Feminist retellings of myth and history lead shortlist for Women's fiction prize

Alison Flood

Novels reassessing the stories of women in history, from Pat Barker's retelling of the Iliad to the Booker-winning story by Anna Burns of a teenage girl during the Troubles, dominate this year’s Women’s prize for fiction shortlist.

Barker, the British Booker prize-winning author famous for her Regeneration trilogy, is in the running for the £30,000 award with The Silence of the Girls, which tells the story of Briseis, a princess who is made a slave to Achilles, the man who killed her husband and brothers.

Greek myth and legend are also retold by a previous winner, Madeline Miller, in Circe, a twist on the story of the witch who seduces Homer’s Odysseus.

Kate Williams, chair of the judges, said: “The two tropes perpetually given to us in myths and stories are the beautiful, captive princess, and the evil witch who is too ugly for a man and therefore sits around trying to kill men. Here, you get those completely turned on their head and see they are living women, that the patriarchal system has written their stories for them, and what the truth could be.

“Suddenly we’re asking where are the women and what do the women think about this, which was ignored to a degree even 20 years ago.

“Anna Burns’s Milkman is doing it, too – the Troubles have been heavily covered but no one really talked about what the women were doing. We all know that history is written by the victors.

“These authors are pointing out these victors are men, even if women are on the winning side, because their stories have been written for them.”

All three stories are set in the past, but Williams was clear about their relevance to the world today, as the #MeToo movement forces a reassessment of the way in which women are seen - and see their own lives. “We are changing. We are saying that women’s perceptions and histories, even in a very masculine environment such as war, are important,” she said.

“What really struck us in Barker and Miller’s books is what hasn’t changed. Women’s bodies are still being used as collateral, women are still being attacked, the rape of women is still a military tool.”

The shortlist is completed with three very different novels: the debut Nigerian novelist Oyinkan Braithwaite’s My Sister, the Serial Killer, a dark comedy set in Lagos; Diana Evans’s Ordinary People, about two disaffected middle-aged couples and their families; and Tayari Jones’s An American Marriage, about a young African-American couple who are ripped apart when the husband is sentenced to 12 years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit.

Williams called the lineup “fiction at its best – brilliant, courageous and utterly captivating ... We fell totally in love with these books and the amazing worlds they created.”

Books from the 16-book longlist that did not make the cut include Sally Rooney’s bestselling second novel Normal People and Freshwater by Akwaeke Emezi, the first non-binary transgender author to be nominated for the prize since it was founded 23 years ago.

Williams, who is professor of history at the University of Reading, is joined on the judging panel by the journalists Arifa Akbar and Dolly Alderton, the campaigner and psychotherapist Leyla Hussein, and the digital entrepreneur Sarah Wood.

The winner of the award will be announced on 5 June.

The shortlist
Six in the frame

The Silence of the Girls
Pat Barker

My Sister, the Serial Killer
Oyinkan Braithwaite

Milkman
Anna Burns

Ordinary People
Diana Evans

An American Marriage
Tayari Jones

Circe
Madeline Miller

‘Women’s bodies are still being used as collateral, women are being attacked, the rape of women is still a military tool’

Kate Williams
Chair of the judges
The nominees for the Women's prize (from left) Madeline Miller, Tayari Jones, Anna Burns, Pat Barker, Diana Evans and Oyinkan Braithwaite.