



## Press Release

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### Books dedicated to personal journeys join prizes' hall of fame

A memoir by a poet whose mother was a survivor of the Holocaust and a novel told entirely via the internal monologue of an Ohio mother of four have won the UK's longest-running literary awards.

Acclaimed writers George Szirtes and Lucy Ellmann join the illustrious list of authors who have won the James Tait Black Prizes, 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, which took place online this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

George Szirtes' winning book in the biography prize is a fascinating exploration of the life of his mother, Magda. *The Photographer at Sixteen: The Death and Life of a Fighter* (MacLehose Press) uses photographs and memories to trace her life, while introducing the reader to tales of suffering and survival.

Budapest-born George Szirtes came to the UK as a refugee in the 1950s. His poetry has received numerous accolades including the TS Eliot prize in 2004.

Lucy Ellmann's winning book in the fiction prize, *Ducks, Newburyport* (Galley Beggar Press), is a complex novel based around the ruminations of an Ohio housewife. Much of it is written in one sentence, beginning with, "The fact that..."

Award-winning author Lucy Ellmann is an American-born British novelist based in Edinburgh, Scotland. Previous accolades include the Goldsmiths Prize and a shortlisting for the Booker Prize.

George Szirtes, said: "I am delighted, grateful and astonished to be awarded the James Tait Black Prize, especially given such a marvellous short list. I am a poet and the book is written much as a poet would write it, not so much a straight story as a set of mysteries in reverse time order, starting from my mother's suicide in 1975, through concentration camps and refugee status, ending with a set of studio photographs of her early childhood in Transylvania. She died before she saw any of my books in print. *The Photographer at Sixteen* is an attempt to bring her to life."

Lucy Ellmann, said: "Amid the daily assaults on our lives and intelligence, it is really cheering to receive this prize. My father won the James Tait Black in 1982 (for his biography of James Joyce), so it feels like quite an Oedipal coup for me to get one! And I liked the international flavour of the shortlist. English literature exists and thrives way beyond the boundaries of England. If it didn't, there'd be little hope for it."

The prizes are for the best work of fiction and biography during the previous 12 months. They are the only major British book awards judged by literature scholars and students. Prizes are awarded by the University of Edinburgh's English Literature department, which is the oldest in the world.



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George Szirtes' book was chosen for the £10,000 biography prize from a shortlist that featured *What You Have Heard is True* by Carolyn Forché (Allen Lane); *Constellations: Reflections from Life* by Sinéad Gleeson (Picador); and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* by Saidiya Hartman (Serpent's Tail).

Lucy Ellmann's book topped a shortlist featuring three other writers, including: *Travellers* by Helon Habila (Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin); *Sudden Traveller* by Sarah Hall (Faber & Faber); and *Girl* by Edna O'Brien (Faber & Faber).

Biography judge Dr Simon Cooke said: "George Szirtes' reverse chronological portrait of the woman who was his mother is a piercingly beautiful memoir-as-prose-poem, as generous as it is scrupulous in its searching meditation on a death and life, on memory and history, and on how we imagine the lives of those we love."

Fiction judge Dr Ben Bateman, said: "Lucy Ellman's book is an experimental and encyclopedic account of one woman's worries large and small in Donald Trump's America. Ducks, Newburyport is the novel of our maddening moment."

The James Tait Black Prizes are distinctive in the way that they are judged. Each year two academic judges rely on the help of postgraduate student readers to critically assess the entries.

Each year around two dozen students divide the 400-plus entries between them, and employ their literary training to pass on their recommendations to the judges, who select the two shortlists and the eventual winners.

The James Tait Black Prizes have been presented by the University of Edinburgh every year since 1919. In 1918 Janet Tait Black née Coats, part of the renowned threadmaking family J & P Coats, made provision in her will for the creation of two book prizes, to be awarded annually in memory to her husband, James Tait Black.

In 2013, the awards were extended to include a new category for drama. Since 2017 the University has also been running a MOOC in partnership with Edinburgh International Book Festival. The free online course – called 'How to Read a Novel' – draws on the James Tait Black fiction shortlist, and has attracted more than 40,000 participants from across the globe.

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For further information on the Prizes go to: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/events/james-tait-black>

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