

Man Booker Prize shortlist announced

By Ella Funge

September 11, 2012

The hour is here. At a press conference this morning, the final shortlist of the six novels vying for the 2012 Man Booker Prize was announced. They are:

Tan Twang Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (Myrmidon Books)

Deborah Levy, *Swimming Home* (And Other Stories)

Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (Fourth Estate)

Alison Moore, *The Lighthouse* (Salt)

Will Self, *Umbrella* (Bloomsbury)

Jeet Thayil, *Narcopolis* (Faber & Faber)

This year the judging panel is comprised of the actor, editor and columnist Dan Stevens; the historian and best-selling author Amanda Foreman and two academics: Bharat Tandon and Dinah Birch. It is chaired by Sir Peter Stothard, editor of the Times Literary Supplement.

Mantel is the bookies' favourite to win with her sequel to *Wolf Hall*, which took the prize in 2009. *Bring up the Bodies*, the second in her Thomas Cromwell trilogy, is popular with readers and critics alike and seems to be a safe bet to receive the prize. Of course, the fact that she has already received the top honour once before, as well as being longlisted in 2005 for *Beyond Black*, may work against her. The odds, however, seem to suggest that many are confident she can pull it off again.

The inclusion of Will Self's *Umbrella* – which the New Statesman's reviewer referred to as a “complexly textured, conceptually forbidding thesis about the modern” – may be a nod to correcting the controversy that seemed to follow last year's prize. When the 2011 selections were made public, the judging panel were criticised for

pandering to populism. They admitted to rejecting “experimental” books, instead prioritising the readability of the novels above any other quality throughout the judging process. The chair of the 2011 judging panel, Stella Rimington, was quoted as saying that “we want people to buy and read these books, not buy and admire them.” Will Self, described by this year’s panel as a “radical of contemporary literature” and *Umbrella*, with its modernist echoes of Joyce and Eliot, may be the perfect way of signalling that the prize is ready to take itself seriously again, and is no longer afraid to include more conceptually challenging books.

Sir Peter said that it was “the pure power of prose that settled most debates. We loved the shock of language shown in so many different ways and were exhilarated by the vigour and vividly defined values in the six books that we chose - and in the visible confidence of the novel’s place in forming our words and ideas.” This marks a significant departure from the explanations given last year, when Judge Chris Mullin prompted some raised eyebrows by declaring that he liked to choose books with storylines that ‘zip along’. In fact, a renewed interest in the fresh and innovative appears to mark out the shortlist this year - the list includes two first novels and three small independent publishers.

The winner of the Man Booker Prize will be announced on 16 October 2012, at a dinner at London’s Guildhall. The announcement of the winner will be televised by the BBC.