



Judging the **Booker Prize**

What is it like to chair the judging panel for one of the world's most prestigious literary prizes? **Howard Davies** reflects on the experience.

When the letter came in, one day last November, asking me to chair the Man Booker judges this year, it seemed an irresistible offer. Who could pass up the idea of a summer spent reading a few agreeable novels – nice new hardbacks to boot? A no brainer, surely?

Well, up to a point, Lord Copper. As with many tempting offers, no one tells you precisely what is involved until you are on the hook and it is too late to reconsider. I will not say it has not been enjoyable but I hadn't quite bargained for the time involved in reading what turned out to be 110 novels, which only start to arrive in mid March and must be finished by early August. I knew there would be a lot of entries, but I suppose I naively believed that many of them would take only minutes to dismiss.

Sadly for my social life, but encouragingly for the state of the English novel, it did not turn out that way. Only a few of the entries could be easily dismissed. The overall standard was remarkably high. Then of course there are the four other judges to consider. A novel you might think a turkey could be a swan in someone else's eyes. So I did read just over 35,000 pages of fiction in five months.

This is a rich imaginative diet. By the end of it those parts of your brain which respond to emotional and imaginative stimuli feel rather like the livers of a Perigord goose.

But, to be fair, there was a remarkable diversity of subject matter which prevented complete indigestion. Two of the entries were in fact written by

LSE alumni. Pat Barker has a new novel this year – *Life Class* – about young art students at the Slade School just before the First World War, who are thrown from the drawing studio into the trenches from one month to the next. We did not shortlist it, but those who have read Barker's other First World War novels in the past will certainly enjoy it. The other LSE submission was a novel about growing up in south Wales by Aneurin Gareth Thomas, who took an MSc in Logic and Scientific Method here a few years ago! *Luggage from Elsewhere* is quite a hard edged tale of growing up which many will find appealing though, once again, I am afraid it did not make the shortlist.

And in addition to two novels written by LSE alumni there is another in which LSE plays an important part. *My Revolution* by Hari Kunzru describes the radicalisation of an LSE student in the 1960s and his transformation into a rather amateur urban terrorist – a novel of the angry brigade for those who remember that curious little episode.

So my reading marathon did not take me too far from LSE. And indeed I uncovered many closet novel readers among the faculty and students. We do offer a course in literature and society, on which I shall now be a guest lecturer, and it turns out that there are other academics here working, for example, on the impact of the novel on our view of economic development in Africa. So there have been more connections between my day job and my night job than I would have imagined when I started.

The long and shortlists we produced this year have attracted quite a lot of attention, partly because of the absence of many better known names. Of the six we chose, only Ian McEwan has previously attracted a large readership. That was not a deliberate policy. But we found that this year the most exciting new fiction was written by relative unknowns. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* was barely reviewed when it first appeared in the UK, though it is a fascinating post Bhopal story with an unforgettable central character. Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*, set in Bougainville, is another gem from a writer previously unpublished outside New Zealand. Mohsin Hamid has had some success in Pakistan, in particular, but was little known before *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* appeared. Anne Enright (*The Gathering*) has had a loyal following in Ireland and London, but not a large one. Nicola Barker has won prizes in the past, but none of her previous novels has attracted the interest of *Darkmans*.

Eventually, we struggled to the choice of *The Gathering* as the winner, but I can recommend all six to any LSE alum as a good companion for a long winter evening. I, by contrast, will spend the next few months reading economics, politics, history and anything but novels! ■

Howard Davies

is director of LSE. He was chair of judges for the 2007 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

Reading the future

LSE and the Hay Festival of Literature and Arts have collaborated on a series of lectures and events called Reading the Future.

The new series was launched at the main festival in May this year with a lecture by Howard Davies, focusing on China's role in the world economy.

Following this successful start, the series continued in Segovia in September with Paul Preston, professor of contemporary Spanish Studies, European Institute, LSE, speaking on foreign correspondents during the Spanish Civil War and Fred Halliday, professor of international relations at the School, discussing poverty and interventionism with Professor Bezosa, rector of Complutense University, and Andrés Ortega, international affairs editor of *El País* and an LSE alumnus.

A public dialogue between Alan Greenspan, former chair of the US Federal Reserve, and Howard Davies took place in October, the first event in the series to be held at LSE. A podcast is available at www.hayfestival.com/archive/details/_274.aspx

Plans are underway for the next event in Cartagena from 24 to 27 January 2008.

For more information, see www.hayfestival.com