



PRESS RELEASE – 11 May 2021
IMAGES CAN BE DOWNLOADED [HERE](#)
[Twitter](#) / [Facebook](#) / [Instagram](#) / [Website](#)

RUTH GILLIGAN ANNOUNCED AS WINNER OF THE 2021 RSL ONDAATJE PRIZE FOR *THE BUTCHERS*



The Royal Society of Literature (RSL), the voice for the value of literature in the UK, has today announced **Ruth Gilligan** as the winner of the 2021 RSL Ondaatje Prize for *The Butchers* (Atlantic Books, 2020), a literary thriller set in the Irish borderlands during the 1996 BSE crisis. An annual prize of £10,000, the RSL Ondaatje Prize is awarded to an outstanding work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry that best evokes the spirit of a place.

Ruth Gilligan said: "I am just elated – and still totally shocked – to have won the 2021 RSL Ondaatje Prize. I am a sucker for books with a strong sense of place, so I have long been a huge fan of the prize, but after a year of isolation and confinement, it feels more pertinent than ever to be celebrating the transportive power of reading. There were some absolute crackers on the shortlist, so I am truly honoured that the judges chose *The Butchers*. A million thanks; this really means an awful lot."

The judges of this year's Prize, **Lola Young**, **Baroness Young of Hornsey** (chair), **Helen Mort** and **Adam Rutherford** said:

“Our winning title is about a moment in time, in a particular place. It’s been described in many different terms: Literary thriller, coming of age story, historical fiction, an account of superstition and the supernatural, but it doesn’t matter how it’s categorised - it’s a page turning, roller coaster of a read. The humour works - we need relief from repressed emotional lives, and the slaughter of cows - and it lures us into recalling the recent past at a moment when ‘crisis’ was constantly on the lips of politicians and pundits alike - just like today.” **Lola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey**

“*The Butchers* - Ruth Gilligan's novel is utterly compelling, combining a complex and subtle narrative with spare, poetic style. The characters are sympathetic, the conflicts they experience loom large. The chapters are full of condensed, original expressions that delight and surprise (sometimes wrong foot) the reader, making every page captivating. But the bigger picture demands our attention too: folklore meets the pressures of modern capitalism in the Irish BSE crisis. Throughout, we experience Ireland at a turning point, a time of rapid change and we are swept along with it. And throughout, landscape lives and breathes. Ruth Gilligan is a writer to truly admire and this is a deft, challenging, ambitious novel.” **Helen Mort**

“Ruth Gilligan's writing is almost annoyingly good. Her language bounds off the page and paints incredibly engaging characters and situations. She is one of those rare breeds whose work invokes the frustrating joy of writer's jealousy. From page one, it was glaringly obvious that *The Butchers* is a special book.” **Adam Rutherford**

Ruth Gilligan is an Irish novelist and journalist and lectures at the University of Birmingham. She has written four novels, including the Irish bestsellers *Forget* and *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan*, and she writes and reviews for the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, *TLS* and *the Guardian*. She was selected by the judges from a shortlist of six authors, made up of **Louise Hare** (*This Lovely City*), **Adam Mars-Jones** (*Box Hill*), **Nina Mingya Powles** (*Magnolia*, 木蘭), **James Rebanks** (*English Pastoral*) and **Francesca Wade** (*Square Haunting*).

First awarded in 2004, the premise and broad remit of the RSL Ondaatje Prize is to create unique lists of outstanding works and authors that you would not usually find sitting side by side. Previous recipients of the Prize have included Roger Robinson, Aida Edemariam, Pascale Petit, Francis Spufford, Alan Johnson, Edmund de Waal, Hisham Matar and Louisa Waugh.

The RSL Ondaatje Prize is one of nine annual awards and prizes presented by the RSL which bring the widest possible community of writers and readers together in celebration of the breadth of UK literature. From debut works and unpublished short stories through to the notoriously challenging second novel and outstanding contributions to literature, the RSL’s awards and prizes celebrate the value of the written word in all its forms, whilst supporting emerging and established writers at some of the most challenging moments of their careers. The RSL’s other annual awards and prizes are: **Sky Arts RSL Writers Awards**, **RSL International Writers awards**, **Encore Award**, **RSL Christopher Bland Prize**, **RSL Giles St Aubyn Awards for Non-Fiction**, **RSL Literature Matters Awards**, the **V.S. Pritchett Short Story Prize** and **The Benson Medal**.

The RSL Ondaatje Prize 2021 will be announced with video animation at 7pm, Tuesday 11 May 2021 across the RSL's social media channels.

For further information and press enquiries relating to the RSL Ondaatje Prize please contact Kate Hassell at Bread and Butter PR
Kate@breadandbutterpr.uk | 07921 264 564

Notes to Editors

The RSL Ondaatje Prize, Shortlist 2021

Ruth Gilligan - Winner

The Butchers (Atlantic Books)

Louise Hare

This Lovely City (HQ)

"Hostility and kindness, tragedy, loss, and love are threaded through the streets of Brixton, Clapham, and London's West End or perhaps it's the streets that are woven into those stories - whichever it is, the locations are intertwined with the milieu and combine to give a vivid picture of the experiences of both newly arrived migrants and those already settled in post-war Britain." **Lola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey**

Adam Mars-Jones

Box Hill (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

"This is an exhilarating, intoxicating close study of an unusual relationship set amongst the biker communities of Box Hill in Surrey. A book that is near-impossible to put down." **Helen Mort**

Nina Mingya Powles

Magnolia, 木蘭 (Nine Arches Press)

"Panoramic yet intimate, these poems explore 'a city's damp unfurling', the physicality of language and how language builds a sense of place. Each piece is filmic, memorable, formally adept." **Helen Mort**

James Rebanks

English Pastoral (Allen Lane)

"A terribly important book about nostalgia and the future, about tradition and progress, about our evolving relationship with the soil that feeds us, and how we have neglected or ignored how farming is the foundation of civilisation. Every politician - in fact, everyone who eats food should read English Pastoral." **Adam Rutherford**

Francesca Wade

Square Haunting (Faber & Faber)

"This fascinating, meticulously researched work combines the personal histories of five women who passed through Mecklenburg Square in the inter-war years, in a way that both links them all and draws out their distinctiveness." **Lola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey**

The Royal Society of Literature (RSL)

Founded in 1820, the RSL acts as a voice for the value of literature, honouring and supporting emerging and established writers whilst creating a bridge between authors and audiences to engage as many people as possible with the breadth of UK literature. <https://rsliterature.org/>

The RSL Ondaatje Prize is an annual award of £10,000 for a distinguished work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry, best evoking the spirit of a place. The RSL is grateful to Sir Christopher Ondaatje for founding and sponsoring the Prize.

Past Winners

2020	Roger Robinson	<i>A Portable Paradise</i>
2019	Aida Edemariam	<i>The Wife's Tale: A Personal History</i>
2018	Pascale Petit	<i>Mama Amazonica</i>
2017	Francis Spufford	<i>Golden Hill</i>
2016	Peter Pomerantsev	<i>Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia</i>
2015	Justin Marozzi	<i>Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood</i>
2014	Alan Johnson	<i>This Boy: A Memoir of Childhood</i>
2013	Philip Hensher	<i>Scenes from Early Life</i>
2012	Rahul Bhattacharya	<i>The Sly Company of People Who Care</i>
2011	Edmund de Waal	<i>The Hare with Amber Eyes</i>
2010	Ian Thomson	<i>The Dead Yard: Tales of Modern Jamaica</i>
2009	Adam Nicolson	<i>Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History</i>
2008	Graham Robb	<i>The Discovery of France</i>
2007	Hisham Matar	<i>In the Country of Men</i>
2006	James Meek	<i>The People's Act of Love</i>
2005	Rory Stewart	<i>The Places In Between</i>
2004	Louisa Waugh	<i>Hearing Birds Fly</i>