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press release

"The British don't really like writers unless they are very old, in which case they get the O.M., or very dead, in which case they get eulogies on T.V."

Harry Norman, Daily Mail, 28th August, 1968.

"Britain comes pretty low in the World Literary Award Stakes. Our top prize is a mere £1,000, which is puny; compared to some American handouts. So far, it also lacks the prestige of the French prizes, such as the Goncourt, which guarantees an automatic print order of 50,000."

Atticus, Sunday Times, 23rd June, 1968.

On Thursday 3rd October 1968, a press conference has been arranged by the Publishers Association and Booker McConnell Ltd. to launch the Booker Prize for Fiction. The Publishers Association, representing the British publishing world, had for some time been planning to launch a really significant literary prize. By coincidence, Booker McConnell Ltd. (see over for details) were considering a similar idea. Representatives of the two organizations met and compared ideas.

As a result there is to be a new £5,000 annual prize for fiction, guaranteed for the next seven years. This is the first example of major industrial sponsorship of literature, although this kind of support is already well-known in the fields of music, art and sport. It comes at a particularly relevant moment when writers in other countries are under attack and will, we hope, go a long way towards increasing the public's awareness of the important part played by writers in the world today.

There are already almost fifty literary prizes and awards available in this country, ranging from inscribed quills to sums of £1,000, for almost every conceivable type of literary work and category of author. One particularly charming one, for a lyric poem, brings its lucky winner 'a bronze medal together with a sum of money (about £4 8s. 6d. less the cost of the medal)'. This is almost exactly the equivalent, financially, of the French Prix Goncourt, but it doesn't take a very astute observer of the British press to note that the latter probably gets more space in British papers than all the British prizes put together.

The Booker Prize will be awarded to the best novel, in the opinion of the judges, to have been published between December 1st and the following November 30th, and the first award will be made in early April 1969. Any novel by a writer from Britain, the Commonwealth or the Republics of Ireland and South Africa which has been first published in Britain between these dates will be potentially eligible. Publishers may submit not more than two books from their lists and the judges are free to call in any others which they feel they would like to consider. A short list of possible winners will be released four to six weeks before the final decision is made so that the sort of speculation so beloved in France will be possible in Britain for the first time, thus

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stimulating interest in more than one book and one author.

For the first year the panel of judges is chaired by W.L. Webb, Literary Editor of the Guardian and the other members are Dame Rebecca West, Stephen Spender, Frank Kermode and David Farrer.

See over for biographical notes on the judges.

Although the sum of £5,000 will be a generous reward to the winning author, we hope that his real success will be a significant increase in the sales of his book and that this will to some extent be shared by not only the authors who have been short-listed, but, in the long run, by authors all over the country. A substantial literary prize should mean that a writer does not need to be censored, imprisoned, or labelled outrageous and controversial before hitting the headlines and will, we hope, help to narrow the all too frequent gap between artistic and commercial success.

Details of other literary prizes will be found in the Writers' and Artists' Year Book (p. 328).

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