

The Book seller 26/4/69

## First Booker Fiction Prize awarded

To P. H. Newby for "Something to Answer For"

NOT the several light-coloured suits, the flowery shirts and the lengthening hair of Britain's younger publishers, nor the more decorative elements of the current London literary scene, could subdue the solemn splendour of the reception in the Drapers' Hall, London, on Tuesday of this week when the winner of the first Booker Prize for fiction was announced by Dame Rebecca West. He was Mr. P. H. Newby, whose latest novel *Something to Answer For*, published by Faber, won him a tax-free £5,000, a trophy (described in the *Guardian* as "an Oscar-like statuette") and a generous citation from the chairman of the judging panel, Mr. W. L. Webb. Due to a misplaced trust in the amplifying equipment, Mr. Webb's words were heard by very few in an audience that grew discourteously impatient with the non-eventfulness of the occasion, and broke into a buzz of private conversations which had to be quelled by a pained master of

ceremonies. It was an unfortunate climax to an operation designed to stimulate interest in modern storytelling.

Introducing the proceedings, the president of the Publishers Association, Mr. Mark Longman, steered a skilful course between gratitude for the donor's generosity and an assurance to the world at large that the award was not so big as to turn any writer's head. "£5,000 is big money by any standards", he acknowledged modestly, and admitted that many people believed an author's best work was done in conditions of adversity. Yet it was not enough, he thought, to allow a writer to rest for long, and it could tempt him to useful experiment.

### Mingy Prizes

Dame Rebecca West welcomed the large literary prize as an incentive to revive public interest in fiction. The awards hitherto available to British authors had, she



P. H. NEWBY

said, been "too mingy". She hoped that the present award would help greatly to increase the attention given to novels. Aggressively nostalgic, she recalled golden days of fifty years ago ("and I was still not such a young lady") when, any day in the *Daily News*, you could read about books, and at greater length than is possible nowadays. She deplored current reviewing, not because the critics were any worse, but because more books had to be summarily dealt with in less space. It had become impossible to do justice to every novel which appeared.

After Dame Rebecca's announcement of P. H. Newby's success, the judges' chairman, Mr. W. L. Webb, literary editor of the *Guardian*, recalled that 62 books had been considered by him and his colleagues (Dame Rebecca West, Mr. Stephen Spender, Professor Frank Kermode and Mr. David Farrer). Out of these a short-list of six had been chosen a month ago, leaving time for outside speculation. Before he came to praise Mr. Newby, went on Mr. Webb, he had first to "lay respectfully to rest, for this year at least", the other five short-listed writers. Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark were "among the most gifted novelists of their generation". Nicholas Mosley was "an intriguing dark horse who has exercised many keen students of form". The other two, Gordon M. Williams and Barry England, were men of promise whose work was worthy of introduction to such company. The judges had thought well and gratefully of the novels these authors had delivered. Mr.

Webb thought perhaps that their notes of a month ago might have given the game away, for it seemed to him when they came to describe P. H. Newby's work, there was a change of tone, "quite audible to the interested ear". That changed note was the respectful reaction of the judges to the novel's authority.

He went on to speak, at some length, of the special qualities of the work and how the judges had reached their unanimous decision. "Mr. Newby has extended his range", he said, "which was not the case with some other established writers on our list". Beside much that was "genteel or sensational, too decorative or too thinly intellectualised in English fiction today", it was proper to prize, in the successful work "its vision, its concreteness and its finely articulate energy".

Those in the profession of literature and its kindred trades could rejoice that such "a modest and dedicated practitioner" should be rewarded in this practical way, and "these good sugar daddies" who had made it all possible could feel proud of the first novel to take their name.

Accepting the award, Mr. Newby confessed that he was inarticulate in speech, which was perhaps why he wrote. It was difficult for him to find words on such a public occasion. Writing was something that had to be done alone, and it was like being called from some dark underground gallery where he had been busy, to have gold showered on his head. But it was "marvellous". One went on writing, never quite knowing what degree of success was being achieved; an acknowledgment of this sort that one's work was not all nonsense was very encouraging.

#### Publicity

The organisers of the award should not have felt dissatisfied with the response of the national press to their industrious efforts. It was a creditable achievement to have captured over 40 column inches in the dailies on a morning when news editors had the Irish problem highlighted with the début of an undergraduate lady M.P., the return of a lone sailor from a ten-month world voyage and the state visit of the Italian president to choose from. The reporters did splendidly. While it was common ground that the winner was the Controller of the BBC Third Programme, there were several

variations on the extent of his literary activity. Against the P.A. note that he was the author of "17 previous novels", the *Daily Telegraph* put the record at "14 novels, two children's books, a volume of short stories and a study of the 19th century writer Maria Edgeworth", and the *Daily Mirror* referred to his 19th book. It was generally agreed that he was a spare-time writer. The *Times* quoted his confession that he was "a weekend novelist", William Hickey in the *Daily Express* reported him as saying that he did most of his writings "on Sunday mornings", and the *Sun* as "just a weekend writer", taking "two years to write a novel". But William Hickey also noted his confession that he wrote "far too easily—about 500 words an hour" and wished that half his books "could be sewn up in a bag and consigned to oblivion".

As to what he would do with the money, the *Daily Mirror* said that he planned to use it to enable him to write more novels, but "not the definitive BBC novel". The *Guardian* thought he might "perhaps build a new study", and the *Daily Telegraph* noted him as saying that since the award had been given for writing, he must use it in some way "as a feedback". It might be spent on travel. Others reported that he had hardly dared to think about it because the Publishers Association might have telephoned to say that they were terribly sorry and had made a great mistake and he had not won after all.

By a benevolent coincidence, the reports appeared on a morning when the financial pages of the dailies carried the announcement of the chairman of Booker McConnell Ltd., of "a healthy improvement in earnings" during the last financial year, and an increase of 35 per cent. in profit. While shops and wholesaling had made the largest single contribution to this happy position, said the chairman, there were also useful profit increases from "shipping, rum, engineering and other operations which include world-wide royalties from books".