



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## *News Release*

Issued: Monday 27 March 2017

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### **Shortlist for UK's oldest book prizes is intriguing cultural mix**

A fascinating blend of books telling stories that cross cultural divides forms the shortlist of Britain's oldest literary awards announced today (Monday, 27 March).

Contenders for the James Tait Black Prizes include a fictionalised account of Samuel Beckett's wartime years in occupied France.

Also in the running is a novel that focuses on one of Kentucky's most powerful dynasties and has horse racing and racial tension as its key themes.

The other nominated titles explore unlikely love affairs, one between a hustler and a writer based in Bulgaria, and another between an 18-year-old Irish student and a professional actor set in London in the 1990s.

The winners of the Prizes, presented annually by the University of Edinburgh, will be announced on August 14 at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

The four novels competing for the £10,000 fiction prize are: *A Country Road, A Tree* by Jo Baker, (Doubleday); *What Belongs to You* by Garth Greenwell (Picador); *The Lesser Bohemians* by Eimear McBride, (Faber); *The Sport of Kings* by C. E. Morgan, (4th Estate).

Contenders for the £10,000 biography prize include a double biography of the great Spanish court painter Diego Velázquez and the Victorian bookseller, John Snare, whose life was transformed after he bought one of Velázquez's paintings, and a book that attempts to overturn myths surrounding the infamous Russian mystic, Rasputin.

Other contenders include an intriguing account of an unknown person whose identity the author explores following the discovery of 148 diaries in a skip, lastly, there is a portrait of Sir Kenelm Digby – a poet, courtier, cook and diplomat who invented the modern wine bottle.

The shortlisted biographies are: *The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velazquez* by Laura Cumming (Chatto and Windus); *A Life Discarded: 148 Diaries Found in a Skip* by Alexander Masters (Fourth Estate), *A Stain in the Blood: The Remarkable Voyage of Sir Kenelm Digby* by Joe Moshenska (William Heinemann); *Rasputin* by Douglas Smith (Pan Macmillan).

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Two prizes are awarded annually for books published during the previous year – one for the best work of fiction and the other for the best biography.

More than 400 books were read by academics and postgraduate students for the University's School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, who nominated books for the shortlist.

A new online course linked to the awards has been launched today (Monday, 27 March).

The new course develops the partnership between the University and the Book Festival.

The four-week course entitled 'How to Read a Novel' will take readers on an insightful journey giving them all the tools they need to get the most out of their reading.

The reading techniques the judges and students use will be made clearer for non-experts in the free online course.

Course leaders from the University's Department of English Literature will give participants an introduction to the four key elements found in most fiction – plot, characterisation, dialogue and setting.

Examples will be presented from an array of texts, from the classics to contemporary works. The most recent examples will be drawn from the four novels shortlisted for the James Tait Black fiction prize.

Videos, quizzes and discussions will be used to explain fundamental concepts. The Book Festival will host two workshops linking to the online course content.

The course, hosted by the FutureLearn platform, is the latest in a series of open online courses called MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) from the University, which to date have been taken by more than two million people.

Professor Dorothy Miell, Head of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, said: "We are delighted to be part of this collaboration with the Edinburgh International Book Festival. We're sure that people will enjoy learning how to get the most out of reading a novel by working through both classic texts and, using the James Tait Black shortlisted novels, the best new writing from last year."

Nick Barley, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, said: "Over the years, the James Tait Black Prizes have been more accurate than any other British awards in identifying books that stand the test of time. This new online short course (or MOOC) gives readers a fabulous opportunity to work with the University's literature team and gain a deep understanding of the four books on the shortlist - before having an opportunity to come to the Festival and ask the authors questions about their work. What better way to get to the heart of great literature?"

The Prizes were founded in 1919 by Janet Coats, the widow of publisher James Tait Black, to commemorate her husband's love of good books.

Participants can sign-up for the free online course which starts in July at:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/how-to-read-a-novel/1>

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For further information, please contact:  
Joanne Morrison, Press and PR Office, University of Edinburgh  
Tel 0131 6514266 or 07717707623 email [Joanne.Morrison@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Joanne.Morrison@ed.ac.uk)  
Twitter: @EdinUniMedia - #JamesTaitBlack

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