

LITERARY PRIZES

There are a great many prizes already awarded in this country for many different types of books; first novels, promising novels, a life's work, poetry, general non-fiction etc. Why, then, is there a need for any more? Mainly because none of the existing British prizes has caught the imagination of either the public or the communications media to a sufficient degree to make them meaningful to anyone except possibly the recipient and his publisher, and neither of these can receive much satisfaction from such a state of affairs.

However, certain non-British literary prizes can and do make a considerable impact, even in this country. A glance through most British papers during the week or two preceding the decision of the Goncourt panel (for a prize worth about £4 before devaluation) will evidence the interest which can be aroused; no Paris correspondent considers his column complete without an assessment of the current situation regarding the prize. Similarly, the winner of the Nobel prize finds that there is an automatic increase in the demand for his books. The Nobel prize is, of course, worth a considerable sum of money, and prizes of the same name are simultaneously awarded to outstanding people in the scientific and other fields. We believe, however, that the main reason for the contrast in the treatment of British awards and others is the secrecy which shrouds every stage of their progress; even the final announcement of the winner is often more furtive than otherwise.

Why a Literary Prize?

The first question that any potential sponsor is going to ask is why should he support a literary prize rather than a race, a cricket competition or a composer. We suggest the following reasons.

1. Originality Many sporting events are already sponsored by concerns outside that field. Many industries and industrialists are already well-known for their patronage of art and series of concerts, and certain compositions are already commissioned by industry. Although books are "naturals" for this kind of patronage - display outlets throughout the country; sympathetic pre-disposition of journalists etc. - there is not at the moment any

industrial sponsorship whatever (except the relatively small Guinness Poetry Awards). Any firm which instigated a major literary prize would be the first in the field - a pioneer without the risks normally associated with pioneering.

2. Prestige Writers have always held a positive degree of prestige and importance; which, unfortunately, is too often not appreciated until freedom of the individual is threatened. This is evidenced by the prevalence of censorship in repressive societies, and the trials of Russian writers, which have been well publicized in the British press. We award the images of our writers prominent positions in national exhibitions such as Expo '67. Britons have achieved more in this field than in any other of the arts. We have produced no Mozart or Beethoven, no Michelangelo or Rembrandt, but we have, in Shakespeare, produced the greatest writer that the world has ever known.
3. Publicity The sponsorship of a literary prize would guarantee the donor a great deal of publicity and prestige. The initial announcement would rate news items, and interviews in diary columns could be arranged without difficulty at around the same time. At the actual time of the prize-giving, and the fortnight or so preceding this, the build-up could be enormous. Publishing is an industry full of people with contacts in strategic places and, properly planned, these could be used to massive effect.
4. Why Industry or Commerce? When seeking a sponsor for an award, thoughts naturally gravitate towards an organisation which not only has an interest in books anyway, but also great scope for promoting it. Granada Television, IPC and the Thomson organization fall into this category, but to be of the greatest possible worth, the award must be totally independent of any existing literary connections.

What sort of prize? The field of literature is vast, but we believe that no one would dispute that the new prize should go to a work of fiction. Not only are novels more widely read, than any other single category of book, thus potentially ensuring far greater interest at all levels, but, as works of creative writing, they make the finest contribution, along with poetry, to literature.

To attract the attention of the more popular papers, which is vital if any real prestige is to be established (in terms of sales and news value) for the prize, the sum of money involved should be greater than any of the existing awards. It should also sound big. Therefore, £5,000 is probably the smallest amount which would qualify on both counts. This is not a lot in terms of the publicity it could attract. There are already five awards of £1,000, four from the Arts Council and one from W.H. Smith. The terms of reference of the award should be calculated, quite simply, to find the best novel, in the judges' opinion, published within a specified time limit. Probably 12 or 24 months would be the most satisfactory. To get the "best book", there should be no limitation on the age of the author, no consideration given to whether it is his first or tenth book or to the quality of his previous work or his "promise". The W.H. Smith award, given for the greatest contribution to English Literature in the two years preceding its donation probably comes closest to this at the moment. There should not, we think, be any limitation based on the author's nationality, but the book in question should have been first published in the United Kingdom and, ideally, the world rights should be controlled by a British publisher or agent since their export value would be great.

How should the award be given? The reason why no British prize has succeeded in generating any enthusiasm either in the Press, on the air, or in the country at large is because they are handled with singularly little imagination, with the exception of the Guardian prize, which is limited by its connections. An announcement is sent out to the Press that Fred Smith has won the William Shakespeare prize for the best first novel of 1967. Occasionally the names of the judges are included. This is not nearly enough. The public and the Press want to know which other novelists were considered for the prize and why Fred Smith actually won it. To achieve this, public debate must be encouraged and this means releasing, at least, the names of the six or so books short-listed for the prize thus allowing individual newspapers to discuss which one they would give it to and the public to disagree (or support their nominee). We need to create tension and anticipation sufficient to cause people to wait outside the building

where the final judging session is in progress, because they can't bear to wait a minute longer than necessary to get the news. The argument often used against the publication of the names of the authors involved in the last stages is that those who don't win it will feel affronted. But surely any novelist who knew that he stood with five or six others out of a potential three or four thousand names could only be proud. The Guardian already uses this device when making its "fiction of the month" choice and does not seem to have raised any hackles!

Judging Suspected corruption must be avoided at all costs, because, as we have already seen in certain cases, suspicion devalues the whole endeavour. It would be impossible to find a panel of judges who knew none of the authors or publishers involved, but the risk of canvassing, or of the accusation of canvassing could be avoided by having an original list of judges so large that to bring any pressure to bear on enough of them to make an impact would be impossible. The final judges, however, would be picked out of a hat from this list at the last possible moment so that the actual task would not involve an unwieldy number of people, and it would be too late to canvass effectively.

Britain as a nation is rightly proud of its level of literacy - there is a great opportunity awaiting somebody to confer real prestige on members of a profession that have made such a contribution to it.

The last point: should be not achieve greater currency for all our prizes if they could be presented at one event. The individualists prize would, as the largest, provide the cue, but there seems little reason why we couldn't have an evening similar to that on which the Evening Standard awards are given or the T.V. Guild presentations.