

The week in books

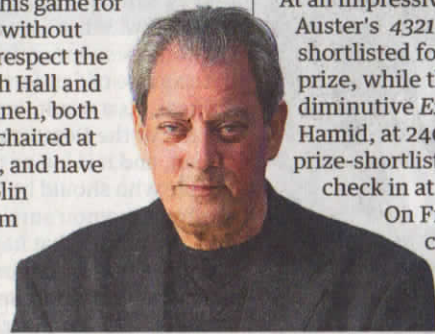
Judging the Booker judges

This week the email from the Man Booker's publicity team arrived, with its announcement of the shortlist: three Americans; two debuts; two formerly shortlisted authors; one winner of a major prize set up in opposition to the Man Booker; and one grand old man. Curious indeed, I thought, and then, as my more reptilian brain kicked in, I started playing the odds. Horse-trading? Who pushed for what? Why were names such as Zadie Smith, Sebastian Barry and Arundhati Roy whittled off the longlist?

As a literary editor for many years, and a former judge, I have sometimes joked with friends that the year that I correctly predicted the Man Booker result was the year I judged it. It is, delightfully, unpredictable. The longlist did seem like a mix-tape of greatest hits (thankfully nobody put on the Rushdie) - and yet the only two surprise tracks are on the shortlist.

With a different set of judges each year, it is a fool's errand to try to guess the eventual winner. So I have always had a simple formula: never judge the books - study the judges.

In the infamous year of having a former spook looking at literature, the prize nearly collapsed under the banalities, until a tried-and-tested victor was put in place (Julian Barnes, with *The Sense of an Ending*). This year's judges are a curious mixture. Having been in this game for so long, I can say without hesitation that I respect the opinions of Sarah Hall and Lila Azam Zanganeh, both of whom I have chaired at literary festivals, and have long admired Colin Thubron and Tom Phillips, whose work I used to push on creative



writing students. I have not met the chair, Baroness Lola Young. But these are people I take seriously, and their decisions should be taken seriously.

But seriously: Paul Auster? The new book strikes me as bloated Borges. What he managed in "The Garden of Forking Paths" it takes Auster a book longer than *Ulysses* to play around in. It's a very macho book, not in content, but in form. After years of slender novels and slim pickings we get the huge work, and it is huge work to finish it.

Another Booker koan: the front-runner never wins. I quite liked George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, but it had a musty air of nostalgic experimentation. Ali Smith (*Autumn*) appears to be always the bridesmaid, and seems content with that - as she observed, Angela Carter never won the Booker. The debuts, *History of Wolves* by Emily Fridlund and *Elmet* by Fiona Mozley, which I read yesterday, are good; at points very good indeed. Mohsin Hamid (*Exit West*), like Auster, attempts alternative realities but has the upper hand in politics.

If you want to win at the Man Booker - as a punter - then here's the strategy: find five friends and each of you place a bet on one of the books. One of you will win and you can divide the dividends sixfold. That's the only way to win. **Stuart Kelly**

A few words on few words

At an impressive 880 pages, Paul Auster's *4321* is the longest novel shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, while the shortest is the diminutive *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, at 240. But the shortest prize-shortlisted novels this week check in at only 25. Words, that is.

On Friday, Bath Spa celebrated 25 years of creative writing at the university by showcasing the



Casa Magni: Shelley's house in Lerici, Liguria. Below left, Paul Auster

winners of its recent Novel in 25 Words competition at the launch of its new anthology, *A Place in Words*. The shortlisted novels were:

Early Learning by Clare Gallagher

"With boys she hit harder. Hit at the child he once was. Thirty years' 'exemplary classroom practice'. The soft palm of so many small hands."

FYI by Kelly Doran

"Obviously I'm not judging Carl; I just think it would've been nice to know about the whole pineapple situation before I moved in with him."

Rise of the Shy Horticulturalist by Michael Hunt

"Veni, vedi, Aesculus hippocastanum: I came, I saw, I conkered. Caesar of playgrounds, bullied no more, commander of string, nut and a smattering of Latin."

The winner, Doran's *FYI*, was read out by the Oscar-winning actor and BSU chancellor Jeremy Irons at the ceremony. The anthology includes an introduction by Tessa Hadley, a deleted scene from Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, Nathan Filer on "How to Write an Award-Winning First Novel" and a story by Philip Hensher.

Brevity is the soul of wit, and the very short story is nothing new. The six-word novel, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn", is often attributed to Ernest Hemingway and a \$10 bet, but similar tales appeared as far back as 1906. Take that, Twitter generation.

Katy Guest

A sonata for Shelley

From the whitewashed balcony of Percy Bysshe Shelley's house, it sounded like a sonata for sea and harp: the mellifluous notes of a piece by Liszt called "A Breath" from within, entwined with the lapping tide of the Bay of Poets, in Liguria. These are the waters in which one of our greatest poets drowned in 1822. Last week the people of Lerici were allowed into the house, Casa Magni, for the first time - a fitting climax to the *Suoni di Golfo (Sounds of the Bay)* festival. "It's an emotional day for me," festival director Gianluca Marcianò said. "I was born here, grew up here, and like you all, had only walked past this house, itself always a legend."

Shelley arrived in Italy in 1818 in flight from stultifying reaction in

Britain (*plus ça change*), surveillance and impending persecution for his atheist beliefs, Jacobin sympathies and championing of the Irish cause. But also for entangled personal reasons: with his wife Mary, their two children, friend Claire Claremont and her daughter Allegra, in order to return the latter to her father, Lord Byron. In the following four years, both the Shelleys' children and Allegra would die, as would a further daughter, Elena, whom Shelley sired by another, unknown, woman - possibly Claire, probably Elisa, the maid.

"Italy at first acquaintance seemed to awake so many correspondences and resonances in Shelley's mind that it came like a revelation," writes his biographer Richard Holmes. These traumatic years were also a time of explosive creativity, producing some of his finest poetry.

Shelley and his oeuvre had forged an inspired and inspiring entwinement between morality, culture and politics, and his vision of art intervening in society has been the propulsion of the festival. Marcianò's endeavours include not just the young orchestra he convened from all over world, but projects in music for peace in former Yugoslavia, the Middle East and the Caucasus. Shelley, a music lover and revolutionary poet, would have savoured this festival and its ethos. He spent his time at Casa Magni sailing and communicating with Byron and similarly exiled radical friends nearby, Edward Williams and Leigh Hunt - and working apace.

After a radical "summit" at Pisa with Byron and others, Shelley and Williams set sail for Lerici from Livorno in Shelley's beloved boat, Don Juan. A storm caught them unawares, leaving Mary widowed within these walls from which the harp's resonance echoed on the warm Mediterranean breeze. **Ed Vulliamy**