



# Reader's Guide

## Background

In 1971, just two years after it began, the Booker Prize ceased to be awarded retrospectively and became, as it is today, a prize for the best novel in the year of publication. At the same time, the date on which the award was given moved from April to November. As a result of these changes, there was whole year's gap when a wealth of fiction, published in 1970, fell through the net. These books were simply never considered for the prize.

Now, 40 years on, a panel of three judges - all of whom were born in or around 1970 - were appointed to select a shortlist of six novels from those books. They are journalist and critic, Rachel Cooke, ITN newsreader, Katie Derham and poet and novelist, Tobias Hill.

The shortlist was announced on 25th March and the international reading public will decide the winner by voting via the Man Booker Prize website. The overall winner will be announced in May.

This *Reader's Guide* provides background information, context and resources designed to enhance both individual readers' and reading groups' enjoyment of the Lost Man Booker Prize. The first section offers a context for the prize: the key historical/political events and the social history of the late sixties and early seventies that influenced the writing and reading of the time.

The next section focuses on the individual shortlisted titles with a short biography of each author, a synopsis of the books and starting points for reading group discussion.

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# The late 60s and early 70s

The Lost Man Booker Prize is an opportunity to discover a different literary era. Giving an award with the benefit of hindsight raises lots of interesting questions: would the judging panel have shortlisted the same books back in the 1970s; if the novels were written today how would they have been received and reviewed and to what extent are they a product of their time?

The 60s changed attitudes. Britain became a more liberal and less restricted society. Rock music and its associated stars played a major part in the popular culture of the sixties and seventies. Recreational drug use was often openly promoted as part of the rock and roll lifestyle. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of the cachet associated with drug use waned as rock music suffered a series of drug-related deaths, including the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison. The central character, Toby, in Nina Bawden's *The Bird on the Trees* is expelled from school for taking drugs; the book deals with the concerns of his family who are disturbed by his drug taking and his refusal to discuss his unhappiness.

Gay rights, feminism and environmentalism were all well under way in the 1960s, but in the 1970s they stopped being marginal and entered into the political and social mainstream. Political and economic liberty of women was a key theme during this period; arguably a number of books on the Lost Man Booker shortlist are a reflection of this new found liberation. The central characters in *The Driver's Seat* (Lise) and *The Bay of Noon* (Jenny) are both responding to the freedoms of the late sixties – travel, clothes, independence, sexual opportunities? Although in different ways both characters are endeavouring to take control: Lise is trying to control her own death, whilst Jenny is striving for independence and wants to take control of her life.

The Gay Rights movement gained momentum throughout the late sixties and early seventies with the first meeting of the London Gay Liberation Front taking place in 1970. Same sex relationships had always been a characteristic in shortlisted author Mary Renault's novels and in *Fire from Heaven* Alexander's lifelong companion, Hephaestion, is depicted as both a lover and an intimate friend. When Mary Renault first starting writing novels in the 1940s homosexuality was a taboo subject, when *Fire from Heaven* was published in 1970, society and attitudes had changed significantly.

Although J.G Farrell's *Troubles* covers an earlier period of Ireland's struggle for independence from England (1919-1922) its publication in 1970 was timely. In January 1969 the nascent movement held a small, peaceful march from Belfast to Londonderry. The march had nearly reached its destination when it was ambushed and broken up by loyalist at Burntollet Bridge. Many observers believe that was the skirmish which marked the start of the modern troubles.

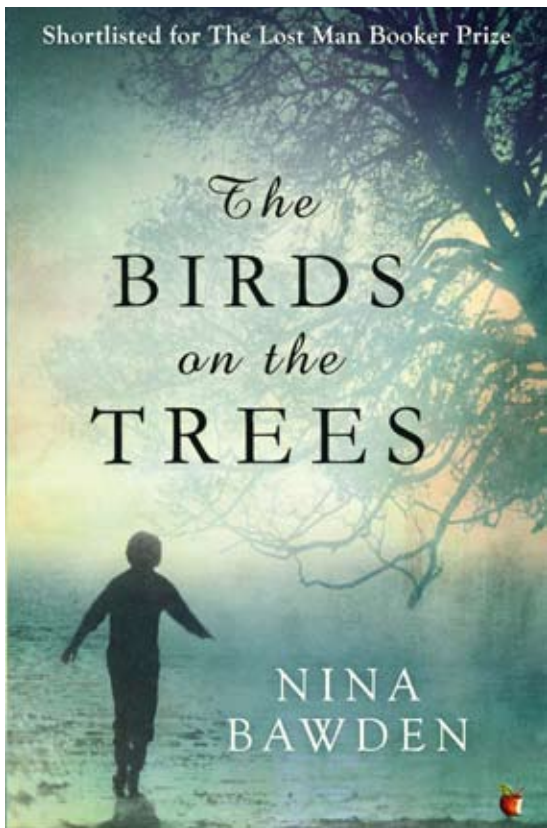
## Extended reading

*When the Lights Went Out* Andy Beckett (Faber and Faber)

*Where Did It All Go Right* Andrew Collins (Ebury Press)



## Reader's Guide



### The shortlist

# The Birds on the Trees Nina Bawden

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## About the author

Nina Bawden was born in London in 1925. She is the author of over 40 novels; 23 for adults and 19 for children. Several of her novels for children have become contemporary classics, notably *Carrie's War* and *The Peppermint Pig*. Her adult work includes the Booker shortlisted *Circles of Deceit* and *Family Money*. She is currently writing a book that draws on her experience of the Potters Bar rail disaster of May 2002, in which her husband of 48 years died. This tragic episode also inspired the recent David Hare play, *The Permanent Way*, in which Nina Bawden featured as one of the characters. She wrote *Dear Austen*, an address to her late husband, a former managing director of the BBC World Service.

## *The Birds on the Trees*

The expulsion from school of their eldest son shatters the middle-class security of Maggie, a writer, and Charlie, a journalist. Since childhood, Toby has been diffident and self-absorbed, but the threat of drug taking and his refusal (or inability) to discuss his evident unhappiness, disturbs them sufficiently to seek professional help. Veering between private agony and public cheerfulness, Maggie and Charlie struggle to support their son and cope with the reactions - and advice - of friends and relatives. Noted for the acuity with which she reaches into the heart of relationships, Nina Bawden here excels in revealing the painful, intimate truths of a family in crisis. Toby's situation is explored with great tenderness, while Maggie's grief and self-recrimination are rigorously, if compassionately, observed. It is a novel that raises fundamental questions about parents and their children, and offers tentative hope but no tidy solutions.

## Discussion points

Toby's expulsion from school for smoking pot sends his family into turmoil and when he shows signs of depression he is sent to hospital for electric shock treatment. To what extent do you think *The Birds on the Trees* is a product of its time; if the novel were set in 2010 how do you think Toby's family would react?

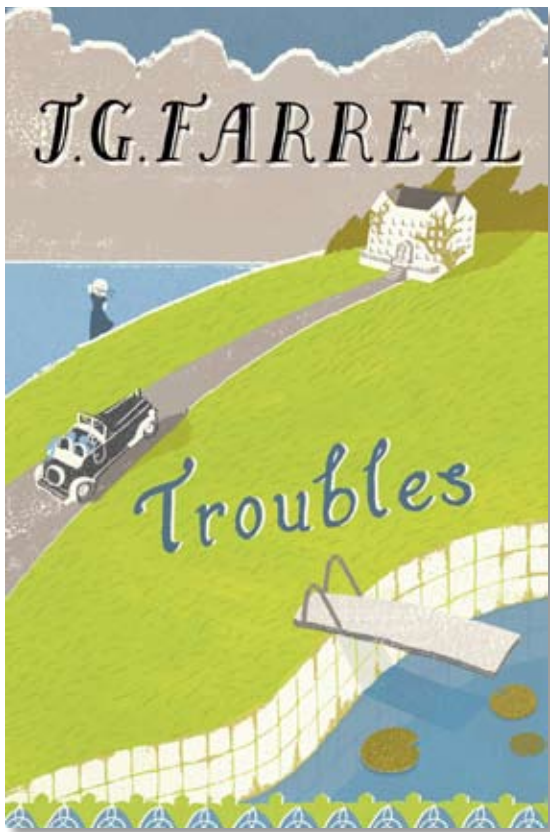
The novel explores the drama from every family member's point of view, what is your response to each of the main characters: do you feel emphatic towards any of the characters; which characters do you find frustrating, likeable, confusing?

To what extent do you agree with the reviewer who described *The Birds on the Trees* as 'A beautifully sustained impression of the impossibility of family life'?

When the reader is first introduced to Toby as a young child we are told of the time when he appeared at a neighbour's doorstep at 10pm on Christmas Eve and tells them that Mummy and Daddy have gone away for Christmas and left him behind, alone. What was your response to this incident? Did you think that Toby was a liar or were his parents negligent in their care?



## Reader's Guide



**The shortlist**

# Troubles

## J. G. Farrell

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## About the author

J. G. Farrell was born in Liverpool in January 1935. In 1956 he went to study at Brasenose College, Oxford; it was while there he contracted polio. He drew heavily on his experience for his second novel, *The Lung* (1965). His novel, *Troubles* (1970), the first in the Empire trilogy, won the Faber Memorial Prize in 1971. A film version of *Troubles* was made for British television in 1988. The second in the Empire trilogy, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) won the Booker Prize. J. G. Farrell died in 1979.

## Troubles

Major Brendan Archer travels to Ireland - to the Majestic Hotel and to the fiancée he acquired on a rash afternoon's leave three years ago. Despite her many letters, the lady herself proves elusive, and the Major's engagement is short-lived. But he is unable to detach himself from the alluring discomforts of the crumbling hotel. Enconced in the dim and shabby splendour of the Palm Court, surrounded by gently decaying old ladies and proliferating cats, the Major passes the summer. So hypnotic are the faded charms of the Majestic, the Major is almost unaware of the gathering storm. But this is Ireland in 1919 - and the struggle for independence is about to explode with brutal force.

## Discussion points

J.G. Farrell wrote scathingly about the British Empire when back in the 1970s few wanted to think about the unsavoury parts of their country's past.

In what ways is the Majestic Hotel a metaphor for British rule in Ireland?

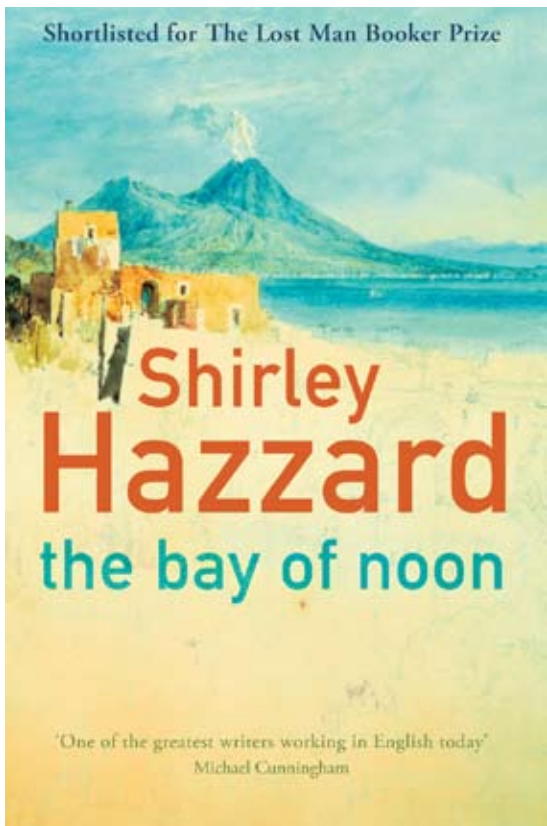
*Troubles* is a mixture of drama and comedy; as a reader do you find this combination comfortable or disconcerting?

Do you agree with the reviewer who said, "From the outset we know that Farrell believes that independence from British rule is both necessary and inescapable"?

Small new stories are interjected throughout the novel, how do these help the reader to understand the wider context of the rebellion in Ireland?



# Reader's Guide



## The shortlist

# The Bay of Noon Shirley Hazzard

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## About the author

Shirley Hazzard was born in Sydney in 1931. She has lived in Hong Kong, New Zealand and New York where she worked for the United Nations. She is a past recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Academy Award and the O. Henry Short Story Award. She divides her time between New York and Naples.

## The Bay of Noon

Lonely and rootless, Jenny finds herself in war-torn Italy. There, against the fading grandeur of Naples, a larger emotional drama unfolds, and her close friendship with the beautiful and talented Gioconda expands to make room for a dour Scotsman and for Gioconda's lover, Gianni. These newfound friends require of Jenny much more than she had foreseen, while gradually revealing to her the changing face of love.

Shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize, Shirley Hazzard won Australia's biggest literary prize, the 2004 Miles Franklin Literary Award, and the 2003 National Book Award in the United States for *The Great Fire*.

## Discussion points

*The Bay of Noon* opens with a strange memory - a crumpled plane lying wrecked on the flanks of Mount Vesuvius, what effect does the opening and its imagery have on the reader?

Like Jenny, the heroine in *The Bay of Noon*, Shirley Hazzard was sent on a year's mission to Naples whilst working for the UN and the city itself is an important character in the novel. To what extent does this novel evoke a real sense of place and atmosphere?

How did you respond to the ending of *The Bay of Noon*? Some readers believe that one of the novel's great strengths is the ellipsis which leaves the reader to fill in the gaps, whilst others found the ending unsatisfactory.

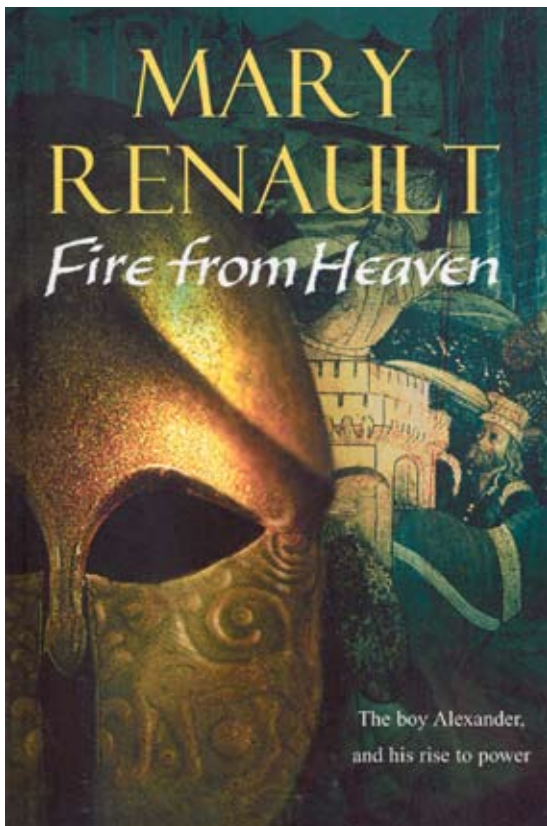
To what extent do you agree with the reviewer who wrote, "Hazzard applies her intelligence to produce a shock of recognition in the reader ... and she has succeeded brilliantly."

When James Campbell interviewed Shirley Hazzard in 2006 he observed, "All her heroines are "good with words", and profit not only professionally but morally; just as some of her male characters are at a loss for the words that would clarify an inner vagueness". Do you think this observation applies to the lead characters in *The Bay of Noon*?





## Reader's Guide



### The shortlist

# Fire from Heaven Mary Renault

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## About the author

Mary Renault was educated at Clifton High School, Bristol and St Hugh's College, Oxford. Having completed nursing training in 1937, she then wrote her first novel *Promise of Love*. Her next three novels were written during off-duty time whilst serving in the war. In 1948 she went to live in South Africa but travelled widely. It was her trip to Greece and the islands that resulted in her brilliant historical reconstructions of Ancient Greece. Mary Renault died in 1983.

## Fire from Heaven

At twenty, when his reign began, Alexander the Great was already a seasoned soldier and a complex, passionate man. *Fire From Heaven* tells the story of the boy Alexander, and the years that shaped him. Resolute, fearless, and inheriting a striking beauty, Alexander still needed much to make him The Great. He must survive - though with lifelong scars - the dark furies of his Dionysiac mother, who kept him uncertain even of his own paternity; respect his father's talent for war and kingcraft, though sickened by his sexual grossness; and come to terms with his heritage from both.

## Discussion points

Mary Renault, at the time of publication in 1970, felt that reviewers did not have a clear notion about what *Fire from Heaven* was about and that historical novels, as a genre, were not taken seriously. Do you think that today historical novels are better understood and accepted as a literary genre?

“The child was wakened by the knotting of the snake's coils about his waist.” Do you agree that this is one of the best ever opening lines?

The key theme of the book is power struggles - the Macedonians against the Athenians for possession of southern Greece, Philip against Olympias for the loyalty of their son, Alexander against the world for his birthright and destiny. How do you feel that this theme is handled in the novel?

How did you respond to the characterisation of Alexander? Some readers have criticised the portrayal of Alexander as ‘over romanticised’ while others think he's a well-crafted, believable character.

Would you agree, “Mary Renault is able to write about ancient Greece as if she had been there”?



# Reader's Guide



## The shortlist

# The Driver's Seat Muriel Spark

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## About the author

Dame Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in February 1918. Her first novel, *The Comforters* was published in 1957. Her other novels included *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Loitering with Intent* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She also wrote a number of collections of poetry and critical works. She was awarded honorary degrees from the Universities of Aberdeen, Strathclyde, St Andrews, Edinburgh, London, Oxford and The American University of Paris. In 1993, Spark was made a Dame of the British Empire and a Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres. In 1997, she received the David Cohen British Literature Prize for Lifetime Achievement and in 2005 was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize. Dame Muriel Spark died at her home in Tuscany in April 2006.

## *The Driver's Seat*

Lise has been driven to distraction by working in the same accountants' office for sixteen years. So she leaves everything behind her, transforms herself into a laughing, garishly dressed temptress and flies abroad on the holiday of a lifetime. But her search for adventure, sex and the obsessional experience takes on a far darker significance as she heads on a journey of self-destruction. Infinity and eternity attend Lise's last terrible day in an unnamed southern city, as she meets her fate.

## Discussion points

*The Driver's Seat*, when it was first published in 1970, was billed as 'an ethical shocker'. If it were published today would it be still be considered as shocking?

Do you agree with the many readers who wonder if *The Driver's Seat* at only 109 pages is really a novella and this will prevent it from winning the Lost Man Booker?

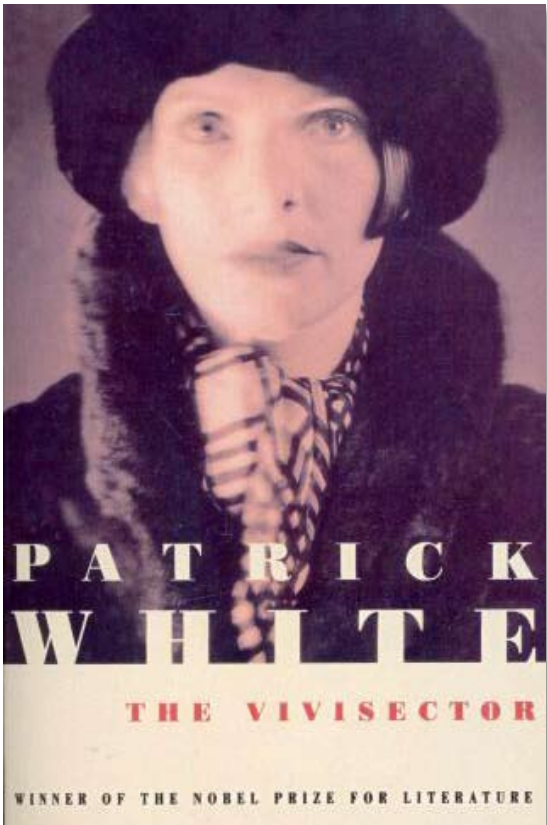
The narrative is detached; what effect does this have on the reader's perception of Lise?

To what extent do you agree with Stephen Schiff who wrote in *The New Yorker* that Muriel Spark's 'spiny and treacherous masterpiece *The Driver's Seat* is so stark as to be nightmarish'?

Do you think that *The Driver's Seat* is a response to the freedoms for women of the late sixties – travel, clothes, sexual opportunities and new cults in diets and religions?



# Reader's Guide



## The shortlist

# The Vivisector Patrick White

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## About the author

Patrick White was born in England in 1912; and taken to Australia (where his father owned a sheep farm) when he was six months old, but educated in England, at Cheltenham College and King's College, Cambridge. He settled in London, where he wrote several unpublished novels, then served in the RAF during the war; he returned after the war to Australia.

He became the most considerable figure in modern Australian literature, being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973. The great poet of Australian landscape, he had turned its vast empty spaces into great mythic landscapes of the soul. His position as man of letters was controversial, provoked by his acerbic, unpredictable public statements and his belief that it is eccentric individuals who offer the only hope of salvation. Technically brilliant, he is one modern novelist to whom the oft-abused epithet 'visionary' can safely be applied. He died in September 1990.

## The *Vivisector*

Hurtle Duffield is incapable of loving anything except what he paints. The men and women who court him during his long life are, above all, the victims of his art. He is the vivisector, dissecting their weaknesses with cruel precision: his sister's deformity, a grocer's moonlight indiscretion and the passionate illusions of his mistress, Hero Pavloussi. Only the egocentric adolescent he sees as his spiritual child elicits from him a deeper, more treacherous emotion.

## Discussion points

How do you think the narrator relates to Duffield?

The unimportance of the family in influencing an individual's destiny is a recurring theme in this and other Patrick White novels, how in particular does it manifest itself in *The Vivisector*?

The death of the prostitute Nance Lightfoot is left unexplained. Do you think Duffield was involved in her death? Was it an accident? Did she commit suicide?

Patrick White's portrait of the artist is not wholly original. He is lonely, misunderstood and doesn't conform to society's conventions. Do you think this aspect of the novel is a product of the 1970s? Are artists today viewed in this way?

To what extent do you agree with the author David Malouf who when reviewing *The Vivisector* said "*(The Vivisector is) full of larger-than-life (theatrical) characters and grotesques, lurid situations, and an oddly old-fashioned view of the artist as a sacred monster; a march of folly in which the traditional decencies have given way to rank opportunism and cannibalistic greed.*"