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British Novelists*

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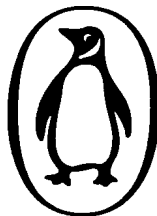
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**GRANTA**

**BEST OF YOUNG  
BRITISH NOVELISTS**

**43**

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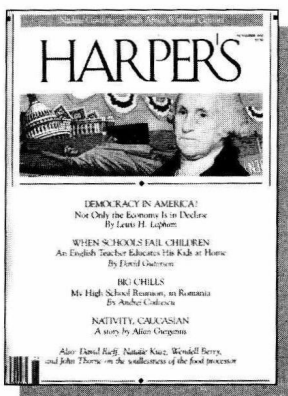
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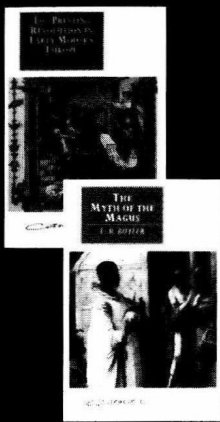
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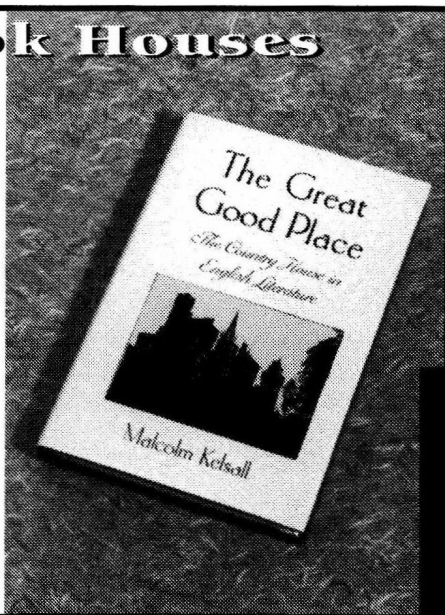
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# Editorial

I thought there should be three judges—that seemed the right number for this sort of task—and I wanted to be one. Was I entitled to be? Probably not. Although I edit this magazine, a literary one, I had read few new novelists—Helen Simpson, Robert McLiam Wilson, Lawrence Norfolk, Adam Lively, Rose Boyl: I had their books but they were stacked in a corner of my house, unread. It was, I could see, evidence enough of the charge made against *Granta* that it was not publishing younger, ‘unknown’ writers—not all that surprising if the editor wasn’t reading them. So, no, I was not qualified to be a judge. But I wanted to be: I wanted to earn my qualifications. It would make me, I felt, a better editor.

The other judges were eminently qualified. I was relieved, after my first conversation with A. S. Byatt—the first of many long phone calls, an hour in length, sometimes an hour and a half—to hear someone who took fiction seriously; it wasn’t a career, like being an editor or *merely* a writer; it was much more, involved a commitment of such an absolute kind that few other enterprises could be compared to it: it was, in that wonderful phrase applied to jazz musicians, as serious as your life. Antonia was concerned especially for women writers who, for reasons of marriage or childbirth or social conditioning, tended to come in to their own later than their male counterparts. It had been true, she said, of herself—she wouldn’t necessarily have qualified for a list of promising writers under the age of forty—and of others like Hilary Mantel or Jane Rogers: their situation was different from that of men; it was harder.

Salman Rushdie was no better read than I was, but driven by a refreshing curiosity: Just who were these young novelists? He wanted to know. He was the perfect judge. While he is a great, contentious cultural critic—full of fight and argument and aggression when the occasion demands it—he is, once introduced to a young novelist, capable of magnanimous displays of generosity (maybe you have to be a great novelist not to feel threatened by a younger generation). Like Antonia, he understands the novelist’s plight, and the vulnerability

and fragility surrounding the task of sitting in a room, day after day, sometimes for years, 'making up' a book. All writing is difficult, but no writing is more difficult than writing of the imagination. Naturally enough, perhaps, I find the refrain from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* knocking round my head, the same refrain that every novelist hears at some point: 'What's the use of stories that aren't even true?' Salman and Antonia understand the use of stories that aren't even true, believe in the duty and hardship of inventing them.

There would be a fourth judge—at the insistence of a consortium of five literary publishers who held a clandestine evening meeting to boycott the whole affair. ('Our authors are certainly not participating,' said one, huffily; 'Nor ours,' said another, 'who are mainly women and it's well known that *Granta* never publishes women.') In fact, their principle concern was that the enterprise—Rushdie? Byatt?—had become a touch too literary (just the objection you'd expect from literary publishers), and, in a spirit of compromise, I offered to invite John Mitchinson to join us: the marketing director of Waterstone's and, as such, a representative of the *trade*. In fact, John Mitchinson is as 'literary' as the novelist-judges, if not more so, having actually read many of the books that were about to be submitted (and I had always thought it wasn't such a bad idea to have someone along who had read the books). This mollified the literary publishers, although not entirely: the judge who really made them unhappy was me (after all, one publisher observed, you're just like us; you're an editor—a remark that has perplexed me ever since: isn't that what editors are meant to do—*judge* books?). Literary publishing, I've come to conclude, is a deeply mysterious process.

I should point out, especially for the foreign readers of this magazine, the reason for the proprietorial concern: 'The Best of Young British Novelists' is not only a special issue of *Granta*; it is a marketing campaign: at its most elementary level, nothing more than a gimmick to get people to buy literary novels. It was originally the idea of Desmond Clarke who, ten years ago, ran the Book Marketing Council, created in the characteristically eighties' belief that books should be treated like any other commodity, and that just as there was a Meat Marketing Council, urging everyone to go out and eat a British cow, so it followed there should be a comparable institution urging everyone to buy good, honest British novels. Desmond Clarke organized several campaigns, including, in 1983, his most successful: the twenty 'best' young British

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novelists under forty, which in turn inspired a special issue of *Granta*. But the campaign's greatest value was this: it became, despite itself, a serious statement about British literary culture.

But which came first—the writing or the campaign? I'm convinced that, had it been organized even three years before, it would have flopped: there was too little to promote. At the end of the seventies, there were only two young novelists whom anyone was making a fuss over: Ian McEwan and Martin Amis (I know this because, editing the first issues of *Granta*, I had no young British writers to put in them). The novel belonged not to the young author, who was writing a play or a television drama or a poem or nothing, but to another, older generation: Iris Murdoch, Angus Wilson, Kingsley Amis, Barbara Pym, Paul Scott, Stanley Middleton. It was easy, I recall Ian McEwan observing in 1985 with the rueful irony of someone now having to share the limelight, to be a young celebrity writer at the end of the seventies, because there was no one else around. I remember the metaphor he used: the horizon was uncluttered.

But not for long. In January of 1980, the beginning of the decade, I read a short story that was good, but, for reasons that must have been persuasive at the time, not good enough to publish, although *apparently* good enough for me to want to contact the writer and urge him to send us something else, resulting in a series of phone calls—to Norwich, London, Guildford—until finally I reached an unknown Kazuo Ishiguro in a bed-sit in Cardiff; the pay-phone was in the hall. Three months later, Adam Mars-Jones published his first story; two months later, Salman Rushdie completed *Midnight's Children*. The shortlist for the Booker Prize is an arbitrary literary chronicle at best, but it is revealing to compare the names that appear on it up to October of that same year, when William Golding's *Rites of Passage* won, and the names that emerge over the next five years: Salman Rushdie, D. M. Thomas, Ian McEwan, William Boyd, Timothy Mo, John Fuller, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Peter Carey, Kazuo Ishiguro. The last ten years have been good to readers—they represent a renaissance in the novel—so good that it's easy to forget just how bad they were before.

At our first meeting as judges, we established informal guidelines. After all, however contrived the task—why twenty? why under forty?—it was a daunting business: publishers were proving unreliable—both Polygon, a small press in Edinburgh, and Penguin, a larger one in London, took

seven weeks to deliver books that we'd asked for at the beginning—and there was the persistent anxiety that authors would be excluded simply because we never saw their work. (With what horror we greeted the parcel of Iain Banks's novels that arrived two days before we made our final decision. How could we have forgotten him?) Each session began with the question: who have we left out? Each one ended with: who can we eliminate? Antonia proposed that every book be read by at least two people (you could tell that, unlike the rest of us, she had done this sort of thing before) so as to ensure that no hidden prejudice was governing someone's judgement. The system proved efficient, but I remain uneasy that there are authors whose work I haven't read. After our list was announced, I was challenged (twice) for excluding Janice Galloway and went through my notes to confirm that she had been read, and rejected, by two of us (Antonia and Salman); but it still makes me uncomfortable

There wasn't much argument, which disappointed me: after all, why gather such colourful people in one room (a series of different rooms, in fact, because one judge, arriving with armed guards, could not be seen in the same place twice), if you don't have the occasional row. There was disagreement, but, in general, we followed the principle that if three judges favoured one view, the fourth, after some squealing, eventually deferred: thus Antonia, eventually, deferred to the decision to leave out D. J. Taylor; thus John Mitchinson, after expressing considerable astonishment, deferred to the decision to leave out Adam Thorpe; and thus I likewise deferred to the decision to leave out Richard Rayner, whose writing I seemed to have pushed so aggressively that it led to one of the few times that Antonia became angry, snapping that I was behaving just as the publishers had warned her that I would (her other angry moment was when she rebuked John Mitchinson as 'chauvinist' for referring to Esther Freud as 'quite a babe.')

When our first session ended—each of us departing with a big box of books—we all felt a little unsure about what was in store. We had established a shortlist of the writers whom we knew deserved a place in the final selection, but it consisted of only seven—Alan Hollinghurst, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Adam Mars-Jones, Ben Okri, Caryl Phillips and Jeanette Winterson—and two of those had been on the list ten years ago. In fact that list of ten years ago was never far from our thoughts, and we regularly looked back to it to see how we were faring: I pointed out, in an act of anticipatory defensiveness, that the

overall standard hadn't necessarily been that high, but the reality was that more than half of the selected writers had gone on to write exceptional books. Was the next generation as good? John Mitchinson advanced the view that it was not; Antonia argued again for extending the age limit, that we would be misrepresenting the achievement of women writers if we didn't; Salman pointed out that you couldn't extend the age limit past forty and still call any of them young, and suggested, instead, that if we didn't find twenty writers we liked, we should announce a shorter list. I tried to come up with a way of working Irish novelists into the campaign, although on the whole I was optimistic: after all, there were 196 more books to read.

A week later, a message from Antonia: she was depressed.

'They're so awful,' she said, when I phoned. 'There is no thought or history or interest except the miseries of the world we've made. They're full of the horror of the horrid eighties, but they are themselves that horror: they are what the eighties produced. It's as if a diet of video nasties has ruined a generation.' She lashed out at Martin Amis—not for being a bad writer, but for engendering so many bad imitations: 'He has had a baleful influence on a whole generation.'

I wasn't doing much better. I had got through twenty-five books and selected the worst (twenty-four) to send on to John Mitchinson: not for a second opinion, but so that John would read himself the junk that publishers were peddling as literary fiction. I entertained the hope that he'd send a note round to the Waterstone's branch managers, with these titles listed on it and instructions to do whatever possible to ensure that no one purchased the books.

Salman, however, had the luck to leave with a better box of books. He was happily halfway through Robert Erdric's *In the Days of the American Museum* and confidently advocated two further additions to our shortlist: Candia McWilliam and Nicholas Shakespeare. I reminded him that Shakespeare had written so rudely about *The Satanic Verses* that Salman had vowed revenge; and Salman said, yes, he remembered, but what could he do? Nicholas Shakespeare had written a good novel.

Our next meeting was two days before Christmas: London traffic was impenetrable, clogged up by last-minute shoppers and IRA bombers. I had just finished editing our winter issue and was exhausted; John Mitchinson had just been left by his wife and didn't know where he'd

be sleeping that night; Antonia had just come down with the 'flu and was bundled up in jumpers; and Salman had just finished reading fifty novels. We protested—it's because he's got protectors looking after him that he gets so much time—but in fact he had been spurred on by the reading. His excitement was contagious.

By the end of the session, it was evident that our perception of this generation was different from the one we had even two weeks before, and that our anxieties were unjustified. Will Self's *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* was one of the best short story collections that any of us had read in a long time—full of originality and bite and surprise—rivalled only by Helen Simpson's *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*. Lawrence Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary* was so ambitious and successful that I couldn't understand why he hadn't been on the Booker Prize shortlist (or, for that matter, hadn't won the prize itself). Why hadn't I read him before? Since then I've learned the depressing statistic that in the last eighteen months Lawrence Norfolk has been asked by more than eighty journalists for an interview—but hasn't been asked once in Britain (his book sales have a comparable home-abroad ratio).

Our shortlist was now seventeen.

A new year's eve fax from Salman Rushdie:

Bill:

A. L. Kennedy: Enjoying.

D. L. Flusfeder: No.

Philip Kerr: Excellent.

Adam Lively: *Very good*.

Carl MacDougall: Likewise, I think.

Sean French: Very surprising and enjoyable.

Anne Billson: Antonia digs her, too.

Alexander Stuart: Second thoughts—out?

See you—

Salman

We had intended to announce our selection on 2 January, but had to delay: there were too many books (more than three times the number that our predecessors considered ten years ago). Polygon, however, had still not responded to our letters or our phone calls or our faxes, and we were desperate to get hold of Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog*. John Mitchinson said there were copies at the Charing Cross Waterstone's, only to learn later that twelve had sold that very

afternoon: there was none left. If we didn't get a copy, would we have to delay our announcement again?

Our shortlist, in the meanwhile, had become a long list, and seven writers were going to have to be eliminated. And then John Mitchinson disappeared again: his father was in hospital, having had a heart attack (which, fortunately, turned out to be untrue, but not before John struck out for Yorkshire, with a parcel of late submissions under his arm, including the fugitive Fischer novel).

Until finally, five weeks and 211 novels after we began, we reached our decision: there was some discussion—one name was replaced by another—but, on the whole, the session was irritatingly amicable. Why did we all get along so well? I think it was because we were animated by the belief that, in coming up with this list, we had something important to say—that people didn't know—about this generation of writers.

And yet wasn't something wrong: why didn't they know already? Why didn't we?

And in conclusion?

No conclusion, merely observations, many trivial: that, in our post-Aids culture, the authors writing playfully about sex are gay—old-fashioned sex between boys and girls no longer, it seems, being of much interest; that this generation confirms, as if confirmation were needed, that the Empire has now fully and properly struck back; that the women novelists, with the exception of Jeanette Winterson, are writing too cautiously, too unambitiously (or perhaps their novels illustrate Antonia's point: that, as writers, they need more time to develop). I found myself growing increasingly irritated with the notion of a British novel, which was really an irritation with the word British, a grey, unsatisfactory, bad-weather kind of word, a piece of linguistic compromise. I still don't believe I know anyone who is British; I know people who are English or Scottish or Northern Irish (not to mention born-in-Nigeria-but-living-here or born-in-London-of-Pakistani-parents-and-living-here) and who sometimes, especially if they're English, make a point of calling themselves British so as not to offend the Scottish or the Northern Irish or the born-in-Nigeria-but-living-here-Nigerian-English. But it's a milky porridge kind of word, which to me says: everyone except the Irish (and is it possible to have a discussion of the novel *in* English *on* this side of the Atlantic and exclude the Irish?)

But, otherwise, while I believe that, overall, these authors are,



sentence by sentence, writing at a higher, more accomplished level than their predecessors ten years ago, I couldn't tell you if they are dirty realists or neo-gothics or baggy monsters or anything but themselves. In fact, my thoughts tend heavily towards inconclusiveness. I continue to be haunted by the first half of *Rose* by Rose Boyt and her menacing evocation of Hans and the atmosphere of sexual threat created around him. Shouldn't she be on our list of twenty, after all? Does Antonia share my regrets? She defended Rose Boyt's talents as she did Tim Pears's, whose *In the Place of Fallen Leaves* has already won the *Publishing News* award for the best first novel—a not inconsiderable achievement, given that, at the time, the book hadn't been published. My own doubts surrounding Robert McLiam Wilson are so strong as to amount to full-blown anger—with myself, with the others, with our failure: how could he have been left off? Salman is re-reading Deborah Levy's novels: Remind me again, he asked when we spoke on the phone, why she's not on the list?

Five weeks and 211 novels taught us that our preconceptions about what is being written today were dead wrong. And far from having to settle for a list that was less than twenty, we found that twenty was too restrictive a number: that it fails to represent the talent that is there.

There are problems: of perception (how exciting can a generation following a renaissance ever be seen to be?) or volume (the glut of books being published today makes it very, very difficult to see what's good) and, finally, of critical reception (it is an ungenerous, bigoted time), culminating in the symptomatic moment when the acting literary editor of the *Sunday Times*, after revealing that he needed controversy to secure himself the permanent position, exploited our exclusive agreement to announce the list only to denounce it. He had already admitted to having read less than half the authors.

Perhaps, then, it is no wonder that we haven't heard of many of these writers. But we will. I even suspect that someone may want to interview Lawrence Norfolk.

In the meanwhile, put this issue away once you've finished it. Pull it out again in the spring—in the year 2003—and see how we did.

Bill Buford