# Women Literature and Literary Prizes

**A comment on some of the best fiction by women published recently**

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Literary prizes have for many years been a means of generating interest and publicity, raising the profile of biographical, historical and fictional works, as well as genres such as poetry and children's literature which tended to be neglected in the past. The Whitbread Literary Awards honour writers in five categories: Fiction, Non-fiction, Poetry, Children's Literature and First Novels.

These prestigious prizes are rewarding not only for their actual monetary value which allows writers to pursue their work without financial worry, but also in drawing public attention to often little known writers. The Whitbread Best Novel winner for 2004 is a case in point. Andrea Levy† is one of a handful of black British novelists to be published by mainstream companies and had written several books previously without attracting much notice. The Whitbread Prize changed all that and she is now a much sought-after author whose novel, **Small island**, has featured in best-seller lists for many months.


In this riveting narrative Levy tells the story of a Jamaican man, Gilbert Joseph, who during World War II served in the Royal Air Force (RAF) for what he regarded as King and Mother country. But when he arrives in England after the war he is shocked to find that black immigrants are not universally admired or welcomed with open arms. In fact when his wife of convenience, Hortense, joins him in his London rooming house the two face a traumatic desiccation of their dreams.

Queenie Bligh, their sympathetic landlady, is a marvellously drawn and complex character who takes care of her father-in-law, Arthur. Running parallel with the emotional shock experienced by the Jamaican couple is the shell-shock which Arthur suffers as a survivor of World War I trench warfare. Other themes skilfully woven into the fabric of this exceptional novel are the pointlessness of war, the ugliness of racism and the nature of affection and loyalty.

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Born in 1956 Andrea Levy has no first-hand knowledge of the London Blitz yet she brilliantly evokes its tensions, horror and the steadfastness of Londoners in that stressful time. The same applies to Gilbert's wartime encounters and to those of Queenie's missing husband, Bernard. The sudden reappearance of this absentee well over two years after demobilisation affords a shock of a new kind and compounds the tensions in all their lives. The way in which these are resolved forms a moving and unforgettable finale to Levy's profound novel.

The only other work on the 2004 Whitbread short list for Best Novel that could seriously rival **Small island** is Kate Atkinson's† **Case histories**. The title refers to three crimes which, though widely spaced in time and type, all take place in the apparently tranquil university town of Cambridge

(with an ironic nod to Inspector Morse?). The first occurs in 1970 when three-year-old Olivia disappears one night from a tent on the lawn, leaving her older sister, Amelia, with a life-long sense of guilt and worthlessness.

The second case involves Theo, a widower who adores his teenaged daughter, Laura, only to lose her in 1994 when she is fatally stabbed by a crazed killer. Case number three takes place in 1979 when Michelle, a young mother, ostensibly attacks her husband with an axe in the presence of her sister, Shirley, and her baby daughter, Tanya.

These disparate events come together in 2004 when ex-policeman, now private detective, Jackson Brodie is approached to find Olivia, the mystery killer of Laura, and the whereabouts of Tanya who was taken into care after her father's murder. But though these details may lead one to expect a conventional detective yarn, this is very far from the fact.

What Kate Atkinson achieves in **Case histories** is not only an exciting set of mysteries but penetrating and compassionate insights into the psyches of the many characters she delineates. Particularly moving is the intense feeling of loss and grief experienced by Theo, and the loneliness of the plain and unloved Amelia. In the last phase of the book the cases are all more or less resolved, but Atkinson does not attempt to tie up every loose end or to give black and white answers to the questions she raises in this fine and thought-provoking novel.

In an article of limited length it is not possible to discuss all the fiction selected for the long and short lists of the various literary prizes. The scope of these can be assessed from the names of winners which appear regularly in the **CL** (see, for instance, the March/April 2005 issue, pp. 14–17). Nor is it possible to read all the novels in contention, much less the thousands of other fictional works that appear each year. This article, therefore, reflects only my own, possibly subjective, choice of those nominated which I found particularly enjoyable.

Susan Fletcher's debut novel, **Eve Green**, is one such title chosen for Whitbread's First Novel short list. Eve, who is 29 and expecting a baby when the story opens, reflects on her childhood and the loss of her mother. At the age of eight she is sent to her maternal grandparents on their farm in Wales. Here she comes across Billy who has been damaged by fire and the nasty shopkeeper, Mr Phipps, who takes a dislike to her and her red hair. The events of that period have deeply affected her life and some of their consequences are resolved only towards the end of this accomplished debut.

Also surprisingly accomplished for a first book is Susanna Clarke's **Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell** which has been described as 'the greatest British fantasy for 70 years'. On a more social realist level but just as polished is Sarah Hall's debut, **Haweswater** which won the 2003 Commonwealth Writer's First Book Award, as well as the Betty Trask Prize. It relates the rural tragedy of a Cumbrian Valley whose traditional way of life is destroyed in the 1930s by a reservoir project. The book's success meant that Hall's second novel was eagerly awaited and it did not disappoint. **The electric Michelangelo** is set in the early twentieth century in the resort town of Morcambe on the north-west coast of England. Here Cy Perks is growing up in his mother's guesthouse which caters mainly for consumptives. She also has a sideline in illicit abortions which, like Vera Drake, she regards as simply 'helping girls out' who have 'got into trouble'.

Cy later apprentices himself to a tattooist and eventually emigrates to America. On Coney Island in all its carnival glory, Cy sets himself up in his own business as 'The electric Michelangelo'. This is a really superb book with a very unusual plot line well on a par with **Haweswater**. Yet, such are the vagaries of prize lists, that this second novel was barely noticed.

**Small island**, on the other hand, won not only the Whitbread Best Novel Award, but went on to win several other prestigious honours, not least Whitbread's Book of the Year Prize. Pleased as one may be by Levy's well-deserved success, this particular prize is controversial in conception, as it pits against each other the winners of the five Whitbread categories mentioned above. This anomaly has persisted for years despite the frequent criticism that it is not possible to compare fiction and poetry, say, or children's literature and historical works. But then controversy is what literary prizes often thrive on and what ensures the most media coverage.

A further feather in Andrea Levy's cap is the 2004 Orange Prize which allows only women to compete. For that reason it is another area of dissent to which several eminent women novelists have contributed by remarking that such a prize pushes women back into the gender ghetto from which they have for so long struggled to escape. One could argue, too, that women would be appalled by a literary prize open only to men, but it is these debates that, ironically, have helped the Orange Prize to go from strength to strength. Another irony is that this prize has in the current year been awarded to a woman who chooses to publish under a man's name! Lionel Shriver changed her first name from Margaret Ann in her adolescence because she believed (perhaps rightly) that men have an easier life. Her prize-winning novel, **We need to talk about Kevin**, concerns the horrific subject of school murders. The eponymous Kevin is fifteen when he runs amok with his crossbow and murders seven of his classmates and two adults at his suburban school near New York. As Sarah Curtis observes in her review of the book, 'Lionel Shriver has skilfully hit the bull's-eye on two best-selling targets in the American market: the fear of rampage killings by teenagers at school, and the guilt of working mothers' (**Times Literary Supplement**, April 8, 2005).


On an equally unpleasant subject is Valerie Martin's 2003 Orange winner, **Property**, which centres on the bitter life of a female slave and the cruelty of her owners. Like Sarah Hall, Martin's next book was overlooked by the prize pundits, despite its undeniable quality. The heroine of **Italian fever**, Lucie Stark, is sent to Italy to sort the papers of her late employer, a bestselling American writer who has

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fallen to his death in a well. The novel has a powerful atmosphere of mystery and a slight quality of Henry James in its straightforward American girl confronting the sophistications of Europe. The book is saved from the dangers of cliché, however, by the ironic manner of the author.

Despite its omissions, the 2004 Orange long list of twenty books contains some very good and widely differing novels. In defiance of what some critics claim is the moribund condition of the novel in English, this list and the other books cited below suggest both the continued strength of the genre and the vast variety it is capable of embracing.

**Notes on a scandal** by Zoë Heller, for instance, examines the consequences of an older woman's passion (reciprocated as it happens) for a young boy, while in contrast Audrey Niffenegger's debut, **The time traveller's wife**, is quite a tearjerker which is also a compelling existential examination of temporality. This is integral to the plot in which Henry is a time traveller who materialises at various points in his life. The innovative chronology is at times bewildering but the overall effect is powerful. Just as imaginative is Dinah Lee Küng's **A visit from Voltaire**, described on its cover as 'A comic novel about the unlikeliest of friends'. This friendship entails a despondent mother of three trying to cope with life in Switzerland when she is visited and ultimately restored to cheerfulness by the ghost of Voltaire. Through this device the reader encounters many truths about human nature as well as a great deal of interesting information about the eighteenth century and one of France's most revered writers.

Veteran novelists Rose Tremain† and Anne Tyler (both born in the early 1940s) also create an interesting contrast with **The colour** and **The amateur marriage** respectively. Tremain tells the story of Harriet who marries the churlish Joseph Blackstone - a man with a secret as dark as his name - and emigrates with him and his mother to New Zealand. When Joseph goes off to join the gold rush, leaving Harriet to care for his ailing mother, the house he stubbornly built in the path of winter storms is swept away. After the mother's death Harriet sets off to find Joseph, surviving many dangers and hardships en route.

The only other description I've read of the brutality and suffering endured by prospectors which rivals **The colour** is Isabel Allende's depiction of the California gold rush in **Daughter of fortune** (1999). (For more about this author see **CL** May/June 2002, pp21-22.) Both books, oddly enough, feature a kind and civilised Chinese man who forms a counterpoint to the greed, desperation and violence of the prospecting community. **The amateur marriage**, on the other hand, is limited to personal relationships, misguided motives and thwarted expectations. This is all familiar Tyler territory but no less interesting for that and the themes are handled with the skill and insight we can rely on from this author.

Domesticity of another sort is the focus of Jhumpa Lahiri's **The namesake**. Besides being nominated for the 2004 Orange Prize, Lahiri has also won America's prestigious Pulitzer award for her earlier **Interpreter of maladies** (2000). **The namesake** is a luminous novel which charts 30 years in the lives of a Bengali family grappling with the problems of adjusting to American immigrant life. On the birth of the Gangulis' first son the couple write to the grandmother in India to name their child. Before a reply arrives they are forced to register the birth and hastily light on 'Gogol' after the father's literary idol.

As the boy grows up he finds his name increasingly embarrassing and eventually styles himself Nikhil, rejecting in the process his parents' cultural heritage and their Hinduism. The conflicts between old and new ways of life are forcefully dramatised in this richly-textured and well-structured novel.

In **The sari shop**, although author Rupa Bajwa restricts her story to India, the world she describes is nevertheless also divided into discrete cultures. When her humble hero Ramchand leaves the shop where he is an assistant and delivers saris to the home of Rina, he discovers a scene of beauty and wealth which contrasts painfully with his own poverty. Determined now to improve himself he shaves off his moustache and starts learning English.

As Ramchand ventures further into the real world from which he has retreated after his mother's early death the book begins to turn into a critique of middle class Indian life, calling into question the values and often double standards of contemporary society. It develops, in fact, into a savage satire and bears witness to some horrific injustices. Ramchand recognises the arbitrariness of these and despairs at his own impotence to alter events despite his courage in discarding his former natural timidity. Dispiriting as much of this is, **The sari shop** is ultimately an affirmative novel, shot through with shafts of wit and moral integrity.

Though not nominated for any prizes that I know of, **A black Englishman** by Carolyn Slaughter has many themes in common with **The sari shop** and seems to cry out for mention in the present context. The action opens in 1920 when 23-year-old Isabel impetuously marries a British soldier and sets off with this virtual stranger for his posting in India. There she finds him to be neither considerate nor loving, so we are not surprised when she falls in love with a handsome Indian doctor - the black Englishman of the title. Born in London and educated at Eton and Oxford, Singh's accent and sophistication serve only to make the colonial establishment distrustful of him rather than welcoming. The difficulties experienced by this mixed-race couple are seen against the vivid background of India in all its political complexity and manifold variety. This is not to mention its double standards, questionable values and sometimes appalling treatment of women which so perplexed Ramchand in **The sari shop**.

Stemming from the same continent, Monica Ali's **Brick lane** recounts the tale of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi girl who is married off to Chanu, an older man living in London. Not only is this match anything but romantic in a totally strange environment, Nazneen must also endure her boorish husband's uncouth manners, frequent stupidity and patronising attitude to her. As Nazneen's history unfolds, Monica Ali opens a window onto the virtually hidden society of the Bangladeshi population living in the east end of London. Her descriptions are vivid and exotic and her style so assured that it is a surprise to learn that **Brick lane**

is a debut novel. Nominated for both the 2004 Orange and 2003 Booker Prizes, Ali's success was not welcomed by the Bangladeshi community who regarded it as something of a betrayal of their sequestered culture.

Another recent debut nominated for the 2003 Booker‡ Prize is Clare Morrall's evocatively titled **Astonishing splashes of color**, with its compelling story of Kitty, a young woman who cannot come to terms with the loss of her baby. The echo of **Peter Pan** audible in the title is subtly explored in the depiction of Kitty's four brothers, 'lost boys' in a sense who have been deserted by their mother.

No woman has won the Booker Prize since Margaret Atwood's triumph in 2000 with **The blind assassin**. This is despite the fact that several strong contenders have appeared on the subsequent short lists. In 2003 these included Margaret Atwood again with the futuristic **Oryx and Crake** and Zoë Heller's **Notes on a scandal** mentioned earlier. In 2004 only one woman featured on the short list: Sarah Hall whose debut and second novels appear above.

The long list that year, however, included four more women: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Shirley Hazzard whose books will be discussed below; Susanna Clarke mentioned above, and Nicola Barker's **Clear: a transparent novel**. This takes as its inspiration David Blaine's extraordinary 2003 stunt when he was suspended in a Perspex box over the Thames river. The public response to this escapade - a lot of it malicious - forms part of Barker's narrative along with an examination of Blaine who, the third person narrator suggests, is 'pointing a small torch into the huge, black sky of history'.

**Purple hibiscus** by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie caused quite a stir in the book world and was nominated for both the Orange and Booker Prizes in 2004. As one critic remarked, 'To whet a foreign reader's appetite for a country with as bleak a reputation as Nigeria's requires a steady hand and great compassion'. Undoubtedly Adichie has both these qualities, setting her story of domestic tyranny against the backdrop of a political coup and subsequent disintegration and oppression. As the story of Kambili and her brother Jaja progresses we see the emotional and physical constraints - not to dwell on actual bodily abuse - imposed by a Catholic father whose fanaticism totally distorts true Christian teaching.

Kambili both fears and adores her father, but it is only when she and her brother visit their aunt, a university lecturer, that she sees for the first time the openness and joy which loving family life can attain. Parallelling the country's inexorable downward slide, racked by strikes, corruption and unrest, is the gradual slackening of the father's hold over his family. The action leads up to a dramatic denouement which brings us back full circle to the opening line of the novel and its salute to Nigeria's literary giant, Chinua Achebe, 'Things started to fall apart at home…'.

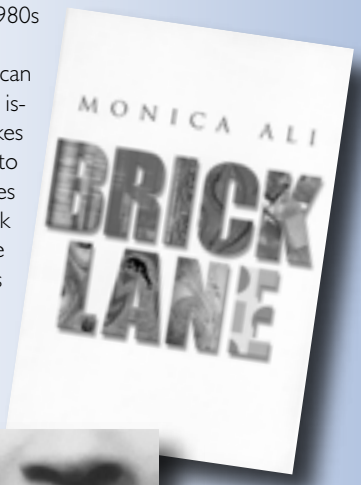
Writing from Nigeria is flourishing at present with Segun Afolabi having just won the Caine Prize (dubbed the 'African Booker' through its association with Sir Michael Caine, who until his recent death chaired the Man Booker Award) for his short story, **Monday morning**, about people fleeing a brutal regime.

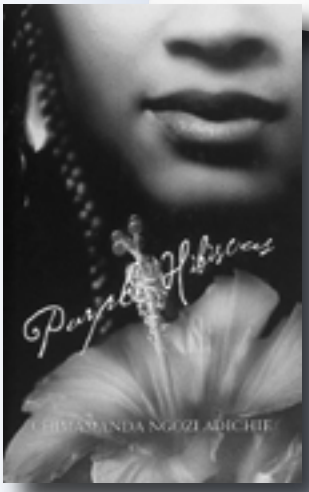
On the female front Diana Evans has currently won the newly instituted Orange First Novel Award for **26a**. This is a semi-autobiographical account of twins born to a English father and a Nigerian mother living in London. Co-incidentally **The Icarus girl** by Helen Oyeyemi has a similar family unit with eight-year-old Jessamy feeling strongly that she is missing half of her being, possibly a dead twin. Though not yet a prize nominee Oyeyemi's book is a very real achievement, especially in its descriptions of Jessamy's impressions when she and her mother leave England to visit the family compound in Nigeria.

Among America's most prestigious literary honours are the National Book Awards, several of which are presented each year. At a recent ceremony Shirley Hazzard, the Australian-born writer, was a winner for her novel, **The great fire**, which is concerned with the effects of war. Also shortlisted for the Orange Prize, the title of this fine book is a direct reference to World War II with its ecological devastation and far-reaching consequences. The action opens with the hero, Aldred Leith, travelling along the stricken coasts of Japan en route to visit Hiroshima. His experiences are counterpoised by those of his army friend, Peter Exley, who is investigating war crimes in Hong Kong. The two narrative strands are deftly integrated in this, Hazzard's first novel in 23 years, which also recounts a most moving and tender love story.

At the ceremony during which Hazzard was honoured the whole question of the value of and criteria for literary awards was highlighted when Stephen King received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American letters, thus joining a list which includes such luminaries as Saul Bellow, Eudora Welty, Toni Morrison, John Updike and Philip Roth. The reason for King's award was commercial rather than literary for a writer who published his first book in 1973, became the biggest-selling novelist of the 1980s and is still going strong in the new century.

**The Bookseller** (the trade journal of American publishing industry) noted in its November 2004 issue that the National Book Foundation which makes the awards 'has now extended the word "great" to take in popularity and how that popularity translates into the business of books'. Oprah Winfrey's Book Club had an enormous impact on the sale of the books she chose which was the reason she was given a National Book Award in 1999. Something similar (that is sales) applied to King who began his thank you speech with the words 'some people think this is an extraordinarily bad idea and some think it an extraordinarily good idea'. He went on to accept the award on behalf of writers such as Elmore Leonard, Jack Ketcham, Nora Lofts, John Grisham and other big-selling popular writers. His generally derogatory attitude to literary works incensed Shirley Hazzard who remarked, 'I don't regard literature which he spoke of in a pejorative way, as a competition - it is so vast'. She ended her acceptance speech with the following observations: 'We have this marvellous language, and we are so lucky it gives us a huge

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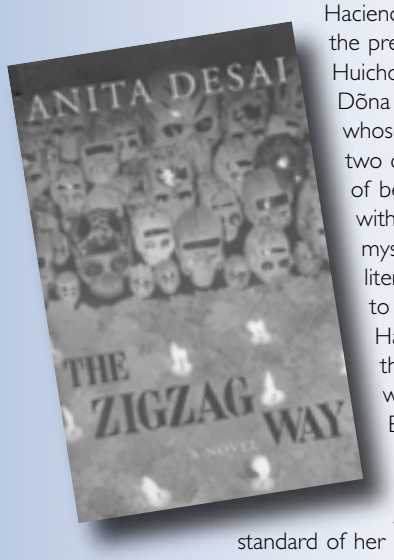
audience. If we were writing in high Norwegian we'd have mostly reindeer for readers.

'I don't think giving us a reading list of those who are the most read is satisfactory. I don't see that we should read this or that. We should bring our own individuality, our own intuitions towards what we want to read. In America, we're drowning in explanations. What we need are more questions. Explanations - the official ones - are not leading us to good places.'

This incident gives some insight into the difficulties of selecting works for literary prizes. While it is true that most of, if not all, the books nominated for awards are worthy of notice and reward, there are many excellent novels which by chance, lack of marketing or neglect by their distributors have not featured on any of the latest lists, long or short. I have mentioned three already (see Hall, Martin and Slaughter) which would not have shamed any recent literary prize list, and there were many more of this calibre published in 2004 alone. Of these I think two of the most deserving are Anita Desai's **The zigzag way** and **Easter island** by Jennifer Vanderbes.

In her new novel Anita Desai breaks away from her usual domestic Indian setting, choosing instead the silver mines of Mexico. The 'zigzag way' refers to the winding pattern followed by miners to alleviate the stress of hauling heavy silver loads up hundreds of steps. The central character, Eric, has accompanied his girlfriend to Mexico where she is researching the malaria-carrying mosquitoes of the Yucatan Peninsula. Her destination has reminded Eric of the seldom-mentioned fact that his father was born in Mexico and that his grandparents died there.




As Eric searches for his roots, he comes across the remote Hacienda de la Soledad, now a centre dedicated to the preservation and study of pre-colonial native Huichol culture. This institute is presided over by Dõna Vera - soi-disant 'Queen of the Sierra' - at whose mysterious past we can only guess. These two characters, each trying to establish a sense of belonging, fail to communicate meaningfully with each other. The 'zigzag way' acquires a mystic and symbolic dimension outside of its literal meaning as Eric resolves to seek clues to the past in the ghost towns above the Hacienda. The story has its denouement in the Mexican festival of the Night of the Dead when a strange encounter at last connects Eric to the past. Though Desai's precise intention and meaning remain somewhat elusive, this elegantly-written book has a gently magnetic quality which sustains the standard of her numerous previous works set more familiarly in India.

**Easter island** also has a dual time frame as Vanderbes parallels the lives of two women living 60 years apart. This device - used so brilliantly in AS Byatt's **Possession** (1990) - allows the author to meditate on the significance of Easter Island's famous statues from disparate points of view.

In 1912 Elsa Pendleton marries an older man, Professor Beazley, in order to provide a means of support for herself and her younger sister Alice. The sisters accompany Beazley on an expedition to Easter Island where Elsa becomes engrossed in studying the island's mystic past, failing to notice the emotional turmoil about to engulf the three of them.

Sixty years later in 1973 Greer Farraday, recovering from the death and scholarly disgrace of her husband, sets off on a research project to establish the ecological and botanical history of this now-desolate island. The stories of the two women are adroitly interwoven, creating a novel - based on fact - which manages to make anthropological, ecological and botanical research both interesting and even exciting.

As I say earlier, the oft-circulated rumour that the novel in English is dead seems to me to be totally without foundation. Considering the last two novels alone, one can see how novelists are venturing further and further into fresh topics, experimenting with new modes and achieving great literary effects. Taken together the two dozen or so novels briefly touched on above powerfully indicate the robustness of the form, its infinite range and the intellectual stamina of the women who choose to write in this multi-faceted genre.

† *For biographical information turn to page 16.*
‡ *The Booker Prize is now known as the Man Booker but I have kept to the old name for convenience.*

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*(All the books listed below were published between 2003 and 2005):*

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*Note: * Titles not available in Library Service stock.*