



The University of Edinburgh

News Release

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Debut novelist and best-selling writer scoop oldest book awards

A novel that intertwines global finance, politics and personal relationships, and a biography that offers a portrait of working-class family life have tonight (Monday, 17 August) won Britain's oldest literary awards.

Debut novelist Zia Haider Rahman and author, journalist and critic Richard Benson have joined the distinguished list of writers who have won the James Tait Black Prizes.

DH Lawrence, Graham Greene, Angela Carter and Ian McEwan are among the past winners of the prizes – which have been awarded annually by the University of Edinburgh since 1919.

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

The winning book in the fiction prize, *In the Light of What We Know* (Picador) by Zia Haider Rahman, was released in the spring of 2014 to international critical acclaim.

Born in rural Bangladesh, the author was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and at Cambridge, Munich, and Yale Universities.

The winner of the biography prize, *The Valley: A Hundred Years in the Life of a Yorkshire Family* by Richard Benson (Bloomsbury), was highly praised when it was published in April 2014.

Richard Benson, author of number one bestseller *The Farm* and a former editor of *The Face* magazine, was educated at King's College, London. He grew up on a small farm in Yorkshire and his winning book was a biographical study of his own family.

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 who nominate books for the shortlist.

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.

One of the top universities in the world

In the Light of What We Know topped a shortlist that included three other novels: *Dear Thief* by Samantha Harvey (Jonathan Cape); *Fourth of July Creek* by Smith Henderson (William Heinemann); and *We Are Not Ourselves* by Matthew Thomas (Fourth Estate).

The Valley: A Hundred Years in the Life of a Yorkshire Family was chosen from a shortlist that featured *In Plain Sight: The Life and Lies of Jimmy Savile* by Dan Davies (Quercus); *Eleanor Marx: A Life* by Rachel Holmes (Bloomsbury); and *Other People's Countries: A Journey into Memory* by Patrick McGuinness (Jonathan Cape).

Chairman of the James Tait Black Prize for fiction Professor Randall Stevenson, of the University of Edinburgh, said of winning fiction entry: "Zia Haider Rahman addresses a whole range of issues – the war in Afghanistan, the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and the banking crisis.

"Moreover, he also explores problematic areas of politics and finance, which are often exiled from the pages of fiction, immersing his readers, dauntingly but comprehensibly. The novel's impressive scope is complemented by Rahman's ability to locate the personal in the political."

Biography judge Dr Jonathan Wild, of the University of Edinburgh, said of the winning biography: "Richard Benson's book represents a remarkable reclamation of a once prevalent social group now almost entirely gone.

"Richard Benson draws upon the history of his family to bring back to life the sort of mining community that once populated large swaths of the British landscape. He does this with an uncanny eye for details that allows his forebears to spring off the page and into life."

Rosie Nolan, a lead student reader on the judging panel, and postgraduate Literature student at the University of Edinburgh, said: "The involvement of postgraduate students in the judging process is one of the reasons that the James Tait Black prize has retained its prestige and integrity over so many years.

"As a student judge, bringing to recognition worthy works of literature restores a sense of how important it is for us all to tell our stories, whether fictional or factual, and have them heard. It is a true privilege to be involved."

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.

In 2013 the prize was extended to include a new category for drama.

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

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