

LITERARY HONOURS



Pets may win prizes, but should writers?

This article looks at the issue of literary awards and asks whether writers should accept state prizes. It looks at the issues of political and moral beliefs that often underpin the refusal of state awards.

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A literary prize is usually considered to be 'a good thing' since the writer receives money and publicity. The recognition that accompanies an award can help a writer enormously. But a literary award is significantly different from an award offered by politicians, governments or the state. The question has to be asked: does the acceptance of such an award contradict a writer's other responsibilities?

In November 2003, when the writer Hari Kunzru refused to accept *The Mail on Sunday* - John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for fiction, he said:

The Mail's campaign to persuade its readers that they live in dangerous times, that the white cliffs of Dover are about to be 'swamped' or 'overrun' by swan-eating Kosovans or HIV positive central Africans would in isolation, be merely amusing. However, the attitudes it promotes towards immigrants have real consequences. Bricks through windows. Knives in guts... I want my work to help reduce prejudice, not reinforce it.¹

A few days later the British poet Benjamin Zephaniah revealed that he had just turned down an OBE.

Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought. I get angry when I hear that word 'empire'; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised... I am profoundly anti-empire.²



And just a few days later a Civil Servant revealed in a leak to *The Times* that in the last 20 years more than 300 people had turned down honours ranging from an OBE to a Companion of Honour and even a Life Peerage. Many writers were listed among those said to have turned down awards from Buckingham Palace: J. G. Ballard (CBE 2003), Michael Frayn (Kt 2003 and CBE 1989), David Bowie (CBE 2000), Alan Bennet (Kt

¹ H. Kunzru, 'I Am One Of Them', *The Guardian*, 22 November 2003.

² B. Zephaniah, 'You Know What You Can Do With This Mr Blair', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2003.

1996 and CBE 1998), John Cleese (CBE 1996), George Melly (CBE 2001), Doris Lessing (OBE 1977, Dame 1993 but accepted CH 2000), V.S. Naipaul (CBE 1977, but accepted Kt 1990). Some who decided not to accept honours from the Queen said they felt that as the Prime Minister had suggested the award it was 'political' and therefore inappropriate. Some refused all connection to an award by royalty; others said that the Empire was outdated, retrograde and patronising. Several clearly objected to the hierarchy of the awards system and while Graham Greene, V. S. Naipaul and Doris Lessing turned down minor awards, they did not refuse higher ranking awards offered to them later. Several artists including Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, L.S. Lowry and Henry Moore are known to have refused honours, and several actors including Trevor Howard, Eric Porter and Paul Schofield are known to have refused them. Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French both turned down OBEs, but Dawn French's husband, comedian Lenny Henry, accepted an OBE and later a knighthood.³ In 2007 the writers Rose Tremain, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Stephen Poliakoff, Ian La Frenais and Dick Clement all accepted OBEs and Salman Rushdie accepted a Knighthood. In 2008 children's writers Jacqueline Wilson became a Dame and Eric Hill was awarded an OBE, while Hanif Kureishi accepted a CBE.

J. G. Ballard wrote of his refusal:

I might have been tempted to call myself Commander Ballard - it has a certain ring. I could see a yachting cap and rum ration as perks of the job. If I was French and was awarded the legion of honour, I might well accept. But as a republican, I can't accept an honour awarded by the monarch. There's all that bowing and scraping and mummery at the palace. It's the whole climate of deference to the monarch and everything else it represents. They just seem to perpetuate the image of Britain as too much pomp and not enough circumstance. It's a huge pantomime where tinsel takes the place of substance.

A lot of these medals are orders of the British Empire, which is a bit ludicrous. The dreams of empire were only swept away relatively recently, in the '60s. Suddenly we seem to have a prime minister who has delusions of a similar kind.

It goes with the whole system of hereditary privilege and rank, which should be swept away. It uses snobbery and social self-consciousness to guarantee the loyalty of large numbers of citizens who should feel their loyalty is to fellow citizens and the nation as a whole. We are a deeply class-divided society.

I think it is deplorable when left-wing playwrights like David Hare, who have worn their socialist colours on both sleeves for so many years, should accept a knighthood. God almighty the man actually knelt down in front of the Queen.

I'm in impressive company in refusing. Most of them are thoughtful people and people of spirit and independence. It's good to see quite a few show business people, like Albert Finney, a great actor. There were Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves - it suggests there's quite a large number of people who reject

³ Y. Alibhai-Brown, 'It is an honour to stand among the refuseniks' *The Independent* 22 December 2003, 15.

the whole notion of honours in their present form. And it might do something towards bringing the whole system down.⁴

In January 2011 the Cabinet Office, which apart from leaks had previously refused to give out any information citing the 30 year secrecy rule, was finally forced under the Freedom of Information Act to reveal a full list of those who turned down honours in the years 1951-99 and who had since died. A substantial number of writers had refused them, including: Roald Dahl (OBE 1986), C. S. Forester (CBE 1953), Robert Graves (CBE 1957 and CH 1984), Graham Greene (OBE 1956, but accepted CH 1966 and Order of Merit 1986), Alfred Hitchcock (CBE 1962), Aldous Huxley (Kt 1959), Phillip Larkin (OBE 1968), F. R. Leavis (CBE 1966), J B Priestley (Life Peerage 1965, CH 1969), C. S. Lewis (CBE 1952), Kingsley Martin (Kt 1965), Sean O'Casey (CBE 1963), Dylan Thomas (OBE 1954), Evelyn Waugh (CBE 1959).⁵ It is surely significant that right up to his death Harold Pinter, Britain's most distinguished playwright, remained just plain Mr Pinter. John Le Carré is thought to have refused an honour.

But the problem is not confined to state-recognition. For some writers literary awards are in themselves a problem.

Perhaps the most famous example of a writer making a political point about a literary award is that of John Berger. In spite of the hostility of the newspaper critics and reviewers, his novel *G* won *The Guardian* Fiction Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In November 1972 it won the Booker Prize for Fiction, worth £5000 to the winner - serious money to any writer in those days. However, at the award dinner Berger upset Booker-McConnell, the US based industrial conglomerate, the British literary scene and the Press on both sides of the Atlantic with his acceptance speech. He said:

Since you have awarded me this prize, you may like to know, briefly, what it means to me.

The competitiveness of prizes I find distasteful. And in the case of this prize, the publication of the short list, the deliberately publicised suspense, the speculation of the writers concerned as though they were horses, the whole emphasis on winners and losers is false and out of place in the context of literature.

Nevertheless prizes as a stimulus - not to writers themselves but to publishers, readers and booksellers. And so the basic cultural value of a prize depends upon what it is a stimulus to. To the conformity of the market and the consensus of average opinion; or to imaginative independence on the part of both reader and writer. If a prize only stimulates conformity, it merely underwrites success, as it is conventionally understood. It constitutes no more than another chapter in a success story. If it stimulates imaginative independence, it encourages the will to seek alternatives. Or, to put it very

⁴ J. G. Ballard, 'It's a pantomime where tinsel takes the place of substance', *The Guardian*, 22 December 2003, 3.

⁵ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2091980/Revealed-big-names-snubbed-26/01/2012

simply, it encourages people to question. Yet one does not have to be a novelist seeking very subtle connections to trace the five thousand pounds of this prize back to the economic activities from which they came, Booker McConnell have had extensive trading interests in the Caribbean for over 130 years. The modern poverty of the Caribbean is the direct result of this and similar exploitation. One of the consequences of this Caribbean poverty is that hundreds of thousands of West Indians have been forced to come to Britain as migrant workers. Thus my book about migrant workers would be financed from the profits made directly out of them or their relatives and ancestors.

More than that, however, is involved. The industrial revolution, and the inventions and culture which accompanied it and which created modern Europe, was initially financed by profits from the slave trade. And the fundamental nature of relationship between Europe and the rest of the world, between black and white, has not changed. In *G* the statue of the four chained Moors is the most important single image of the book. This is why I have to turn this prize against itself. And I propose to do so by sharing it in a particular way. The half I give away will change the half I keep.

First let me make the logic of my position really clear. It is not a question of guilt or bad conscience. It certainly is not a question of philanthropy. It is not even, first and foremost, a question of politics. It is a question of my continuing development as a writer: the issue is between me and the culture which has formed me.

Before the slave trade began, before the European de-humanised himself, before he clenched himself on his own violence there must have been a moment when black and white approached each other with the amazement of potential equals. The moment passed. And henceforth the world was divided between potential slaves and potential slave masters. And the European carried this mentality back to his own society. It became part of his way of seeing everything.

The novelist is concerned with the interaction between individual and historical destiny. The historical destiny of our time is becoming clear. The oppressed are breaking through the wall of silence which was built into their minds by their oppressors. And in their struggle against exploitation and neo-colonialism - but only through and by virtue of this common struggle - it is possible for the descendants of the slave and the slave master to approach each other again with the amazed hope of potential equals.

This is why I intend to share the prize with those West Indians in and from the Caribbean who are fighting to put an end to their exploitation. The London-based Black Panther movement has arisen out of the bones of what Bookers and other companies have created in the Caribbean; I want to share this prize with the Black Panther movement because they resist both as black people and workers the further exploitation of the oppressed. And because, through their Black People's Information Centre, they have links with the struggle in Guyana, the seat of Booker McConnell's wealth, in Trinidad and throughout the Caribbean: the struggle whose aim is to expropriate all such enterprises.

You know as well as I do that the amount of money involved - as soon as one stops thinking of it as a literary prize - is extremely small. I badly need more money for my project about the migrant workers of Europe. The Black Panther movement badly needs money for their newspaper and for their other activities. But the sharing of the prize signifies that our aims are the same. And by that recognition a great deal is clarified. And in the end - as well as in the beginning - clarity is more important than money.⁶

On the other hand, perhaps we take these things too seriously. It would seem there is nothing much wrong with accepting a foreign award, even if it derives from the state rather than a literary body:

One of the most prized distinctions among writers at the moment is to belong to L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Julian Barnes, who has avoided the British honours system, has been in turn a *chevalier*, *officier* and now *commandeur* of this Parisian academy.⁷

Mark Lawson reserved some particularly barbed comments for Sir Elton John when he received a US honour, and relished the idea of the actor Robert Downey junior ('Hollywood's flakiest star') introducing the openly gay Sir Elton John as 'the other First Lady' to the right-wing, Christian fundamentalist, gay un-friendly President George Bush Jr. Lawson went on to comment:

The British honours system is so politicised that acceptance of a gong has long risked being seen as a kind of party membership, which is why a number of artistic figures have said no...⁸

The writer Peter Ackroyd said:

One thing I hate about English culture is this absurd obsession with awards and prizes like the Booker, which is a lot of shit. The day I take those things seriously is the day I will have to shoot myself.⁹

The poet Oliver Reynolds voiced his concern about a literary landscape dominated by the notion that writing was about winning prizes:

This poem has won no prizes
This poem feels that giving prizes to poetry
is another way of not reading poetry
This poem believes that literary prizes
are a part of PR, not literature.¹⁰

⁶ G. Dyer, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger*, Pluto: London, 1986, 92-4.

⁷ M. Lawson, 'Medals of Dishonour', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2004, p.23.

⁸ M. Lawson, 'Medals of Dishonour', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2004, p.23.

⁹ P. Ackroyd in: J. O'Mahony, 'London Calling', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2004, 20-23.

¹⁰ O. Reynolds, *Hodge*, Areté Books: London, 2010.

Follow-up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- In what way do British honours like MBE, OBE, CBE, CH, a Damehood or a Knighthood differ from literary awards like the Nobel, the Orange, Booker or Whitbread?
- Why should prizes nominated by politicians and awarded by the Queen in the name of the Empire be such a problem?
- What kind of writer would refuse an honour?
- What kind of writer would accept an honour?
- Are honours a problem only for writers or do other artists have trouble with them too?
- Why have honours emerged as a problem just now?
- In what way do the problems of honours, awards and prizes connect to the issues of writing and responsibility?
- Although Hari Kunzru and Benjamin Zephania turned down awards rather than turned the awards against their sponsors, they take up very similar political positions to that of John Berger. Why?
- Together these three writers offer what we might call a 'position paper' on where writers might stand in relation to the world, their role as writers and the function of their writing and ideas in the world. Can you offer a brief summary of their opinions?
- What aims do you think a white middle class British writer and Black Panther political activist could share?
- What could John Berger mean when he says: 'If a prize only stimulates conformity, it merely underwrites success as it is conventionally understood. It constitutes no more than another chapter in a success story'?
- John Berger says: 'The novelist is concerned with the interaction between individual and historical destiny'. Is the novelist the only kind of writer concerned with these things?
- Where and in what way do you and your writing fit into John Berger's picture?
- John Berger says: 'It is not a question of guilt or bad conscience.' What does he mean by this?
- John Berger says: 'It is a question of my continuing development as a writer: the issue is between me and the culture which has formed me.' In what ways can a writer like John Berger take issue with the culture that formed him?
- How does John Berger's argument with the culture that formed him help him improve as a writer?
- J. G. Ballard said of the honours system: 'It uses snobbery and social self-consciousness to guarantee the loyalty of large numbers of citizens who should feel their loyalty is to fellow citizens and the nation as a whole.' Is writing different?
- How and in what ways do you think writers and writing oppose this?
- In what way is writing connected, as in J. G. Ballard's and John Berger's comments, to issues of citizenship?
- Do you think writers should be awarded prizes?
- Do you think writers should accept prizes?
- Would you accept an award if it was offered to you?
- What kind of award would you accept?

- On what grounds would you accept an award?
- What kind of award would you refuse?
- On what grounds might you refuse an award?
- What other issues (social, historical, political and literary) do you think these writers have raised?
- In what way do these issues touch you and your writing?