

Who's who in book award stakes

"WHAT HAVE the following names in common?" a quiz question master might ask: "Duff-Cooper, Whitbread, Cholmondley, Scott-Moncrieff?" Add a few more—James Tait Black, Hawthornden, Booker, W. H. Smith — and the answer's easy.

Modestly, magnanimously, annually, or erratically, quite often enigmatically, they are a handful of the 50-odd literary awards made to writers in this country, ranging from medals and an inscribed quill to very large sums of money.

The biggest of them, the annual £5000 Booker Award, went this week to V. S. Naipaul, the Trinidad-born writer, for his latest novel "In a Free State." The award, established in 1968 is sponsored by Booker McConnell Ltd., the parent company of the £40m. Booker Group which is involved in a variety of business all over the Commonwealth, and by the Publishers' Association, with the main purpose of giving a major boost to book sales.

To some extent also, if unspoken, there is a wish to emulate the French Prix Goncourt, an award which, though not so valuable in

monetary terms, brings the winner immense prestige — France being a more intellectual country than Britain. Such matters, therefore, are far more widely discussed and squabbled over.

Squabbles indeed do seem endemic to literary awards. Malcolm Muggeridge resigned from this year's panel of judges of the Booker Award, finding the submitted books not to his taste, and there were one or two conspicuous absences from the prize-giving dinner at the Cafe Royal.

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There has been trouble over the timing of it: the 1968 and 1969 awards were made earlier in the year but did not fall in conveniently with publishers' seasonal lists, or produce particularly successful sales. Now that a new timescale is established, with a convenient run-up to Christmas buying, dissatisfaction is expressed that it will clearly favour books published in the autumn, that authors will therefore put pressure on their publishers for autumn publication, and the spring lists will become accordingly weak.

Booker procedure is that publishers may submit two books from their lists, and that judges are free to call in others. The panel usually comprises a

couple of writers, an academic, a bookseller perhaps (Mr Ross Higgins, of Glasgow, for example, one year), a reviewer, and so on.

This year's panel of Lady Antonia Fraser, Saul Bellow (a real feather in the Booker's cap), John Fowles, and Philip Toynbee, under the chairmanship of John Gross, considered 42 books and a month ago issued a short-list of six — more encouragement to sales.

Their final verdict declared Mr Naipaul "the clear winner," his book "a work of great distinction, beautifully written, deeply felt . . . in every way worthy of the prize." Mr Naipaul must be very happy: glowing praise and publicity apart, £5000 tax free is a lot of money.

He's been happy in this sense several times before — winning the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize (£100) in 1957, a Somerset Maugham Award (£500, to be used for travel) in 1961, the Hawthornden Prize (only £100, but good for prestige, in 1963), and in 1967 the substantial £1000 W. H. Smith annual literary award, given for the book that in the opinion of the judges represents "the most outstanding contribution to English literature in the period concerned."

It's predictable, obviously

logical, that the cream should keep coming to the top. Go to the ultimate summit and you find Shaw, Hemingway, Solzhenitsyn winning the Nobel Prize for Literature (precise value unstated, rumoured currently to be around £20,700).

Before the under-rewarded, steady writers, and the dedicated, hard-working, unpublished ones start protesting that "to them that hath shall be given," and in certain quarters that "to them that hath good friends shall be given," further facts should be noted.

First, the big awards, even the Booker, have been made to relative unknowns: the Jewish writer Bernice Rubens had admirers but no public name when she won the Booker with "The Elected Member": readers thought Jean Rhys dead until she suddenly came to the fore after the W. H. Smith Award for "The Wide Sargasso Sea": and very few had heard of Gerda Charles until she was awarded one of the new Whitbread Awards (three, of £1000 each for the outstanding books of 1971 in biography, fiction, and poetry) for her novel, "The Destiny Waltz."

Secondly, there are specific awards for new authors: for one, the New English Library's £2500 prize (representing in part an advance on royalties) for

a previously unpublished novel, open to residents of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth under the age of 25.

Again, the Arts Council all the year round makes grants to writers, allowing them in effect to continue to eat while they work, the process here being that a particular writer in need is sponsored by an established writer who puts forward the individual case. (These awards, it should be noted, are not to be confused with the Scottish Arts Council awards designed as recognition of merit in writers either Scottish by birth or living in Scotland.)

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Aside from particular categories too there must be encouragement in such outsider's victories as that of Bob Copper, the countryman who won the £1000 Robert Pitman award "for a first book of any kind by a British author" for his account of life as it used to be, "A Song for Every Season."

Poets are eligible for the £350 Cholmondley award, translators for the Scott-Moncrieff Prize — while Jack Lindsay, the Australian-English writer, received the Soviet badge of honour for translating Russian works.

A spokesman for Foyles says the response in the first week after an award has been

announced is "usually quite good." A representative of W. H. Smith is more cautious: "It's a very variable thing," he says, "and you won't sell a book that isn't selling without an award." W. H. Smith naturally make a feature of their own awards, but even they were surprised at the instant and continuing success of Laurie Lee's "Cider with Rosie."

More grudgingly a literary agent states that a competition should throw up bestsellers, and that if a book's good enough to win, it's good enough to stand on its own feet. Winning publishers frankly rub their hands with glee, and Andre Deutsch, V. S. Naipaul's publishers, are getting 12,000 copies of the winning book swiftly between hard covers.

No survey of literary prizes in this newspaper, however, can end without mention of the once only "The Glasgow Herald" Short Story Competition. The first prize of £100 seems fairly modest today — though it still bought quite a lot in 1954 — but with "The Dileas" it landed in the net, and set on his career one of the biggest money-earners in the writing business today, Alistair MacLean. Competitions are not to be scorned.

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