

BOOKER PRIZE 1971

The judges considered 42 novels that had been submitted by publishers or called in. Although the level of achievement fluctuated a great deal, it was generally felt to be encouraging; about a dozen titles were considered at length as serious contenders, and ^{the} final short list consists of six books which in their various and often unpredictable ways are all of exceptional interest.

The Big Chapel by Thomas Kilroy is an extremely self-assured first novel based on the actual career of a rebellious priest in nineteenth-century Ireland and the violent reactions which he provoked. In terms of historical reconstruction this is something of a tour de force, although it also has many contemporary reverberations, while the author's irony and feeling for idiosyncrasy prevent a sombre theme turning ponderous.

Briefing for a Descent into Hell by Doris Lessing, which is defined by the author as a work of "inner space fiction", describes the fantasies of a professor who has undergone a breakdown in a series of De Quincey-like fantasies, while at the same time anchoring them firmly in the context of his experiences in a mental hospital, and relating them to his personality through the letters of friends and others who have been close to him. A bold, highly original work, at one level it is an indictment of civilization's obtuse treatment of the mentally disturbed, at another an attempt to explore the imaginative truths which lie beyond the reach of everyday rationality.

In a Free State by V.S. Naipaul dramatises the possibilities and limitations of freedom, personal as well as political, in the post-colonial epoch. A prologue and epilogue, together with three episodes dealing respectively with an Indian in Washington, a West Indian in London, and English expatriates in a newly-independent African state, enable the author to bring out the global dimensions of his theme without sacrificing a powerful, wholly convincing sense of the individual and the unique. The characters are subtly presented, the comic and poignant undertones beautifully handled, the implications unexpected and often disturbing.

St Urbain's Horseman by Mordecai Richler chronicles the fortunes and farcical (though alarming) misfortunes of a Canadian scriptwriter living in London, though it also ranges beyond them through fantasy and picaresque techniques to evoke some of the darker issues of recent history. An unfailingly energetic work, full of comic energy and enlivened by a sharp eye for grotesque contemporary detail.

Goshawk Squadron by Derek Robinson is a compelling first novel about the Royal Flying Corps in the closing stages of the first world war.

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The squadron which Mr Robinson describes is dominated by "a wild old man of twenty three", a ruthless, sarcastic, foul-mouthed C.O. who gets results -- at a price. Savagely ~~met~~ (from an artistic point of view) lovingly portrayed, he is a frightening and memorable creation, and the little world in which he wields his power is equally vividly presented.

Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont, by Elizabeth Taylor, is the deceptively low-keyed story of an old lady living in a hotel on the Cromwell Road and the friendship which she strikes up with a vague young man whose first thought is to put her into a novel. Every stroke is made to tell, and what looks at first like a miniature develops into a compassionate, tough-minded, almost Chekhovian study of human strength and weakness.