

Eight female writers among Waterstones's pick of debut novels

Most talked about novel on Waterstones 11 annual list, however, is by a man – The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach

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guardian.co.uk, Thursday 19 January 2012 20.01 GMT

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Chad Harbach, one of the few men on the Waterstones 11 list. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

Waterstones has named its annual pick of the forthcoming year's best debut novels.

The Waterstones 11, which gathers together the new authors that the chain thinks are most likely to scoop literary prizes and hefty sales, is notable for the fact that eight of the writers are women. So far, however, the most

talked-about novel on the list is by a man – The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach.

Since its release in America in the autumn, the book has been named one of the New York Times's top 10 of the year, praised by Jonathan Franzen, and has even spawned an ebook about its decade-long genesis called *How a Book is Born*. It was published in the UK on Thursday.

As its title might suggest, *The Art of Fielding* is about baseball, but Harbach is hopeful that British readers won't be deterred.

"Bastardised rounders, huh?" he said at the list's launch at Waterstones's flagship London store. "Even though there's quite a bit of baseball in the book, I never thought of it as a sports novel, which is why it has a broader cast and some characters who are a bit dubious about all these athletes and how seriously they take themselves."

Harbach added that his US publisher had been concerned about whether baseball would put women off reading it "because, at least in the US, novels are marketed exclusively toward women. But I think, in the US, women are the people who have been really liking the book."

He attributed the novel's success to the fact he "let the characters flourish" over its long gestation. "It's a novel about male friendships, trying to depict the relations between men in a slightly more complex way than often happens in culture, where you have the romantic comedy as a basic form."

Other anticipated novels on the list include *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery, whose South African setting and exploration of apartheid have led some readers to compare it to JM Coetzee. "I've certainly been influenced by him, I wouldn't deny that, but he's one of many writers I return to as a source of inspiration and influence," said Flanery.

The novel, about a world-famous South African author and her biographer, was started in 2005, then set aside until 2009. It will be published in March.

"It's quite strange to have worked in a void for so many years, suddenly to have it going out in the world, but it's very nice to find a community of other writers – that's very new for me," said Flanery. "I can't wait to read the other books on the list – there are some fantastic titles on there."

Of the eight novels on the list written by women, half focus on child narrators. The books include *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce, formerly a celebrated actor, and *The Snow Child* by the Alaskan writer Eowyn Ivey, who was inspired by a book of Russian fairytales she came across in the bookshop she worked in. Ivey was named after a character from *The Lord of the Rings*.

The others on the list are *The Panopticon* by Jenni Fagan, *Shelter* by Frances Greenslade, *The Land of Decoration* by Grace McCleen, *Signs of Life* by Anna Raverat, *The Lifeboat* by Charlotte Rogan, *The Age of Miracles* by Karen Thompson Walker and *Care of Wooden Floors* by Will Wiles.

Waterstones recently caused minor controversy by dropping the apostrophe from its name, but Harbach professed himself unconcerned. "I'm looking at the logo right now – I like it," he said. "There's altogether too much punctuation in the world."

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