Cecily van Gend

It is that time of year again when the literary world hands out accolades in the form of prizes. I briefly mentioned our own **Sunday Times** Award in my last column, expressing my disagreement with the choice, by the judges, of Justin Cartwright's **Promise of happiness**. I question the exclusion from the shortlist of Ivan Vladislavic's very fine **Exploded view**, on the (rather technical) grounds that it was not really a novel, but a collection of short stories. As Tim Cousins has pointed out, the stories together comprise a complete work, in the same way that TS Eliot's **Four quartets**, while they can be read separately, are a single, unified work, and that a symphony is an entity, although its movements can be enjoyed individually. As I emphasised, then, I am not knocking the **Promise of happiness**: it's a terrific book, but I do feel it was a great pity to nominate it for this award, particularly at the expense of another very fine local work.

Apart from the prestige which they confer, these literary awards are usually quite substantial monetarily speaking, and in addition, the publicity and interest which they generate often leads to large increases in the sales of the winning work, as well as anything else written by the prizewinner. These awards can only ever be subjective, and, as a result, the decisions are often controversial, leading to much lively discussion and disagreement in the press because there is usually so much at stake, these awards are the subject of much rivalry, often leading to a great deal of snide comment, if not downright nastiness.

Probably the most prestigious, and one of the most lucrative awards is the Nobel Prize, which is international, and is given for a lifetime's work. Often this award seems to have a somewhat political slant, and this year's winner, Harold Pinter, is no exception, although I think there is very little disagreement with the view that he is also a very deserving recipient. In the biography issued by the Swedish Academy in its announcement of the winner, he is described as 'the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century', who 'restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretence crumbles. 'He has given the English language the term Pinteresque, implying, says Maureen Isaacson in the **Sunday Independent** (16 October 2005), 'a particular voice and method that seems to be symbolic of something larger and more significant than the characters and action of the plays they inhabit, denying us the comfort of knowing what they "mean".' Pinter is also an outspoken political activist and critic of George Bush and Tony Blair, having described the Iraqi War as 'a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law', with the Americans 'having the ostensible support of the international community through various sure-fire modes of intimidation; bullying, bribery, blackmail and bullshit' and suggesting that Bush and Blair should be tried as war criminals.

The winner of this year's Man Booker Prize has also been announced: John Banville's **The sea**. While exquisitely written, I found it a less than riveting read, and my money would have been on Ian McEwan's **Saturday**, which I read earlier this year and found absolutely mind-blowing.

I have recently been reading a fascinating study of the British publishing scene, *Popular fiction and publishing 1960s-1990s*, an unpublished doctoral thesis by Moira C Robinson. She devotes an entire chapter to the subject of literary prizes in which, amongst other topics, she discusses the origin of the Booker, probably the best-known and most-discussed of all the prizes in the English-speaking world. It was instituted by the Booker McConnell food company in 1969, ostensibly to reassure publishers and booksellers, who feared that novel readers were becoming a dying breed. Rather an odd interest for a bunch of food manufacturers, you might think, but then, this particular company had an interesting sideline: an Authors' Division, which owned the copyright and managed the affairs of several successful writers, including Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer, Dennis Wheatley, Robert Bolt, and Harold Pinter.

This interest all began with Ian Fleming, a friend of Jock Campbell, managing director of the Booker Company, who set up the division as a tax loophole for Fleming, who found that his income tax contribution, in the 1960s, was 'almost equivalent to confiscation'. The company thought that, by introducing a prize, they would encourage more best-selling authors to their stable, and enlisted the help of WL Webb, literary editor of the **Guardian** newspaper. Until this time, British literary prizes had been rather modest, awarded with very little fanfare, but all this changed with the Booker, which offered a prize of £5 000, backed by generous funding for publicity. Today the award is substantially larger, having kept pace with inflation and the publicity budget has also grown. It has become a glittering event, where the winner is announced at a lavish dinner in London's Guildhall, after weeks of speculation in the press, and bookmakers offering odds on the shortlisted works. Besides the award dinner, there are numerous other parties on award night, thrown by the publishers of the shortlisted authors, not unlike the one so delightfully sent up by David Mitchell in **Cloud Atlas**:

'Twas the Night of the Lemon Prize Awards, held in Jake's Starlight Bar, grandly reopened atop a Bayswater edifice with a rooftop garden thrown in for good measure. The whole ruddy publishing food chain had taken to the air and roosted at Jake's. The haunted writers, the celebrity chefs, the suits, the goateed buyers, the malnourished booksellers, packs of hacks and photographers who take "Drop Dead" for "Why, I'd love to!"… Anyway, the winner was announced, and we all know who got the fifty-K prize money. I got sloshed…'

The panel of judges changes annually, and this is often where the controversy begins, with the appointment of celebrities to the panel, or the deliberate selection of judges whose tastes do no coincide, so that the selection of the winner is often a compromise. In an article entitled, *Literary Prizes, Ha, Ha, Ha*, (in ***n.b.: the book magazine for librarians***, Vol 1 No 2 June/July 1995) Harry Ritchie expressed his views on the subject:

'Although the publicity created by the Booker is not uniformly positive…even the customary scandals, vilifications and outrage contribute to the profile of the prize and, much more importantly, the profile of contemporary fiction. Which, after all, is the only

justification for the Booker's existence, since the notion of a "best" novel or book of the year is patent nonsense. (With the winner being selected from a shortlist of five separately categorised books, the Whitbread is even more patently nonsensical.) The innate daftness of the major literary prizes and the fact that they are assessed by a committee mean that predicting their winners is even more futile than most bookish punditry.'

In 1993, on the 25th anniversary of its inception, three previous chairmen of the judges, David Holloway, Malcolm Bradbury and WL Webb, were asked to choose the Booker of Bookers - the work they considered to be the best of all the previous winners. They chose Salman Rushdie's **Midnight's children**, which had won the award in 1981. Six years later, during the televised presentation of the 1999 prize, there was a tongue in cheek interlude entitled 'how to write a winner', in which an anonymous critic was asked what he thought were the distinctive characteristics of the kind of work which tends to win the Booker. This is what he came up with:

'Try to be foreign - thirteen previous winners were non-British; try to be historical; try to be warlike - war stories have a habit of doing well; do not be too experimental - the critics panned **The bone people**; make sure you have a big theme like the Holocaust or death; do not write Science Fiction, Thrillers, Crime Fiction, or Romances; try to be a famous writer who has been inexplicably overlooked in the past; try not to be Beryl Bainbridge who has been inexplicably overlooked five times - 1973, 1974, 1990, 1996, and 1998. So, overall, try to be a foreign writer, with a not too experimental book featuring a war in an exotic setting and get a few big themes in - in fact, just try to be Salman Rushdie.'