

Wellcome Trust Book Prize: 2011 shortlist

Wellcome Trust Book Prize judges **Vivienne Parry**, **Roger Highfield**, **Erica Wagner** and **Joanna Bourke** talk about the Prize and the 2011 shortlist.

VP: Well here are our shortlist and now we've got to find the winner. So let's go through them.

RH: This is the one true nonfiction entry, but actually I think it's a completely magnificent book. I'm very familiar with lots of aspects of the cancer story but I like the way that Mukherjee pulled together this story at lots of levels. We get a historical portrait of the attempts to treat cancer, you get a glimpse of the science, you get a glimpse of the personalities as well.

EW: It's a sort of metaphysical book as well I think: what does it mean to declare war on a disease? It's rather like war on terror; it's not really possible.

VP: Yes, it's not just a history is it? It is about –

JB: I mean this is what I really liked about the book, it is a biography, he tries to give cancer sort of a character.

RH: He does a great job in bringing us right up to date with kind of genetic insights into cancer, which I found very satisfying.

VP: Well then let's go to the memoir next.

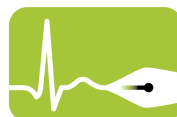
JB: This book is by Sarah Manguso, it's called *The Two Kinds of Decay* and it's a memoir of her experiences suffering a very, very serious neurological disorder. What I like about this book is the complete sort of honesty that comes forth. I mean she really doesn't let up on herself, she says really interesting things about, well, you would expect illness to make you better as a person and yet it's very, very clear from this memoir that in fact the illness she says has made her more selfish, has made her more jealous and not a very nice person.

RH: She's trying to give you an insight into the sort of suffering you get when you're having cold blood infused into your body through a shunt in your chest or something like that. Things that I found extraordinary and interesting – I don't want to sound too morbid about it.

VP: It's funny, I'm aware that as we're talking about it people will think 'well why would I want to read a book like that?' but actually I do think it does speak to people about how illness is experienced, and that to me is part of what this prize is about.

Very good, so let's move onto our next one and this is the start of our fiction cornucopia in this year's shortlist.

EW: Louisa Young's *My Dear I Wanted to Tell You*, which is a novel set largely on the Western Front, it's a novel of the First World War and one of the stories it tells is the story of Riley, who's an aspiring artist but who is badly wounded and disfigured in the War. The aspects of the novel that concern our prize are the way it depicts the infant science of plastic surgery and how Riley



comes to terms with his disfigurement. I love this book, I think it's a wonderful novel.

VP: This is your particular area isn't it Joanna?

JB: Yes, I mean the story of the First World War and I really couldn't fault her on any of these aspects and it doesn't only deal with facial disfigurement, it also deals with the psychiatric casualties of war and I found that interesting.

VP: Okay so here comes the next of our fiction – *Nemesis*, from Philip Roth. Now, Roger, what were your thoughts about this? I mean tell us about the plot without revealing the fantastic twist?

RH: Okay, there's a character at the heart of this book, Bucky Cantor – healthy, fit, vivacious kind of character, and it describes his encounter with polio at a time when there was nothing you could do about this disease, when you faced death or, even worse, being paralysed and interned in an iron lung. I thought he did a brilliant job in giving a real sense of fear and unease and foreboding.

VP: And the claustrophobia is extraordinary.

JB: And also the fact that anyone who's a stranger, who's somehow not like yourself, is somehow this source of contagion, and I think he does that very, very well. And the whole thing between what's happening in Europe at this time, with the War, the Holocaust, you know, God gets very, very bad press in this novel, you know, who's responsible, how could God strike down the young, the healthy? And that comes out very, very strongly.

VP: This is *State of Wonder*, it's by Ann Patchett, it's the story of drug discovery, in a way, in the Amazon jungle, except it's much more plotted than that, it's a tribe in the Amazon who chew on bark and they defeat the menopause and they go on being fertile into their 70s. And it's told from the point of view of someone who is sent out by the drug company to find out what's going on.

EW: I thought this was a really wonderful and unusual book, a mystery, an examination of how we view the other.

VP: Because it could have been just another of those kind of black-and-white 'wicked pharmaceutical company versus poor downtrodden natives' kind of novels, but actually it was so much more.

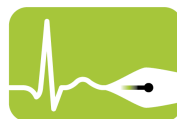
EW: And also partly because you also felt the passion of the scientists for what they were doing.

VP: So now we turn to the very last of our six. This is Alice LaPlante, *Turn of Mind*.

JB: This is a very, very moving novel. Basically the narrator is extremely unreliable because she's sinking into Alzheimer's and at the heart of this novel, though, there is a murder mystery.

VP: What I loved about this book was the insight that it gave you into Alzheimer's. There's a to me extraordinary bit where she comes back into her house and she says 'well who are all these strangers, what were they doing in my house, how dare they come into my house?' But then of course you discover it's her family and her carer.

JB: It's also a very funny novel, I mean it's not serious throughout the whole novel.



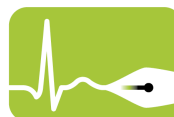
RH: At the end of the day you end up with a sort of page-turner about dementia, which I never thought would have been possible.

VP: Well that's our shortlist and all we have to do now is find a winner.

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