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David Cohen Prize for Literature: 2017 judges announced

The David Cohen Prize for Literature is proud to announce the judges for 2017. Now in its 25th year, the prize is singular in its approach: it is awarded every two years in recognition of a living writer's lifetime achievement in literature, and has consequently earned its position in the literary canon as the "UK Nobel for literature".

The winner of the prize is nominated and selected by a panel of judges comprising authors, literary critics and academics. Their identity may now be revealed. Under the chair's eye of Mark Lawson, the judges are: Kate Bassett, Gillian Clarke, Professor Simon J. James, Alan Johnson, Denise Mina and Anita Sethi. They met together for the first time on 18th May. Managed by New Writing North, the award will be announced in London on 8 November 2017.

Comments from the judges include:

Alan Johnson: "I'm honoured to be asked to judge this prestigious award. Some of the greatest names in British and Irish literature have been recognised through the David Cohen Prize but there are so many writers to honour and so few generic awards to be made. It will be fun to have a role in determining the latest recipient."

Professor Simon James: "Many literary prizes give the opportunity to make a judgement on the quality of a single work; the David Cohen prize, unusually, allows the opportunity to recognise, and applaud a lifetime's work. Most professors of literature evaluate writing from the past - it is very exciting to be able to celebrate the work of a living writer, and I am delighted to be involved in this year's prize."

Anita Sethi: "I'm delighted to be a Judge for the David Cohen Prize for Literature 2017 which has a prestigious history of honouring some fantastic writers including Doris Lessing, Hilary Mantel, VS Naipaul and Harold Pinter. As someone with a lifelong love of literature, I'm looking forward to discussing the work of our greatest living writers with my fellow judges. Recognising a lifetime's achievement in literature is also a recognition of the vital role that literature plays in our world in fostering empathy, imagination and an appreciation of the power of storytelling. Literature has the power to change lives, for both the writer and the reader."

Established in 1993, the David Cohen Prize for Literature is one of the UK's most distinguished literary prizes. It recognises writers who use the English language and are citizens of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, encompassing dramatists, as well as novelists, poets and essayists. Former winners include V S Naipaul, Harold Pinter, William Trevor, Doris Lessing, Seamus Heaney, Hilary Mantel and, most recently in 2015, Tony Harrison.

The biennial prize, of £40,000, is for a lifetime's achievement and is donated by the John S Cohen Foundation. Established in 1965 by David Cohen and his family, the trust supports education, the arts, conservation and the environment.

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Judges' biographies

Kate Bassett is the Literary Associate at Chichester Festival Theatre, a freelance script consultant and dramaturg, an author and an academic. She has been a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Reading and is currently a Visiting Research Fellow there. As an arts journalist and former theatre critic, she has written for *The Times*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *TLS*. She has hosted platform talks at the Barbican, the National Theatre, the British Library and elsewhere, and has served on judging panels for awards including the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and Verity Bargate Award – twice chairing the Edinburgh Comedy Awards. Her book *In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller* (published by Oberon Books) was shortlisted for the HW Fisher Best First Biography Prize, the Theatre Book Prize and the Sheridan Morley Prize for Theatre Biography.

Gillian Clarke was the National Poet of Wales 2008-2016. She was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 2010 and the Wilfred Owen Award 2012. Her books include *At the Source: A Writers Year* (prose); her tenth collection of poems, *Ice*, was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Award 2012, *The Gathering*, a poem-sequence for The National Theatre of Wales performed on Snowdon 2014. A new collection, *Zoology*, is published in 2017.

Simon J. James is a Professor and the Head of Department at English Studies, Durham University. He is an expert on British literary culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and has published on H. G. Wells, George Gissing and the Victorian bestseller. He is currently editing Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and writing a book on Charles Dickens and memory. He is the academic curator of the exhibition *Time Machines: The Past, the Future, and How Stories Take Us There*.

Alan Johnson was born in May 1950. He is a British Labour Party politician who served as Home Secretary from June 2009 to May 2010. Before that he filled a wide variety of cabinet positions in both the Blair and Brown governments, including Health Secretary and Education Secretary. Until 20 January 2011 he was Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer. Johnson has been the Member of Parliament for Hull West and Hessle since 1997.

His first book, *This Boy*, won the RSL Ondaatje prize and the Orwell Prize in 2013. His second, *Please Mister Postman*, won the National Book Award for Autobiography of the Year in 2014. His latest book is *The Long and Winding Road* (2016).

Denise Mina left school early, after a peripatetic childhood in Glasgow, Paris, London, Invergordon, Bergen and Perth. She worked in a number of dead end jobs, all of them badly, before studying at night school to get into Glasgow University Law School.

Denise went on to study for a PhD at Strathclyde, misusing her student grant to write her first novel. This was *Garnethill*, published in 1998, which won the Crime Writers Association John Creasy Dagger for Best First Crime Novel.

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She has now published 12 novels and also writes short stories, plays and graphic novels. In 2014 she was inducted into the Crime Writers' Association Hall of Fame. Denise presents TV and radio programmes as well as regularly appearing in the media, and has made a film about her own family.

She regularly appears at literary festivals in the UK and abroad, leads masterclasses on writing and was a judge for the Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction 2014.

Anita Sethi is an award-winning journalist, critic and writer who has written for the Guardian and Observer, Sunday Times, Independent, Telegraph, New Statesman, Granta, and Times Literary Supplement, among others. In broadcasting she has appeared as a critic and commentator on several BBC programmes and is a regular speaker and chair at festivals in the UK and around the world. She has interviewed authors including Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, Louis de Bernières, and Ian Rankin. Her short stories and essays have been published in several anthologies. She was born in Manchester, UK.

Previous winners of the David Cohen Prize for Literature:

- 1993 V S Naipaul
- 1995 Harold Pinter
- 1997 Muriel Spark
- 1999 William Trevor
- 2001 Doris Lessing
- 2003 Beryl Bainbridge and Thom Gunn (joint winners)
- 2005 Michael Holroyd
- 2007 Derek Mahon
- 2009 Seamus Heaney
- 2011 Julian Barnes
- 2013 Hilary Mantel
- 2015 Tony Harrison

About New Writing North:

New Writing North is the literature development agency for the North of England, and is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation www.newwritingnorth.com. It works in partnership with regional and national partners to produce a range of literary and performance activities including flagship projects such as the David Cohen Prize for Literature, the Northern Writers' Awards, Cuckoo Young Writers, the Gordon Burn Prize and Durham Book Festival.

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