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From Times Online  
December 18, 1998

## NB

J.C.

Our Moscow correspondent reports: Alexander Solzhenitsyn has refused to accept a state medal from President Yeltsin to mark the writer's eightieth birthday, which fell on December 11. Solzhenitsyn turned down the Order of St Andrew, on the grounds that he could not accept an award from a head of state who had reduced Russia to ruin. The Presidential response was that Solzhenitsyn, who launched his career with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a story of life in a Soviet labour camp, and was stripped of his citizenship in the mid-1970s, was free to decline the medal, but that Mr Yeltsin thought it would honour his outstanding contributions to Russia and to world literature.

Meanwhile, in a curious twist of fate, the Booker Russian Novel Prize has been awarded to *Somebody's Letters* by Alexander Morozov. The novel was written thirty years ago. It was then accepted for serial publication in *Novy Mir*, the journal which, at roughly the same time, published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. However, the Editor of the journal, Alexander Tvardovsky, was finally unable to publish Morozov, for political reasons (he faced the same dilemma over Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*), and *Somebody's Letters* returned to its creator's desk drawer, where it remained until last year. Morozov gladly accepted the sum of \$12,500 from the Booker panel. Booker plc have announced that 1999 will be the last year of their participation, though the company name will remain attached to the prize; from 2000, it will be sponsored by Smirnoff.

Public libraries are hoping to receive, at last, some National Lottery money.

Since most other things in the country to do with art and culture are propped up by gamblers' losses, why not the libraries? The fact is, local libraries are not eligible for direct infusions of Lottery cash, as local authorities have a statutory duty to provide for them out of the available funds, as they do the hospitals and the police force. The 1964 Libraries Act states that local authorities must provide "an efficient and comprehensive" library service. Now, however, as a way of getting round the terms of the Act, Pounds 400 million of Lottery dosh has been allocated to something called the New Library Network, from which your local library may benefit. The bonanza was announced by Arts Minister Alan Howarth.

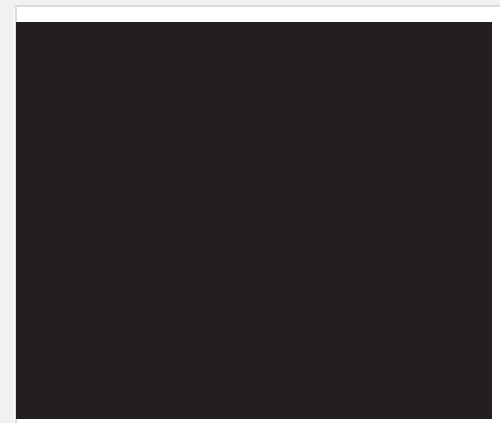
Does this mean lots of new books, an end to the depressing ranks of tattered paperbacks, an extension of shelf space, some replacement of existing stock? Not likely. Reporting the award, the Bookseller managed to devote almost half a page to Mr Howarth's speech and its implications without once employing the word "book". Libraries, said the Minister, provided access to education and training resources; they are expected to be involved in "information provision on a local basis". The Lottery handouts will favour those libraries which show themselves committed to "community projects", and, in particular, "give the socially disadvantaged equal access to the new University for Industry and the National Grid for Learning", those figments of the New Labour cyber-imagination. Neanderthals who think of the library as a place where you go to pursue an interest in

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Oriental poetry or the French Revolution or the techniques of boat-building will be shown one of those signs which used to hang on library walls:

"Quiet Please".

By a pleasing coincidence, the Public Record Office and government archive services from other countries have joined forces to express concern at the fragility of information stored on electronic systems. The continual turnover of new computer software and the built-in incompatibility of competing systems, means that, in the words of Luciana Duranti, who has been researching the subject, "the majority of data is less accessible than ever before". Ms Duranti is the head of International Research on Preservation of Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPares). She points out that, while the average book printed on acid-free paper could be expected to last 500 years, "anyone who attempts to recover an old letter from an outdated five-inch floppy disk which was written with an obsolete word processor on a personal computer whose manufacturer is no longer in business faces a problem".

Kickshaws, the tiny Paris publisher mentioned in NB a few weeks ago, is not the sole upholder of the tradition of English-language publishing on the Left Bank.

Jim Haynes, that eternal Sixties carnival king, reminds us that his own operation, Handshake Editions, founded almost twenty years ago, is still going strong. Handshake books - most contracts are sealed by a handshake with the publisher - tend to be distinguished by their titles: there's Lynne Tillman's Weird Fucks, for example, or David Day's Just Say "No" to Family Values, and other rants, howls and moans. Ted Joans's Honey Spoon, a "prose novel" (eh?), was such a success that he wrote a follow-up entitled Money Soon; and for those not yet hooked up to the new University for Industry, there is the leisure-loving Haynes's response to Marxism: Workers of the World Unite and Stop Working. The highlight of the coming season is undoubtedly How To Wash Dishes by Jack Henry Moore, "a practical manual with elaborate philosophical overtones and copious notes", while historians will not want to miss the A2 Dinners Cook Book, listing the "menus, recipes and participants" from twenty years of dinner parties at Haynes's studio. A complete list of Handshake books, present and future, is available from Studio A2, 83 rue de la Tombe Issoire,

75014 Paris, France. With typical geniality, the publisher notes that "we charge \$10 for each title, but we will not prevent anyone from ordering copies if this is beyond their means".

J. C.

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