RSL Ondaatje Prize 2018: 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.

This year’s judges are Tahmima Anam, Eva Hoffman and Daljit Nagra.

Kushanava Choudhury  The Epic City  (Bloomsbury Circus)
Xiaolu Guo  Once Upon a Time in the East  (Chatto & Windus)
Lucy Hughes-Hallett  Peculiar Ground  (4th Estate)
Kapka Kassabova  Border  (Granta)
Fiona Mozley  Elmet  (JM Originals)
Pascale Petit  Mama Amazonica  (Bloodaxe Books)

The winner will be announced on Monday 14 May 2018.
Notes to editors

‘Lively and vivid - a picture of contemporary Calcutta which is both panoramic and intimate. Through his own relationship to a city which keeps drawing him back from his transplanted, American life, Choudhury brings us close to the textures and social contradictions, the continuing traditions and signs of up-to-date modernisation.’ - Eva Hoffman

Kushanava Choudhury grew up in Calcutta and New Jersey. After graduating from Princeton University he worked as a reporter at *The Statesman* in Calcutta. He went on to receive a PhD in Political Theory from Yale University before returning to Calcutta to write a book about the city. *The Epic City* is his first book.

Xiaolu Guo, *Once Upon a Time in the East: A story of growing up* (Chatto & Windus)
‘An incredible story of extreme hardship leading to intellectual glory; an event-packed account that’s as much about an undernourished girl’s hunt for food as it is about the mountains and villages of China.’ - Daljit Nagra

Xiaolu Guo is a novelist, essayist, screenwriter and filmmaker based in London. Her novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* was shortlisted for the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction, and *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008) was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. In 2013, she was named one of Granta’s ‘Best of Young British Novelists’.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Peculiar Ground* (4th Estate)
‘The multi-generational story of a house, and how its inhabitants have transformed and been transformed by the place. It is a riotous cacophony of voices, showing the diverse and rich history of a place through the inhabitants of one house.’ - Tahmima Anam

Lucy Hughes-Hallett is a biographer, critic and journalist. Her biography *The Pike: Gabriele D’Annunzio* (2013) won the Samuel Johnson Prize, the Duff Cooper Prize and the Costa Biography Award. Her cultural history *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (1990) won the Fawcett Prize and the Emily Toth Award. She was elected a Fellow of the RSL in 2010.
Kapka Kassabova, *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* (Granta)

‘Kassabova’s memories of Bulgaria’s bucolic beaches and its menacing border of the Cold War period mingle with her observations of latter-day migrations and border traffic of less savoury kind. This author remains a sympathetic, non-judgmental but never sentimental presence throughout.’ - Eva Hoffman

Kapka Kassabova was born and raised in Bulgaria. In 2004, she moved to Scotland and later published *Street Without a Name* (2008) which was shortlisted for the Prix Européen du Livre and the Dolman Travel Book Award. *Border* was shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize and was 2017 Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year.

Fiona Mozley, *Elmet* (JM Originals)

‘A Yorkshire ballad of astonishing sustained imaginative vigour in prose that’s as muscular, feral and fleet-footed as the bare-knuckled boxing figure of the protagonist.’ - Dajit Nagra

Fiona Mozley was born in Hackney but grew up in York. After briefly working at a literary agency in London, she moved back to York to complete a PhD in Medieval Studies. She also has a weekend job at The Little Apple Bookshop in York. *Elmet* is her first novel and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2017.

Pascale Petit, *Mama Amazonica* (Bloodaxe Books)

‘Pascale Petit manages to do the impossible, weaving together a story of trauma, illness, and tragedy and steeping it in the natural world, transforming her troubled relationship with her mother into a story of the Amazon rainforest. It is a feat both stylistic and imaginative, and the result is something utterly original.’ - Tahmima Anam

Pascale Petit is a Parisian-born poet. *Mama Amazonica*, her seventh collection, was a Poetry Book Society Choice. Her sixth, *Fauverie* (2014), was her fourth to be shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, and five poems from this collection won the Manchester Poetry Prize. She was awarded an RSL Literature Matters Award in 2017.

The RSL Ondaatje Prize, now in its 15th year, is an annual award of £10,000 for a distinguished work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry, best evoking the spirit of a place.

Founded in 1820 the Royal Society of Literature is Britain’s national charity for the advancement of literature. In addition to the RSL Ondaatje Prize, the RSL runs the Encore Award for best second novel of the year, the V. S. Pritchett Short Story Prize, RSL Literature Matters Awards and the RSL Giles St Aubyn Awards for Non-Fiction, as well as regular events, and manages a schools outreach programme.

For more information, contact Annette Brook, annette@rsliterature.org | 020 7845 4680 | rsliterature.org