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Debutant American takes top French literary prize

By Kimberly Maul

PARIS (Reuters) - The Academie Francaise, austere guardian of the French language, on Thursday awarded its top literary prize for the first time to an American author, whose debut novel, written in French, has become a best-seller.

"Les Bienveillantes" (The Benevolent) by Jonathan Littell, was the hot favorite and took the prestigious "Grand Prix du Roman" on the first round of voting by 12 votes to four for the other two short-listed novels, the academy said.

The 900-page tome tackles the Holocaust through the eyes of Nazi Maximilien Aue, following the activities of the SS death squads responsible for exterminating Jews and communists in areas conquered by German forces in World War Two. Littell, 39, son of the U.S. writer Robert Littell, was awarded a prize of 7,500 euros (\$9,494) for the work, which has already sold more than 200,000 copies. The End

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