

BOOKER LOOKS TOO TIGHT TO CALL

Friday October 12, 2012

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THE judges of the 2012 Man Booker Prize have a tough task. The panel, including Downton Abbey actor Dan Stevens and historian Amanda Foreman, has whittled the year's best books down to a shortlist of six. Now the judges must decide which title wins the £50,000 award.

Between them the contenders cover a dizzying variety of themes. They feature historical and contemporary storylines and range from a stunning account of life at Henry VIII's court to an eccentric novel with no chapters and few paragraph breaks.

First up is *Swimming Home And Other Stories* (Faber and Faber, £7.99). Surprisingly Deborah Levy struggled to find a mainstream publisher for this, though Faber and Faber stepped in as co-publisher after its appearance on the Man Booker longlist. Lyrical and mysterious Levy's first novel in 15 years examines the fall-out after a naked woman appears in the pool of a French holiday villa rented by a poet and his war correspondent wife.

Next is Alison Moore's *The Lighthouse* (Salt, £8.99), an extraordinarily assured debut novel. The unsettling story of a middle-aged man who embarks on a solo walking holiday after separating from his wife it's haunting and beautifully observed. Moore is a writer to watch and could scoop the prize.

Like Moore, Jeet Thayil (below, centre) has been shortlisted for his first novel. An Indian poet and songwriter Thayil is a former drug addict and *Narcopolis* (Faber and Faber, £12.99) draws on his own experiences. His book, which makes up for "the lost 20 years of my life", is set in Mumbai's opium dens.

The Garden Of Evening Mists (Myrmidon, £12.99) is Malaysian writer Tan Twan Eng's second novel. His tale of the sole survivor of a brutal Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and her determination to create a garden in memory of her dead sister is moving and quietly compelling. In a strong year he may be hard-pressed to win.

The smart money is on the best known writers, Will Self and Hilary Mantel (left).

Either would be a worthy winner of the UK's most prestigious literary award, although Mantel's book is infinitely more accessible.

Umbrella (Bloomsbury, £18.99) is Self's ninth novel and his most ambitious. A 400-page stream of consciousness without chapters and hardly any paragraph breaks the novel spans almost a century. It follows a woman wrongly admitted to a mental hospital after the First World War and the psychiatrist who treats her in the Seventies. Dense and poetic it has divided critics and is the most difficult read on the list.

Mantel's *Bring Up The Bodies* (Fourth Estate, £20) is in a league of its own. The follow-up to *Wolf Hall*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2009, it continues the story of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister, in the tumultuous months leading up to Anne Boleyn's beheading.

If Mantel wins she'll be the first British author to win twice.

South African JM Coetzee and Australian Peter Carey are both double winners but will Mantel join their exalted ranks? We'll find out next Tuesday.