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Bring on the Books: The Man Booker Prize for 2012

Merritt Moseley

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Bring on the Books: The Man Booker Prize for 2012

Merritt Moseley (bio)

Hilary Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*. Henry Holt and Co., 2012. 432 pages. \$28;

Tan T wan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists*. Weinstein Books, 2012. 352 pages.

\$15.99 pb;

Will Self, *Umbrella*. Grove Press, 2013. 448 pages. \$25;

Deborah Levy, *Swimming Home*. Bloomsbury USA, 2012. 176 pages. \$14 pb;

Alison Moore, *The Lighthouse*. Salt Publishing, 2012. 192 pages. £8.99 pb;

Jeet Thayil, *Narcopolis*. Penguin Press HC, 2012. 304 pages. \$25.95.

The announcement on October 16 that Hilary Mantel had won the 2012 Man Booker Prize for her novel *Bring Up The Bodies* produced a complicated reaction. That Mantel might win was not a great surprise. Named **[End Page 473]** the favorite as soon as the short list came out in September, she was still considered joint front-runner (together with Will Self for *Umbrella*) as the decision approached. And yet a Booker for *Bring Up the Bodies* was unprecedented in several ways. Since she had won in 2009 for *Wolf Hall*, this made Mantel a double winner. There have been only two double winners—J. M. Coetzee and Peter Carey. Coetzee is South African; Carey, Australian—both men. So Mantel became the first English novelist to achieve the prize twice and the first woman.

Carey and Coetzee have shown that nothing rules out a double winner, but still it is rare. Salman Rushdie reportedly threw a tantrum in 1983 when he did not win the prize for *Shame*, only two years after taking the prize for *Midnight's Children*, and many observers agreed that he had been mistreated. Such former winners as Ian McEwan, Margaret Atwood, and A. S. Byatt continue to appear on the short list. Carey was short listed for what would have been his third Booker in 2011, and the double winner Coetzee was on the short list when Mantel won it in 2009. That the new repeater was an English woman may have redeemed some oversight by previous judging committees. Mantel pronounced herself astonished and made a small joke: "You wait 20 years for a Booker prize and then two come along at once."

Perhaps more unusual, or controversial, is that *Bring Up The Bodies* is the second installment of what will be a trilogy—in other words a sequel to *Wolf Hall*. As Sameer Rahim writes in his report for the *Telegraph*: "During the dinner all the discussion was about whether the judges could

dare give it to Mantel once more and for a novel in the same series— something unprecedented in Booker history." Pat Barker won the prize in 1995 for *The Ghost Road*, which was also part of a trilogy; but it was the concluding volume, and neither of its predecessors had won (or even been on the list). The chair of judges, Sir Peter Stothard, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, ignored the possible controversy of re-recognizing Mantel, declined to reveal the vote, and only said that the panel had decided to give the prize to "a very remarkable piece of prose that transcends the work already written by a great author. She uses her art, her power of prose, to create moral ambiguity and the real uncertainty of political life then."

Finally, though very muted in this case, there are always murmurs about historical fiction. Historical novels have won a large number of (Man) Booker Prizes over the years, and there is a small but insistent critical voice that decries this fact, arguing that historical fiction is escapist and demonstrates a timid refusal to confront and represent the world in which we are all now living. Perhaps its prestige-challenged near-relative, the historical romance, infects the historical novel with its dubious reputation. Of course distinguishing between the two is not always easy, nor is there any agreement on how far back a novel has to be set to be a historical one. At any rate three novels on the 2012 shortlist are at least partly of that genre. Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* is set in Malaya and moves back **[End Page 474]** and forth between about 1940 and 1986. Self's *Umbrella...*

boil of the European mind, had been lanced." Joyce is a character, but the characters who surround him are just as stimulating. It's curious that we don't feel more of Nora's presence in this book so that Brenda Maddox's account remains a necessary corrective. The help and sacrifices of others made Joyce's art possible, both by deepening his sympathies as a man and by providing him with money. His long-suffering brother, Stanislaus, who loved and resented him, made it tenable for Joyce and his family to maintain themselves in Trieste and Zurich. And while Pound and other literary friends committed small acts of editorial censorship to get him into print, they also proselytized on his behalf. They built for him the readership he deserved.

None of this would have happened, however, if Joyce had not screwed his courage to the sticking place and completed extraordinary books against enormous odds, twice uprooting his family because of world wars, but more often because of economic necessity, and battling his own depressions and demons. There was no tenured chair of creative writing for James Joyce. There was no Nobel Prize. There was only a life given over to and devoured by the work. That essential story remains in all the versions we have of it. Nothing in Bowker's version will alter our admiration for the man who made the books, even if it mildly influences our curiosity about aspects of his sexuality. Bowker's biography is a helpful synthesis of previously existing scholarship. Its value is not in the addition of new insight, but in that it reminds us once again what real literary ambition can be and can achieve. I hope it will bring new readers to the beauty and audacity of Joyce's heroic work.

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MERRITT MOSELEY

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