

Case Study: The Commonwealth Writers' Prize

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Introduction

The Commonwealth Writers' Prize (CWP) forms a part of the Commonwealth Foundation's ongoing mandate to break down barriers and increase people's understanding of other cultures. Instigated in 1987, the prize was established to encourage and reward the upsurge of new Commonwealth fiction and ensure that works of merit reach a wider audience outside their country of origin. The CWP is administered annually as part of the Foundation's Culture and Diversity programme. Through the CWP, the Foundation is rewarding excellence, recognizing new talent and encouraging broader readership of Commonwealth literature.

Background

For the purposes of judging, the Commonwealth is divided into four regions; Africa, Canada and the Caribbean, Europe and South Asia, and South East Asia and the South Pacific. Every year, books are submitted by author's publishers and entered either into the 'Best Book' or 'Best First Book' category for their region. The entries are then read by a three member regional judging panel who compile a shortlist, usually consisting of their top six to ten choices for each category. A regional judging meeting will then take place where the judges discuss the books for the regional award and then choose a regional 'Best Book' and 'Best First Book' winner, each of whom receives a sum of £1000. There are eight regional winners.

The Chairs of each of the four judging panels then convene to pick the two best overall category winners out of the regional winners at a different venue around the Commonwealth each year. Winning writers from across the Commonwealth and the panel of judges participate together in a week-long program of event including public readings, book signings and regional tours. The overall winner of the Best First Book prize receives £3000 and the winner for the Best Book prize receives £10,000.

Impact

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There are many book awards, but the uniqueness of the CWP lies in its character and administration. It is truly international in its judging, administration, regional set up, advisory structure and funding. It brings together writers and judges from around the world to create international dialogue and to share ideas and principles. Kate Grenville, the 2006 Best Book overall winner, commented after receiving her prize that, ' We'd all given a voice to our very different culture, and in so doing shared it with others. The world might even be - in a small but important way- a better and less divided place because we'd had the chance to come together and share those stories. There aren't many ways in which the arts can travel beyond their own cultures; the Commonwealth Foundation provides that opportunity.'

The regional structure makes the prize unique and differentiates it from other major literary awards. It recognizes individual writers in their regions which makes them winners in their own right. It creates publicity around the region, giving immediate recognition of the winners to the international community and it recognizes first time writers that other major awards tend to ignore. Finally, this regional focus also makes an important statement about regions being equal and all cultures standing a chance. Kate Taylor, Canadian and Caribbean regional winner in 2004 comments that, 'In Canada, the regional win does count. Indeed, I often see myself identified as a winner of the Commonwealth prize, without any mention that it was only the Canada-Caribbean.'

All awards can only ever be based on subjective judgments, but there are relatively few literary awards that use judges with in-depth expertise and knowledge to appraise critically the wide range of cross cultural work produced across the Commonwealth. Due to the literary backgrounds of the judges, their choices tend to be highly reflective of the qualities that are sought in good literature and thus, after being awarded with a best first book award, many of the winners have gone on to achieve wider recognition and win other prizes.

- Benjamin Kwayke, a Ghanaian writer, who won the Best First Book award for the Africa region in 1999 for his novel, 'The Clothes of Nakedness' has in, 2006 won the Best Book regional award for 'The Sun by Night'

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- Zadie Smith won the Best First Book award for her book 'White Teeth' in 2001 and has since then won the overall, regional Best Book prize for 'On Beauty' in 2006

The CWP is a means of making known to the international community the successes of Commonwealth writers. The award contributes to sustaining the tradition of excellence amongst writers, discovering new talent, and creating a platform whereby the literature can be shared.

Lessons

- Bringing together judges and writers creates a means for them to share their cultures through words, stories and experiences.
- Receiving the award from a judging panel made up of respected literary judges gives writers credibility and can help lead to further successes in their careers.
- First time winning writers gain the benefits of publicity that makes it known to readers, publishers, booksellers, literary critics and peers, the latest achievements of the best first writers from around the Commonwealth
- True cultural diversity is about creating opportunity and putting in place mechanisms to facilitate that change such as the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.