

The 1983 BOOKER McCONNELL PRIZE SPEECH:-

Two hundred years ago, you must understand, a gathering such as this would have been unthinkable. Novels, you see, were hardly respectable. Nor were their publishers. To invent depravity - for what are novels but accounts of one kind of depravity or another - was surely a calculated insult to the munificence of the Prime Creator. A blasphemy. Novels were seen to weaken the mind and the aesthetic sensibility; and to sap the morals of young women, always very tender. But now, here we all are, eating our very good dinner, highly thought of and eminently respectable. It is not philosophers we look to now, to explain the nature of our reality: or to the church to tell us how to behave - no, we look to our novelists to explain it all away. The writer, once subversive, is now seen to carry the weight of the establishment upon his shoulders. He bears the burden pretty well: it is like making the naughty boy form prefect: he rises to the occasion. But it was never a task the writer asked for.

The Booker Prize is given each year by Booker McConnell, private patrons of the arts. What the publishers themselves fail to do, and the Arts Council barely manages, Booker McConnell does, out of generosity, and for love of literature. For this disinterested goodness; for their excellent organisation, via the National Book League, of what has become an annual and newsworthy event, publishers must be grateful.

For writers, of course, the Booker Prize is both good and bad. Good for the sales and reputations of a few, bad for the nerves and the sensibilities of many - including those on the shortlist. Writers do not set out to win the Booker Prize. If they do, by that fortunate, preserving perversity which dogs the artist's life, they do not even approach the shortlist. Literature is not written to order, or to deadlines, or to please, or to make money. It is written by a writer quite helpless in the grip of his or her art.

The Booker Prize goes to a work of literature. It does not go to the the 'best' novel written in any one year: nor can the other five shortlisted be said to be the five next best. How could this be, unless by happy accident? Writers may be geniuses: but judges are not. We may hope as judges that the sum of our wisdom and experience adds up to more than the sum of our parts, and perhaps it does; but as judges we are the product of our times, thrown up by the times, and we cannot see beyond that. We judge only what we see on the written page, here and now. It is the writers who see beyond and about and around, up and down the generations. As judges, compared to writers, I tell you, we are pretty poor stuff. No. The prize goes to the book best suited to winning the Booker Prize and the short-listed books to those best fitted to be shortlisted, and you may find the argument circular, but I don't. The Booker Prize, thank God, has gained by a process of literary and critical osmosis, over the seven years since it began, a character of its own - hard to define but having to do with, I suppose, timelessness. It is, if you like, the sum of the total novels entered, divided by the sum of the judges' appreciation, multiplied by ten thousand pounds over one great work. (I speak as one who does

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someone else's maths homework every night, and none too well at that). I refer to it myself as Factor B, with that degree of frivolity with which one sometimes refers to the Maker as the great B-Movie writer in the sky. Factor B has nothing to do, I assure you, with anyone's convenience. The shortlist is not chosen, as is sometimes rumoured, with a view to balance, or the requirements of the book trade. No-one says, look here, we need a poet's book, or a woman's book, or a funny book, or a historical book, or a book with cosmic sweep. No. The shortlist emerges by consensus: a consensus remarkably easy, at least this year, to achieve - perhaps because three of us on the panel are writers ourselves. And so we know that though all books are different, yet they are the same thing: they follow different paths through the jungle of incomprehension but the paths lead to the same place: that is, that convinced understanding, that verbal grace, which goes hand in hand with excellence. And if the shortlist ends up representing many strands of writing, many kinds of writers, it is not by design but because it reflects the literary world outside. We don't steer: we don't have to. The current is too strong.

Were there ever more diverse books than the ones on this year's shortlist? Funny, profound, delicate, distressed: the work of the miniaturist and the great glowing canvas - all there.

Malcolm Bradbury's Rates of Exchange: amazingly funny, amazingly clever: world weary and benign.

John Fuller's Flying to Nowhere; beautifully composed, brief, horrific, a parable about the nature of the flesh and the spirit.

J. M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K; a hymn to the human spirit, the world seen from the inside out.

Anita Mason's The Illusionist, set stubbornly in the blackest of black ages, a new kind of writing: a moral thriller.

X Rushdie's Shame: what can I say? A kind of flawed diamond in the crown of literature? See how he leads one? The world seen outside in.

Swift's Waterland: gathering up the knots of the past into the tensions of the present -

What diverse undertakings there were. What astonishing aspirations! (~~The~~ Life and Times of Michael K...) won the Booker Prize because, to those of you who know their Plato, it most approached the Platonic ideal of what the judges think a novel should be. Does that help? No? Try again.

~~The~~ Life and Times of Michael K...went furthest, we thought, along its own particular path, towards this image of literary perfection we hold in our minds. May I offer you my congratulations, and that of the judges?

And so the Prize is given, and so here we are. (~~More than~~) A X hundred novels thumped through the letter box, submitted by their publishers, in their National Book League Jiffy bags.

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All, I thought, were of high quality; some failing, perhaps, either by paucity of content or lack of form, or that peculiar combination of both we call style; but all of which had something to offer, and many of which in earlier decades we would have called masterpieces, but now take as a matter of course, so far advanced are we along our literary road.

It was when I was on about the fiftieth, that I realised, with a kind of almost physical shock which made the hairs on my arm stand up, what has happened to the novel: why we are here tonight, why Booker McConnell act as they do - as symptom rather than cause. It is this: that in fiction, and only in fiction, in this peculiar gift given to such a few, to invent and sustain alternative realities, do we have such small evidence of human progress as is allowed us. In the novel we see grace, form, shape, purpose and intent . We find compassion, understanding, and true morality. Turn on the news: what do you hear? You hear the human race disgraced. Turn back to the one hundred novels and find there, at least the runes of civilisation. Barbarity driven from the door: routed. Here in the novel, believe me, we see better where we're at: where in fact the human race has arrived. Find some comfort here in the degree of our understanding and wisdom, our sense of purpose, our attempt to grasp, comprehend and cope with the nature of the universe, and our existence in it: poised as we are, uneasily, at some halfway point between black hole and atomic particle. I tell you, all is not lost!

Now. There are 120 people at this dinner tonight. Of these, perhaps twenty, thirty are writers. Six shortlisted authors, three writer judges, and a handful of others who double as critics, publishers, agents and so forth. The number is about par for the course. Writers know well enough that they are like Atlas, that they bear on their shoulders the entire literary world: all those who depend upon the writer for their income, the exercise of their own particular skills, their status and their very jobs. Publishers, booksellers, editors, librarians, journalists, academics, festival organisers, Arts Councils and so forth. Nothing, without writers. Only criminals have the same kind of responsibility. Each errant act, as each act of creativity, sits at the bottom of an inverted triange - prison officers, prison governors, prison architects, probation officers, criminologists, the whole judiciary, the Home Office - criminals, like artists, create an amazing amount of employment for an amazing number of people. Well, look round tonight.

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So to the publishers, I would say this. We are the raw material of your trade. You do tend to forget it , you know. You forget that books need writers: that there are very few of us: that we are quite tough but perhaps not as tough as you think. You are now an industry, not a profession. You don't use wood, or ham, or cheese, or electronics to make your products. You use what is in our heads. You use us: the living us: and you don't, quite frankly, look after your raw material very well. And as you turn into an industry, so must we turn into workers and organise. One hundred and twenty present and a handful of writers - I think you'd do without us altogether

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if you could. If there was a way of getting a book without a writer - unchancy people who can never be trusted to produce a product of consistent quality -

I am being unfair. Of course I am. I have you captive. You cannot answer back. I am now going to ask some awkward questions. I am going to ask you why you will not negotiate with the writers who wish to negotiate with you? Why the P.A. is such a peculiar beast, which has teeth only when it chooses, and mumbling gums when it doesn't? It's a beast which rather plumply wanders round the current contract jungle, tearing into the living flesh of writers, snarling 'custom and practice' if anyone so much as asks why. I will remind this beast of another jungle, after the war, in which television management then roamed, crying 'we'll never negotiate, never!' - but when they did, as in the end they had to, when they gave the writer dignity, and consistency - it is not primarily money writers are after, you must understand, but acknowledgement, self-respect, and a degree of control over what happens to their own work - it was then, with the standard contracts, that the television writers really began writing, to a standard undreamed of until then. The new young generation of novelists could do the same for you. Where are these new young novelists? That's another awkward question. Perhaps you've left it too late?

I will ask you if in your dealings with authors you are really being fair, and honourable, and right? Or merely getting away with what you can? Whether the 'custom and practice' you quote as reason for this and that, in an industry changed

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beyond all recognition since these customs and practices arose, can really go on as they are. If you are not careful, you will kill the goose that lays your golden eggs.

I will tell you what the writers dislike. The writer dislikes your paternalism: rivalled only in the world, perhaps, by BBC Radio, which has a world monopoly in radio plays: but even they are learning. The writer dislikes the way you say 'aren't you lucky, we're going to publish your book, actually publish your book! What a risk we're taking: how very, very, lucky you are, and honoured! Just sign this, please, you don't need an agent. Custom and practice!' It's wearing very thin. Of course you're taking a risk. Businesses do take risks. Should take risks, need to take risks, to live. The publisher can't these days claim too much financial cultural martyrdom. A publisher can get underwritten by the Arts Council, if the book's good, but might not make a profit. Then the taxpayer bears the loss, not you. Takes the risk. Even very large, very grand, very rich publishing houses take advantage of the taxpayer in this way.

The writer dislikes the rise of the editor. The editor is, of course, very often the writer's best friend. That's the trouble. The new young writer - that increasingly elusive creature - writes for his editor, not his readers. The reader seems so far, so long away - on the other side of months and years, with a mountain range of publishers, designers and

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production people in between. So he writes half-finished novels and says what do you think, what shall I do? And the editor says, because that's what he's employed to do, why, develop this character, or draw that one back, or change the end, or set it in Cardiff, not Belfast, no-one's buying Belfast any more, and anyway the Welsh market's still untapped. Or if the writer can't think of what to write, why the editor's there to think up a story: and the editor smooths over all inconsistencies and all eccentricity, and produces a bland finished product, unexceptional and perfectly controlled and no wonder Britain has the lowest percentage of novel buyers per head of population in Europe. Why bother! Some editors, of course, are exempt from this censure. They really are our friends: and lovers of literature. For these we're grateful. But they're thin on the ground. And where are your new young editors, your hope for the future? Are they vanishing, too? I fear they may be!

The writer dislikes the way you underpay your editors, and your designers, and your production people. It means morale inside your houses is low: it means a job which should take a week takes a month: it means low standards and depression within an industry which rates, for turnover, in this country, one below pharmaceuticals. And which is not labour intensive. All you need for raw material is here, in our heads, and which we offer you with a degree of integrity, and generosity, and professionalism unequalled anywhere. And of which you are happy enough to take advantage. Quoting 'custom and practice'.

We know there are graduates queueing up at your door for jobs in publishing, and we know they have 1st class degrees in English Literature. So why should you bother to pay them more? They may be queueing, but they're the wrong graduates, and they're not queueing for the right reason. They just want jobs. They don't love books. The ones you want toss up: heads a life of dignified poverty in publishing, tails, an exciting and well-paid job in television or journalism: and the coin comes down tails: of course it does. They make sure it does. And that's where your new young editors are. Somewhere else. Like the writers.

We wonder why the publishers - apart from one or two magnificent people - did not help us, the writers, get Public Lending Right. They helped, en masse, in other countries. It was so evidently fair that we should have it. And the scheme, initiated here and sustained almost beyond human endurance by two British writers, Briget Brophy and Maureen Duffy, was implemented all over Europe, and even in Australia, before it happened here. Why should we love and trust you?

We find it extraordinary that you demand to keep the copyright of what comes out of our heads, not just while we're living but after we're dead. Fifty years after we're dead! Why? There's no sense in it, or justice. Only custom and practice! We lease our work in other fields for a period of years - only two years in television - and the proportion of capital invested to reward is higher there than it is in publishing. Well, reading takes longer than viewing. As things are, a novel I write when I'm twenty you can still be making money out of

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ninety, and me not a penny, and your grandchildren, not mine, fifty years on. We'll give you twenty years. Twenty years of your business: twenty years of our lives.

I'll tell you a horror story, shall I? There are always horror stories. This is a current one. Famous media person writes memoirs, signs a contract, no agent (custom and practice quoted), sells phenomenally, wonders, odd, no money's coming in: discovers a) there is no escalating royalty clause in the contracts, b) the writer is paying off the cost of the amazingly expensive PR tour the publishers organised, their hotel rooms, their air fares - Is this fair? No. It's just what you do if you can get away with it, even the most good-natured and gentlemanly of you.

I do not want to end this on a sour note. But the Booker Prize is a serious event and a serious occasion, and we must take literature seriously, and put its house in order. I know enough of the temperament and character of most - not all- of the authors here tonight to believe that what I say will find sympathy with them. Writers and publishers inhabit the same world, share the same beliefs, have the same ambitions, part worldly, part literary. It is important that some real reconciliation between us is accomplished, and soon. Your writers, I can tell you, are in a fair old state of indignation.

The Writers' Guild, which will soon be linking with the Society of Authors and the Theatre Writers' Guild - for these days a writer increasingly is a writer, is a writer, is a writer -

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and can move easily amongst the various media - is anxious to achieve this reconciliation. We hope your Publishers' Association will do the same: will be able to define itself, if only in relation to its opposition. Might even link, for mutual advantage, with the Booksellers' Association. And in the meantime, we, the writers, will gladly go on writing novels for you, and even judging them. Thank you, Booker McConnell, for this opportunity, this lengthy plug for the writer. I hope you forgive me. In the meantime, may I congratulate Penguin on having John Fuller's truly wonderful novel on the bookstalls within a week -within a week! May I pass on the judges' congratulations and admiration to the shortlisted authors and, as for the winner of the Booker Prize 1983, well I personally would kiss the hem of his/her garment, if I dared. The aesthetic, as they say, is sexless.

Fay Weldon