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David Cohen Prize for Literature: a lifetime in letters celebrated 2021 judges announced

The David Cohen Prize for Literature is proud to announce the judges for 2021. Chaired by Hermione Lee, the panel of judges has been selected to strike a balance of strengths. The impressive array comprises:

- Peter Kemp: the chief fiction reviewer for the *Sunday Times*
- Reeta Chakrabarti: BBC News presenter and correspondent
- Susheila Nasta: founder of *Wasafiri*, literary activist and 2019 winner of the RSL's Benson Medal for a lifetime's achievement
- Maura Dooley: acclaimed poet and founding Director of the South Bank Centre's Literature and Talks programme

Now in its 28th year, **The David Cohen Prize for Literature** is singular in its approach: it is awarded every two years in recognition of a living writer's lifetime achievement in literature in the UK and Ireland. It has consequently earned its position in the literary canon as the "UK Nobel for literature".

The David Cohen Prize was last awarded in 2019 to Edna O'Brien who, when asked what it meant to her, said: "It meant delight, I felt it had come from heaven. This matters a lot: there are so many books in the world and the judges had read very carefully; the depth to which they went to really see what was within those books (and there are many) that would maybe allow them to stand the test of time... I am delighted to have got it."

Managed by New Writing North, the award will be announced in London in November 2021. The judges commented as follows:

Peter Kemp: "It's a pleasure and a privilege to take part in the judging process for an award with such an illustrious roll call of past winners as the David Cohen Prize. An additional appeal is this offers a rewarding and enthralling opportunity to take a whole literary career into account."

Reeta Chakrabarti: "The David Cohen Prize is special, awarded not for one book, but for a lifetime's achievement – so the bar is set very high! I am a dedicated reader (when time allows), and a strong believer in the power of literature to entertain, but also to disrupt and disturb. I greatly relish the coming challenge."

Maura Dooley: "There are now many distinguished prizes that mark the strength of a particular book but this award recognises the development of a writer's work across decades. There is a particular thrill to be had in growing up and older alongside a writer who keeps you company over the years and whose work lights the way. It is that kind of brilliant and continuing illumination that is celebrated by the David Cohen Prize."

Susheila Nasta MBE: "This is a unique prize and I feel very privileged to have this chance to read and savour works by so many outstanding British writers. Given the restrictions endured as a consequence of the global pandemic, the opportunity to travel freely and discover the riches of such a diverse range of literary landscapes will be a huge tonic."

Chair of the Judges, **Hermione Lee:** "I'm honoured to be chairing the DCP and hope to sustain the very distinguished history of this exceptional literary award. I'm especially delighted to be working with four exceptional fellow-judges, who have expertise across a wide range of literary and

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media areas and who are all passionate, informed, and dedicated readers. I look forward to some exciting and interesting discussions with them over this coming year.”

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Notes for editors:

Established 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 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.

Judges' biographies

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.

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 and has directed Literature festivals in Birmingham, Swansea and Rotterdam. She re-established and directed Poetry International in the UK after a 30-year absence, worked for Jim Henson Film in script development and, in theatre, for Performing Arts Labs. She is Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London where she founded and directs the MA in Creative Writing. She has served as judge for many literary awards, including the T S Eliot and Forward Prizes, the Eric Gregory Awards, the John Llewellyn Rhys Award for first novel and the Foyle Young Poets Award. She chaired the Poetry Book Society and for ten years was a trustee of the Royal Literary Fund. She is currently a trustee of Poetry London.

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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, publisher, academic 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). Currently completing a biography, *The Bloomsbury Indians*, she was awarded the 2019 Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature for a lifetime's achievement.

David Cohen Prize Chair of the Judges' biography:

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.

PTO 4/ Notes for the editors: Previous winners

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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

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. 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; #DavidCohen; #Acareerworthreading

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