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BOOKS BLOG

# Looking back at the Booker: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's Heat and Dust is the Coldplay of literature. Far too dull to loathe, in short

Perfect Booker material?...Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

Looking back over the Booker club so far, I was surprised to note that I've become something of an apologist for the award. Before I started reading I had cynically assumed that many of the winners would conform to a pattern of unchallenging mediocrity. They probably wouldn't be bad books, but they certainly wouldn't be great. They'd basically set a load of chatter against a vaguely exotic background and substitute a meandering trawl through middle English values (with some weeping) for a real plot.

As far as the years 1969-1974 went, I was wrong. The novels have been gloriously mad, tragic, furious, revolutionary, hilarious, difficult and exacting. None have been average.

Until I got to Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's Heat and Dust, I was even starting to think that the Platonic (sub)ideal form of the Booker winner I'd been expecting was little more than a figment of my ever-present adolescent desire to kick against the pricks and the establishment forces that such a prize represents. I was wrong again. Heat and Dust by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is MOR incarnate.

It probably won't surprise Booker haters that the novel is set in an EM Forster-influenced decorative version of India with brief interludes in a vaguely bohemian, cosily grubby England. An unnamed narrator is piecing together the story of her grandfather's first wife, who caused a scandal in the 1920s when she took up with an Indian Nawab. She travels to India, picking up more details of the story as she goes along, as well as meeting some spiritual-traveller stereotypes, seeing some picturesque poverty and indulging in some singularly joyless sex.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvla has spent a large part of her career writing screenplays for successful Merchant Ivory films and her talents serve the dual narrative well. The stories fold into each other neatly, all transitions are smooth, both have plenty of momentum. There's no doubting that this is the work of a pro. While I'm notching up the positives, I should also note that the dialogue is always slick and often witty and, as you might also expect from a Merchant Ivory alumnus, Jhabvala has a keen eye for the

alluring setting. There are old-fashioned cars, exotic shaded shrines, a Moghul palace with storerooms brimming, most evocatively, with unused early 20th-century gadgets: rusting camera equipment, a pinball machine and Meccano sets share the dusty space with pianos with "thickened" keys that play host to a number of squirrels. The trouble is that it all gets a bit Laura Ashley. Even the beggars who die smeared in their own shit are used as so much wallpaper. Wallpaper that might be eye-catching, but hardly covers the cracks.

We might be expected to deride the English colonials when they describe the Nawab as "The worst type of ruler - the worst type of Indian - you can have," but it's hard not to suspect that Heat and Dust's exoticised India, its picturesquely primitive natives and its Orientalist distaste for most aspects of Eastern life would stick in Edward Said's craw. None of it ever seems real, anyway.

What's more, none of the characters have any weight in this unconvincing world. It's possible to forgive, perhaps, the many caricatures. The young seekers after knowledge that the narrator meets are clearly meant to be no more than amusing. (They aren't, but that's not for want of exaggeration.) Harry, meanwhile, a friend of the Nawab's back in the 1920s is explicitly described as being nothing other than "a child". He's a confirmed bachelor, you see, and so has to conform to Mr Humphries-style patterns of pathetic fruitiness. More fundamental is the problem that the narrator is without shape. There's no real sense of why she should have gone to India in the first place, beyond vague curiosity about her ancestors, and once she's there no motive to her actions and reactions. A generous critic could ascribe this lack of concern to Camus-style existentialism, but my impression was of an empty vessel; there only to carry the plot and the Anglo-Indian baby that will symbolically tie the book up at the end.

These faults are serious, and prevent the book ever becoming satisfying as a work of literature, but that doesn't mean Heat and Dust is hateful to read. It's all too mild for that. But this inability to provoke genuine antipathy is almost the worst thing about it. It's the literary equivalent of Coldplay; securely pedestrian, slightly patronising, tinged with the exotic, referencing far better work, but ultimately dull and pointless. It is, in short, literature for people who hate literature.

· Next time: David Storey, Saville

Next
Previous
Blog home