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News Release

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Acclaimed writers win oldest book prizes with tales past and present

A biography that explores a pivotal year in William Shakespeare's life and a novel that charts an experiment in utopia in modern-day Detroit have won Britain's oldest literary awards.

Award-winning authors James Shapiro and Benjamin Markovits have joined the distinguished list of writers who have won the James Tait Black Prizes, which are awarded annually by The University of Edinburgh.

The winners of the £10,000 prizes were announced by broadcaster Sally Magnusson at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

The winner of the biography prize, *1606, William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* by James Shapiro (Faber and Faber), portrays how the events of 1606 shaped Shakespeare's writing in the tumultuous year of *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

James Shapiro is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and a leading authority on Shakespeare. The winning book is a sequel to *1599*, which followed another eventful year in the life of the Bard, who died 400 years ago this year.

The winning book in the fiction prize, *You Don't Have to Live Like this* (Faber and Faber) is set primarily in Detroit around the time of the financial crash and Barack Obama's election, in 2008.

It is the sixth novel by Benjamin Markovits, who was a professional basketball player before becoming a writer.

The author, journalist and critic who grew up in Texas, London, Oxford and Berlin, teaches Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London.

The James Tait Black Prizes are distinctive in the way that they are judged. Each year more than 400 novels are read by academics and postgraduate students from the University of Edinburgh who nominate books for the shortlist.

Two prizes are awarded annually by the University of Edinburgh's School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures for books published during the previous year – one for the best work of fiction and the other for the best biography.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

James Shapiro's book was chosen for the £10,000 biography prize from a shortlist that featured *The Blue Touch Paper: A Memoir* by David Hare (Faber and Faber); *Bloomsbury's Outsider: A Life of David Garnett* by Sarah Knights (Bloomsbury); *John Aubrey: My Own Life* by Ruth Scurr (Chatto and Windus).

Benjamin Markovits's novel topped a shortlist with three other writers competing for the £10,000 fiction prize that included: *Beatlebone* by Kevin Barry (Canongate); *The Wolf Border* by Sarah Hall (Faber and Faber); *The First Bad Man* by Miranda July (Canongate).

Biography judge Dr Jonathan Wild, of the University of Edinburgh, said of the winning entry: "Shapiro quite brilliantly interweaves the material found in the 1606 plays with the historical events of this momentous year, allowing us in the process new perspectives on familiar material. He is particularly deft in the ways that he writes about often arcane detail for a non-specialist readership. This is 'keyhole' biography at its very best and no reader could put this volume down without feeling enormously enlightened about Shakespeare's work and times."

Fiction Judge of the James Tait Black Prize Dr Alex Lawrie, of the University of Edinburgh, said of the winning book: "In this astonishing state-of-the-nation novel, Markovits deftly captures the racial and economic fault lines at the heart of a supposedly utopian experiment for urban renewal in 21st-century Detroit. *You Don't Have To Live Like This* forces us to re-examine our own prejudices and advantages, and the impact these have on our willingness to behave in an ethical and socially responsible manner."

The James Tait Black Awards were founded in 1919 by Janet Coats, the widow of publisher James Tait Black, to commemorate her husband's love of good books. This year's authors join the roll call of past fiction winners which includes Angela Carter, Graham Greene, DH Lawrence, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan, Muriel Spark and Evelyn Waugh.

Equally distinguished names appear on the list of biography winners, including Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Quentin Bell, John Buchan, Richard Ellmann, Kathryn Hughes, Hermione Lee, Lytton Strachey and Claire Tomalin.

In 2013 the prize was extended to include a new category for drama, which will be announced next week.

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For further details please go to: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/james-tait-black>

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