

FICTION AS FASHION

Jim Powell

I have never yet tried to make a list of my favourite novels. But I compiled enough lists of my favourite records when I was a teenager to know the impossibility of the task. While it is wonderful to have made *The Culture Show's* list of 12 of the best new novelists, I am well aware that a different panel of judges (or the same panel on a different day) might have reached a different verdict.

It would be nice to present the accolade as the culmination of a smooth upwards rise through the strange world of publishing. The opposite was the case. Being advised that an unpublished novelist should not even think of approaching a publisher directly, I set out first to find myself an agent. Over nearly two years, *The Breaking Of Eggs* was rejected by 30 of the country's top literary agencies. Now it is supposedly one of the 12 best first novels of the past two years.

So, in one camp, sit thirty experienced agents. And, in the other, sit Susan Armstrong, my agent at Conville & Walsh, Arzu Tahsin, my editor at Weidenfeld & Nicolson, Stephen Morrison, my editor at Penguin in New York, and four distinguished judges from *The Culture Show*. Can both camps be right? Yes, possibly.

Agents seem not to be primarily preoccupied with the quality of a submission, but with their chances of selling it. Like clothes, like music, like most things these days, fiction reflects the fashion of the moment. When I started trying to place *The Breaking Of Eggs*, the fashion was for misery memoirs and chicklit. My novel fell into neither category, so those agents were not necessarily wrong to reject it.

But fashion changes. When Susan took me on, it was with the express view that publishers were starting to look for something new, something different. When Arzu, and then Stephen, immediately bought the novel, that seemed to confirm the fact. Possibly its presence on *The Culture Show's* list is further confirmation.

In his article in *The Guardian*, the chair of the judges, John Mullan, kindly wrote: "Among our dozen, there were one or two who seemed wonderfully oblivious to formal trickery. I remember beginning Jim Powell's *The Breaking of Eggs* and experiencing an unusual narrative voice that was neither inadequate nor self-consciously stylish ... The fashion for literary showiness seemed to have passed him by."

Well, yes it has. Completely. Not by deliberate avoidance, but because I have managed to remain unaware of it. I have never been on a creative writing course. I have not sought to discover, let alone to emulate, the style of the moment. We all have our influences. Mine must be the novelists I read decades ago, many of them writing in the 1930s. As a friend charmingly wrote about John Mullan's piece: "It conjures a nice image of you strolling insouciantly past those pesky literary fashions in your well-tailored Greene-ian tweeds." (Not that I possess any tweeds, well-tailored or otherwise.)

With the naïvety of a novice, I embarked on an embryonic career as a novelist without knowing what fiction was fashionable, or what was supposed to be the fashionable way of writing it. And not caring about either. Somehow the upshot of that approach seems to be that I have now become fashionable.

Of course, fashion can and will change again. Next time I may be on the wrong end of the change, equally unwittingly. But at the moment, my feeling (which should not come as a surprise) is that it is better for novelists to write what they want to write, however they want to write it, regardless of fashion. It certainly hasn't done me any harm. Maybe it wouldn't do any harm for more agents to view submissions in the same light.