

GORDON BURN PRIZE

Press release: strictly embargoed until 9.45pm Thursday 15 October

Peter Pomerantsev wins the Gordon Burn Prize 2020

This Is Not Propaganda by Peter Pomerantsev has won the Gordon Burn Prize 2020. The literary prize is open to books from the UK, Ireland and the USA and recognises the year's boldest, most ambitious and uncompromising work.

The Gordon Burn Prize was announced on Thursday 15 October in a digital event streamed as part of Durham Book Festival, a Durham County Council event. The prize was judged by the writers Anthony Anaxagorou and Richard T. Kelly, artist Rachel Howard and journalist and broadcaster Sali Hughes, who presented at the event.

Four years on from his stunning debut, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, Peter Pomerantsev's *This Is Not Propaganda* is a compelling, insightful and disturbing book about our ever-shifting world.

Mixing case studies, analysis and family history, Peter Pomerantsev broadens his scope outwards from Moscow and London to a more global canvas, as he looks at the origins and spiralling problems of the disinformation age. Timely and important, it confirms Pomerantsev as one of our most stylish, dexterous and important new non-fiction writers.

Peter Pomerantsev is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at London School of Economics, studying twenty-first-century information manipulation and how to fix it. An author and TV producer, he is a widely cited expert on disinformation and media. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* won the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize 2016 and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize 2015.

The Gordon Burn Prize was founded in 2012 and is run in partnership by the Gordon Burn Trust, New Writing North, Faber & Faber and Durham Book Festival. The prize seeks to celebrate those who follow in the footsteps of the groundbreaking author Gordon Burn, who died in 2009 and whose work includes *Happy Like Murderers*, *Alma Cogan* and *Born Yesterday*.

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Eight years on from the prize's inception, it has become one of the most highly anticipated prizes on the literary landscape. Previous winners include *For the Good Times*, David Keenan (2019); *Census*, Jesse Ball (2018); and *The Long Drop*, Denise Mina (2017).

Through both fiction and non-fiction, the 2020 shortlist took the reader on an unflinching journey through race, sexuality and class, probing into some of our most complex relationships, most troubling politics and profoundest sources of identity as it ranged from global power play to the broken care system.

Awarding the prize, Sali Hughes said of the shortlist: "We ended up with a shortlist that we all felt was a really remarkable one. We all had a number of books, individually, that we were really excited about, that we were ready to go out to bat for, but in the end I think we all agreed that it wasn't enough just to be a terrific read – because they were all terrific reads on the shortlist – but what the winner also had to do was encapsulate the spirit and the ethos of the Gordon Burn Prize and of the man himself. We agreed unanimously that there was one book that absolutely did that, as well as being a remarkable book in its own right."

Speaking about the winning title, *This Is Not Propaganda*, Sali said: "I thought it would make me panic, I thought it would make me stressed. But actually, I felt as though somebody had opened a window and I felt like I could breathe again."

Fellow judge Richard T. Kelly said: "In *This Is Not Propaganda* Peter Pomerantsev trains a properly keen writer's eye on some of the burning themes of our age, and in the style of genuinely creative nonfiction, telling true stories with artistry – as was Gordon Burn's special gift. Readers can trust Pomerantsev to dig out the truthful account that lies deeper than the hot takes and conspiracy theories we're otherwise bedevilled by. We're all going to benefit by hearing more of his trenchant voice in the times ahead."

On receiving the prize, Peter Pomerantsev thanked his parents, whose story is at the heart of the book. "I recommend it to anybody who has the chance: go and interview your parents. As I interviewed them, as I sat with them for a long time, they suddenly became people to me and at the age of 43 I realised that parents are actually people with their own life stories."

In his acceptance speech for the Gordon Burn Prize 2020, Peter Pomerantsev said: "We live in an age of impunity where regimes can carry out heinous deeds and

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people just don't react. There's always been heinous things going on, but now we have more information than ever before, granular day-by-day filming of crimes against humanity. And it's almost like the more information there is, the less our reaction. Apart from that being wrong on so many levels, it's also very dangerous because that impunity will grow, and that cavern will expand and pull more and more people into it.

So, what can books do for this kind of thing? The only thing they can do – and it's a small thing, but maybe it's an important thing – is to bring people's attention to it. But that's easy to say and the reason why the Gordon Burn Prize is so important is that in order to bring people's attention, when people become so calcified, so surrounded by a surfeit of information, you have to be quite experimental. You have to find new ways of opening people up to the world. It is important to have places like the Gordon Burn Prize, which encourage you to experiment and to find new ways of trying to talk about the truth."

Cllr Joy Allen, Durham County Council's Cabinet member for transformation, culture and tourism, said: "The reporting of accurate information is incredibly important, especially now as the world navigates its way through the unprecedented challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. Peter Pomerantsev's book is highly relevant and a worthy winner of this year's Gordon Burn Prize. We are proud to host this prestigious competition as part of Durham Book Festival, which is not only spreading the joy of reading but shining a spotlight on what a fantastic place our county is."

Peter Pomerantsev receives £5,000 and the opportunity to take a writing retreat at Gordon Burn's cottage in the Scottish Borders.

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For all media enquiries, including high-res images and interview requests, please contact Laura Fraine, Senior Marketing and Communications Manager, New Writing North, laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com, 0191 204 8850.

NOTES TO EDITORS

The Gordon Burn Prize celebrates both fiction and non-fiction from the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States of America. The winner of the Gordon Burn

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Prize will receive £5,000 and the chance to spend a month's retreat at Gordon Burn's cottage in the Scottish Borders.

Durham Book Festival is a Durham County Council event produced by New Writing North with funding from Durham University and Arts Council England and support from BBC Newcastle.

The shortlist for the Gordon Burn Prize 2020, announced on 23 July 2020, is:

Jenn Ashworth, *Notes Made While Falling* (Goldsmiths Press)
Paul Mendez, *Rainbow Milk* (Dialogue Books)
Deborah Orr, *Motherwell* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson)
Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda* (Faber & Faber)
Lemn Sissay, *My Name Is Why* (Canongate)
Lisa Taddeo, *Three Women* (Bloomsbury)

The longlist for the Gordon Burn Prize 2020, announced on 17 June 2020, is:

Jenn Ashworth, *Notes Made While Falling* (Goldsmiths Press)
Luke Brown, *Theft* (And Other Stories)
Garth Greenwell, *Cleanness* (Picador)
Kirstin Innes, *Scabby Queen* (4th Estate)
Mark Lanegan, *Sing Backwards and Weep* (White Rabbit)
Casey Legler, *Godspeed* (Scribe)
Paul Mendez, *Rainbow Milk* (Dialogue)
Jenny Offill, *Weather* (Granta)
Deborah Orr, *Motherwell* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson)
Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda* (Faber & Faber)
Lemn Sissay, *My Name Is Why* (Canongate)
Lisa Taddeo, *Three Women* (Bloomsbury)

Previous winners of the Gordon Burn Prize

2019: *For the Good Times*, David Keenan
2018: *Census*, Jesse Ball
2017: *The Long Drop*, Denise Mina
2016: *All That Man Is*, David Szalay
2015: *In Plain Sight: The Life and Lies of Jimmy Savile*, Dan Davies

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2014: *The Wake*, Paul Kingsnorth

2013: *Pig Iron*, Benjamin Myers

Shortlisted author biographies

Jenn Ashworth

Jenn Ashworth was born in Preston and studied at Cambridge and Manchester. She is the author of the novels *A Kind of Intimacy*, *Cold Light*, *The Friday Gospels* and *Fell*. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2018. Her latest book, *Notes Made While Falling*, is a memoir told in a series of essays, published by Goldsmiths Press. She lectures in creative writing at Lancaster University.

Paul Mendez

Paul Mendez was born and raised in the Black Country. He now lives in London and is studying for an MA in Black British Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has been a performing member of two theatre companies and worked as a voice actor. As a writer, he has contributed to the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Brixton Review of Books*. *Rainbow Milk* is his debut novel.

Deborah Orr

Deborah Orr was an award-winning journalist whose work regularly appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Sunday Times* and in many magazines. She was the first female editor of the *Guardian's Weekend* magazine, at the age of thirty. Deborah was a co-creator of *Enquirer*, a play commissioned by the National Theatre of Scotland and shortlisted for New Play of the Year at the Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland.

Peter Pomerantsev

Peter Pomerantsev is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics, studying twenty-first-century information manipulation and how to fix it. An author and TV producer, he is a widely cited expert on disinformation and media, and writes for publications including *Granta*, *The Atlantic*, the *Financial Times* and many others. His first book, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, won the 2016 Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize.

Lemn Sissay

Lemn Sissay is a BAFTA-nominated, award-winning international writer and broadcaster. He has authored collections of poetry and plays. He has been made an honorary doctor by the universities of Manchester, Kent, Huddersfield and Brunel.

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Sissay was awarded an MBE for services to literature and, in 2019, he was awarded the PEN Pinter Prize. He is Chancellor of the University of Manchester.

Lisa Taddeo

Lisa Taddeo spent eight years and thousands of hours tracking the women whose stories comprise *Three Women*, moving to the towns they lived in to better understand their lives. She has contributed to *New York* magazine, *Esquire*, *Elle*, *Glamour* and many other publications. Her short stories have won two Pushcart prizes. She lives with her husband and daughter in New England.