

Russian Authors Face Long Odds for Nobel

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Russian literature is a serious business. The books are heavy, the beards are long and the descriptions of women's upper lip hair are detailed. Russian authors from the 18th century onwards are read in classrooms from Tokyo to Buenos Aires and have been lauded the world over.

Writers of more contemporary times, however, may not have been quite as lucky as their 19th- or 20th-century forefathers, however. The Nobel Prize for literature, traditionally awarded in the month of October, is expected to be announced Thursday. While the academy is known for its secrecy, it is very unlikely that the annals of Russian literature will welcome another Nobel laureate this year.

The Swedish Academy, which has been criticized for not awarding talents like James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov, is almost impossible to read. The Nobel committee does not release the shortlist until 50 years after the prize is awarded and literary critics have been wrong far

more than they have been right in predicting the winner each year.

One outlet that has been surprisingly successful at choosing the future laureate is an unlikely source of literary expertise. Ladbrokes, a British sports betting website, did not accurately predict Chinese writer Mo Yan's victory last year but has become an oft-cited authority on the prize, as the author with the lowest odds on the site has won 50 percent of the time since the company opened up its book on the award in 2005. The site does not analyze each author's oeuvre as works of literature, but rather uses a combination of mentions of possible winners from prominent literary figures and the number of bets on each writer to set the odds.

According to the odds for this year, Russian authors have little shot at the prize. The post-modernist writer Viktor Pelevin was listed as a 50-to-1 possibility in 2011, though the prize ultimately went to Swede Tomas Transtr mer.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the dissident Soviet writer and poet, is perhaps the closest this year, though his odds at winning the award, 100 to 1, are still twice as long as the seemingly ludicrous idea of giving the award to folk legend Bob Dylan.

Alexander Donohue, who runs the Nobel Prize for literature bets at Ladbroke's, told The Moscow Times that at the end of last week, no money had yet been placed on the Russian writer who came to prominence during the Khrushchev thaw. The lack of interest from gamblers, despite the fact that the pot is one of the site's most international, compounds the minimal English-language chatter about Yevtushenko. By comparison, Donohue said thousands of British pounds have been placed on the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami and the American novelist Joyce Carol Oates, at 3 to 1 and 6 to 1, respectively.

A Russian writer has not won the award since 1987, when the exiled Joseph Brodsky won the prize for his work in both English and his native tongue. Yevtushenko, who now splits his time between Russia and teaching at the University of Tulsa, also had brushes with Communist Party authorities that put him in the company of a considerable group of literary heavyweights. Before Brodsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn won in 1970, state-sanctioned poet Mikhail Sholokov was awarded the prize in 1965 and Boris Pasternak won in 1958 for "Doctor Zhivago," which was smuggled out of Russia and published in Italy.

It is up for debate whether Russian literature's luster has faded when no longer butting up against Soviet censorship or whether the academy is simply looking in new places to recognize talent.

Meanwhile, Russia still has hope that its first post-Soviet author will receive the world's highest literary recognition. But you probably should not bet on it.

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