RSL Ondaatje Prize 2020
The Shortlist

The £10,000 RSL Ondaatje Prize is awarded annually to a book of the highest literary merit – fiction, non-fiction or poetry – which best evokes the spirit of a place.

This year’s judges are Peter Frankopan, Pascale Petit, and Evie Wyld.

Jay Bernard
Surge (Chatto & Windus)

Tishani Doshi
Small Days and Nights (Bloomsbury Circus)

Robert Macfarlane
Underland (Hamish Hamilton)

Roger Robinson
A Portable Paradise (Peepal Tree Press)

Elif Shafak
10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (Viking)

Jumoke Verissimo
A Small Silence (Cassava Republic)

The winner will be announced on Monday 4 May 2020.
Jay Bernard, *Surge* (Chatto & Windus)

‘A searing combination of artistic invention and meticulous research into the 1981 New Cross Fire – Jay Bernard, one of our most exciting young poets, has created an artwork that is a book but also an immersive installation made of soot, smoke and shape-shifting mercury.’ - Pascale Petit

**Jay Bernard** is a writer from London. Their work is interdisciplinary, critical, queer and rooted in the archive. They won the 2017 Ted Hughes Award for *Surge: Side A*. Jay’s short film *Something Said* won best experimental and best queer short at Leeds International Film Festival. Jay is a programmer at BFI Flare, an archivist at Mayday Rooms and resident artist at Raven Row. They were elected an RSL Fellow in 2018. *Surge* is their first collection.

Tishani Doshi, *Small Days and Nights* (*Bloomsbury Circus*)

‘An astonishing novel that is beautifully written but underpinned by a quiet simmering anger about injustice and unrealistic expectations of a family – and of life in contemporary India.’

– Peter Frankopan

**Tishani Doshi** was born in the city formerly known as Madras. She has published six books of poetry and fiction and has won numerous awards including: an Eric Gregory Award for Poetry, All-India Poetry Competition, and the 2006 Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her debut novel, *The Pleasure Seekers* was longlisted for the Orange Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. She is Visiting Professor of Practice, Literature and Creative Writing at New York University, Abu Dhabi.

Robert Macfarlane, *Underland* (*Hamish Hamilton*)

‘These timely, subterranean journeys are astonishing, impassioned, lyrical. This is a landmark book, operatic and oceanic in scope.’ – Pascale Petit

**Robert Macfarlane**’s books include *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Wild Places*, and *Landmarks*. *Mountains of the Mind* won the Guardian First Book Award and a Somerset Maugham Award and *The Wild Places* won the Boardman-Tasker Award. Both books have been adapted for television by the BBC. He is a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and writes on environmentalism, literature and travel for publications including *The Guardian* and *The Sunday Times*. He was elected an RSL Fellow in 2011.

‘A fabulous and ingenious work that seethes in its condemnation of injustices but sparkles in its tenderness and subtlety and revels in celebration at the things that make us all unique. It made me laugh and cry.’ - Peter Frankopan

Roger Robinson is a writer and educator who has taught and performed worldwide. He was chosen by Decibel as one of 50 writers who have influenced the black-British writing canon. *A Portable Paradise* won the 2019 TS Eliot Prize and was selected as a New Statesman book of the year. He is a co-founder of both Spoke Lab and the international writing collective Malika’s Kitchen. He is the lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound.

Elif Shafak, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (Viking)

‘A brutal book but also so deeply moving and uplifting. She is such a vivid writer and such a dexterous storyteller, she manages to go to places other writers plainly could not. Just wonderful.’ - Evie Wyld

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist and the most widely read female author in Turkey. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and chosen as Blackwell’s Book of the Year. Her previous novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* was one of the BBC’s 100 Novels that Shaped Our World. She holds a PhD in political science and she has taught at various universities in Turkey, the US and the UK. She was elected an RSL Fellow in 2019.

Jumoke Verissimo, *A Small Silence* (Cassava Republic)

‘The atmosphere of this book was the first thing that drew me in. A feeling of disquiet and tension, even in the quotidain. It manages beauty and lyricism and at the same time as restraint, an impressive line to walk. It left me feeling like I had witnessed a spell of some kind.’ - Evie Wyld

Jumoke Verissimo writes poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. She has published two collections of poetry; *I am memory* won the Carlos Idzia Ahmad Prize’s for a first book of Poetry, and *The Birth of Illusion* was shortlisted for the Association of Nigerian Authors Poetry Prize. Jumoke is currently enrolled in a PhD programme in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. *A Small Silence* is her debut novel.

Founded in 1820, the Royal Society of Literature is Britain’s national charity for the advancement of literature. In addition to the RSL Ondaatje Prize, the RSL runs the RSL Christopher Bland Prize for best debut from a writer over 50, the Encore Award for best second novel of the year, the V. S. Pritchett Short Story Prize, RSL Literature Matters Awards and the RSL Giles St Aubyn Awards for Non-Fiction.

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