

Picking a Winner

Who Should Get This Year's Booker?

BOOKS | October 11, 2012, 5:15 p.m. ET

By PAUL LEVY



Thanks to e-readers, it is now possible to carry the entire six-book Man Booker Prize shortlist around in a pocket, making light work of the annual task of reading it.

This year's judges, chaired by Peter Stothard, editor of the Times Literary Supplement, include a couple of academics, the best-selling historian Amanda Foreman and the young actor from "Downton Abbey," Dan Stevens. They have chosen the most entertaining shortlist I've read in the 20 years or so I've been reviewing it. The current shortlist also reflects the unorthodox publishing arrangements of much contemporary fiction.

However, the judges have a problem this year: one novel is so superior that only non-literary reasons could excuse their awarding the £50,000 to one of the other five. Hilary Mantel's "Bring Up the Bodies," a sequel to her 2009 Man Booker Prize-winning "Wolf Hall," occupies an eminence of its own. Set in 1535, Thomas Cromwell, now chief minister to Henry VIII, has both to see to the defense of the nation and deal with the succession, while accommodating the new church and the king's sexual whims. Anne Boleyn loses her head, chillingly, off-stage—an indication of Ms. Mantel's subtlety, narrative control and light touch. Using modern-day language, she respects the reader's intelligence, and creates an atmosphere that makes you appreciate the 16th-century mindset without resorting to "egads," "gadzooks" or "by my troths."

The sole reason possible for denying Ms. Mantel the 2012 prize would be that the judges feel it is someone else's turn to win. It would be disgraceful, but perfectly in keeping with the perverse record of Man Booker Prize judges down the years.

Supposing they are so boneheaded, might they then choose Will Self's "Umbrella" because it is the most difficult/experimental/tricky book on the 2012 shortlist? I repeatedly lost my place on my Kindle, a device that can return you to the last page read. Thinking my download was corrupt, I got a copy of the hardback—only to learn that "Umbrella" is a continuous text, with no chapter divisions and very few paragraphs. Worse, the e-book lacked the hardback's chronology,

printed on the front end-paper, that allows you to follow the story of Audrey Death, "feminist, socialist and munitions worker," who "falls ill with encephalitis lethargica" in 1918 and is misdiagnosed as insane. There is also the tale of a psychiatrist, Dr. Zack Busner, who in summer 1971 wakes up some of these patients with a new drug, and spends 2010 trying to find out what really happened in 1971.

Or so the chronology says. It also states that in this dense book "Will Self takes up the challenge of Modernism." The title is explained in the epigraph from James Joyce: "A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella." Joyce is obviously Mr. Self's model, but is this homage to the brilliant "Ulysses"? Or to the undecipherable "Finnegan's Wake"? I fear it is the latter.

"The Lighthouse," Alison Moore's debut novel, is sufficiently strange to win. The third-person narrator is distanced from, but never judges, the weird protagonist Futh, a middle-aged, not particularly attractive, recently separated man going on a walking tour in Germany. He is visiting some places he went to with his newly single father, after his mother abandoned them when he was 12. The people he meets along the way are even less prepossessing than he, but the narrator's tone of voice somehow contrives to make the reader continue to turn the pages.

Jeet Thayil's first novel, "Narcopolis," told me all I ever need to know about opium dens in Bombay in the 1970s. The main character is a transsexual prostitute called Dimple, and there's a good deal of gore and drug-lore, but my sympathetic attention was captured by the exotic aura of the sordid goings-on. Enchanted by Dimple, I enjoyed the novel.

Deborah Levy's "Swimming Home" is an accomplished work that investigates the distressing effect the young, bipolar, copper-haired Kitty Finch has when she intrudes on a group of chic people in a summer holiday villa near Nice. She especially upsets Jozef Nowodgrodzki, the "post Holocaust poet, the philandering poet" better known as Joe Harold Jacobs. The narrative is tautly contained in time and place, and each character is finely drawn. Ms. Levy's first novel for 15 years was originally published for subscribers by And Other Stories Publishing, before being issued by Faber.

The novel I most relished reading was Tan Twan Eng's elegantly constructed "The Garden of Evening Mists," delightful for its wonderfully visualized Malaysian setting and with a plot that will thrill anyone who likes a good conspiracy theory. Though it's ostensibly about memory and forgetting, much of it is set during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, and the post-War Communist insurgency. The protagonist is a former prisoner of the Japanese and retired female Malaysian Supreme Court judge of Straits Chinese origins, who apprenticed as a garden designer to a former gardener to the Japanese emperor; the charismatic gardener is the keeper of a nasty, big secret. This page-turning literary synthesis of archery, the tea ceremony, tattooing, comfort girls, "Golden Lily" hoard of gold and Japanese war-guilt made me eager to read Mr. Tan's previous novel, "The Gift of Rain."

A case can be made for any of these five—but only at the expense of the truth that "Bring Up the Bodies" outclasses them all.