

James Tait Black prize – 2022 winner announced at Book Festival

A journey into Indian classical music by an author, performer and vocalist, and an interweaving series of vignettes set in south London have won the UK's longest-running literary awards.

Acclaimed writers Amit Chaudhuri and Keith Ridgway join the dazzling line-up of authors whose books have won the James Tait Black Prizes, awarded annually by the University of Edinburgh.

The winners of the £10,000 prizes were announced by author and broadcaster Sally Magnusson at a live event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, which is taking place at the University's Edinburgh College of Art.

Amit Chaudhuri's winning book in the biography prize, *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music*, published by Faber, is a mesmerising exploration of the author's relationship with North Indian classical music.

The author of several acclaimed books and works of poetry, Chaudhuri has also released recordings of his singing North Indian classical music. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2009 and has been a Professor of Creative Writing at Ashoka University since 2020.

Biography Judge Dr Simon Cooke, of the University of Edinburgh, called *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music* “a work of great depth, subtlety, and resonance, which unobtrusively changed the way we thought about music, place, and creativity. Folding the ethos of the raga into its own form, it is a beautifully voiced, quietly subversive masterpiece in the art of listening to the world”.

Keith Ridgway’s winning book in the fiction prize, *A Shock*, published by Picador, follows several different characters living in south London. Over nine overlapping chapters the novel shines a spotlight on their lives and relationships.

Born in Dublin and based in London, Ridgway’s writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Zoetrope – All Story* and many other magazines. His is a winner of the Prix Femina Étranger, The Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, and the O. Henry Award. *A Shock* is his fifth novel and first in eight years.

Fiction Judge Dr Benjamin Bateman, of the University of Edinburgh, called *A Shock* “a sensitive, creative, and highly humane examination of lives that, in so much other fiction, would be relegated to the status of minor characters”.



Amit Chaudhuri with Sally Magnusson after the announcement .
Neil Hanna Photography

The James Tait Black Prizes are for the best works of fiction and biography during the previous 12 months. They are the only major British book awards judged by literature scholars and students. The prizes are awarded by the University of Edinburgh's English Literature department, which is the oldest in the world.

Amit Chaudhuri's book was chosen from a biography shortlist that featured: *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance* by Hanif Abdurraqib (Allen Lane); *In Memory of Memory: A Romance* by Maria Stepanova, translated by Sasha Dugdale (Fitzcarraldo Editions); and *Burning Man: The Ascent of DH Lawrence* by Frances Wilson (Bloomsbury).

Keith Ridgway's book topped a fiction shortlist also featuring: *English Magic* by Uschi Gatward (Galley Beggar Press); *Libertie* by Kaitlyn Greenidge (Serpent's Tail) and *Memorial* by Bryan Washington (Atlantic Books).

Biography judge Dr Simon Cooke said: “The postgraduate readers and I were exhilarated by the way this year’s shortlist opened up connections across different art forms, languages, and cultures – each is a profound appreciation of creativity in others, and a dazzling creative performance in its own right.”

Fiction judge Dr Benjamin Bateman said: “My student readers and I were bowled over by both the imaginative reach of this year’s shortlist and by their authors’ shared commitment to sharing lives and stories that are not normally given centre stage.”

The James Tait Black Prizes are distinctive in the way that they are judged. Each year two academic judges work with postgraduate student readers to critically assess the shortlisted works.

The century-old prize format is still evolving. This year there was greater student involvement in the judging process.

Four of the student readers presented their literary expertise at the Book Festival event, giving their perspectives on the qualities that make a winner, what makes the books appealing, and how they chose them.

The James Tait Black Prizes began celebrating books more than a century ago after Janet Tait Black née Coats – part of the renowned thread-making family J & P Coats – made provision in her will for the creation of two book prizes to be awarded annually in memory of her husband, James Tait Black.

Since 2017 the University has also run a free online course in partnership with Edinburgh International Book Festival to offer readers the chance to engage with judges and other readers on the shortlisted fiction books.

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) – called ‘How to Read a Novel’ – draws on the James Tait Black fiction shortlist and

to date has attracted more than 60,000 participants from across the globe.