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Press Release

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Shortlist for UK's oldest book prizes shares journeys of discovery

A compelling collection of books exploring themes such as identity, belonging and the challenges of self-discovery form the shortlist of Britain's longest-running book awards.

Contenders for this year's James Tait Black Prizes – announced today (Tuesday, 4 May) – include a vivid short story collection, a coming of age journey, drama amid the climate emergency, and a trip back in time to the decadent interwar years.

The international shortlist features authors with links to America, Australia, England, Ireland, Mauritius, Scotland and Uganda, with stories transporting readers to New York, Haiti and a fictitious artistic town in central Europe.

The prizes are for the best work of fiction and biography published in the previous 12 months. The awards – presented by the University of Edinburgh since 1919 – are the only major British book prizes judged by literature scholars and students.

Nominees for the £10,000 fiction prize include a collection of short stories exploring the themes of identity and displacement in the context of a Syrian experience and a novel set in Uganda charting a young girl's journey to find her place in the world.

The other fiction nominees are a novel exploring the dark side of generational divides amid an environmental apocalypse and the story of a quest for self-discovery fueled by an infatuation with a forgotten Black modernist poet.

The four books shortlisted for the fiction prize are: *Alligator & Other Stories* (Picador) By Dima Alzayat; *The First Woman* (OneWorld) by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi; *A Children's Bible* (W.W. Norton) by Lydia Millet; and *Lote* (Jacaranda) by Shola von Reinhold.

The shortlist for the £10,000 biography prize includes a portrait of empire as told through the lives of a Native American, a Pacific Islander and the British artist who painted them both and a memoir of a woman who becomes obsessed with the life of 18th-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonail.

Also in the running is a biography of Toussaint Louverture, a former Haitian slave who led the only successful slave revolt in modern history, and an author's memoir describing her formation as a writer and as a feminist in 1980s San Francisco.

The four biographies shortlisted for the prize are: *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire* (Yale) by Kate Fullagar; *A Ghost in the Throat* (Tramp Press) by Doireann Ní Ghřiofa; *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (Allen Lane) by Sudhir Hazareesingh; and *Recollections of My Non-Existence* (Granta) by Rebecca Solnit.

The winners of both prizes will be announced in August at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, which will take place from its new home at the University's Edinburgh College of Art. The Book Festival's full programme of events will be announced at the end of June.

Fiction judge, Dr Benjamin Bateman said: "These books represent the very best qualities of global anglophone literature—epic, experimental, and engaged with pressing concerns both political and planetary."

Biography judge, Dr Simon Cooke said: "These bold, generous, and radiant books expand the reach of life-writing in exhilarating ways: alive to the stakes of shaping life through form and voice, each is uniquely and profoundly attuned to powerful resonances between individual lives and other lives, other places, other times."

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 shortlisted works and to determine the eventual winner.

The James Tait Black Prizes began celebrating books more than a century ago after 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.

Since 2017 the University has also been running a free online course in partnership with Edinburgh International Book Festival to offer readers the chance to engage with judges and other readers on the shortlisted fiction books.

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) – called 'How to Read a Novel' – draws on the James Tait Black fiction shortlist and has attracted more than 52,000 participants from across the globe.

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

Twitter: @EdinburghUni #JamesTaitBlack

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