

Book Prize

Dear John Fowles,

Many thanks for your letter. It raises some serious issues, which the others may well feel we should go into further; but before we get down to them, I wonder whether I could comment on one or two points relating to my own role.

i) I believe your memory is at fault when you say in Paragraph 1 that I told the first meeting that I had discussed the question of eligibility with Antonia Fraser and that we had decided that Naipaul's book was eligible. Whatever my own views, it would, I feel, have been improper for me as chairman to introduce the issue in this manner, as though I were nudging you towards a fait accompli. In fact I hadn't previously discussed the question (or for that matter anything else about the book) with Antonia; I raised it entirely on my own account, having become concerned over it after taking a second glance at the rules shortly before the meeting.

ii) With regard to Paragraph 2, I'm quite sure that I didn't say that I had discussed the question of Naipaul's own views on the topic with him, or received any assurance from him in the matter. Although I am a friend of his, I had at no point talked about the book with him (or indeed seen him other than fleetingly since well before he began writing it). There is indeed no reason why I shouldn't have talked about the book itself -- though it would surely have been rather strange for us, under the circumstances, to have discussed the book's eligibility for the prize -- and in isolation this point may not seem all that important. But taken in conjunction with point i), your version of what happened looks like additional evidence of a less than scrupulous approach on my part.

Incidentally, I feel that when you say that Philip Toynbee and you decided (quite rightly) that the author's own views on the book carry no weight as evidence, it would have been fairer -- in the light of what had gone before -- to add that I myself, without being prompted, several times made it clear that we should judge only what the author had written, not what he, his publisher or anyone else may have claimed he intended to write.

iii) This next is a matter of opinion, but after searching my conscience I still feel convinced that I passed on Tom Maschler's suggestions to the judges in an impartial manner, rather than insinuating that they were "meddling and unwarranted". But I leave it to the others present to decide. Had I in fact thought his intervention was out of order, I would of course have refused to mention it to the other judges, and told him so.

iv) On the same topic, I don't recall that the exchange as to whom Tom had been speaking for was particularly confused; at any rate, I tried to establish as clearly as possible my own understanding of the situation, which is that he was speaking in his own capacity, but also as a member of the organising committee prepared to raise the question of eligibility with his fellow-members.

v) With regard to Paragraph 10, we may or may not have spent too little time, proportionately, on some of the other books -- but I would strongly resent any attempt to construe such a criticism as meaning that I tried to force the issue or hustle the other judges into taking a decision before they were ready. On the contrary, I did my best to make sure that they had every chance to change their minds, and it seems to me that if anything my role in the final stages was to prolong the discussion to a slightly later hour than most people wanted.

vi) In Paragraph 2 you describe me as Naipaul's "chief advocate". Taken together with some of your other points, I think that this would give anyone who hadn't actually been present at the meeting a rather misleading impression. Certainly I spoke strongly in favour of the book; but in fairness to me -- once again, in the context -- it should surely be added that I spoke up at least as strongly on behalf of another book as well (the Elizabeth Taylor).

No doubt the other judges will have their own comments to make -- and forgive me if what I've written seems unduly egocentric. But since your letter may well be used as one of the texts on which we base subsequent discussions of the main issue, the question of eligibility, I feel it essential to clear out of the way first those things in it which might be taken to suggest that I abused my position as chairman.

As you'll readily appreciate, this hasn't been an easy letter for me to write either. Please believe me when I say that I have no ill feelings in the matter; I know how easy it is for misunderstandings to arise when trying to unravel seven or eight hours' of complicated conversation. On the other hand I simply can't accept your letter as it stands. Do let's sort this out as quickly as possible, so that we can concentrate on our real job as judges.

Yours sincerely,

copies to: Mr John Murphy  
Mr Rayner Unwin  
Miss Marilyn Edwards  
Lady Antonia Fraser  
Mr Saul Bellow  
Mr Philip Toynbee

John Gross