt that such drastic measures should be taken to spare his family. However, they were “accepting each other back, and that feeling, that feeling of being accepted back again and again, of someone’s affection for you expanding to encompass whatever new flawed thing had just manifested in you, that was the deepest, dearest thing” (*TD* 250). In the face of death the man finds a universal, but very human truth.

Saunders shows the failings of humanity, but in a compassionate way. He demonstrates that we are not perfect, we are not infallible, and that is alright. Different from Flanagan and James, the Booker Prize winners, there is no specific historical background in the short stories. Instead, Saunders writes deeply personal stories of families that anyone can relate to. He is an excellent observer of the many small details that make up a human life and can accurately depict the many insecurities and hardships, but also the pleasures, of life. As the stories are not very localised and deal with personal events and choices, they are perhaps more timeless than Flanagan’s and James’ novels. There is a greater sense of universality, because the stories are about circumstances that could happen to anyone, whereas not everyone has lived through Jamaica in the seventies and eighties. The Folio Prize was

awarded to *Tenth of December* because, as stated by the judges, the stories would become “more essential in the years to come” (Brown, “George”). The absence of time and mostly of place in the settings of the stories confirms this idea.

4.2. Akhil Sharma - *Family Life*

Akhil Sharma won the 2015 Folio Prize with his novel *Family Life*. Other novels on the shortlist that year were: *10:04* by Ben Lerner, *All My Puny Sorrows* by Miriam Toews, *Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill, *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, *Nora Webster* by Colm Tóibín and *Outline* by Rachel Cusk. William Fiennes, chair of the judges, stated that “*Family Life* is a masterful novel of distilled complexity: about catastrophe and survival; attachment and independence; the tension between selfishness and responsibility . . . we loved its deceptive simplicity and rare warmth” (“Family”).

Family Life is a novel loosely based on the author’s life and portrays an Indian family that moves from India to America in 1979 (Sharma, “Novel”). The story details how the Mishra family decides to take care of their son Birju in their own home after he suffers a swimming pool accident, which leaves him brain damaged and bedridden. Birju’s younger brother Ajay is the narrator and the reader experiences through his eyes how the family slowly falls apart while dealing with the aftermath of Birju’s accident. First and foremost, this story is about how the family feels obligated to take care of Birju, but consequently demonstrates how this decision affects the everyday life of the parents and brother of Birju. The novel has a distinct setting, New York and New Jersey in the eighties and after, but at first glance this features only in the background of the story. Although the novel shows how the family adapts to American life, it is mostly about how they also have to adapt to the changing circumstances in their family life.

The family members all have their own way to cope with living and taking care of a physically and mentally disabled person. The father becomes an alcoholic to suppress the desire to hang himself. The mother, Shuba, invites different quacks into their home in the hope that obscure medical practices might cure what western medicine could not. Ajay, four years younger than Birju, takes to lying about his brother's exploits in life before his accident, creating an image of a perfect brother who does not exist. The family knows from the start that Birju will never recover and become healthy again. Ajay observes that the unchanging condition of Birju takes its toll on the family and that "we still needed him to be OK to be OK ourselves, [this] made me feel like I was being gripped and slowly crushed" (*FL* 125). The hardships that the family face spring from feelings of guilt and obligation towards Birju. The family, especially Ajay, feel guilty for being healthy while Birju is not. They do not know how to be happy while someone so close to their heart will never be healthy and normal again. Life is put in perspective and every bit of fortune in Ajay's life is weighed down by the fact that Birju will never receive such opportunities.

It is mostly the narrator whose reaction to the fate of his brother becomes the book's thematic focus. Ajay cannot refrain from lying and this creates a gap between Ajay and his classmates. He also becomes an avid reader to escape reality and this fuels his desire to become a writer. Writing enables Ajay to become more detached from his own life and to deal with the disintegration of his family unit. Similarly, when the family troubles are compared to a fairytale Ajay believes that the family's torment "was being diminished by being compared to something unreal" (*FL* 71). He resents that his suffering and the family's hardships are unacknowledged or made less painful than what he actually feels. He becomes aware of the power of words and processes the hardships he experiences at home through lying and writing. Additionally, the unreality of Ajay's lies and writings is contrasted with the reality of Birju's handicapped state.

Ajay also struggles with the power shift that occurs after his brother's accident. Before Birju's accident, Ajay was constantly comparing himself to his older brother. Birju was someone who guided his little brother, especially in India, but also in America. Ajay resented this and tried to be better than his brother. This rivalry ceases when Birju is disabled for life and instead Ajay feels guilty for his continued health and his advancement in life while Birju will stay bedridden until his death. Ajay becomes the superior brother, but it comes at high cost and he has difficulties adapting to his new role in the family.

Furthermore, the obligation Ajay feels towards Birju also colours how he views other bonds and relationships. He states that "all relationships were serious and full of obligations, and the idea of having one suddenly felt like a burden" (*FL* 159). The family bond with Birju and the subsequent responsibilities Ajay has towards Birju make him feel constricted. The obligations enforced by the family bond make Ajay hesitant to enter into new relationships, for example, with a girlfriend. This condition is similar to fear of commitment, but has a clear origin in the bond between Birju and Ajay.

The Mishra family takes in Birju and this is seen as a noble sacrifice by the Indian immigrant community in New York and New Jersey. Many Indian families visit the Mishra house, treating it reverently and almost like a temple. They visit the bedridden Birju and touch his feet for luck. Additionally, Shuba is requested to give blessings to these families, because she is "considered holy . . . [and] seen as someone who would be compassionate" (*FL* 133). Ajay remarks that "it was as if we represented something—love of family, sacrificing for others" (*FL* 73). This is one of the examples of how outsiders treat the Mishra family after Birju's accident. Birju's handicapped state and the family's subsequent determination to take care of him in their own home mark the Mishra family as different and their suffering is worshipped by other families. The family gains status through their actions within the Indian community, but there is a tension between their act of sacrifice and the subsequent rise in

status they undergo. There is a precarious balance between accepting their rising status and staying humble. Shuba is reluctant to accept her new duty as a role model, but is scared to be seen as arrogant by her peers if she refuses to perform blessings. The decision to take care of Birju themselves disrupts the family and also changes the family's dynamic within the Indian community.

Sharma mostly shows what his characters experience, instead of telling the reader what everyone felt. Birju's accident slowly disrupts the Mishra family life and this is revealed through Ajay's eyes. There is no return to the happy days when Birju was still healthy, but the family slowly learns to accept and deal with the changes after the swimming pool accident. The family's grief is transformed, over time and through encounters with other people, from deep suffering to acceptance of one's fate. *Family Life* portrays what changes people can undergo when faced with a sudden catastrophe and their subsequent crawl back to "normal" life. There is no big historical background like Flanagan and James use. It is a small story about an Indian family that moves to America and has to deal with hardships they could never have imagined. In that sense this novel is more like Saunders' collection of short stories than the two Booker winners. Furthermore, both Saunders' and Sharma's stories provide less closure than Flanagan's and James' novels. *Family Life* shares a certain sense of universality with Saunders, as the family struggles with selfishness and responsibility, which are inherently human traits. The Booker Prize tends to be awarded to novels that deal with grief and nostalgia, whereas the Folio Prize seems to be awarded to novels that have a deeper sense of universality and do not have a localised historical setting.

5. Ali Smith - *How to Be Both*

The appropriately-titled novel *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith was placed on the 2014 shortlist of the Booker Prize and the 2015 shortlist of the Folio Prize. After the novel did not win the Booker, it was likely Smith would win the Folio (Wood, “Folio 2015”). However, it missed out on that prize as well, as Sharma took the Folio Prize. Nonetheless, the fact that the novel appeared on both the Booker and the Folio shortlist does imply that Smith’s novel is perceived as a literary fiction novel². The following paragraphs will investigate in what way *How to Be Both* is similar to the Booker Prize winner and the Folio Prize winners. Is this novel the perfect blend of the two?

The novel consists of two parts. One part is written from the point of view of a modern-day English teenager who is trying to cope with the death of her mother. The other part is narrated by an Italian painter, based on a historical figure, who lived in the 15th century. The novel is published in two versions, with either the English teenager or the Italian painter part as the first part of the book. It does not matter in which order you read the two parts: Smith skilfully builds up the narrative of the story so the reader can make sense of the story, no matter which part is read first. Although there are two narratives, the main focus lies with the contemporary story, as the painter returns as a ghost to the English girl’s side. Young states that “themes of death and grief, as well as ghosts, recur in Smith’s works” (132). The painter’s (fictional) historical background features in both parts as well, but that time has passed and the life of the painter is explored through the memories of the ghost. My edition of the novel printed the modern-day part first, followed by the Italian painter part.

Smith is known for playing around with the notions of gender in her novels (Young 139). The main theme of *How to Be Both* is an exploration of how to be two things at once.

² Smith did win various other awards with *How to Be Both*: 2014 Costa Novel of the Year Award, 2014 Goldsmiths Prize and 2014 Saltire Society Literary Book of the Year Award.

The English girl Georgia, nickname George, questions this principle right from the start: “Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can’t be both. It must be one or the other” (*HB* 8). However, her mother challenges this idea, asking why this must be so. The rest of the novel then explores the possibilities of how things can be both. Smith takes various oppositions and erases the boundaries for definitions such as male/female and past/present. Georgia, for example, is addressed with the male variant George, while the Italian painter Francescho del Cossa is presumed to be a male painter, but Smith writes him as a woman in disguise as there is so little known of the real-life historical counterpart. The way Smith uses a real-life person and then creates a fictional background is similar to how James uses the gaps in the real-life Bob Marley assassination attempt as a historical backdrop for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Both writers fill in the gaps; they use the omissions in history to bring to life their own versions of history in a fictional form.

Smith describes how the state of being two things at once relies heavily on perception. Many things appear to be one thing at first glance, but a second look will reveal a deeper layer, because “there’s always more to see, if you look” (*HB* 142). In the novel this principle is applied to the paintings by Francescho, which play a major role in George’s part of the novel as well. Francescho learns how to paint from examining other paintings which show her “how to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it” (*HB* 237). Similarly, the concept of layers can be found in literature and other art forms, because a revisiting will often provide new insights. Furthermore, George attributes the classic status of paintings to something in its essence that “makes them new and lets them still be old both at once” (*HB* 170). The fact that paintings remain relevant and interesting is due to their ability to be old and new at the same time.

According to Francescho only someone with a keen eye can perceive the multiple layers that exist in paintings. Furthermore, it is a painter’s job to use the eyes, to observe and

then to reflect the world in paintings. When Francescho returns as a ghost to modern-day England, she observes that it is “full of people who have eyes and choose to see nothing” (*HB* 229). The ability to see is associated with the ability to understand. Eyes can look, but not many eyes truly see what is underneath. Smith depicts Francescho, a 15th century painter, as being puzzled by electronic devices and the way technology diverts attention from the real world. As George’s mother says: “Seeing and being seen . . . [are] very rarely simple” (*HB* 123). The fact that the two parts of the novel can be read in two different orders also questions whether how we see or what we see is more important.

How to Be Both appears to argue that to be able to see and understand life will enable people to be more, to have a hidden layer underneath. Francescho is a woman who lives a man’s life and this epitomises the novel’s main theme. It is noticed by a worker that Francescho is “more than one thing . . . [and exceeds] expectations” (*HB* 284). George/Georgia also has the potential to be both and this is exemplified with her name. The main characters, George and Francescho, and the paintings themselves are examples of how something can be two things at once. The paintings especially function in two ways: “[I]t lets the world be seen and understood . . . [and] it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both” (*HB* 308). George receives a break from grieving over her mother’s death when she is observing Francescho’s paintings in a museum. She connects with what the paintings depict and is momentarily freed from her grief.

Smith takes the theme of how to be both and uses metaphors as eyes, paintings and gender to experiment with double identities and double meanings. The second nature in paintings can be found in other art forms, but also in the identities of George and Francescho. Both characters are more than meets the eye, especially Francescho who is a woman disguised as a man. In comparison with the prize-winning novels discussed before, *How to Be Both* is

less localised than both Flanagan's and James' novels, but it does have a historical background. It also leaves less open for the readers, compared to Saunders' and Sharma's novels. There are many layers in Smith's novel and it shares some similarities with the other novels analysed before, but it is not a perfect blend between Booker Prize and Folio Prize winning novels.

6. Conclusion

All the novels that have been analysed in this thesis have a dozen accolades on their covers, promoting themselves as good books that are worth buying. This alone proves that literary prizes are perceived as good marketing tools by publishers. The literary theory described how literary prizes influence the publishing industry and how they are used to raise awareness of new novels on the market. Furthermore, the prizes and press coverage of the prizes contribute to increased sales for prize winners and shortlisted works. The Booker Prize website even states that increased sales is one of the main benefits of winning the prize.

After 45 years of the Booker Prize, which was only open to Commonwealth writers until 2014, research has shown the trend that prize-winning novels incorporate the themes of grief and nostalgia (Norris). Flanagan's Australian war novel does indeed feature grief through the hardships the characters experience through WWII and also nostalgia as the main character reminisces about his love affair and keeps on thinking about what could have been. James' novel deals less with nostalgia, but does show the many hardships Jamaicans suffer through the political unrest in the country during the 15-year period that James describes. Furthermore, both novels use a historical backdrop to narrate various personal stories. The changing perspectives in the novels explore the story from different angles and various voices are heard throughout the narratives. Flanagan and James both use a historical framework and the distance between the past and the present allows both writers to offer a more comprehensive view of events in their novels. The literary techniques used by these two writers were a break with tradition during the Modernist Period in English literature. With the widespread reach of the Booker Prize, it can be stated that these techniques have become more mainstream in recent years and are now accepted by more readers.

In recent years, Booker Prize winners have become more accessible for the general reader and, according to some critics, even resemble popular fiction more than literary fiction. Although these two genres are not mutually exclusive and can coexist within novels, judges have been criticised for choosing easy reads instead of thought-provoking novels. The Folio Prize strives to place the focus back on literary fiction and was clearly created as a rival to the Booker Prize. The Folio Prize is open to all authors that publish an English work (a novel or other forms) and the fact that the Booker Prize rules changed in 2014, the same year as the inaugural Folio Prize, to include all English-writing authors as well, clearly indicates that the Booker Prize does feel somewhat threatened by the Folio Prize. This Booker Prize rule change places the Booker Prize on a more even footing with the Folio Prize.

While the Booker Prize tries to make literary fiction more popular, the Folio Prize re-examines the concept of literary fiction. The 2014 and 2015 Folio Prize winners deal less with nostalgia, but Saunders' and Sharma's novels do include hardships and suffering. However, there is no historical backdrop used as setting as with Flanagan's and James' novels. Saunders' short stories deal with complex relationships within society and are set in a non-descript, sometimes futuristic, Western world. Sharma describes how misfortune can have catastrophic consequences within a family unit and writes a somewhat autobiographical account about how a family learns to live with a handicapped son and brother. Both books are less localised than Flanagan and James' novels and offer a slightly more universal narrative than the Booker Prize winners. With only 2 prize winners, it is difficult to determine what the general criteria for winning the Folio Prize are, but universality, or stories that could still be relevant to readers in 30 or 40 years could both be something that the Folio Prize jury looks for. Additionally, both Folio Prize winners' stories offer less closure than the Booker Prize winners.

In short, Flanagan's and James' novels are executed on a grand scale and are able to grab the reader through writing style and themes. On the other hand, the Folio Prize winners are more about the inner machinations of life and the complex relationships between humans. The personal stories described by Flanagan and James are quite plot-based, but Saunders and Sharma write stories with less closure and, thus, leave things open for the readers. The many layers in the Folio Prize novels add complexity to their work. This is different from the Booker Prize winners as both James and Flanagan's novels are more closed and provide more information for the reader.

Smith's novel *How to Be Both* was shortlisted for both the Booker Prize (2014) and the Folio Prize (2015), but did not win. This novel is thematically in-between the Booker Prize and Folio Prize winners and offers something of both. Smith not only writes about complex relationships, but there is also an interesting plot and the novel features the historical background of the 15th century Italian painter. The English girl grieves for her mother and tries to hold on to her memory through an obsession with the Italian painter. However, *How to Be Both* has many thematic layers that are all intertwined and connected. Smith makes the most out of her main theme: an exploration of how to be both.

Comparing the five novels that are analysed in this thesis does not provide any conclusive evidence for clear literary criteria in the present day. Both grief and nostalgia feature in almost all novels, in some to a lesser extent than in others, but maybe those themes are so universal that they are found in most literary fiction. There are overarching themes that are featured in all five novels, but the writing style, for example, differs considerably. A difference in narration between the novels, for example, is that Flanagan and James use multiple focalisers, whereas Sharma sticks to a single first-person narrator. The various short stories in Saunders' collection either offer a first-person narration or a third-person narration with different focalisers. However, Smith is a mixture of the two as her two-part novel offers

two perspectives on one story, but both parts feature one narrator. The use of multiple focalisers, similar to Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*, used to be avant-garde, but the presence of this technique in Booker Prize-winning novels could indicate that it has become more mainstream and accessible for more readers.

To summarise my points, it seems that the Booker Prize winners do indeed seem more accessible for readers with their plot-based narratives. However, this does not mean that there is no depth at all in both Flanagan and James' novels. I would wager though, that both novels are more easily understood than either Saunders' short stories or Sharma's complex *Family Life*. If literary fiction is meant to have complexity through the presence of many layers in a story, then the Folio Prize has reached its goal by awarding Saunders and Sharma the prize. However, there are no clear literary criteria present, no clear format used by the jury of either the Booker Prize or the Folio Prize. Not even after examining *How to Be Both*, shortlisted by both prizes, was there any conclusive evidence for clear-cut literary criteria that seem to influence the judges' decisions.

My observations are mainly made from thematic analyses of the five novels. The drawback of this approach is that the comparisons are limited to the presence or absence of certain themes in the novels. Future research may include the differences in writing style and other factors that contribute to ultimately win a literary prize. Another way to study the mechanics of literary prizes might be to research the background of the various critics and writers that are part of the jury panel and to question how that influences their choices. Also, I would recommend future research to concern itself with multiple literary prizes, as most scholarly articles are solely concerned with the Booker Prize.

Maybe the true test to prove whether all these novels are worthy literary fiction is to wait and see whether they will enter the long-term canon or the classics canon in 50 or 100 years. Saunders and Sharma have a chance because their novels' themes are quite universal,

but Flanagan and James could be remembered as well, because they chronicle a piece of history. Of course this is pure speculation; only time can tell.

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