

Dr Amanda Foreman, Chair of judges, 2016 Man Booker Prize
24 October 2016

Your Royal Highness, Your Excellency, my Lords, Ladies and
Gentlemen:

It's taken many months to reach this day. And since we sat down, it's taken several hours to reach this moment – hours that may have felt like years to some of you. But you know what they say about Prize Dinners: 'It's not over until the fat lady sings'. Except, maybe, for this year's Nobel Prize, where they're still waiting for the thin man to answer the phone, let alone sing.

Happily for us, I can say with total confidence that tonight's winner is definitely here. On that note, I would like to welcome the Man Booker shortlisted writers: Paul Beatty, Deborah Levy, Graeme Macrae Burnet, Ottessa Moshfegh, David Szalay, and Madeleine Thien. It is a great pleasure – not only for the judges but for

everyone assembled - to be able to congratulate and honour each of you for six outstanding works of fiction.

It's also my great pleasure to have this opportunity to thank my fellow judges: Jon Day, David Harsent, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Oliva Williams. To put it bluntly, the Man Booker Prize is the Grand National of judging. It requires five complete strangers to spend the best part of a year together, under conditions that demand almost preternatural self-discipline, while working at the very top of their game. You did all that and more. And I thank you.

Given what the Man Booker Prize represents, it's not surprising that in years past there have been a few dust-ups among the panel. Judges have been known to take things pretty far, though perhaps none as far as Philip Larkin, the 1977 Chair, who threatened to throw himself out the window if Paul Scott's *Staying On* didn't win. It's a good thing the window had bars – but even better that *Staying On* won anyway.

We certainly had our flashes of heat and light – but in the absolute best sense – because without passion, without commitment, the judging process would be merely an academic exercise.

And that goes for everything connected to the Man Booker. Although the panel is the public face of the prize-giving process, what goes on behind the scenes is just as important. The Man Booker Prize is supported and maintained by a truly remarkable partnership between Luke Ellis and the Man Group, Gaby Wood and the Booker Prize Foundation, and Dotti Irving and the team at Four Colman Getty. They are its beating heart, and on behalf of the Judges I would like to thank them for **their** passion and **their** commitment to what has become a beacon for literature and freedom of expression around the world.

It bears repeating that the Man Booker Prize is open to any book written in English and published in the UK. Telling writers what is and what isn't allowed is once again all the rage. Governments do it

because they can. Pressure groups do it because they feel entitled. And look, even marketers do it, not because they're evil but because they fear taking risks, and are looking to their bottom line.

But not here. Not at the Man Booker Prize. There are no barriers, no taboos, no boycotts, no gentlemen's agreements. Just a shared commitment to excellence.

When Tom Maschler founded the Booker in 1968, he said he wanted to create a prize that would stimulate interest in serious fiction. But behind that seemingly simple and innocuous statement was something profound – you might even call it subversive. Because fiction **is** freedom: To quote Ursula LeGuin, “The Imagination is truly the enemy of bigotry and dogma.”

What we have in our six shortlisted books is proof that an unfettered imagination – one that is free to explore the outer bounds of the human condition - is the sine qua non of not just good writing, but all writing. The truth is rarely pretty and never comfortable.

In Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, we have an anti-hero whose absurdist attempts to resurrect segregation are painfully funny, with the emphasis on both painful and funny.

In Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*, we have a fearless exposé of monstrous mothers and feckless daughters - in prose that revels in the sheer complexity and danger of the feminine.

Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* goes into the mind of a young murderer in order to explore where the true destroyers of humanity reside.

Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen* invites the reader to experience a young woman's rebirth from victim to avenger through the glorious, technicolour reality of blood, vomit and alcohol.

David Szalay's *All that Man Is*, dares his reader to re-examine the masculine in a world that has become unmoored and every person is an outlier, an outcast or an outsider.

And in Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, we have a fictional tale about what is very real indeed: the deep poison of totalitarianism and its existential threat to the human spirit.

My friends: by being here tonight for the Man Booker Prize, we are part of a global vanguard that stands against all threats, both political and practical, to the freedom of writers to write, the freedom of novels to be literary, and the freedom of people – everywhere - to read them.

Please join me now in celebration: The Winner of the 2016 Man Booker Prize for Fiction is....