

# A COMMON GROUND? BOOK PRIZE CULTURE IN EUROPE

CLAIRE SQUIRES

## Abstract

This article argues that research into literary prizes can potentially be extremely pertinent in the understanding of the material and ideological conditions of the production and reception of literature and literary value. As such, the analysis of prizes awarded is similar to the wider project of book history and publishing studies, and in their fusion of cultural and economic capital, literary prizes are thus part of the larger environment in which books are produced, distributed and consumed. Through an examination of the impact of eligibility requirements and the reception of prize-winning books, particularly within the European context, this article examines the vital role of prizes in the creation of communities of writers and the development of communities of readers. The article considers a variety of methodologies for the study of literary prizes. It calls for an analysis both quantitative and qualitative, and that pays attention to both the histories and development of individual prizes, and the wider negotiations book prize culture makes with the publishing industries and culture in general, both on the “common ground” of European and global prize cultures, and in its regional and national differences.

Claire Squires is Senior Lecturer in Publishing, Oxford Brookes University, e-mail: [csquires@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:csquires@brookes.ac.uk).

## Introduction

"Citizens of the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland"; "from Central European countries," "using the French language, but [...] not of French origin": such demarcations suggests ideas of nation and community, asylum and entrance, passports and control. The post-Communist, post-September 11th Europe of the 2000s is one ill at ease with such considerations, its borders assailed by those fleeing political persecution and economic deprivation, and with internal uncertainties about how each country – and the continent – should be governed. And yet the demarcations that begin this article are not those of the customs officer or the border police, but of the eligibility requirements for literary prizes; respectively, for the Man Booker Prize, the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie, and the Vilenica Literary Awards.<sup>1</sup>

Over six hundred literary prizes exist in Europe today, a vast number which is only a small sub-set of the tally of international awards.<sup>2</sup> A glimpse at their variety of eligibility requirements, prize money or other form of reward, judging criteria and mission statements quickly gives an impression of the diversity of such awards. These range from the long-existent that offer only token financial rewards, such as the French Prix Goncourt, with its prize of €10, to the more recently established, which give impressive cash prizes, such as the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, with its total of €100,000. Prizes also exist for books written for children, by women, by black people, by those under 35, or over 60. There are also awards that are concerned more with the look of the book than its contents (e.g. the British Book Design and Production Awards), or exist with the aim of encouraging translation and hence rights sales (e.g. the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize, or the Astrid Lingren Translation Prize), or privilege lifetime achievement over the single book (most notably, the Nobel Prize in Literature).

This article, presented in a volume that is concerned with the methodology of publishing studies, surveys this bewildering variety of literary prizes, and asks what the point of researching and analysing book awards is, and how it links to the study of book history and the contemporary publishing industry. It also moves towards considering how a methodology for the comparative study of literary awards might be created, and what it might reveal about the European context.

## What Is the Reward in Researching Literary Prizes?

At the beginning of his article "Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art," James English makes the claim that "There is no form of cultural capital so ubiquitous, so powerful, so widely talked about, and yet so little explored by scholars as the cultural prize" (English 2002, 109). It is certainly true that the most prominent of literary prizes acquire remarkable visibility in the media, as well as being given display space in bookshops, both of which make a substantial contribution to the promotion and sales of the prize-winning books.

The glitz of the award ceremony – or at least the award ceremonies of the better endowed prizes like the Man Booker – offers a further analogy of Europe in flux, in which the free-flowing champagne, the dinner-jacketed attendees and the generous company sponsorship are a symbol of a Western consumer lifestyle, in which capitalism turns its benevolent smile upon the arts. Lavish events and corporate

entertainment work towards making such prizes appear highly desirable to all elements of the supply chain: author, publisher, bookseller and reader.

But what reward will be gained by the researcher studying the workings of particular literary prizes, or literary prize culture in general? English asserts that cultural prizes are an ultimate – and underexplored – form of “cultural capital.” Developing the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu who, in “The Field of Cultural Production,” denoted literary prizes as one of the major forms of critical acclaim contributing to a writer’s “cultural” rather than “economic capital,” English goes on in his article to explore the cultural prize (including the literary prize, a sub-category of cultural prizes). He uses the Booker Prize as his main example, while also considering the Turner Prize (for British art). In so doing, he contemplates how Bourdieu’s work might be applied to cultural prizes in the latter half of the twentieth century. Through an examination of writers’ and artists’ refusal of awards, he argues that in the course of the 1960s and 1970s a shift took place whereby it was no longer possible for a “refusal [to be] counted upon to reinforce one’s artistic legitimacy by underscoring the specificity or the properly autonomous character of one’s cultural prestige, its difference from mere visibility or ‘success’” (English 2002, 121). English thus introduces the concept of “journalistic capital (visibility, celebrity, scandal)” as the mediating – and transforming – force between economic and cultural capital in the late twentieth century (English 2002, 123).

The prize culture that English describes – a culture of the heavily promoted artistic prize – is the realm of marketing and promotion, in which meaning proliferates in the promotional circuit and value is seen to be constructed rather than absolute. As Andrew Wernick puts it in his poststructuralist account of “Authorship and the Supplement of Promotion,” “There is no *hors-promotion*” (Wernick 1993, 101). English contends that the “rules no longer apply,” and that the “two discreet zones” of cultural and economic capital “must be set aside” as a means of understanding the production of value (English 2002, 125, 126). Instead, English calls for, via Michel de Certeau’s critique of Bourdieu in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), an examination of “tactics [and...] the many forms of provisional and witty alliance, duplicity, and double-dealing that characterize effective instances of contemporary cultural agency, [...] the fluid and improvisational practices of intraconversion that defy any reduction to simple law of opposition” (English, 2002, 128).

In practical terms, what English calls for is “study of the concrete instruments of exchange and conversion whose rise is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of our recent cultural history”: cultural prizes, corporate patronage and sponsorship, arts festivals, book clubs (English 2002, 127). As English comments, “these phenomena have generated a good deal of journalistic coverage and comment, but scholars have barely begun to study them in any detail, to construct their histories, gather ethnographic data from their participants, come to an understanding of their specific logics or rules and of the different ways they are being played and played with” (English 2002, 128). The analysis of literary prizes, as one specific example of the “phenomena” of “recent cultural history,” provides concrete examples of institutions and the rules by which they function (the sponsors, the prize-giving bodies, the eligibility criteria etc.), as well as the ideological contexts both in which they operate and which they also construct. As an aspect of the discipline of book history – a subject situated at the borderlines of Literature, History, Publish-

ing Studies, Economics and Sociology – literary prizes can afford the researcher a pertinent view of the material and ideological conditions of the production and reception of literature and literary value.

The call to reconstruct the workings of literary prizes made by English, then, is the same one made by book history generally. In Nicolas Barker's essay "Intentionality and Reception Theory," he discusses the history of the book in evolutionary terms:

*The process is one of Darwinian selection and survival: of all the different intentions involved, those of writer, editor or compositor, publisher, bookseller or reviewer, reader at first or second hand, or of those still further removed, only some survive to form that part of the general reception (and onward transmission) of the text (Barker 1993, 200).*

In a text's travel through time, intentional impulses, suggests Barker, will be scattered or obscured, thus forging the nature of its reception. Following the pattern of intentions lost or transformed, and receptions made, is the project of book history, with the history of loss – through a history of constraint, censorship, arbitrariness – arguably as important as the history of the achievement. The history of the book, in its role in recuperating transmission, reception and the desires that motivate them, is itself, in other words, an intending intervention that, through its representations, influences the process and hence the field itself. It is thus part of that very "journalistic capital" that mediates between the cultural and the economic or, to rephrase and subtly reorientate, it is what might be termed "scholarly capital." The investigation of the impact of literary prizes, the reconstruction of their contexts and the analysis of their ideologies can make a very meaningful contribution to this scholarly capital, to our understanding of the phenomena of recent cultural history, and to the way in which those phenomena operate.

## The Scholarship of Literary Prizes

Although there remains – as English rightly points out – much to be studied in the field of the literary prize, it is not completely uncharted territory. English's own forthcoming book-length study, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* will do much to remedy this. There have been other scholarly examinations of literary prize culture, with the Booker Prize in particular attracting much attention in the British and English-language sphere. Richard Todd's *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain* extends his thesis from the prize itself to an analysis of the status of literary fiction as a market commodity. Luke Strongman, in *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* provides more textual than contextual analysis, but nonetheless examines the role of the Booker in leading debate around, and constructing conceptions of, "the after-text of Empire": in this case, the postcolonial and post-imperial novel (Strongman 2002, xii). A lengthy section of Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* is concerned with the role of the Booker in promoting postcolonial literature as an exotic commodity. My own article "A Guide to Literary Prizes" (Squires 2000) considers the question of literary value with regard to a variety of different book awards in the UK.

Equally, there are studies of literary prizes in other geographical and linguistic contexts, both European and beyond. To give just a couple of examples, there is Britta Scheideler's "Von Konsens zu Kritik: Der Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels," Priscilla P Clark and Terry Nichols Clark's "Patrons, Publishers and Prize: The Writer's Estate in France," and Paula Burnett's "Hegemony or Pluralism? The Literary Prize and the Post-Colonial Project in the Caribbean."<sup>3</sup>

Literary prize studies also now have its own reference bible in the shape of *The Europa Directory of Literary Awards and Prizes* (2002), which is a listing of "more than 1,000 awards from some 70 countries" (2002, v). The volume will inevitably need augmenting and updating, and will always remain an imperfect document. Nonetheless, it serves as a good reference guide to the subject, as well as a clear indication of the variety and complexity of literary prize culture, which can be supplemented by a range of national agencies and other websites that provide information about literary prizes, including Booktrust in the UK ([www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)), The Booklist Center website in the US (<http://home.comcast.net/~dwtaylor1>), or the French <http://prix.litteraire.info>.

In October 2003, Oxford Brookes University hosted the *Culture and the Literary Prize* conference, during which about forty speakers met to disseminate the findings of their research into prizes as diverse as the Hawthornden, the Prix Fémina Vie Heureuse and the Ingeborg Bachmann, and to debate the issues arising out of a consideration of the function and impact of literary prizes.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship of the literary prize is undoubtedly a strongly developing area of study, rich for analysis and interpretation. Access to archival sources as well as individuals and organisations involved with literary prizes is clearly crucial to such study. The placement of the Booker Prize Archive at Oxford Brookes is a sign of the mutual importance with which literary prizes and academia regard one another.<sup>5</sup>

## The Role and Purpose of Literary Prizes

What, then, might the scholarship of the literary prize reveal? Why is it an area that researchers might want to explore, and what might it tell us about the particular cultures in which literary prizes operate and which they influence? Which general principles of book history and publishing studies might the study of book awards illuminate? And, moreover, what might the scholarship of the literary prize entail?

As I previously asserted, cultural awards can offer a fascinating and informative insight into the material and ideological conditions of the production and reception of literature and literary value. When discussed in terms of Bourdieu's field of cultural production, they can demonstrate the fusion of cultural and economic capital, mediated by journalistic capital. In terms of the central tension of the publishing industry – between culture on the one hand and commerce on the other – literary prizes are situated on the fault line. In their aptly titled *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, Coser et al. expound their thesis that:

*book publishing in the past as in the present has operated under the pressures of the marketplace, the countinghouse, and the literary and intellectual currents of the day. The quest for profit and the demands of excellence have all too often refused to go hand in hand. One should not be surprised that these same tensions, albeit in somewhat different forms, are still here today* (Coster et al. 1982, 35).

The negotiation between marketplace, counting house and the literary and intellectual environment is perennial in the publishing industry and so, as an adjunct to the industry, literary prizes are subject to those negotiations too. Literary prizes frequently intend to reward literary value – to fulfil “the demands of excellence” – but can also have the effect of increasing sales and promoting business.

In terms of their impact on regional, national and international publishing industries, literary prizes, then, are part of what Robert Darnton, in his model of the communications circuit presented in “What is the History of Books?” names “other elements in society”: i.e. “Intellectual Influences and Publicity,” “Economic and Social Conjuncture” and “Political and Legal Sanctions” (Darnton 1990, 112-3), and Thomas R Adams and Nicolas Barker, in “A New Model for the Study of the Book” term “The whole socio-economic conjuncture,” comprising “Intellectual influences,” “Political, legal and religious influences,” “Commercial pressures” and “Social behaviour and taste” (Adams and Baker 1993, 14). They are part of the larger environment in which books are produced, distributed and consumed.

They also have a range of specific purposes which affect different parts of the communications circuit, and have particular impact on varying elements of the publishing supply chain, depending on both the nature of the individual prize and the environment in which it is functioning. These roles can be defined in four broad categories, which relate to Adams and Barker’s revised model for the study of the book, and their five phases of the book of publication, manufacture, distribution, reception and survival (Adams and Barker, 1993).

Perhaps the most obvious relation of literary prizes to this five-stage model is in the phase of reception. One of the most important roles of prizes – ostensibly the most important role – is to recognise and reward quality. In this regard, they work in a similar way to book reviewers, acting as gatekeepers and guardians of culture. Judgement is a key function of the literary prize, increasing the cultural capital of the book and informing the opinions of potential future readers. Fundamental to an examination of this phase of reception, then, is the criteria by which the judge or judges make their decisions. Equally as relevant, though, is the criteria by which the judges are chosen: are they members of a perceived literary establishment? Writers themselves? Academics? Members of the target audience? (Using children or young adults as judges for prizes – as done by the Blue Peter Children’s Book Awards in the UK and the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens in France – is one example of the target audience being co-opted as judges). Moreover, it is vital to ask the question who appoints the judges. The answer to this reveals much about the ideological construction of the particular prize. The Man Booker, for example, has a different set of judges every year, but a more permanent management committee whose role it is to oversee the long-term direction of the prize, and to choose the judges annually.

To turn to the second broad category, prizes also have a very important role in distribution, if distribution is taken to mean not just the act of physically moving books from one place to another, but also the rationale for why one book circulates more widely and effectively than another. This is the realm of marketing mentioned earlier, in which literary prizes, via the public act of judgement, are promoters of books, sometimes substantially increasing the exposure of chosen titles and authors, and hence their appeal and access to the market. The “phenomenon of literary celebrity,” as Joe Moran defines it in his book *Star Authors*, in which au-

thors and their lives are promoted as heavily as the books themselves, is closely connected to prize culture and the promotional circuit, to the glamour of the award ceremony and the public appearance of the literary creator. This role has a direct link to sales, and hence the economic capital accrued by the title, but it is also linked to the mediating journalistic capital referred to by English. The award of the Booker Prize to J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* in 1999, for example, increased the sales of the novel ten-fold, going from £5000 revenue in the week before the award to £50,000 the week after (*Book Sales Yearbook* 2000, 67-8). Ironically Coetzee was not actually present at the awards ceremony to receive his prize, but the *Guardian* nonetheless intimated his literary celebrity by printing a colour image of the author's empty chair on the front page of the newspaper (Gibbons 1999).<sup>6</sup>

It can also be supposed – though much research remains to be done here – that literary prizes have a crucial role in a third category: the survival of books. The award of a literary prize can be seen as another form of the instant appreciation offered by the book review – the stage that Lindsay Duguid, the Fiction Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* calls “Before It Becomes Literature,” in her essay of the same title. However, literary prizes can also be viewed as one of the first steps in the canonisation of books, and in the continuing presence of certain texts in bookshops and libraries beyond their initial year of publication. A revealing research project in this area could establish the correlation (or otherwise) between a book winning or being shortlisted for various prizes and the admission of the book onto school and university syllabi.

The final, and by no means insignificant, role of literary prizes is perhaps related to all five phases of Adams and Barker's model, but can have a particularly direct link to production. The place of the book award in literary development can have a vital role in encouraging literary production (and consequently manufacture, distribution, reception and eventually survival). Literary prizes can be used to encourage and develop regional and national publishing industries, particularly those whose economies are disadvantaged or within which a reading culture is less developed. Examples could include awards for literature such as the Caine Prize for African Writing and the NOMA Award for Publishing in Africa, or prizes such as Booktrust Teenage Prize, which encourage a notoriously difficult group of readers to read: the teenager. Book prizes can also encourage – even subsidise – the production of literatures about minority or at risk languages and cultures, for example the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes, awarded to an individual in recognition of a contribution to the cultural life of the Catalan-speaking region, or An duais don bhfilíocht as Gaeilge, for Irish-language poetry.

Literary prizes, then, can have a profound and enduring impact on the publishing industry when viewed through the phases of the study of the book. What, then, might be an appropriate methodology of literary prize scholarship, particularly within a European context?

## Methodologies of Literary Prize Scholarship

A volume such as *The Europa Directory of Literary Awards and Prizes* suggests one way in which a comparative study of literary awards might be constructed. As a reference guide, it demonstrates a number of variables relating to each literary prize, such as the eligibility requirements, the prize kitty, the organising and/or

sponsoring body, and the application and judging procedure. A matrix of such variables is a solid starting point for any comparative analysis of literary prizes, and would grant any researcher of an individual prize a useful understanding of book prize culture in general. Common aspects and difference between the variables could be easily established by such a method. Yet such a matrix would only offer bald information and statistics without further investigation and interpretation. The study of literary prizes should be very strongly qualitative as well as quantitative. What, otherwise, is to be made of the fact that the two most arguably visible prizes in the UK and France – the Man Booker and the Prix Goncourt – offer very different amounts of money to the winners (£50,000 and €10 respectively)? What statements are actually made by the sponsors and prize-giving bodies by the amounts that they offer their laureates? In recent years the major prizes in the UK, for example, expressed their competitiveness towards each other by the amount of award money they offered. When the Orange Prize for Fiction, a prize only awarded to female novelists, was established in 1995 as a political statement against the frequently-male dominated shortlists of the Booker Prize, its organising committee upstaged Booker by offering £10,000 more than the Booker's sum of £20,000. When Booker acquired a new sponsor in the shape of the Man Group in 2002, one of the first moves was to lift its prize purse to £50,000, and thus to reclaim the prize's supremacy. On the other hand, the IMPAC Award may be one of Europe's richest prizes, but it is debatable whether its generous sponsors have yet garnered for the prize the journalistic capital that some of its poorer relations possess.

What, then, would be a methodology of analysing book prizes, which moves beyond a comparative matrix of quantitative information? And in what ways might this methodology be rendered particularly appropriate to European contexts?

The communications circuit described by Adams and Barker – that of production, manufacture, distribution, reception and survival – offers, as demonstrated earlier, a basis for analysis of the impact of literary prizes on the cycle of the book, and consequently, the impact on the cultural and ideological meanings conveyed within books. The specific impact of literary prizes can be measured in the four categories described earlier: reception, distribution (or marketing in a broader sense), survival (or canonisation) and production (or literary development). These four categories cover all of the ways in which literary prizes affect the transmission of texts, and so are usefully incorporated into book history and publishing studies.

Literary prizes, though, while very closely connected to the publishing industry and its cycles of production and consumption, also have histories of their own which are not fully explained by the communications circuit of the book. There is much work still to be done in establishing the histories and development of individual prizes as institutions in their own right, alongside their larger impact on the book communications circuit. However, the study of individual prizes risks falling prey to an approach that, in concentrating on the no doubt fascinating history of one particular prize, ignores the negotiations that the prize makes with the publishing industry and culture in general.

Furthermore, beyond the book communications circuit and the light that a literary prize can shed on the past and present structures of publishing, it must be considered both how literary prizes impact on a nation's (or region's, or continent's) culture, and also how it reflects that culture. One issue of particular relevance to the European context can illustrate this. Literary prizes, as the opening

paragraph of this article suggests, are established with certain eligibility requirements which reflect past and present – and sometimes, aspirationally, future – concepts of communities of writers. The Booker Prize, with its entry requirements of Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland citizenship, refers to the imperial history of Great Britain and the concomitant colonial structure of its publishing industry. The imperial past of the nation is reflected in the British Commonwealth territorial rights acquired by the British publishing industry. It is telling that Giles Clark, in *Inside Book Publishing* describes the traditional split of rights as follows: “the UK and US publishers [...] have been in separate ownership and have divided the world English book market between them” (Clark 2001, 62). The link between Empire and business is clear in both actual and metaphorical terms. These “rights” are now being eroded by challenges to closed markets, but the principle remains in the eligibility requirements of the Booker Prize. It is in many ways appropriate, then, that Booker has come to be seen as primary in the promotion of postcolonial fiction, awarding authors from postcolonial nations such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy.<sup>7</sup> Alastair Niven, a past Booker judge sensitive to the debate surrounding the contentious term “Commonwealth Literature,” states in his essay “A Common Wealth of Talent” that:

*The Booker Prize sets out the story of the novel in English, outside America. No path is more boldly charted than that of Commonwealth writing. There may be no such thing as Commonwealth literature, but there are certainly individual writers from post-colonial environments whose work has manifestly changed attitudes to fiction and our knowledge of the world* (Niven 1998, 41).<sup>8</sup>

As a literary prize, the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie shares Booker’s colonial past and postcolonial future. It continues the process of promoting French (and thereby all the baggage that an imperial language bears), but also acknowledges the post-colonial status – for good as well as bad – of the French language in former colonies. It is worth noting that the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie offers not just a financial reward to the author, but also a year’s marketing of the book, thus combining the roles of reception and distribution (Europa 2002, 275). It thereby works to encourage a community of writers (though a geographically and culturally diasporic one) and to gain a community of readers. As Niven goes on to say, “what are writers but the articulate voice of nations?” (Niven 1998, 42). Although the practices of literary prizes and cultural industries throughout Europe can vary widely (as well as display similarities) it is perhaps in the creation of communities of articulate voices – and hopefully the ears to listen – that literary prizes achieve the common ground of European culture, thus making their study a highly relevant act.

It is clear, then, that literary prizes are intrinsically bound up with the histories of nations, empires and their peoples. Europe’s long history as both coloniser and colonised, as a place of emigration and immigration, as a place of war and reconciliation, is played out – among so many other aspects of our common and differentiated culture – in literary prizes. Literary prizes, through their eligibility requirements and rosters of prize-winners, create communities of writers and develop communities of readers. Through the construction of literary value, and their

interaction with the cultural, social, ideological and economic practices of European nations, literary prizes offer to the researcher a fertile arena of study which is both fascinating in itself but also, more importantly, extremely telling in its wider implications. To analyse the common ground of book prize culture, and its regional and national differences, is, therefore, a vital and revealing scholarly project, for which work has only just begun.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes:

1. All three of these eligibility requirements have been derived from their respective entries in *The Europa Directory of Literary Awards and Prizes* (2002).
2. This figure is derived from *The Europa Directory of Literary Awards and Prizes*, which excludes categories such as "small local prizes [...] where the eligibility is severely restricted; awards which are very specialized or academic by nature; and awards which are mainly for journalism" (*Europa* 2002, v).
3. I am currently developing a bibliography of studies and information sources for literary prizes. For further information, or to contribute to the developing bibliography, contact [csquires@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:csquires@brookes.ac.uk).
4. The conference was convened by myself and Daniel Lea of Oxford Brookes University.
5. For further details about the Booker Prize Archive go to [www.brookes.ac.uk/services/library/speccoll.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/library/speccoll.html).
6. In *Star Authors*, Joe Moran discusses "author-recluses" such as J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, whose absence only increases their writerly "mystique" (2000, 54-6).
7. To Salman Rushdie for *Midnight's Children* (1981), to Ben Okri for *The Famished Road* (1991), to Peter Carey for *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), to Michael Ondaatje for *The English Patient* (1992) and to Arundhati Roy for *The God of Small Things* (1997).
8. Niven alludes in his comment to S Rushdie's essay "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" (Rushdie 1991).

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