

onyms physically clustered together—ensures that, even when an error occurs, the proper amino acids are often assembled. Computer simulations with up to a million random codes have shown the existing code to be “a stellar performer” in minimizing errors—“the best of all possible codes,” as one team of researchers put it several years ago.

But the case is not entirely closed. The computer simulations have certain weaknesses, and scientists continue to speculate about the code. Some are intrigued by various mathematical patterns in the code—such as the fact that the number 64 is equal to both 4^3 and 2^6 . The patterns suggest many possibilities, including, unlikely as it may seem, connections with the I Ching.

ARTS & LETTERS

A Prize for the Books

“Sitting in Judgment” by Fiammetta Rocco, in *The Economist* (Oct. 23, 2004), 25 St. James’s St., London SW1A 1HG England, and “The Booker Prize for 2003” by Merritt Moseley, in *The Sewanee Review* (Spring 2004), 735 University Ave., Sewanee, Tenn. 37383.

A year ago, *Economist* literary editor Fiammetta Rocco picked up the phone to hear a thin, reedy voice ask if she would serve as a judge of the Man Booker prize. Fifty thousand pages later, Rocco and four other judges named Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* the 2004 winner, in a process Rocco sees as emphatic proof of the prize’s value.

The Man Booker—or simply the Booker, as it’s better known—has become enormously powerful. Presented each year for a novel written in English by an author from the British Commonwealth or Ireland, the \$90,000 prize has prestige that reaches far beyond. The 2002 winner, Yan Martel’s *Life of Pi*, has sold 1.75 million copies worldwide, and publishers often print thousands of additional copies merely on the strength of a book’s mention on the shortlist of finalists.

In Britain, where more than 100,000 books are published every year—the same number as in America, which has five times the population—obscurity yawns just beyond the printing house. Of the 10,000 novels published, many never even reach major bookstores. So the Booker is more than a shot in the arm. It can mean salvation.

Rocco’s turn as a Booker judge made her a demanding reader with no patience for timidity, limited vision, or flabby language. She read a “minestrone” of 132 books in 147 days: “Unhappy families featured prominently; so did alcohol and absent fathers. The music of Bruckner was mentioned

more than once, and a quantity of Italian food was ruined either by a disgusting liquor or by an exploding espresso machine.”

Many of the books were admirable, but only a few stood up to all-around scrutiny and gained serious consideration—and the attendant publicity. In a literary age when reviews and bookshop placement aren’t the literary Good Housekeeping Seals of Approval they once were, and knowledgeable bookstore owners are an endangered species, Rocco believes that the Booker selection process is important. It showcases talents that might not otherwise get their due.

Critic Merritt Moseley, who has covered the Booker for *The Sewanee Review* over the past dozen years, has a slightly more jaundiced view. He sees in the Booker a grande dame that is still the most prestigious British literary award but has lost a bit of its strut in recent years to the Whitbread Prizes and the Orange Prize. The Booker response, in Moseley’s eyes, has been to whip up hype. The four to six week interlude between the release of the shortlist and the naming of the winner is calculated to generate chatter: “interviews with the shortlisted authors, comments on the list by all and sundry, oddsmaking and betting, and leaks and speculations.” And now there’s a “longlist” of the 20-plus semifinalists, released even earlier.

Then there’s the matter of the winner itself. When Moseley surveyed the competition in 2003, “the worst novel on the shortlist” won for the first time since he began following the

Booker. That book, *Vernon God Little*, is the tale of a Columbine-style shooting narrated by a colloquial Texas teenager, and its author is Peter Finlay, an Australian swindler using the pseudonym D. B. C. (short for Dirty-But-Clean) Pierre. Moseley intimates that the judges were swayed more by the novel's sensational subject and author than by its literary merit, dryly noting that perhaps their choice made them feel "daring."

Whether the Booker rewards true talent or has run off to join the publicity circus, it continues to play the role of a fairy godmother. In the case of Pierre, he and his past sins were thrust into the international lime-light—as was his promise to use his prize money to compensate those he swindled. Since then, his book has sold nearly half a million copies in Britain alone and has been translated into 30 languages.

EXCERPT

How She Got Her Smile

Waiting to see the Mona Lisa has all the thrill of standing in an airport check-in queue. The crowd pushes forward, cattlelike and unquestioning, performing a ritual they know they have to go through with in order to complete a preordained tourist experience. . . .

You have to feel sorry for Salvator Rosa, whose pictures hang to the left and the right of the Mona Lisa. No one spares a glance for the enormous Heroic Battle, 1652, to the left, with its dramatic portrayal of carnage. There must have been a time when this would have been the more obvious crowd gatherer, but a sequence of quite random events has transformed the Mona Lisa over the past century into a celebrity painting.



Before the 1789 revolution, scarcely anyone had access to it. Then, with the creation of the Louvre, it was for some time kept in the curator's bureau, away from the hordes, and valued much less than Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St. Anne. But as the romantic poets of the 19th century began to be obsessed with the femme fatale, the Mona Lisa was seized on as an ideal of womanhood, her smile and the eyes venerated. The confusion over quite who she was increased her allure. . . .

Then just as the painting was gaining mass recognition, it was stolen in 1911, at a time when popular newspapers were booming. The image was reproduced globally as the search began. Such was the painting's new significance that people lined up to stare at the empty space where the picture had been hanging. The story of the theft and its rediscovery inspired dozens of books and films. Then came the lampooning of the work by Marcel Duchamp, [and] the appropriation of the image by surrealists, pop artists, and finally by the advertising industry.

Art historian E. H. Gombrich says the picture has become so worn out by all these references that it's almost impossible "to see it with fresh eyes." But the reality is that in the Louvre, you cannot really see the painting at all for the far more practical reason that there are too many other people in front of it.

—Amelia Gentleman, a journalist who reports from France for *The Guardian*,
London (Oct. 19, 2004)