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David Cohen Prize for Literature 2021: COLM TÓIBÍN awarded prestigious prize

New Writing North is delighted to announce the winner of the 2021 **David Cohen Prize for Literature**. Unveiled this evening in the splendid surroundings of the Royal Institute of British Architects, London, and streamed live, the prize was awarded to an Irish writer who has thrilled readers for decades, with a huge and devoted following:

Colm Tóibín

Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in 1955. He started writing at the age of 12, and has drawn admiration from countless readers: his deep pleasure in writing is evident and is fêted by readers and viewers across the world. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages, his output includes ten novels and eleven works of non-fiction, as well as poetry, short story and essay collections, and journalism. His novel, *Brooklyn*, was adapted for film in 2016. His most recent novel, *The Magician*, published in September 2021, reaffirmed his position as “one of our greatest living novelists” (The i).

Now it is with pleasure and recognition that the David Cohen Prize for Literature is awarded to him.

Hermione Lee, chair of judges, said: “Chairing the David Cohen Prize-judging for the first time has been an enormous pleasure and exciting privilege for me. Colm Tóibín was our unanimous choice and we’re all proud and delighted to be giving him the prize. I think of him as a Renaissance man who can do almost everything with equal brilliance: he’s a novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, travel-writer, critic, teacher, journalist and activist for gay rights. His novels and stories imagine their way into the lives and minds of others with amazing empathy and skill. He’s a deeply perceptive writer who can also be lethally funny and daringly erotic. He’s a truly international figure, and a watchful historian of our times. He’s a beautiful writer of loss and grief, silence and quietness. He writes with the intensity of a poet and the lyric rhythms of a musician. I have never missed a book by him and every book of his I’ve read has been a revelation. He’s one of the essential writers of our times.”

Colm Tóibín said: “When I attended the inaugural reception for the David Cohen Prize in London in 1993, I did not imagine for a moment that my own writing would ever be honoured in this way. Those who have won the Prize in the past are artists whose work I revere. I am proud to be among them.”

The **David Cohen Prize for Literature** holds a unique and invaluable position: it is the only prize that is awarded for the whole body of work, not just for one book, one solo spark of genius. The prize is awarded every two years in recognition of a living writer’s lifetime ...

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achievement in literature, and has earned its position in the literary canon as the “UK and Ireland Nobel in literature”. Previous winners who went on to win the Nobel proper are Harold Pinter, V S Naipaul, Doris Lessing and Seamus Heaney.

Colm Tóibín was awarded at the prize by a panel of judges chaired by Hermione Lee. They were: Reeta Chakrabarti, Maureen Dooley, Peter Kemp and Professor Susheila Nasta FRSL MBE.

Reeta Chakrabarti said: “To be a judge for the David Cohen Prize is to run not a sprint but a marathon. Over ten months, our panel of five read around 80 books by the UK and Ireland’s most accomplished writers, studying their life’s work, following their progression through the decades, and assessing their ability to develop and sustain their craft. Our outstanding winner – Colm Tóibín – is quite simply a class act in a highly competitive and talented field. He is a natural novelist, a writer of tremendous subtlety, simplicity and intelligence. His novels are rooted in time and place. He brings together seamlessly big public themes of politics and history with the personal struggles of individuals. He is fascinated by ambiguous characters, and writes of them in beautiful, spare prose. I have made many happy discoveries on this literary marathon, but none has given me more sustained pleasure than the writing of Colm Tóibín. I am thrilled that he has won.”

Maura Dooley said: “The experience of reading Colm Tóibín often feels to me like an old friend drawing close to tell me a story. Whatever the form, whether it is criticism, essay, poetry or fiction, Tóibín’s distinctive voice crystallises in a register so compelling, intimate and engrossing that all awareness of his technical accomplishment is masked. He casts a spell. He is himself ‘A Magician’.

Yet those technical skills are extraordinary. This is a writer just as at home writing poetry, or for the stage, as he is, with subtlety and grace, creating character and narrative voice in his fiction. His personal essays are of wit and substance, and he has made brilliantly vivid, tender, presences of Henry James and Thomas Mann. His remarkable insight, careful attention and nuanced reading of the human condition is never clearer than when he is writing about women, from the Virgin Mary or Clytemnestra to his own Nora Webster. Tóibín’s work steps across countries, sexualities, and gender; he examines silence and writes with the greatest sensitivity of how it is to be alive. Colm Tóibín is a writer of dazzling gifts who, over decades now, has brought the interior lives of his characters to life with kindness, insight and precision.”

Peter Kemp said: “The 2021 David Cohen Prize has gone to a writer of impressively wide range and outstandingly high accomplishment. The author of ten novels, two collections of short stories, three travel books and various collections of essays, Colm Tóibín is a writer of both exceptional versatility and steady consistency. With intense immediacy and piercing lucidity, his fiction – especially his masterpiece Brooklyn - explores persisting themes such as ways in which home life can support or entrap, uprootings can disturb or vitalise. Relationships between writers and their families, most recently to the fore in his masterly

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novel about Thomas Mann, *The Magician*, are a recurrent concern too in non-fiction works such as his brilliantly perceptive survey of James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and their fathers. Ireland, exile, gay life and creativity, politics, and travel are also subjects to which his novels and his other writings have brought unfailingly illuminating intelligence and literary flair. It was with happy unanimity that we judges awarded the prize to a writer who is a man of letters in the finest and fullest sense.”

Susheila Nasta said: “The more one reads Colm Tóibín, the more his imaginative universe resonates like a haunting piece of music. From the intimate portraits of his Enniscorthy fictions, set in an Ireland riven by conflict and change, to the wider historical and cultural compass of his fictional biographies, a sustained emotional integrity exposes the conflicts of his characters’ lives. One of the privileges of judging the David Cohen Prize is the opportunity it offers to read across a whole writing life. Already well known for his pioneering chronicling of gay sexualities and critique of narrow Irish nationalisms, the depth of Tóibín’s empathetic engagement with the full arc of human experience continues to amaze. Above all, his work compels us to recognise the vital power of writing as vehicle for interrogation and change.”

Established in 1992 and first awarded 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, Tony Harrison, Julian Barnes, Tom Stoppard and, most recently in 2019, Edna O’Brien.

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. David Cohen died in August 2019 and the family remains very involved.

Having received the David Cohen Prize, Colm Tóibín went on to award the **Clarissa Luard Award** to **Padraig Regan**. The Clarissa Luard Award was founded in 2005 by Arts Council England, in memory of a much-loved literature officer, Clarissa Luard. The award is worth £10,000 and the winner of the David Cohen Prize for Literature in turn nominates an emerging writer whose work they wish to support.

Padraig Regan is the author of two pamphlets, *Who Seemed Alive & Altogether Real* (Emma Press, 2017) and *Delicious* (Lifeboat, 2016). In 2015, they were a recipient of an Eric Gregory Award, and in 2020 they were awarded the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary Prize. They hold a PhD from the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen’s University Belfast, where they are currently one of the Ciaran Carson Writing and the City Fellows for 2021. Their first book *Some Integrity* will be published by Carcanet in January 2022.

Padraig Regan said: “I am honoured to be selected as the recipient of this year’s Clarissa...
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Luard Award, and deeply grateful to Colm Tóibín for nominating me. To have one's work recognised by a writer one admires is always encouraging, and this is especially true of a writer like Colm, whose body of work has made it easier for younger queer writers like myself to find their place within Irish literary traditions."

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Notes for editors:

Chair's and Judges' biographies

Hermione Lee is a biographer, critic and Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of Oxford. She has taught at the universities of Liverpool and York, and from 1998 to 2008 she was the Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford. From 2008 to 2017 she was the President of Wolfson College, Oxford, and founder and director of the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing at Wolfson College. Her work includes biographies of *Virginia Woolf* (1996), *Edith Wharton* (2006) and *Penelope Fitzgerald* (2013, winner of the 2014 James Tait Black Prize for Biography and one of the New York Times best 10 books of 2014). She has also written books on Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Roth and Willa Cather. She has published a number of books about life-writing: *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* in 2005, a "Very Short Introduction" to *Biography* in 2009, and, in 2020, a co-edited collection, *Lives of Houses*. Her biography of Tom Stoppard was published in October 2020. She is a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature, and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2013 she was made a Dame for services to literary scholarship.

She has judged a number of literary prizes, including the Booker (twice), the Hawthornden Prize (for twelve years), the W.H. Smith award, the Guardian First Book prize, and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. She was a judge for the David Cohen prize in 1999 when it was awarded to William Trevor.

Reeta Chakrabarti is a BBC News presenter and correspondent. She presents the *One, Six, and Ten O'Clock News* on BBC1, and presents on the BBC News Channel. She also reports at home and abroad.

Reeta started out as a producer on BBC Radio 4, working on the *Today* programme, the *World at One* and *PM* before becoming a reporter on Radio 5Live *Breakfast*. She later became a general News Correspondent for television and radio, and then BBC Community Affairs Correspondent; covering the Stephen Lawrence inquest and Public Inquiry.

From 1999, she became a Political Correspondent for the BBC. She spent a decade at Westminster and covered three General Elections. In 2010, she became Education Correspondent and reported on the trebling of university tuition fees in England, and the introduction of free schools. She has covered a range of international stories, including in 2017 and 2018 the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. She also reported twice from a rescue ship in the Mediterranean during the European migrant crisis of 2016/17. Reeta has covered international social issues such as attitudes to abortion in Chile and in Poland, the rise of female executives in India, and the trafficking of young women from Albania. She also reported in the summer of 2017 from Lahore and Amritsar on the 70th anniversary of independence in Pakistan and India.

In the 2019 General Election, Reeta was one of the key number crunchers in the BBC Studio, analysing the results as they came in.

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Reeta is a graduate in English and French from Exeter College, Oxford. In 2018, she was made an Honorary Fellow of the College. In 2020 she became Chancellor of York St John University.

Maura Dooley was a Centre Director of the Arvon Foundation, founding Director of the Literature and Talks programme at the South Bank Centre, worked for Jim Henson Film in script development and, in theatre, for Performing Arts Labs. She re-established and directed Poetry International in the UK after a 30-year absence. She is Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London where she established and directs the MA in Creative Writing. She has served as judge for many literary awards, including the T S Eliot and Eric Gregory Awards, the John Llewellyn Rhys, the Forward and the Piggott Prize. She chaired the Poetry Book Society and for ten years was a trustee of the Royal Literary Fund.

Maura Dooley's most recent book (with Elhum Shakerifar) is translation into English of the poetry of the Iranian writer Azita Ghahreman, *Negative of a Group Photograph*. *The Silvering* is her own most recent collection. She has twice been short-listed for the TS Eliot Prize and twice for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem. Her work has received an Eric Gregory Award and a Cholmondeley Award and she is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Peter Kemp is the Chief Fiction Reviewer for the *Sunday Times*, a position he has held since 1991. He was also Fiction Editor of the *Sunday Times* from 1994 to 2010 and theatre reviewer for the *Independent* from its launch in 1987 to 1991. He lectures widely, is a frequent speaker at literary festivals, and often broadcasts for the BBC, having contributed most regularly to Radio 4's art programmes, *Open Book*, *Front Row* and *Saturday Review*.

He has been a judge for various literary awards, including the Booker Prize, the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award, the Betty Trask Award, the Geoffrey Faber Prize for fiction, the Encore Award, the Society of Authors' European Literature Prize, and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. He is a Patron of the Oxford Literary Festival and a member of the Booker Advisory Committee. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, on whose Council he has also served. He has been a Visiting Fellow of Kellogg College, Oxford, since 1995.

His publications include *Muriel Spark* (Elek, 1974), *H.G. Wells and the Culminating Ape* (Macmillan, 1982, revised and expanded 1996), and *Edith Wharton* (BBC, 1994). He is currently writing a critical study of fiction in English since 1970 for Faber and Faber.

Susheila Nasta MBE is Honorary Fellow of the RSL and Founder of *Wasafiri*, the magazine of international contemporary writing she launched in 1984. A writer, critic and literary activist, she is Professor of Contemporary and Modern Literatures at Queen Mary University of London. Recent books include *Brave New Words: The Power of Writing Now* (2019) and the first *Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2020). She is currently working on a group biography, *The Bloomsbury Indians*. Passionately committed to public engagement and to extending the boundaries of literary culture, she was awarded an MBE in 2011 and the 2019 Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature for a lifetime's achievement.

About the winner:

Colm Tóibín/ List of Works

Fiction

The South 1990

The Heather Blazing 1992

The Story of the Night, 1996

The Blackwater Lightship, 1999

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The Master, 2004
Brooklyn, 2009
The Testament of Mary, 2012
Nora Webster, 2014
House of Names, 2017
The Magician, 2021

Short story collections

Mothers and Sons, 2006
The Empty Family, 2010

Essay collections

Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar, 2002

Poetry

Cush Gap, 2007

Non-fiction

Walking Along the Border, 1987 (republished as Bad Blood, 1994)
Martyrs and Metaphors, 1987
Homage to Barcelona, 1990
Dubliners, 1990
The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe, 1994
Lady Gregory's Toothbrush, 2002
The Use of Reason, 2006
Sean Scully: Walls of Aran, 2007
A Guest at the Feast, 2011
New Ways to Kill Your Mother, 2012
On Elizabeth Bishop, 2015
Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce, 2018

Plays

Beauty in a Broken Place, 2008
Pale Sister, 2019

Colm Tóibín/ List of Awards

1993: Encore Award for Second Novel for *The Heather Blazing*
2004: Los Angeles Times Novel of the Year for *The Master*
2004: Stonewall Book Award for *The Master*
2004: Lambda Literary Award for *The Master*
2006: International Dublin Literary Award for *The Master*
2007: Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature
2009: Costa Novel Award for *Brooklyn*
2011: Irish PEN Award for Contribution to Irish Literature

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2015: Hawthornden Prize for *Nora Webster*

2017: The Dayton Literary Peace Prize Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award

2017: The Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement

2019: Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award in Irish Literature

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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
- 2017 Tom Stoppard
- 2019 Edna O'Brien

Quotes from previous winners on the David Cohen Prize for Literature:

Julian Barnes (2011)

"A literary prize is only as good as its list of winners. When I was awarded the David Cohen in 2011, I looked at my predecessors and thought, Yes, this really is the best literary prize in Britain. And it remains so."

Hilary Mantel (2013)

"A writing life is made up of trial and error, and necessary failure on the way to success. In recognising 'lifetime achievement,' the David Cohen Prize bows to that reality, as one-off awards do not, so embracing the whole of a writer's efforts. What pleases me particularly is that the prize looks to the future, allowing the winner - through the Clarissa Luard award - to help a writer who is still building a career. The award spurred me on, as well. It made me want to say, 'I can do more'."

Tom Stoppard (2017)

"The David Cohen Prize is awarded without a lot of hoopla but over the years it has come to be acknowledged as perhaps the highest accolade accorded to writers in this country."

Edna O'Brien (2019)

"The David Cohen Prize has a glowing pedigree and the winners are writers whose reputations remain undimmed. I felt so lucky to be included in that galaxy. In an age saturated with self promotional and shallow "entertainments" of every kind, real literature is more imperilled."

About New Writing North:

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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 activities including flagship projects such as the David Cohen Prize for Literature, the Northern Writers' Awards, Young Writers, the Gordon Burn Prize and Durham Book Festival.

Social media and online:

www.newwritingnorth.com . @NewWritingNorth . #DavidCohenPrize . #CareerWorthReading



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