

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Goldsmiths, University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 27: English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The Goldsmiths Prize for Fiction at its Most Novel: Enriching and Shaping Contemporary Literary Culture		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Alan Downie	Professor of English	1978-2017
Dr Tim Parnell	Senior Lecturer in English	1994-
Professor Francis Spufford	Professor of Creative Writing	2007-
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> November 2013-December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>The Goldsmiths Prize, awarded to the most adventurous and innovative contemporary novels published in the British Isles, has supported and encouraged new forms of writing, encouraged publishers to take risks, and, in bringing new readers to the work of its winners and shortlistees, helped change attitudes towards kinds of fiction traditionally considered inaccessible. The prize, conceived and run by Dr Tim Parnell, whose work on Laurence Sterne engages with a key moment of creative freedom in the history of the early novel, directly builds on Goldsmiths' ongoing research into, and creative response to, the eighteenth-century literary traditions of exuberantly inventive and unconventional fiction.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The research informing the impact described in this case study has been undertaken by Dr Tim Parnell, Professor Alan Downie, and Professor Francis Spufford. It belongs to Goldsmiths' long-standing tradition of inquiry into the nature of the novel, and comprises critically-informed creative practice and literary-historical scholarship. It shares a concern with the characteristics of the 'new species' of fiction which emerged in Britain during the eighteenth century. Written before the conventions of the genre were largely fixed in the nineteenth century, such fiction was novel in more than name.</p> <p>The long view of the novel derived from research into its earliest forms and themes enabled the creation of a prize conceived as an intervention into a contemporary literary culture in which the British experimental novel had endured a long period of marginalisation. Notwithstanding the creative daring of eighteenth-century fiction and the brief flowering of experiment associated with modernism in the last century, the British novel has typically been conservative in comparison to its counterparts in Europe and elsewhere. If the popular novel in the eighteenth century was intrinsically experimental, its twenty-first century counterparts were most read and admired within the relatively narrow confines of university syllabi. This situation was implicitly encouraged by major book prizes which sought to reward nebulous qualities associated with the idea of the 'best' fiction. The Goldsmiths Prize was accordingly created to encourage the writing of, and to bring new readers to, works of fiction truest to the spirit of invention and creative freedom found in the eighteenth-century novel.</p> <p>Parnell's work on the eighteenth-century novel and Laurence Sterne's contribution to it (resulting in critical editions of <i>Tristram Shandy</i> (R1) and <i>A Sentimental Journey</i> (R2), articles, chapters in books (R3 &amp; R4) and the forthcoming <i>Literary Life</i>), naturally expanded into an</p>		

interest in the experimental traditions in the contemporary novel. Sterne informs the prize as its tutelary spirit, and *Tristram Shandy* serves as a point of reference for the novel genre's near limitless possibilities.

Downie's research has focussed on the distinctive qualities of eighteenth-century print culture. He has published monographs on two key novelists of the period, Defoe and Fielding, and his *Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (R5) constitutes a new and significant contribution to current thinking about the nature of the genre.

Spufford's *Golden Hill* (R6) draws on the conventions, structure and language of eighteenth-century fiction. As chair of judges for the 2014 Goldsmiths Prize, he brought to it the conviction that the creative freedoms of the early novel offered a way of energising historical fiction in particular. As he went about his work as judge, he was further inspired by the prize's implicit search for contemporary writing equal to the challenge laid down in *Tristram Shandy*, and found in the rule-scrambling tropes of eighteenth-century novels an ideal vehicle for the ideas about the blurring of boundaries which are central to his novel. *Golden Hill* is the creative counterpart to the critical work of Downie and Parnell. *Golden Hill* won the Costa First Novel Award 2016, the RSL Ondaatje Prize 2017, the Desmond Elliott Prize 2017, and was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction 2017.

### 3. References to the research

- R1. Parnell, T. (2000) *Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne*. London: J. M. Dent.
- R2. Parnell, T. and Jack, I. (2003) *A Sentimental Journey and other writings by Laurence Sterne*. Oxford: OUP.
- R3. Parnell, T. (2013) 'Laurence Sterne, Author of the Tale?', in: Juhas, K., Real, H. J. and Simon, S., eds. *Reading Swift: Papers from the Sixth Munster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 581-593.
- R4. Parnell, T. (2016) 'Sterne and mid-century fiction: the "vast empire of biographical freebooters", and the "crying volume"', in: Downie, J. A., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 264-281. (Submitted to REF2)
- R5. Downie, J. A., ed. (2016) *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Oxford: OUP.
- R6. Spufford, F. (2016) *Golden Hill*. London. Faber & Faber. (Submitted to REF2)

\*Outputs available on request, unless otherwise stated.

### 4. Details of the impact

The debates embodied by these research outputs have been deployed and re-imagined in the Goldsmiths Prize's conception and mission. Its distinctiveness in the current ecosystem of British literary prizes stems from its embeddedness in an academic culture of research and creative practice. First awarded in November 2013, the Goldsmiths Prize has always foregrounded its link to Sterne and eighteenth-century fiction by taking its logo from *Tristram Shandy*: the serpentine line which appears on our website and our social-media branding points both to Sterne's inventiveness and to current and future possibilities of creative freedom in the novel form. The prize has had a significant impact in two interrelated areas of literary culture:

#### 1. Writing and Publishing

The prize's profile and purpose have encouraged authors to experiment by creating a milieu in which innovation is rewarded and valued. Having had her novel rejected by several major publishers because it was perceived as too experimental, the prize's inaugural winner, Eimear McBride, stressed the value of the award in a largely conservative literary culture: the 'support that winning the Goldsmiths Prize gave *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* changed the entire life of the book. . . . It afforded me the previously impossible opportunity to connect with an interested and engaged readership' (IMP1). McBride's success and the interest generated by the prize's other nominees have led publishers to reassess conventional notions that formal innovation and commercial success are antithetical. The 'miracle' of the Goldsmiths Prize, according to Ali Smith, is that it has 'changed the industry' by persuading traditionally cautious publishers to take 'risks on works which are much more experimental' (IMP2). Such risk-taking is manifest in Hamish Hamilton's willingness to publish the two versions of Smith's *How to be Both* and Heinemann's investment in the typographical *exuberance* of Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY*. It is evident too in the fact that two of the prize's winners, McBride and Mike McCormack, who were published by small, independent publishers when their novels were submitted, were taken on by larger publishers (Faber & Faber and Canongate) in the wake of their wins.

With its focus on innovation, the prize casts its net wider than most other prizes and has consequently been able to generate interest in novels unnoticed by the mainstream literary media. Thus, Kevin Davey's *Playing Possum* (Aaaargh! Press) received its first review (in the *New Statesman*) as a result of being shortlisted in 2017 and Isabel Waidner's *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe) was reviewed in both the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian* following its shortlisting in 2019. Such critical attention brings readers to the books, either directly or because, as one of Hamish Hamilton's editors, Hermione Thompson, puts it, many 'booksellers follow the Goldsmiths Prize and value it as a metric of literary interest' (IMP3). The resulting boost to sales is seen most strikingly with novels published by small presses: Philip Terry's *Tapestry* (Reality Street) received 'a significant spike in sales following the shortlisting' and has now sold nearly 1000 copies for a publisher whose books 'normally sell between 100-200 copies' (IMP4); the publishers of *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* similarly record a 'spike in sales' after shortlisting, together with 'a lot more interest in international rights and rights in translation' and an increased 'interest' in Waidner's earlier work (IMP5); bookshops ordered over 1000 copies of Galley Beggar Press's two winning titles, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* and *Ducks*, *Newburyport* 'immediately after the prize announcement' (IMP6).

## 2. Literary culture

It is key to the prize's conception and purpose that its influence extends beyond the confines of the university, where literary innovation is already valued. To reach new audiences, it is important not only that its nominees should be publicised but also that its informing ethos be amplified and disseminated as widely as possible. This is achieved through the extensive media coverage the prize attracts as well as its partnership with the *New Statesman*. Shortlist and winner announcements have been covered by the following (among others): *The Guardian*, *The Daily Express*, *The Mail*, *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The TLS*, the BBC. Apart from giving detailed attention to shortlists and winners, the *New Statesman* co-presents the prize's popular events series, among which the *New Statesman*/Goldsmiths Prize lecture on 'Why the Novel Matters' reaches an audience of thousands through a combination of in-person attendance and print and online publication.

With the additional support of its social media channels (principally Twitter which currently has over 6,950 followers), the prize both brings new readers to novels that would not typically have attracted such attention and further shapes literary culture by creating a receptive

climate for innovative novels. As the literary agent, Lucy Luck, puts it, the prize has ‘opened up the conversation about literary fiction in ways’ that few would have predicted before it came into being (IMP7). The conversation is most clearly heard in such pieces as Sam Leith’s *Guardian* article, ‘Why we need difficult books’, which takes its cue from the imminent announcement of the 2018 winner (IMP8), but its effects are seen more subtly and significantly in the ways in which Britain’s most influential prize, the Booker, has embraced the language and concerns of the Goldsmiths Prize. Thus, their 2016 chair of judges talked of ‘[experimentation]’ as ‘one of [the prize’s] criteria’, along with ‘being innovative, being bold, courageous, a willingness to take risks, and being novel within the novel’ (IMP9).

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

IMP 1 [Article] Philip Maughan, ‘Ali Smith Wins the Goldsmiths Prize 2014 for her Novel “How to be Both”’, *New Statesman*, 12 November 2014.

IMP2 [Article] Sarah Shaffi, ‘Smith Credits Goldsmiths Prize with Changing Publishing’, *Bookseller*, 24 September 2015.

IMP 3 [Written Statement] Editor, Hamish Hamilton. Written testimony/response to questionnaire, 6 July 2020.

IMP 4 [Written Statement] Editor and publisher, Reality Street. Written testimony/response to questionnaire, 15 June 2020.

IMP5 [Written Statement] Editors and publishers, Dostoyevsky Wannabe. Written testimony/response to questionnaire, 22 June 2020.

IMP 6 [Written Statement] Co-director, Galley Beggar Press. Written testimony/response to questionnaire, 6 July 2020.

IMP 7 [Written Statement]: Literary agent, C&W. Written testimony, 16 July 2019.

IMP 8 [Article]: Sam Leith, ‘Pretentious, impenetrable, hard work . . . better? Why we need difficult books’, *Guardian*, 10 November 2018.

IMP 9 [Article]: Katherine Cowdrey, ‘The Man Booker judges explain their choice’, *Bookseller*, 13 September 2016.