

# PRESS RELEASE



## The Royal Society of Literature



### Jonathan Tel

WINS

## the £1,000 Royal Society of Literature V.S. Pritchett Memorial Prize 2015

with his short story

### *The Seduction of a Provincial Accountant*

Judges Philip Hensher, Adam Mars-Jones and Rose Tremain have selected the winning short story for the V.S. Pritchett Memorial Prize 2015. The prize, now in its fifteenth year, is awarded for the year's best unpublished short story.

This year's winner is *The Seduction of a Provincial Accountant*, by Jonathan Tel, Adam Mars-Jones called it 'a convincing picture of the new China, a place where the old hierarchies have outlasted the pieties that sustained them. The sense of place was sharp, the point of view adroitly handled, never quite destroying sympathy for the central character, and the flashes of humour were especially welcome.' Philip Hensher noted that the story 'plunges us into an exotic but familiar relationship. Its portrait of dependence and exploitation is rueful, funny and utterly compelling', and to Rose Tremain it was 'seeded with surprise, humour and sadness in a setting deftly realized and held. A work that shows a promising understanding of the short story form and which is often arresting 'on the page.'

The runner-up is Nick Sweeney for his story *Traffic*. Adam Mars-Jones enjoyed 'a story built on traditional lines, though with a setting full of topicality, Ukraine in meltdown, moving towards an ending that none of the judges, for all their centuries of experience, quite saw coming', and Philip Hensher praised 'the power of its visual style, which gives texture, detail and truth to the sour misery it outlines'.

### History of the prize

The V.S. Pritchett Memorial Prize was founded by the RSL at the beginning of the new millennium to commemorate the centenary of an author widely regarded as the finest English short story writer of the 20th century, and to preserve a tradition encompassing Pritchett's mastery of narrative.

The winning story will appear in the *RSL Review* and will be published in *Prospect Magazine* online.

# Notes to Editors

## The winner and runner-up

**Jonathan Tel** has written *Scratching the Head of Chairman Mao*, a book-length collection of linked short stories relating to financial corruption in contemporary China. The story that won the VS Pritchett Memorial Prize 2015 comes from this collection. Another of these stories won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2015. A third of these stories was a finalist for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award 2014. A fourth story was a finalist for the Australian Elizabeth Jolley Story Prize 2015. He is seeking a publisher for the book. He is currently writing fiction about Syrian refugees. 'V.S. Pritchett, among his many passions, was an admirer and biographer of Chekhov - who wrote: "A writer should be destitute. He should know he'll die of hunger if he doesn't write, if he gives into his laziness. Writers should be put on chain-gangs and forced to write ... Oh how I thank Fate that I was so poor in my youth!" Elsewhere he wrote, to the contrary, that writers need financial security. The dialectic is the point. It's appropriate, then, that my winning story was inspired by what is perhaps Chekhov's most famous story, 'The Lady with the Dog'. Whereas he wrote about a romantic seduction in the Russia of his day, I am writing about a financial seduction in China nowadays.'

**Nick Sweeney's** novel *Laikonik Express* was published by Unthank Books in 2011. Much of his work reflects his fascination with Eastern Europe and its people and history. His other obsessions are Balkan music, bike racing and Byzantium, all of which creep into his work from time-to-time. He is a freelance writer and editor, and a musician, guitarist with Balkan troubadours the Trans-Siberian March Band. 'Everybody needs a sign that they're doing it right, sometimes, and I'm very happy to be among those writers following in the fine tradition that V S Pritchett played such a part in establishing. It's a great honour to have got my story up to second place in this prestigious award.'



## The Royal Society of Literature

With around 20 events every year, the RSL presents talks and conversations from some of the most exciting writers working in the English Language. Forthcoming speakers include **Melvyn Bragg, Mark Lawson, Val McDermid, Paul Muldoon, Jo Shapcott, Jackie Kay, Claire Harman, Rowan Williams, Robert Harris** and **Alan Hollinghurst**. Events take place at Somerset House and other venues in London and with partner organisations such as the National Portrait Gallery and King's College London. The RSL also offers a programme of Masterclasses in collaboration with the Booker Prize Foundation.

In addition to the V.S. Pritchett Memorial Prize, the RSL awards annually the RSL Ondaatje Prize, three RSL Jerwood Awards for Non-Fiction (for first major commissioned works), and RSL Brookleaze Grants.

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