

Winner takes nothing?

Generous prizewinners are a bit of a mixed blessing. It was less than civil of Mr John Berger to insult the system that presented him with Britain's most famous literary award, the £5,000 Booker prize for fiction, as he took the cheque. (On the same day, the Booker prize lost its sole claim to being the richest literary prize: the presentation of the first £5,000 Wolfson literary award for history to Mr Michael Howard attracted almost no attention.)

Mr Berger intends to present half his money to the Black Panthers. That is a generous gesture, and one can sympathise wholeheartedly with his criticisms of the maze of literary prizes; but some other novelists may feel that they could have done with the money. Mr Heinrich Böll, the winner of the 1972 Nobel prize for literature, was even more generous and perhaps more logical in his decision to spend part of his money (nearly £42,000) helping imprisoned writers and their families. Lastly, the generosity of Sir John Hicks, who announced on Tuesday that he will give almost all the money he receives as joint winner of the Nobel prize for economics (rather over £21,000) to help the London School of Economics in its fund-raising for a new building to house what he rightly describes as "probably the best economics library in the world," is beyond praise. And Sir John is an Oxford man.