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Shortlists for UK's oldest literary prizes have a global reach

An international line-up of respected novelists forms the shortlist for Britain's oldest literary awards announced today (Monday 19 May).

Novels based around an 18th century English village; a family's response to a terminal illness; a young woman's obsession with motorcycles; and the daily toil of a shepherdess are contenders for this year's James Tait Black Prizes.

Works by American authors Kent Haruf and Rachel Kushner join the latest books by acclaimed British writer Jim Crace and Australian novelist Evie Wyld in the shortlist for the £10,000 fiction prize.

Contenders for the £10,000 biography prize include fascinating accounts of Joe Ranz and fellow members of the 1936 Olympic rowing team, Empress Dowager Cixi, who ruled China for almost half a century until 1908, Booker prize-winning novelist and biographer Penelope Fitzgerald; and an account of the biographer's aunt, a young woman in Nazi-occupied France.

Two prizes are awarded annually by the University of Edinburgh for books published during the previous year – one for the best work of fiction and the other for the best biography. The winners will be announced at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August.

The four novels competing for the fiction prize are: *Harvest* by Jim Crace ; *Benediction* by Kent Haruf ; *The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner; *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld.

The shortlisted works for the biography section are: *The Boys in the Boat: An Epic True-Life Journey to the Heart of Hitler's Berlin* by Daniel James Brown ; *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine who Launched Modern China* by Jung Chang ; *Penelope Fitzgerald: A life* by Hermione Lee; *Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France* by Nicholas Shakespeare.

The nominations have been chosen from more than 350 books worldwide by English Literature academics and 25 postgraduate students at the University.

The James Tait Black Awards, awarded annually by the University of Edinburgh's School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, were founded in 1919 by Janet Coats, the widow of publisher James Tait Black, to commemorate her husband's love of good books. Fiction judge Dr Lee Spinks of the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures said:

Ranked among the top universities in the world

“This is an exceptional short-list, showcasing four original prose stylists, each with a distinctive gift for narrative suspense and revelation. Any one of these four novels would be a worthy recipient of the James Tait Black Award for Fiction.”

Biography judge Professor Jonathan Wild of the School of Language, Literatures and Cultures said: “These biographies represent the cream of a truly remarkable year for writing in this field.”

The prizes are the only major British book awards judged by literature scholars and students. The James Tait Black prize for drama, announced earlier this month, was launched last year.

Past winners of the fiction awards include figures of global literary distinction, such as DH Lawrence, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, Angela Carter, Cormac McCarthy, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.

Last year, Oban-born author Alan Warner was the winner of the fiction prize for his book *The Deadman's Pedal*.

Tanya Harrod, co-editor of the *Journal of Modern Craft*, was the recipient of the biography prize for her book *The last Sane Man: Michael Cardew, Modern Pots, Colonialism and the Counterculture*.

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