RSL Ondaatje Prize 2016: the shortlist

The £10,000 RSL Ondaatje Prize is awarded annually to a book of the highest literary merit – fiction, non-fiction or poetry – which best evokes the spirit of a place.

The judges, Kate Adie, Moniza Alvi and Mark Lawson, comment:

‘The variety of fine entries across the genres made judging the RSL Ondaatje Prize an education, as well as an adventure in reading.’

2016 shortlist

Jane Clarke
The River
(Bloodaxe)

Brian Dillon
The Great Explosion
(Penguin Books)

Alexandra Harris
Weatherland
(Thames & Hudson)

Peter Pomerantsev
Nothing is True and Everything is Possible
(Faber)

James Rebanks
The Shepherd’s Life
(Allen Lane)

Samanth Subramanian
This Divided Island
(Atlantic)

The winner will be announced on Monday 23 May 2016.
Jane Clarke, *The River* (Bloodaxe)
‘Quiet, lucid, subtle poems, nevertheless urgent in their presentation of a farming background in rural Ireland, and the poet’s enduring attachment to it.’ - Moniza Alvi.
Originally from a farm in the west of Ireland, Jane Clarke now lives in Co. Wicklow and combines writing with her work as a management consultant in not-for-profit organisations. She received the Listowel Writer’s Week Poetry Collection Prize in 2014 for her then unpublished first collection, *The River*, and also won the Trocaire/Poetry Ireland Competition (2014), Poems for Patience (2013), iYeats (2010) and Listowel Writers’ Week (2007).

Brian Dillon, *The Great Explosion: Gunpowder, the Great War, and a disaster on the Kent Marshes* (Penguin Books)
‘In a strikingly unusual contribution to the literature marking the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, Dillon uses a 1916 fire at a munitions factory in Kent to explore the history of explosives and buried (sometimes literally so) aspects of British history and topography.’ - Mark Lawson.
Brian Dillon is the author of *In the Dark Room*, a memoir that won the Irish Book Award for Nonfiction 2005, and *Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives*, which was shortlisted for the Wellcome Trust Book Prize 2009. He teaches at the Royal College of Art.

Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers & Artists under English Skies* (Thames & Hudson)
‘Alexandra Harris’s book is scholarly, intimate, deft and witty, and in its cultural explorations through time, via the English weather, it makes an original contribution to the “spirit of place”.’ - Moniza Alvi
Alexandra Harris is a cultural historian and writer, who won the Guardian First Book Award and a Somerset Maugham Award for *Romantic Moderns*. She is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Liverpool, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a New Generation Thinker on BBC Radio 3.
Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia* (Faber)

‘A sort of anti-travelogue, making the reader desperately keen never to go near the places described: the Muscovite, Siberian, American and English haunts of those who became super-rich from the division of state assets and the new entrepreneurial possibilities that arose in post-Soviet Russia. Pomerantsev’s storytelling is funny, frightening, exhilarating.’ - Mark Lawson

Peter Pomerantsev is a contributor to the London Review of Books and his writing has been published in the *FT, New Yorker, El Pais, WSJ, Foreign Policy, Daily Beast, Newsweek, Le Monde Diplomatique*, among others. He has also worked as a consultant for the EU and World Bank. He lives in London.

James Rebanks, *The Shepherd’s Life: A Tale of the Lake District* (Allen Lane)

‘Compelling, authentic and absolutely unromanticised, *The Shepherd’s Life* illuminates an honorable tradition in a changing rural world and, in doing so, reveals little known aspects of a celebrated landscape.’ - Moniza Alvi

James Rebanks is the Herdwick Shepherd, whose account of shepherding has a strong following on Twitter. He is the latest in a long line of sheep farmers, that stretches back over 600 years in the Lake District. He holds a double first in History from the University of Oxford.

Samanth Subramanian, *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War* (Atlantic)

‘Set in an enchanting environment, an evocative dissection of the history of violence that seems entwined with the landscape and people of Sri Lanka.’ - Kate Adie

Samanth Subramanian studied journalism at Pennsylvania State University and international relations at Columbia University. He has written for the *Guardian, the New Yorker, the New York Times, Mint, the Far Eastern Economic Review, Foreign Policy, New Republic, Foreign Affairs, The National and The Hindu*. His first book was *Following Fish: Travels Around the Indian Coast* (2010).

Notes to editors

Now in its 13th year, the **RSL Ondaatje Prize** is an annual award of £10,000 for a distinguished work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry, evoking the spirit of a place. The **Royal Society of Literature**, founded by George IV in 1820, celebrates and nurtures all that is best in British literature, past and present. The RSL organises a programme of events; makes awards and grants to established and emerging writers with the **RSL Jerwood Awards** for first commissioned works of Non-Fiction and the **RSL Brookleaze Grants**. In addition to the **RSL Ondaatje Prize**, the RSL administers the **V.S. Pritchett Memorial Prize** for short stories, runs regular Masterclasses with the Booker Prize Foundation, and manages a Schools Outreach Programme.

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