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## David Cohen Prize for Literature 2017: TOM STOPPARD awarded prestigious prize

New Writing North is delighted to announce the winner of the 2017 **David Cohen Prize for Literature**. Unveiled tonight in the splendid surroundings of BAFTA, London, the prize was awarded to a man who is arguably our greatest living playwright:

### Sir Tom Stoppard OM CBE FRSL

Now in its 25th year, the David Cohen 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 and Ireland Nobel in literature".

**Sir Tom Stoppard**, playwright and screenwriter, has dedicated his lifetime to his writing, to immeasurable effect. No stranger to prizes, his work has been recognised on countless occasions: accolades include five Tony Awards for Best Play, The Critics' Circle Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts, America Award in Literature, seven *Evening Standard* Awards. There are many, many more. He was made a CBE in 1978, a KBE in 1997, and awarded the Order of Merit in 2000.

Tom Stoppard was born Tomáš Strausler on 3 July 1937 in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. At the age of 29, Stoppard was the youngest dramatist ever to have a play performed at the National Theatre (based at that time at the Old Vic), with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a play that was revived at the NT on its 50th anniversary earlier this year. This launched a career that would see him rise to his position as one of the most acclaimed playwrights of the modern age, with works such as *Arcadia*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, *Professional Foul* and *The Real Thing*.

Stoppard has written prolifically for TV, radio, film and stage, and across countless topics: from metaphysics and quantum mechanics to moral philosophy and moon landings, the pain of adultery and the excitement of love, linguistics and philosophy. He has also written passionately across human rights, censorship and political freedom. It is this extraordinary range of writing and quality of work throughout his literary career that made him a overwhelming choice for the judges.

The winner of the prize was nominated and selected by a panel of judges under the chair Mark Lawson. They were: Kate Bassett, Gillian Clarke, Professor Simon J. James, Alan Johnson, Denise Mina and Anita Sethi.

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**Mark Lawson**, chair of judges, said: “Stoppard’s work is built on foundations of electrifying dialogue, vivid stage-pictures, literary and historical perception, and roles that allow actors unusual verbal and emotional scope. It is another mark of the literary merit of Tom Stoppard that the judges who met his plays mainly on the page were just as enthusiastic as those who had spent numerous evenings with them in the dark. Two decades after Harold Pinter was an early winner of the David Cohen Prize, the award marks its Silver Jubilee by honouring a second giant of 20th century British drama.”

**Kate Bassett** said: “What a wonderful thing: to survey and celebrate the rich panorama of a writer’s oeuvre, to relish their creativity through the decades – their youthful flair and maturing artistry, their changing outlooks and their hallmarks of persistent brilliance. That’s what the David Cohen Prize for Literature is here to do, and being on the judging panel for this year’s award has been not only fascinating but thoroughly delightful too. The winner is almost impishly intelligent, wittily experimental with overarching structures at the same time as being, close up, a crafter of exquisite phrases. The writing, even as it enfolds big ideas and is laced with a delicate mournfulness, effervesces with *joie de vivre*.”

**Professor Simon James** said: “The David Cohen Prize recognises true literary value – writers whose works will endure for generations. Sir Tom Stoppard is one of our very finest dramatists, if not the finest dramatist, who has created an outstanding and enduring body of unfailingly creative, innovative and brilliant work.”

**Anita Sethi** said: “It was wonderful to discuss great writers’ lifetimes in literature. I’m delighted that such a phenomenally talented writer has won the prize; I’ve been dazzled by Stoppard’s work from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to *Rock n Roll*, and his innovative stylistic experimentation has made its irrevocable mark in literature.”

**David Cohen** himself commented: “Congratulations to the judges on coming up with another outstanding winner. Is there no end to the great writers this country produces?”

The awarding of the 2017 David Cohen Prize for Literature reinforces its unique and invaluable position as the only prize that is awarded for the body of work by a writer of the United Kingdom and Ireland. 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 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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## Notes for editors:

### 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 was a judge for the Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction 2014. Her latest book, *The Long Drop*, was awarded both the Gordon Burn Prize and The McIlvanney Prize in 2017.

**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.

### About the winner:

#### **Tom Stoppard/ List of Works**

- 2015 The Hard Problem
- 2010 The Laws of War (collaborative piece for one night benefit performance in support of Human Rights Watch)
- 2008 Ivanov/Chekov
- 2006 Rock n Roll
- 2005 Heroes
- 2004 Pirandello's Henry IV
- 2002 The Coast of Utopia
- 1999 Shakespeare in Love
- 1999 Plays: Four
- 1999 Plays: Five
- 1998 Plays: Three
- 1997 The Invention of Love
- 1995 Indian Ink
- 1994 Plays: Two
- 1993 Arcadia
- 1993 Plays: One
- 1993 The Television Plays 1965-1984
- 1991 In the Native State
- 1988 Hapgood
- 1986 Dalliance/Undiscovered Country
- 1985 Rough Crossing
- 1984 Squaring the Circle
- 1983 The Dog It was that Died and Other Plays
- 1982 On the Razzle

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- 1982 The Real Thing  
1980 Undiscovered Country  
1980 Dogg's Hamlet/Cahoot's Macbeth  
1978 Every Good Boy Deserves Favour/Professional Foul  
1978 Night and Day  
1976 Dirty Linen/New-Found-Land  
1976 15-Minute Hamlet  
1975 Travesties  
1973 Artist Descending a Staircase/Where are They Now ?  
1972 Jumpers  
1971 After Magritte  
1968 The Real Inspector Hound  
1968 Enter a Free Man  
1968 Albert's Bridge  
1967 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead  
1966 Lord Malquist and Mr Moon (book)  
1966 Tango  
1965 The Gamblers

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](http://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.

Social media and online:

[www.newwritingnorth.com](http://www.newwritingnorth.com) . @NewWritingNorth . #DavidCohenPrize . #CareerWorthReading

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