

Judging begins for The James Tait Black Prizes

The oldest book awards are approaching an important milestone. The annual James Tait Black Prizes – presented by the University since 1919 – have recognised many landmark works and continue to encourage great new writing.

More than 500 new books are now at the University of Edinburgh for judging in the centenary awards of Britain's longest-running literary prizes.

Postgraduate students June Laurenson and Vivek Santayana launched the judging process and distributed books to 25 student readers who will assess each entry.

The James Tait Black Prizes are distinctive in the way that they are judged. Each year the books are considered by senior staff from English Literature at the University, assisted by a reading panel of postgraduate students

Two £10,000 prizes are awarded by the University of Edinburgh for books published in English during the previous year – one for the best work of fiction and the other for the best biography.

A shortlist of eight books – four in each category – will be announced in the Spring.

The winners – announced in August – will join the illustrious roll call of past winners that includes Angela Carter, Graham Greene, DH Lawrence, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan, Muriel Spark and Evelyn Waugh.

Equally distinguished names appear on the list of biography winners. Among them are Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Quentin Bell, John Buchan, Richard Ellmann, Kathryn Hughes and Hermione Lee.

The James Tait Black Prizes were founded by Janet Coats, the widow of publisher James Tait Black, to commemorate her husband's love of good books.

The inaugural fiction winner was Hugh Walpole for *The Secret City*, his seminal work about the Russian Revolution. Henry Festing Jones won the inaugural biography prize for his book about the writer and artist Samuel Butler.

Four winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature have been awarded a James Tait Black Prize earlier in their career.

William Golding, Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee each collected a fiction prize and Doris Lessing was awarded a prize for biography.

Lead student reader for the Biography prize June Laurenson, said: "Our panel of readers come from a wide-range of specialist backgrounds. They have the critical, analytical, and creative skills to enable them to identify potential prize-winners. We are looking forward to spending the coming weeks sifting through the entries to find the books that balance academic merit with being and engaging reads. We look forward to announcing a shortlist full of entertaining and high quality writing in the Spring."

Vivek Santayana student reader for the Fiction prize, said: "As the new entries arrive, there is a sense of excitement and anticipation among the readers. We all look forward to discovering fresh stories and helping to contribute to the next chapter of the history of the prizes."

In 2013, the awards were extended to include a new category for drama.

A free online course to help book lovers get the best out of their reading and the James Tait Black fiction shortlist was launched in 2017 by The University of Edinburgh and Edinburgh International Book Festival.

The MOOC – Massive Open Online Course – offers readers the chance to work with James Tait Black judges to study what makes a good novel.

PHOTO Neil Hanna