



BARTLEBY REVIEW

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Man Booker Prize •••• Kenneth Goldsmith



The hundred-thousandth coming of age novel, developing psychological portraits of characters amidst difficult romantic relationships and family tensions, is somehow still within the bounds of the properly creative. Yet the first or second work to use previously written source texts, even in some novel way, are still felt to be troublingly improper.

These are the synopses from the 2011 Man Booker Prize shortlist:

"The story of one man coming to terms with the mutable past."

"His journey – if he survives it – will push faith, love and friendship to their utmost limits."

"A novel about the things you tell yourself in order to be able to continue to live the life you find yourself in, and what happens when those stories no longer work."

"The horror of betrayal, the burden of loyalty and the possibility that, if you don't tell your story, someone else might tell it for you."

"A story of innocence and experience, hope and harsh reality."

And moreover, that we don't think of those Booker Prize Finalists as unoriginal, or uncreative, or plagiarized, despite the fact that they have close precedents and that we can imagine confusing them with another work. "A story of innocence and experience, hope and harsh reality";

a quick Google search reveals that these are the exact words used to describe Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and James Joyce's "Araby" (that's just the first page of results).

Nor do we think of these works as unoriginal, or uncreative, or plagiarized, despite the fact that just in the one paragraph synopses from the Man Booker website, we learn that 4 of the 6 shortlisted novels advertise themselves as featuring immigrants negotiating the difficulties of a strange land, 5 of the 6 hinge on the dramatic turn of a murder, 4 of the 6 reveal secrets from the past that come unexpectedly to light (half of them through the surprise arrival of a letter), 4 of the 6 reveal the unreliability of narration; and so on – all of which is starting to sound a lot like a Charles Dickens novel.

But they're all, no doubt, very original works.

Kenneth Goldsmith