
NEW WRITING NORTH

News release: STRICTLY EMBARGOED until 20.30hrs, Thursday 9 November 2023

John Burnside wins the David Cohen Prize for Literature

The John S Cohen Foundation and New Writing North are delighted to announce that the winner of the 2023 David Cohen Prize for Literature is Scottish poet, memoirist and novelist **John Burnside**. Burnside was announced as the winner, in recognition of his lifetime's achievement in writing, by chair of judges Hermione Lee at a celebration at the Ham Yard Hotel in London earlier this evening.

The David Cohen Prize, currently in its 30th anniversary year, is awarded biennially to one writer from the UK or Ireland for their complete body of work.

On accepting the David Cohen Prize for Literature, John Burnside said: "I have to say that, considering the list of previous winners, being added to such a company is more than a little daunting. At the same time, it's a reminder that every writer is gifted with a live tradition and that tradition is rooted, not in mere fashions and fads, but in what Eugenio Montale called, with characteristic succinctness, the 'long patience, conscience and honesty' of those who precede us."

John Burnside has written sixteen books of poetry include *Black Cat Bone*, which won both the T.S. Eliot and the Forward Prizes in 2011 and, most recently, *Ruin, Blossom*, which will be published in April 2024. Amongst his prose work are the novels, *Glister* and *A Summer of Drowning*, three memoirs, of which the most recent is *I Put A Spell On You* and *The Music of Time*, a personal history of twentieth century poetry which was a Financial Times Book of the Year in 2019.

For as long as he has been writing, John's work has concerned itself with the environment; he has written regularly on nature for *The New Statesman* and his last prose work was a meditation on extinction and mortality entitled *Aurochs and Auks*. His radio work has explored Sami music and culture, near-death experiences and the landscape and history of the Orkney islands. He now teaches creative writing and ecocriticism at the University of St Andrews.

Hermione Lee, Chair of judges said: "The David Cohen Prize is a literary prize for writers in the UK and Ireland which is like no other in this country and which I am very proud to chair. This prize is special. It looks at a writer's whole writing life. The great names of the David Cohen Prize writers are wonderful models of lasting, unswerving, passionate dedication to a writer's life. They have all been thrillingly adventurous, imaginative and daring in their work - and this year's winner is no exception.

'John Burnside, the winner of the 2023 David Cohen Prize for a life-time's literary achievement, is a poet, novelist, story-writer, memoirist, and essayist. He has been writing every imaginable kind of book - and some unimaginable kinds - for at least 35 years. He has an amazing literary range, he pours out a cornucopia of beautiful words, and he has won an array of distinguished prizes before this one. He casts a spell with language of great beauty, power, lyricism and truthfulness. There is much sorrow, pain, terror and violence lurking in his work: he is a strong and powerful writer about the dark places of the human mind - but he's also funny and deeply humane. He has a resonant Northern quality, with his Scottish language and landscapes and people and ghosts, his strange, wild, dreamlike story-telling and his mysterious adventures in the far North. There's a deeply spiritual side to his work, but he's also in love with ordinary, the everyday, the earthbound. He's a writer who pays attention to the natural world with tenderness and care, even a kind of pagan religious intensity, and who makes us care about the things that matter to him.'

NEW WRITING NORTH

Sitting alongside Hermione Lee on the judging panel were: Aida Edemariam, Helen Mort, Malachy Tallack and Boyd Tonkin, who have all commented on different aspects of Burnside's work.

Aida Edemariam said: "It was a privilege to spend over a year with the work of our greatest writers, and to see how they developed over long and stellar careers. Choosing one was extremely difficult. John Burnside's work has great formal range — poetry, non-fiction, fiction — and is outstanding in all these categories. He is a master of a kind of beautiful unease, a chronicler and celebrant of the borderlines between humans and the rest of the natural world, between knowing and not knowing, between darkness and light."

Helen Mort said: "John Burnside's poetry is restless and haunting, populated by ghosts. His use of stepped-verse forms is distinctively his and gives the writing an unsettling energy. Nobody writes the liminal better. He's the master of the evocative image, creating worlds we think we almost know but can't quite reach. He often gives the reader an uncanny, intoxicating, unshakable feeling of *déjà vu*. Reading his poems is an exhilarating experience."

Malachy Tallack said: "To choose a winner for this year's prize was both an enormous challenge and, at once, a privilege. John Burnside stood out in our discussions as judges, right from the start, for his insight and precision, and for his virtuosity across forms and genres. In his remarkable series of memoirs, John Burnside confronts trauma with curiosity, exposing its sources and its legacies. He is generous, always, and preternaturally perceptive. Whether writing about love, about music, about cruelty or about mental illness, his words illuminate."

Boyd Tonkin said: "John Burnside shines in many forms of literature. His fiction, however, has an utterly distinctive flavour, timbre and voice that makes it quite unforgettable. In his novels, readers will encounter Burnside in his darkest, and most daring, moods. These stories take us deep into unsettling landscapes, and disturbed mindscapes, rendered with a dreamlike clarity and intensity. We enter places on the earth, and places in the soul, full of menace, dread and wonder. Burnside's fiction often enlists the style, and decor, of Gothic tales, with their uncanny events, ominous scenery and skin-prickling shocks, along with the looming presence of fear, threat, even horror. A child's capacity for both terror and awe frequently underlies these journeys into mystery and danger. These works are no cold exercises in genre mimicry: aching real currents of solitude, loss and mourning flow through novels in which everyday family tragedy shades into archetypal and supernatural drama. A consistently spellbinding narrator, Burnside unites a piercing sense of our modern malaise with a gift for channelling the timeless powers of nature and of myth."

The David Cohen Prize was founded in 1993 and for three decades has been one of literature's most prestigious prizes, recognising the UK and Ireland's greatest living writers. Uniquely amongst these countries' prizes, the David Cohen Prize for Literature recognises a lifetime's achievement and is awarded based on a writer's whole career. The biennial prize, of £40,000, is donated by the John S Cohen Foundation. Established in 1965 by the late philanthropists Dr David Cohen and Veronica Cohen, the John S Cohen Foundation is now chaired by their daughter, Dr Imogen Cohen.

Dr Imogen Cohen said; "It was my great privilege to observe Hermione Lee at work with her selected panel of judges as they debated who should be this year's recipient. As the chair of the John S. Cohen Foundation I am delighted that we are honoring this magnificent writer."

In its 30 year history the prize has earned its position as one of the country's most distinguished literary prizes, known as the "UK and Ireland Nobel in literature". Past winners include dramatists, novelists, poets and essayists including VS Naipaul, Harold Pinter, William Trevor, Doris Lessing, Seamus Heaney, Hilary Mantel, Tony Harrison, Julian Barnes, Tom Stoppard, Edna O'Brien and Colm Tóibín.

NEW WRITING NORTH

Having received the David Cohen Prize, John Burnside gave the **Clarissa Luard Award** to Abigail Peters. The Clarissa Luard Award was founded in 2005 by Arts Council England, in memory of Clarissa Luard, a much-loved literature officer. The award is worth £10,000 and the winner of the David Cohen Prize for Literature nominates an emerging writer whose work they wish to support. On announcing Abigail Peters as the winner, John Burnside commented:

“Having worked for two decades with postgraduate writers, I have had occasion to meet students who show real potential in their craft for some way down the line – a year hence, say, or a decade (patience being the chief virtue of any writer). It is a rare pleasure, however, to encounter someone who is already *there*, fully defined and confident in their gifts and, at the same time, aware that writing is a lifelong and demanding discipline. In exceptional cases, I am struck with the immediate sense of a writer who is not only alert to the possibilities of narrative and the subtle pitfalls of memory, but is also attentive to the nuances of place and character and speech. Abigail Peters possesses all these gifts and more – and I am fully confident that we will all be reading her work for decades to come.”

Abigail Peters commented: “As a young writer there is no greater joy than having your work recognized by an established writer. John Burnside is not only that but also a wonderful professor and trusted mentor, and I am so honoured that he has chosen me for the Clarissa Luard Award. When I felt at sea in the foreign and exciting world of writing, John showed me the way forward and I am overjoyed that he sees potential in me. I have always been deeply passionate for a future as a writer, but winning this award has made that dream come into focus.”

Abigail Peters grew up in rural Norfolk, England and moved to New York for her undergraduate degree in creative writing at Columbia University. She then received her MA in writing from the University of St Andrews. Abigail writes about motherhood, nature, class, and grief. She is currently working on her first book, a coming-of-age memoir set against the backdrop of the fens.

John Burnside and Abigail Peters are available for interview through Laura Creyke at MHM on laura@markhutchinsonmanagement.co.uk / 07951 777 407.

Notes for editors:

About the winner:

John Burnside FRSL FRSE is a Scottish writer. He is one of only three poets (the others being Ted Hughes and Sean O'Brien) to have won both the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Poetry Prize for the same book (*Black Cat Bone*).

Burnside was born in Dunfermline and raised in Cowdenbeath and Corby. He studied English and European Thought and Literature at Cambridge College of Arts and Technology. A former computer software engineer, he has been a freelance writer since 1996. He is a former Writer in Residence at the University of Dundee and is now Professor in Creative Writing at St Andrews University, where he teaches creative writing, literature and ecology and American poetry. His first collection of poetry, *The Hoop*, was published in 1988 and won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award. Other poetry collections include *Common Knowledge* (1991), *Feast Days* (1992), winner of the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and *The Asylum Dance* (2000), winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award and shortlisted for both the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year) and the T. S. Eliot Prize. *The Light Trap* (2001) was also shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. His 2011 collection, *Black Cat Bone*, was awarded The Forward Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Burnside is also the author of two collections of short stories, *Burning Elvis* (2000), and *Something Like Happy* (2013), as well as several novels, including *The Dumb House* (1997), *The Devil's Footprints*, (2007), *Glister*, (2009) and *A Summer of Drowning*, (2011). His multi-award-winning memoir, *A Lie About My*

NEW WRITING

Father, was published in 2006 and its successor *Waking Up In Toytown*, in 2010. A further memoir, *I Put A Spell On You* combined personal history with reflections on romantic love, magic and popular music. His short stories and feature essays have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*, among others. He also writes an occasional nature column for *New Statesman*. In 2011 he received the Petrarca-Preis, a major German international literary prize.

Burnside's work is inspired by his engagement with nature, environment and deep ecology. His collection of short stories, *Something Like Happy*, was published in 2013.

He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (elected in 1999) and in March 2016 was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy for science and letters. He also lectures annually and oversees the judging of the writing prize at The Alpine Fellowship.

John Burnside's Bibliography

Fiction

Havergey, 2017
Ashland & Vine, 2017
Something Like Happy, 2013
A Summer of Drowning, 2011
Glister, 2008
The Devil's Footprints, 2007
Living Nowhere, 2003
The Locust Room, 2001
Burning Elvis, 2000
The Mercy Boys, 1999
The Dumb House, 1997

Non Fiction

Aurochs and Auks: Essays on mortality and extinction, 2021
The Music of Time: Poetry in the Twentieth Century, 2019
On Henry Miller, 2018
I Put a Spell on You, 2014
Waking up in Toytown, 2010
Wallace Stevens : poems / selected by John Burnside, 2008
A Lie about My Father, 2006
Wild Reckoning, 2004 (joint editor with Maurice Riordan)

Poetry

Ruin, Blossom, to be published in 2024
Learning to Sleep, 2021
Still Life with Feeding Snake, 2017
All One Breath, 2014
Black Cat Bone, 2011
The Hunt in the Forest, 2009
Gift Songs, 2007
The Good Neighbour, 2005
The Light Trap, 2002
The Asylum Dance, 2000
A Normal Skin, 1997
Swimming in the Flood, 1995
The Myth of the Twin, 1994

NEW WRITING NORTH

Feast Days, 1992
Common Knowledge, 1991
The Hoop, 1988

Screen

Dice (with A.L. Kennedy)

Judges' biographies:

Hermione Lee (Chair) was President of Wolfson College from 2008 to 2017 and is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at Oxford University. Her work includes biographies of Virginia Woolf (1996), Edith Wharton (2006), Penelope Fitzgerald (2013), and Tom Stoppard (2020). She was awarded the Biographers' Club Prize for Exceptional Contribution to Biography in 2018. From 1998 to 2008 she was the Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford. She is a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature. In 2003 she was made a CBE, in 2013 she was made a Dame for services to literary scholarship, and in 2023 she was made GBE for services to English Literature. She is currently working on a biography of Anita Brookner.

She has judged a number of literary prizes in the past, 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.

Aida Edemariam's first book, *The Wife's Tale*, was a finalist for a Governor General's Literary Award in Canada and won both a Royal Society of Literature Jerwood Award and the 2019 Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize. She has judged various prizes, including the International Booker Prize, and is a senior feature writer and editor at the Guardian.

Helen Mort is a poet who has also written novels and non-fiction. Her collections *Division Street*, *No Map Could Show Them* and *The Illustrated Woman* are all published by Chatto & Windus. Her memoir *A Line Above the Sky* (Ebury, 2022) is shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Award. She's a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and teaches at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Malachy Tallack is the award-winning author of four books, most recently *Illuminated by Water* (Doubleday, 2022). His novel, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Canongate, 2018) was a BBC Radio 4 Book at Bedtime; it was shortlisted for the Highland Book Prize and longlisted for the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize. Malachy is from Shetland, and currently lives in Fife.

Boyd Tonkin is a journalist, editor and critic who in 2020 was awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Benson Medal for service to literature over the course of a career. His writing on literature and arts appears in international media including *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Times Literary Supplement*. As Literary Editor and then Senior Writer of *The Independent* (1996- 2016), he re-founded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in collaboration with Arts Council England, and judged it 2001-2015. He chaired the Man Booker International Prize 2016 and then served as the prize's Special Adviser. His reader's guide to global fiction, *The 100 Best Novels in Translation*, is published by Galileo. He is a Trustee of the Orwell Foundation, a member of the Booker Prize Foundation's advisory committee, and an editorial adviser to the journal *Critical Muslim*.

Previous winners of the David Cohen Prize for Literature:

- 1993 V S Naipaul
- 1995 Harold Pinter
- 1997 Muriel Spark
- 1999 William Trevor

NEW WRITING NORTH

- 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
- 2021 Colm Tóibín

Quotes from previous winners on what winning the David Cohen Prize for Literature meant to them:

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.”

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.”

Colm Tóibín (2021)

“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.”

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. 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.

newwritingnorth.com @NewWritingNorth
davidcohenprize.com #DavidCohenPrize

For more information please contact Laura Creyke at MHM
on laura@markhutchinsonmanagement.co.uk / 07951 777 407