

John Caine

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Playwright's first novel wins £5,000 Lichfield Prize

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AN AMAZING coincidence came to light when a Middlesex playwright was named as winner of the second Lichfield Prize on Tuesday evening.

For 52-year-old John Caine, from Uxbridge, was born and raised in Salford just five miles away from Valeries Kershaw who won the first prize in 1989.

His first novel, *A Nest of Singing Birds*, was picked as winner of the £5,000 prize by judges Mr Ralph James, of Lichfield bookshop James Redshaw, and Mrs Barbara Boote, publishing director of the Macdonald Group, from a shortlist of ten novels.

Spain

There were 51 novels submitted for the Lichfield District Council-run contest, which is held every two years, including one from the USA and another from Spain.

Mrs Boote said: "I was particularly impressed with the way Lichfield was slipped into the novels in a very natural way and very pleased with the variety of submissions.

"One did stand out above all the others," she explained. "It had fresh views, very witty with good dry humour, a simple but effective storyline, and most of all, lovely observations of both places and people."

Speaking after the announcement by Lichfield District Council chairman, Councillor Mrs Brenda Constable, Mr Caine said he was very surprised to have won.

But he is no stranger to critical acclaim in his chosen field of playwriting.

He has written several TV plays, including 'Everyday is Sunday' about the life of Salford artist LS Lowry and 'A Family Affair' dealing with incest, seven stage plays, and last year received the London Broadcasting Council's drama award for his radio play 'On The Knocker'.

"For a long time, my agent has been asking me to write a novel, and it was he who pointed out the Lichfield Prize to me," said Mr Caine, who is divorced with two children. He describes his plays as 'drama with a social conscience.'

"I came to Lichfield once or twice and had a look round and then settled down to write it."

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He admitted the most difficult part of the two-year process was trying to add detail to the words: "I write dialogue very naturally because my work is always quite visual.

"The joy of writing a novel was not having to face 13 different people at the end all of whom have a point of view on how it should be interpreted - there is just the publisher to face."

A Nest of Singing Birds, he says, cannot be said to be in any particular genre, but can be loosely classed as 'a love affair' told through the eyes of the hero, Roger, and his wife.

The title is taken from a quote by Dr Johnson about Bedford College.

Winner of the first Lichfield Prize, Valerie Kershaw passed on her congratulations to Mr Caine, and said: "I think it is great because we are both Mancunians - we are like a pair of ram-raiders in Lichfield!"

Cllr Mrs Ann Johnson, chairman of the district council leisure committee, told the Mercury: "The prize has been well worth while for the winner, but also for us as a council - we feel this is really in the spirit of Dr Johnson."

Guest speaker for the evening was author of *Flowers in the Field*, Sarah Harrison, who said: "The Lichfield Prize has a sound and a ring about it that makes you believe it has been going for years and years - it is undoubtedly here to stay."