

Man Booker Winners at the Nichols Library

A Sense of an Ending follows a middle-aged man as he contends with a past he has never much thought about. —until his closest childhood friends return with a vengeance. Tony Webster thought he'd left all this behind as he built an average life with an unremarkable career, a quiet divorce, and a calm middle age... Now in his mid-60s, his retirement is thrown into confusion when he's bequeathed a journal that belonged to his brilliant school-friend, Adrian, who committed suicide 40 years earlier at age 22. Though he thought he understood the events of his youth, he's forced to radically revise what he thought he knew about Adrian, his bitter parting with his mysterious first lover Veronica, and reflect on how he let life pass him by safely and predictably. Barnes's spare and luminous prose splendidly evokes the sense of a life whose meaning (or meaninglessness) is inevitably defined by "the sense of an ending" which only death provides. Despite its focus on the blindness of youth and the passage of time, Barnes's book is entirely unpretentious. From the haunting images of its first pages to the surprising and wrenching finale, the novel carries readers with sensitivity and wisdom through the agony of lost time... "An elegantly composed, quietly devastating tale about memory, aging, time and remorse. . . . —NPR

Last year's winner, *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson (2010) also deals with existential themes. Julian Treslove, a BBC producer feels out of sync with his longtime friend and sometimes rival Sam Finkler, a rabidly anti-Zionist scholar. After Treslove is mugged—the crime has possible anti-Semitic overtones—he becomes obsessed with what it means to be Jewish ("a Finkler"). Treslove's search for a Jewish identity takes him through food, study and sex. Jacobson contrasts Treslove's obsession with his friend's thorny relationship with his Jewish heritage. "Jacobson's prose is effortless-witty when it needs to be, heartbreaking where it counts—and the Jewish question becomes a metaphor without ever being overdone." (*Publishers Weekly*).

The Sea by John Banville (2007). Widower Max Morden returns to the seaside cottage where he summered as a boy. There, his thoughts drift between his wife's final illness, and more distant memories of his youth, where he his fate became entwined with a well-to-do family at a neighboring cottage. Max found himself drawn both to the charismatic and seductive Mrs. Grace, her volatile daughter Chole and her nursemaid Rose. "Banville seamlessly juxtaposes Max's youth and age, and each scene is rendered with the intense visual acuity of a photograph." (*Publishers Weekly*).

Wolf Hall (2009) by Hilary Mantel looks into the unsettled reign of Henry III. Henry wants to annul his marriage of twenty years and marry Anne Boleyn. The pope and most of Europe opposes him. Into this impasse steps Thomas Cromwell: a wholly original man, a charmer and a bully, both idealist and opportunist. Cromwell helps him break the opposition, but what will be the price of his triumph? "Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* is both spellbinding and believable. [It] has epic scale but lyric texture. Its 500-plus pages turn quickly, winged and falcon-like" (*New York Times*).

The White Tiger (2008) by Aravind Adiga is a "darkly comic" debut novel. Balram, a chauffeur, murders his employer and justifies his crime as the act of a "social

entrepreneur." In a series of letters, the chauffeur recounts his transformation from a hardworking boy growing up in "the Darkness" (hose areas of rural India where education and electricity are equally scarce,) a determined killer. "While "Adiga's message isn't subtle or novel (*New Yorker*), Balram's appealingly sardonic voice and acute observations of the social order are both winning and unsettling."

The Inheritance of Loss (2006) by Kiran Desai also deals with social turmoil. Jemubhai Patel, an English-educated judge in Bhutan has retired from serving a country he finds "too messy for justice." He lives in an isolated house with his cook, and his orphaned seventeen-year-old granddaughter. The tranquility of his existence is contrasted with the life of the cook's son, who is trying to survive as an illegal immigrant in New York and with his granddaughter, who falls in love with a member of an insurgency group, which is bitterly anti-English. "Briskly paced and sumptuously written, the novel ponders questions of nationhood, colonization, and class, in ways both moving and revelatory (*New Yorker*)."

The True History of the Kelly Gang (2001) by Peter Carey. In prison and awaiting execution, the outlaw Kelly explains in letters to the baby daughter he will never see. "Conveyed in run-on sentences, with sparse punctuation and quirky grammar and enriched by pungent vernacular," Kelly's "mesmerizing" voice "relates the events that earned him a reputation as a horse thief and murderer (*Publishers Weekly*)."

Finally, the *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel mixes magic realism and speculation in an imaginative brew. Sixteen year-old Pi Patel survives a shipwreck, only to find sharing a lifeboat with a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Pi must use his cunning, wisdom knowledge of animals (his father was a zoologist) to coexist. *Publishers Weekly* called this a "fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilience."

Seeking a more conventional read? The Nichols Library also has an up-to date good selection of best-sellers, engaging non-fiction, crime stories, family dramas and romances.