How James Kelman Survived the Booker Prize

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1. Introduction

In this paper I look at the Booker McConnell Award for Literature and its effect on a particular author, the Glaswegian writer James Kelman. A key question of this paper is, “What is the effect of an anti-establishment writer winning a major prize of literature?” Since the critical response to James Kelman’s Booker Prize is important, I will outline this response and review some of the objections raised. I will also look at how Kelman survived this onslaught. This involves a brief look at how he gains editorial control over the media.

Such issues require an analysis of the relationships between the Booker McConnell company, Kelman, his texts, and literature. In this paper, I use the term ‘literature’ with a connotation similar to that of Bourdieu where literature is seen as a social field (or game) where people ‘play’ for some sort of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Therefore, the term ‘literature’ refers not only to awards and texts but also to the agents of literature such as authors, critics, judges, and readers.

2. A Brief Overview of Kelman and His Work

James Kelman is a Glaswegian author who writes about Glasgow life and uses relevant language styles to represent it. Kelman aims to write about experiences from his own community using the language of his home, culture, and the Glaswegian working-class (Ledbetter, 1995: 9; Turner, 1997: 24; Winder, 1994: 18). He writes both non-fiction and fiction works, which includes novels, short stories, essays, plays, and articles. Kelman sees writing as an artistic and expressive process, and makes many changes to the language, layout, and form of a text. Kelman’s stories might be written using anything from standard English to phonetically rendered Glaswegian.

Kelman’s Booker Prize novel, How Late It Was, How Late, is written using a combination of Glaswegian and English, and is a protest novel referring to ongoing social issues for Glasgow working-class (Ledbetter, 1995: 9). The reason why Kelman focuses on Scottish experiences is because he perceives his situation to be colonised (Bantick, 1997: 8; Chollet, 1995: 3). He believes

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1 Kelman says he is “not content to take language as it’s given through the structures of authority,” and that writing in dialect is “a way of talking about the validity of your own culture, indigenous culture, as opposed to the kind of dominant culture, whether it’s based in London or in Yale or Harvard. It’s just a way of saying as a writer ‘I have a right to write from my own experiences, from my own community’” (Ledbetter, 1995: 9). The main project in Kelman’s writing is to represent the culture of hard-living Glaswegians (Winder, 1994: 18).

2 Kelman says that How Late It Was, How Late partly refers to the complicity of Scotland’s medical authorities in neglecting to curtail industrial diseases (Ledbetter, 1995: 9).

3 Kelman says: “The problem with any term like idiom or vernacular used about my work is that it appears to be a euphemism or synonym for language. I try to say at all times, let’s just call the Scottish working class way of speaking a language. The rejection of it as a language is to do with imperialism and the language of the coloniser. This is the idea that every other culture and therefore language is going to be defined against it. The way we use language is seen as being a debased form of English” (Bantick, 1997: 8). Kelman says his writing is “like a post-colonial, post-imperial kind of voice — where the local people, in a sense, are fighting the imperial
his culture is being suppressed and he is conscious of the long history of poor living conditions for many Glaswegians (McIlvanney, 1999). Kelman sees himself belonging to an indigenous culture being suppressed by the dominant culture of the English (Bantick, 1997: 8; Chollet, 1995: 3). An agenda of his writing is to resist Standard English. This is because it does not serve his literary needs and has too many embedded negative connotations about Glasgow culture and speech. He also believes his own language best serves the perspectives and perceptions of his subject matter. Not only do Kelman’s Glaswegian characters speak realistically, they are central to the story. This contrasts to the typical literary role of working-class Scottish characters — as servants who speak in a ‘funny’ manner in a world of English speaking superiors. Kelman wants to draw attention to the fact that working-class people are capable of abstract thought and as such should be represented more accurately in literature (Turner, 1997: 24).

3. Booker Plc and the Booker Prize

The Booker McConnell Prize for Literature is funded by the Booker McConnell company. The Booker McConnell company itself (Booker Plc) was formed in 1834 and quickly achieved wealth via sugar estates by profiting on the colonial regime and the repressive labour practices typical of the day (Todd, 1996). By the 1990s, the Booker McConnell company was a multinational agribusiness conglomerate employing over 20,000 people and generating annual revenue in excess of 5 billion pounds (Todd, 1996). The Booker McConnell Prize for Literature recognises contemporary English language fiction in a pluralist manner, and is an acknowledgment that many forms of English writing have merit. The Booker encourages the notion of a new frontierless writing, it encourages a postcolonial dynamic which recognises the “shared cultural fund” of the Commonwealth nations and their contribution to English language literature.

The Booker Prize is regarded as one of the world’s top literary awards, and its image is carefully managed in the media. There is a televised gala dinner, a “controversial” run-up debate, a time lag between the announcement of the short-list and the declaration of the winner. People lay bets on the outcome. It has enormous commercial appeal. Writers who are shortlisted, and particularly those who win, are guaranteed commercial success: sales increase, advances are given, and film rights are possible (J.C., 1999).

4. “Thatcherism had another important catalytic effect in Scotland... In the absence of any political forum, it was Scotland’s writers and artists who most powerfully articulated a resistance to Thatcherism. In the works of Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Liz Lochhead and Tom Leonard, a confident and combatively Scottish sensibility gained eloquent expression, as culture became politics by other means” (McIlvanney, 1999).

5. Kelman says: “The problem with any term like idiom or vernacular used about my work is that it appears to be a euphemism or synonym for language. I try to say at all times, let’s just call the Scottish working class way of speaking a language. The rejection of it as a language is to do with imperialism and the language of the coloniser. This is the idea that every other culture and therefore language is going to be defined against it. The way we use language is seen as being a debased form of English” (Bantick, 1997: 8). Kelman says: “The whole kind of simplistic criticism I received after the Booker took pains to evade the serious question — like how would it be possible for this character to exist without the language he uses, which is the language of his culture?” (Chollet, 1995: 3).

6. Kelman’s use of the Glasgow accent states that working-class people had just as much intellectual capacity as the people who patronise them (Turner, 1997: 24).

7. How Late It Was, How Late sold about 25,000 in hardback and 45,000 in paperback (J.C., 1999). Trainspotting and The English Patient are two books associated with the Booker Prize which later became popular movies.
The literary industry also benefits from the Booker prize because it encourages interaction between agents of legitimation such as authors, publishers, booksellers, reviewers, and reader groups. The Booker Prize allows us to see the continuing evaluative process by which the literary text is constructed — as an object of negotiation between different interest groups where literary prizes allow the “legitimisers” the “right to judge” and “stake a claim” in the writer’s work (Bourdieu, 1993). While Booker Plc is awarding the writer with prestige, recognition, networks, access to other previously closed social areas, a little of this prestige and recognition is transferred to the company through its role in the legitimising process (Huggan, 1997: 412-22). The Booker Prize allows a capitalist entity to evaluate and endorse a cultural product. So while Booker Plc gains status as a postcolonial literary patron as a recogniser, judge, and consumer of refined culture, the company gains prestige in a realm typically beyond its field of influence and action.

4. Capital and the Commercialisation of Literature

The Booker Prize not only provides money to the prize winner, it also confers cultural and social capital to the recipient. Kelman said that he desired the economic capital, such as money and book sales, because he needed the money; he also did not mind gaining the cultural capital, such as authority and respect in matters to do with culture, because it gave recognition to Glasgow, its writers and artists, and so on. Kelman was the first Scot to win the Booker Prize. However, he did not want social capital because this means being let into the “right” social circles and closed social groups. When Kelman was shortlisted in 1989 for the Booker Prize, he declined to attend the award ceremony because he did not want to ‘swan around’ with the literati (Wynne-Jones, 1997: 8-11).

When Kelman won the Booker Prize in 1994 there was a mixed reception in the literary world, but it was mostly unfavourable. One of the judges of the prize, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, stormed off of the panel and declared to the press that the book was ‘crap’, meanwhile Kelman’s peers had mixed reactions (Clark, 2001). The BBC would not air readings of Kelman’s works, this is partly exacerbated by the fact that UK critics were outraged and reacted very badly. In fact, Kelman was labelled a literary savage (Freely, 1998: npn; Gallagher, 1997: npn; Mehegan, 1995: 65). One large book chain refused to buy How Late it Was, How Late (Elliott, 1997: 15).

One would imagine his work taking a place in the Scottish Literature curriculum, but this is not so (Agate, 1998: 10). Politically, the Scottish Labour Party were astounded and vocal, and the Scottish National Party still do not recognise Kelman’s achievements (Agate, 1998: 10; Clark, 2001). There were some groups who were happy, the American critics were mostly impressed and obviously his publisher was satisfied (Clark, 2001).

One reason why people were upset was because the Booker Prize indicated that Kelman’s anti-establishment writing was interesting, his critics were wrong about him, and that his language was okay. Pierre Bourdieu says of literary struggles (1993: 42):

…the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary legitimacy .... the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorised to call themselves writers .... the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products...

Kelman achieved social and cultural capital, which was what many of his opponents did not want to happen (Clark, 2001; Kelman, 1997; Ledbetter, 1995; McNeill, 1989). Kelman is a person who does not back down from controversial human rights issues and is quick to take action against bad policies. Some people were also annoyed because his so-called gutter language was recognised as both readable and literary. This reaction is not surprising since language issues are important to most people anyway and the Glasgow variety is a low prestige variety. Nonetheless, he won the top literary award (Freely, 1998; Gallagher, 1997; Mehegan, 1995; The Economist 1989, 1994). In short, Kelman gained political
clout and he won against language snobbery.

Another reason for the furore over the Kelman winning the Booker Prize was because it upset the balance of the prize itself. The Booker Prize and its predominantly British judges essentially push to legitimise the multicultural, the exotic, and the foreign. This allows marketing of commercially viable forms of “otherness”, a further commercialisation of literature (Huggan, 1997: 412-422). The Booker Prize allows metropolitan readers to purchase and consume a sense of cultural “otherness” — to exercise fantasies of unrestricted movement and free will (Ahmad, 1992). Over half of the Booker winners are concerned with presenting a counter history to a colonial history. It was a shock to readers when the ‘culturally exotic other’ the Booker usually supplied turned out to be a bad mouthed writer from a mainstream regional area (McRobbie, 1994: 40). Readers waiting for the exotic counter-history got a counter-reality instead, one which was far too plausible and close to their homes.

Furthermore, Kelman did not use the award winning formula of sex and violence (Ledbetter, 1995: 9). The abundant swearing in the novel was not viewed favourably because it was not funny or good-natured enough (Winder, 1994: 18). The reader did not get a book full of new exotic foreign words waiting to be discovered; rather, they found what is considered in polite circles to be a ‘deprived language’. The minimum seventeen functional uses of the word “fuck” — such as an intensifier, modifier, interjection, adjective, adverb, noun, verb — was often overlooked (Winder, 1994: 18). This leads us to the special use Kelman has for such language, as we will see in the next section.

5. Kelman and Editorial Control

The media were particularly interested in Kelman, and he had to control them in some manner. The furore was intense and many authors would have difficulty maintaining control of such a situation. Kelman coped using a restricted form of language to his advantage. What follows is a sample of a talk he gave at the Edinburgh fringe festival, during which BBC reporters unexpectedly attend (Kelman, 2001):

Everybody tries to get in on the racket. Here is the BBC in here and taking notes about everything so it can be brought out and used in evidence at some later date. I didn’t know in advance they would be there. My only editorial control stems from my use of the words, fuck, cunt, shite, prick, bastard and so on. If I keep using them in an arbitrary fashion little of what I say will be fucking recorded for the fucking police or whoever get their hands on these videos eventually. These fucking bastards on the fucking BBC hate paying any cunt, especially these stupid fucking pricks we call artists. A couple of weeks back the cunts asked me to appear on a fucking programme along with some fucking other writer bastards. The time and date were fucking not inconvenient so I asked the cunts about the proposed fee. No fucking fee, fuck all was being proposed at all. These bastards had the fucking downright fucking cheek to tell me I should be proud to get fucking invited because I was the fucking one and only Scottish writer they were fucking asking. All the other shites were international authors and none of them was asking for a fucking fee. Imagine that, not a solitary fucking international fucking megastar writer bastard was asking for a fee. The stupid pricks were doing it for fuck all bar the glory. So that was me, good old bonny [S]cotland. Where was I. Sour grapes, yes.

I believe this is one of the reasons why many people cannot recall seeing too much about Kelman on television. The above quote is a good example of how a person might control media reportage and the use of their comments. Restricted language forms usually serve to partition non-powerful social groups from powerful social groups. In this case, Kelman used societal norms about unacceptable language to reduce the negative media attention. The language he used prevented the media from reframing or replaying any part of the speech he gave. Essentially, this is one way in which someone might survive negative media onslaught after winning a controversial major prize.
6. Some Final Remarks

Kelman says of the hostility over the Booker Prize: “It continued for a long time and I had to fight hard to sustain and rediscover my concentration.” (Agate, 1998: 10). Since Kelman won the Booker Prize he has continued writing and teaching creative writing. He also got work in the USA and spent some time at Goldsmiths College in London.

Interestingly, he recently was appointed a professor of Creative Writing at the Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities — not through the Scottish Literature Department but through the English Literature Department (Agate, 1998: 10; Walsh, 1999: 2). On a wider social level, Kelman became active in international affairs which involved the rights of people, especially in suppressed situations such as Kurdistan. He works with Amnesty International, and so on. Kelman also has a strong interest in developing other writers. He has encouraged new writers to find their own voice, and has influenced many writers, including Scottish authors such as Janice Galloway, Duncan McLean, Ian Rankin, and Irvine Welsh. He also recently made the 2001 long-list for his most recent book, *Translated Accounts*.

To summarise, this essay has outlined some of the positive and negative aspects of the Booker Prize. Also, it has been demonstrated how and why an author may have to survive such an award. It is clear that James Kelman has been able to negotiate a passage between many differing social groups successfully. More importantly, Kelman’s work remains as full of integrity as before, he has used his power to unselfish ends, and he has set a great example for other Scottish writers.

References


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*Kelman is studied at Glasgow in the “Foreign Literature in Translation” course (Walsh, 1999: 2). Kelman says: My work gets taught in other countries as a normal thing, as literature, and yet here it’s foreign. When I go abroad, it really is a breath of fresh air to be treated as a writer, because that doesn’t happen in this country [Scotland]. It’s like being an ethnic in your own community” (Agate, 1998: 10).*


Walsh, Maeve (1999) “It was five years ago today: How controversial it was, how controversial.” Independent on Sunday, 21 March 1999, p.2.
