

ee Report -Sept.7th

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# Report

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## SAD STORY

This is the story of a Prize. It is not, all appearances to the contrary, a funny story, even if it reads like one. It's about how Literature-loving Booker Brothers McConnell (who handle inter alia the copyright in Fleming, Christie, Lyall, Clifford, Robert Bolt and both Mortimers) did a Good Thing, and offered £5000 to the author of the best book of the year, guaranteeing the prize for seven years.

The rules were sometimes confusing, but everyone tried. In '69 31 books were entered, of which six were shortlisted. P H Newby's SOMETHING TO ANSWER FOR won and Faber smiled. In 70, it was even better: 60 submissions. Bernice Rubens won with THE ELECTED MEMBER (EAS) In 71, after certain diffident complaints, the submissions fell to 42, but everyone thought V S Naipaul was a worthy winner with IN A FREE STATE. Even Andre Deutsch, who had published the book, and only shortly before had been heard complaining about the whole affair. In 1972, the most controversial winner of them all, John Berger, got the money for "G" (Weidenfeld) By now the general reaction to Bookers' Good Thing was a resounding 'so what?'

Was it because of the curious composition of the judging panels, with the Chairmanship going each year to a Literary Editor of a newspaper or a reviewer? Perish the thought that these eminent gents wouldn't know a bestseller if it bit them in the thigh. Could it have been because the publicity attaching to the judging, the shortlistings and the award was slightly less than usually devoted to church fetes? Just as if. Or was it, perhaps, that the publishers themselves thought the whole thing had degenerated at startling speed from a Good Thing to a Bloody Bore?

Hands up all those who think it was the first two.

Talking to two dozen publishers by phone, we came across only three whose publicity departments (or anyone else) had the remotest idea of what -- if anything - they had submitted for the prize. And that was when they knew what the prize was. Others, frankly, didn't seem to care. 'Good grief,' said the Chairman of one large general publisher, hiding his copy of Little Annie Fanny, 'I don't know.' 'Booker?' asked the Chairman of an avant-garde house, 'what's that for?' Well, we won't bore you with all the (predictable?) responses. Our favourite was the voice off (twice) that said "What do they want to know that for?"

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## SAD STORY (CONTINUED FROM P.1)

It's a good question because this year (if our estimate is right) the submission rate is going to be the lowest ever - less than three dozen books out of all those published between 31 July and 23 November.

Not submitting, and making no bones about it, are Cassell, Hodder, Allen, Heinemann, Granada, Macdonald, Constable and Hamish Hamilton, the last named having picked up most of the going literary plums last year. Why? Well, guess.

Karl Miller, who chairs the Booker judging panel (the other two are Edna O'Brien and Mary McCarthy, both coincidentally Weidenfeld authors but let's have none of that) will have books by some very eminent and admirable writers: David Storey, Gilbert Phelps, Derwent May (who is Karl Miller's lit.ed. on the Listener, but let's have none of that) William Trevor, Dan Jacobson, Dennis Potter, Michael Frayn, John Banville, George Mackay Brown, David Garnett, Muriel Spark, Stanley Middleton, Marc Brandel, Barry Unsworth, Brian Aldiss, Isobel Colgate, Anthony Storey, J G Farrell, Ronald Harwood, Celia Dale, Sarah Gainham and (a guess) John Ginger. Few of whom, meaning no disrespect to any, has ever figured or is likely to figure in the bestseller lists of the world.

Especially interesting in view of the foregoing is the fact that their publishers have either decided not to or neglected to send in new books by Bernice Rubens, Patrick White, Angus Wilson, Piers Paul Read, Brigid Brophy or Winston Graham. Why? Well we'll guess for you, this time: because they are only sending in stuff they think the judges will like. Which surely isn't what Bookers' Good Thing was originally all about.

Here, as they say, is a pretty kettle of fish. On the one hand the publishers: disinterested,

irritated over rules and restrictions they don't understand, not over-enthusiastic about having to guarantee an expenditure of £1000 advertising the winner and having 3000 copies in print should they win (that's if half of them print that many of anything) And on the other hand, booksellers like the highly respected one who held up one derisory finger (not two) when we asked him last year how many extra copies winning the Booker prize meant to him in sales across the counter. Frankly, my dear, he didn't give a damn.

### Does anyone?

Strangely enough, we do. We'd like Booker to continue because, despite our criticisms, which have been as vehement as any, we still think it's a Good Thing. So couldn't they do something to make it work? Extend the deadlines maybe for a whole year of books? Get guarantees that booksellers too must support the winner? And most important, get a real PR operation going, run by someone who knows how to get Press coverage.

Whichever book wins the prize this year, it will win it in a vacuum of ignorance on the part of both Trade and public which isn't going to be dispelled by throwing a fancy dinner for the usual freeloaders. Publishers who obviously don't care whether their books are entered or not are bad enough. Book sellers who aren't interested are even worse. And a public in total ignorance of what the Booker Prize is for, who won it, and why will ensure disaster - a disaster brought about by a set of upmarket snots who care as much about a healthy book trade as you and I do about the dearth of boiler-scrappers in Istanbul.

### HOORAY!

Good news for Tillings: they may not have to change their name to Maxwell House if Pan keep paying out sums like the £12,000 Tom Rosenthal coaxed out of them for the McKay skyscraper-disaster novel, TOWER by Richard M Stern.