

Books for the Booker

This year the Booker Prize was split between Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Yes, prizes do sell books. But have you ever wondered about the traumas that lie hidden behind these awards? Dr Harriet Harvey Wood, Head of the British Council's Literature Department since 1981 and one of the five judges ('each with different tastes and prejudices') of the 1992 Booker Prize, has written a witty and perceptive article on 'the judging' in the current *Literature Matters*, issue N° 12.

And as for the split decision... 'Even the College of Cardinals manage to come up with a single pope!'

The task which Booker Prize judges are set is, says Harriet, admittedly ridiculous. What is the best novel of the year? The novel that most people enjoy? The novel that sells most copies? The most innovative? The most accessible? The longest? The shortest?

'We got them from both ends of the range, one book weighing in at 896pp, another at 128pp, of which at least two pages were straight repetition. Altogether, we were asked to consider 105 books; we read all of these once, twenty of them (the 'long list') twice and six of them (the 'short list') three times. I read two of them four times, but that was a work of supererogation. At the end, we were still arguing.

'Some of my fellow judges, clearly faster readers than I am, managed to find time to compile statistics on the task confronting us. John Coldstream, Literary Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, produced his on this basis: 'pile of books 8 feet 11 inches tall, weighing 7 stone 4 lbs, consisting of 29 842 pages containing 10.5 million words at a conservative estimate.' Other lists categorised so many books set on board ship, so many using photography as a metaphor for the cold modern soul, and so on.

Harriet believes that these lists were an attempt to postpone the awful task of making up their minds. 'It sounds simple enough but it was not. To begin with, one's judgement does not remain constant throughout an exercise of this kind. It is not normal, even for a dedicated novel consumer, to read the same novel no less than three times in two months, and this can give a very odd

impression of a book which, if read once, might be judged brilliant. Books placed under the microscope in this way reveal aspects not disclosed on a more impressionistic reading. Most of us changed our minds about novels on the long list over the judging period as we read and re-read. One of us threw a spanner in the works at the final meeting by arriving with the announcement that he had completely revised his opinion of one of the front runners and had withdrawn his vote from it.

'In the end, having narrowed it down to five titles, the choice of one became 'a necessary nonsense, resolved only by a show of hands'. This produced a three to two majority for Unsworth, greeted with dismay by the two judges who had voted for Ondaatje. It was Mark Lawson who suggested, like the good liberal he is, that we should re-vote by proportional representation. We each placed the last five in order of preference, giving five marks to our first choices, four to the second, and so on. This procedure, which gave proper weight to our second, third and fourth choices, produced equal marks for the Unsworth and Ondaatje novels, with

Christopher Hope one mark behind. Triumph. Martyn Goff, mindful of his instructions from Booker, did his best to dissuade us from a shared prize, but we listened to his views, thanked him and decided to pay no attention.

'I do not see any reason to regret the decision we made. For now that all the fuss is over, we come back to what is really important: the winning books. Very different in every way, they are both books which will give pleasure to many readers. Barry Unsworth has been writing novels of enormous distinction for decades. So far they have disgracefully not had the public recognition they deserve, though this was his second time on the short-list; I hope that his success with this magnificent epic novel, *Sacred Hunger*, which I found as good the third time round as the first, will stimulate interest in his earlier books. Michael Ondaatje is a younger writer, a poet as well as a novelist, and his strange, atmospheric book, *The English Patient*, will haunt the imagination of readers long after they have finished it.'

(Excerpted with kind permission from *Literature Matters*, the Newsletter of the British Council's Literature Department.) ■

Technicians in Adelaide

Peter Murdoch's next instalment on That Conference, 22-24 September

Library Technicians will be looking at the growth and development of information technology and its impact on libraries and library technicians during the first day of their conference in Adelaide.

Frances Awcock, Director of the State Library of South Australia will open the conference with the inspiring title *Taking charge of tomorrow: facing the future with confidence*. She will be followed by the Keynote Speaker for the day, the Chairman of the Commission for the Future and presenter of ABC radio's *The Science Show*, Robyn Williams. His paper will explore the trends and potential of technology in the information environment.

Other papers on the first day will include: Tricia Murray, from RMIT Libraries, on *From slides to the digitised im-*

age collection; Lorraine Golden, from University of Western Sydney (Nepean) on *A technologist, if not, why not?* and the Dunn and Wilson Oration by Mary Ellen Leonard, latest recipient of the Dunn and Wilson Scholarship.

During the afternoon delegates can visit a nearby academic, special or public library to be shown current and developing technologies at work in SA.

The *Provisional Program and Registration Brochure* is being sent out during April. If you don't receive one, or you would like further information, please contact Elizabeth Collins, Conference Convener, or Margaret Wallace at the Parks Library on phone: (08) 243 5691, fax: (08) 347 3632 or Peter Murdoch at the State Library of South Australia on telephone: (08) 207 7211, fax: (08) 207 7207. ■