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ARTS + FEATURES

booker winner beats the odds

By Galina Stolyarova

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Photo by Alexander Belenky / SPT

A Russian resident of Madrid was named winner of the 2003 Open Russia Booker Prize last week for his novel, "White on Black," published by St. Petersburg-based Limbus Press. Paralyzed from birth, Ruben David Gonzales Gallego did not attend the ceremony last Thursday, but the \$15,000 award guarantees him the publicity of Russia's most prestigious literary honor. Grandson of a general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, Gallego grew up in a series of Soviet homes for the permanently disabled - a harrowing experience scrupulously detailed in the pages of his novel.

St. Petersburg poet and critic Tatyana Voltskaya called Gonzales Gallego's victory a rare combination of talent and remarkable life experience.

"Of course, someone might be tempted to say that the writer won primarily owing to exploitation of his sorrowful childhood and his being disabled," she said.

"But 'White on Black' is a piece of genuine art, when the writer is not playing with words for the sake of form or experiment."

The award ceremony came two months after the shortlist of six finalists was announced. Founded in 1991 by the prestigious British Booker Prize, the Russian Booker was hailed as the first independent literary award since 1917. Worldwide attention zeroed in on the winners, who have included Bulat Okudzhava, Ludmila Ulitskaya and, last year, Oleg Pavlov.

However, with the proliferation of literary prizes, many readers now look elsewhere for Russia's literary avant-garde. In 1997, the prize lost its British backing when it was taken over by a branch of the Smirnoff vodka company. In 2002, it was turned over to the Open Russia Foundation, a fund of Yukos shareholders headed by jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Of the six novels that made it to this year's shortlist, only two - Gonzales Gallego's novel and Leonid Yuzefovich's "Kazaroza" - initially appeared as books. The others - Yelena Chizhova's "Monastery," Afanasy Mamedov's "Frau Shram," Leonid Zorin's "Jupiter" and Natalia Galkina's "Villa Renault" - were printed in journals, a vestige of the Soviet literary industry that has not fared well since publishing took off in the 1990s.

Established in St. Petersburg 15 years ago, Limbus Press became Russia's first private publishing house after the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Its general director, Konstantin Tublin, called the win of "White on Black" deserved and commendable.

"In my opinion, the jury's choice was incredibly easy this year," Tublin said. "In fact the real choice for the Booker was to either support Gonzales Gallego or just destroy itself. It is encouraging to see that the prize has chosen to live on."

Some of Gonzales Gallego's rivals were so impressed with his work that they have spoken publicly of the writer's talent. Yulia Belomlinskaya, representing St. Petersburg's Amphora Publishing House and who was nominated for her novel "Poor Girl," withdrew her name from the competition during the short-listing process when she heard that Gallego's book was in contention.

"She told the jurors that she believes all the laurels of the contest should go to Gallego, as his novel is extraordinary," said Amphora's chief editor Vadim Nazarov.

"She felt it would be dishonest of her to compete with someone whose novel she admires."

At a press conference before the winner was announced, critic Igor Shaitanov, who heads the Booker Prize jury, argued that the number of nominees drawn from literary journals is proof that they still cater to the public's taste.

But the question of what exactly the public wants to read seems far from settled. Given a choice of topics, all the finalists who attended the Booker Prize ceremony - Chizhova, Yuzefovich and Mamedov - focused on the question of where "popular" literature ends and "high" literature begins.

Yuzefovich, whose "Prince of the Wind" won the 2001 National Bestseller prize, was reluctant to box in any kind of writing, but he ventured to associate "popular" literature with demand, and "high" literature with quality of delivery.

Shaitanov has veered away from this debate by emphasizing the Booker's role in publicizing serious literature Russia-wide.

"They tell me that serious literature can only market from 5,000 to 15,000 copies [throughout Russia]," he said.

Despite the popularity of detective thrillers and bodice-rippers, however, Shaitanov is convinced that Russians would read better books if they could find them in their bookstores.

One of Gonzales Gallego's responsibilities over the next year will be to promote this vision. The Booker Prize "is an attempt to open Russia like a door, to satisfy an existing demand for literature," Shaitanov said.

"To be a successful writer a literary talent alone is not enough," Votskaya said.

"What is also needed is a desire to talk to the audiences and, most importantly, the message should be rich in content - in other words, the author has to have something to say. Gallego does by far meet all the criteria.

"What the reader is seeking [in a book] is love and death," Votskaya added. "And Gallego talks about love and death with tremendous strength."

Staff writer Rebecca Reich contributed to this report.