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press release

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From The Publishers Association, 19 Bedford Square, London, W.C. 1.

The winner of the first £5,000 Booker Prize for fiction will be chosen from among the following six novels. The authors are in alphabetical order:

Figures in a Landscape by Barry England (Jonathan Cape)
Impossible Object by Nicholas Mosley (Hodder & Stoughton)
The Nice and the Good by Iris Murdoch (Chatto & Windus)
Something to Answer For by P.H. Newby (Faber & Faber)
The Public Image by Muriel Spark (Macmillan)
From Scenes Like These by Gordon M. Williams (Secker & Warburg)

The terms of reference for the 1969 prize are 'the best novel, in the opinion of the judges, to have been published between 1 December 1967 and 30 November 1968'. The judges are W.L. Webb (Chairman), Dame Rebecca West, Stephen Spender, Professor Frank Kermode and David Farrer. Here are W.L. Webb's comments, both in general and on the six short-listed novels:

"The judges considered sixty-two novels, a number which they reduced fairly easily to fourteen, and more slowly to six. The trouble was not that there were too many good novels, but that so many of them were evenly middling - talented but confused, flawed but interesting: typical examples, in short, of that large literary middle class that makes English fiction so readable and respectable, so rarely exciting or inspiring.

"In fact, it wasn't a good year. Many of the established writers produced work that was notably less than their best, and there were no newcomers of arresting originality or sure promise. Of the six that remained, the runners-up, some finished more easily than others, but all had the staying quality that finally overrode objections on points of form.

"Figures in a Landscape by Barry England, follows to the bitter end a manhunt through harsh country somewhere in south-east Asia. In a quite straightforward way, it was surely the most exciting novel published last year, and for a first novel, remarkably confident and technically accomplished. Beyond that, the judges were impressed with something strikingly up-to-date in the author's sensibility and style, which doesn't just imitate the techniques of another medium, but seems to have evolved a proper literary analogue of the violent and nervous immediacy of the hand-held camera.

"Nicholas Mosley's Impossible Object caused most trouble and took most time. Again and again the discussion turned to this complex (or complicated) telling of a love affair whose phrases are reflected in eight interdependent stories linked by short, densely allusive commentaries. In some ways and places everyone thought it strained, miscalculated, even absurdly pretentious; but three at least of the stories were separately effective, and everyone found too that the author's method could produce resonances so strange and fine that the novel was not to be set aside.

"The Nice and the Good was another of Iris Murdoch's highly patterned fables, achieved by placing in the garden-pastoral setting of a rather archaic sort of conventional English novel all the machinery of a big operatic libretto, complete with pairings, coincidence, illusions and sotto voce invocations of Fate. There was some relief to be got from contemplating the work of a writer who can do, and does, just what she wants to do, and the judges devoted less attention to the wilfulness of some of the things that were done and more to the new evidence of the intelligence, grace and particular charm of Miss Murdoch's fiction.

"P.H. Newby's Something to Answer For, set in Port Said at the time of the Suez invasion, is at one level a meditation on the difficult theme of national and individual responsibility, on England and the English at that critical time. But the mood of the novel, expressed through the tough character of its hero Townrow, is not so much meditative as explosively restless; the discoveries are made in his self-discovery through a kind of social and psychological shock treatment, echoing the larger political shocks which roll about the book's horizons like the thunder of an approaching storm. Townrow was a considerable achievement, the judges thought, possessed by a kind of psychic energy that is currently rare in English fiction.

"Muriel Spark's short novel or long novella, The Public Image, a cool appraisal of the uncertain realities of the Italian film world, its votresses and victims, was admired for its grace, its clarity, and its fluent ingenuities. If it did not show any extension of Miss Spark's range, the judges had reason to be grateful nevertheless for this fresh demonstration of the author's lavish gifts.

"From Scenes Like These, by Gordon M. Williams, was voted the best example, among those available, of a novel in the straightforward realist tradition. One important character was thought to be seriously misconceived, but the vigour of its descriptions, its vivid and accurate account of physical work and the palpable shock of violence were rooted in a sense of life that contrasted sharply with much that was painfully contrived elsewhere on the shelves of the year's fiction."

A team from BBC 2's Release, under the direction of Gavin Miller, has filmed the judges in session, and interviewed the authors, for transmission in colour on March 29 and April 5, 12 and 19.

The announcement of the winner will be made on the evening of April 22, when the cheque and a trophy will be presented at a reception to mark the occasion.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

Barry England is thirty-four. He was born in London, educated at Downside, and served for two years as a subaltern in the Far East. After five years as an actor, he began writing for the theatre in 1960. Three of his plays have been performed at the Belgrade, Coventry. He is married to actress Diane Clare.

For further information, photograph, etc., please ring Anthony Colwell at Jonathan Cape (01-636 5764)

Nicholas Mosley was born in 1923. He was an infantry officer during the Second World War. He is married and has four children. Among his previous novels are The Rainbearers, Corruption, Accident and Assassins.

For further information, please ring Robin Denniston at Hodder & Stoughton (01-248 5797)

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919 and educated at the Froebel Educational Institute, London, Badminton School, Bristol and Somerville College, Oxford. She has been a Fellow of St. Anne's, Oxford since 1948 and an Honorary Fellow since 1963. In 1956 she married John Oliver Broyley, and lives in Oxford. Her previous novels are Under the Net, The Flight from the Enchanter, The Sandcastle, The Bell, A Severed Head, An Unofficial Rose, The Unicorn, The Italian Girl, The Red and the Green, The Time of Angels. Bruno's Dream, her latest novel, was published earlier this year.

For further information, etc., please contact Carolyn Post at Chatto & Windus (01-836 0127)

P.H. Newby was born in 1918. He was educated at Hanley Castle Grammar School, Worcester, and St. Paul's College, Cheltenham. He was in the R.A.M.C., D.E.F., and H.E.F. during the Second World War and was seconded as a lecturer in English Literature to Foud 1st University in Cairo from 1942 to 1946. In 1949 he joined the BBC. He received the Atlantic Award in 1946 and the Somerset Maugham Award in 1948. He is married and has two daughters. His previous novels are One of the Founders, Picnic at Sakkarah and The Barbary Light.

For further information, etc., please ring Charles Monteith at Faber & Faber (01-636 9543)

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh and educated at James Gillespie's School for Girls in that city. She was married in 1937 (subsequently dissolved) and has one son. She is the General Secretary of the Poetry Society and was editor of the Poetry Review from 1947 to 1949. She became a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature in 1967.

Her previous novels are The Comforters, Robinson, Memento Mori, The Ballad of Peckham Rye, The Bachelors, The Prince of Miss Jean Brodie, Girls of Slender Means and The Mandelbaum Gate.

For further information, etc., please ring William Kolins at Macmillan (01-836 6633)

Gordon M. Williams is 34 years old and the son of a Scottish policeman. His previous novels are The Last Day of Lincoln, Charles, The Camp and The Man Who Had Power Over Women.

For further information, please contact Charles Latimer at Secker & Warburg (01-437 2075)

For further general information and photographs of the trophy, please contact Jill Mortimer at the Publishers Association (01-580 6321).