



PRESS RELEASE

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The 2020 Booker Prize for Fiction

Shortlist announced

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- Four debut novelists – Diane Cook, Avni Doshi, Douglas Stuart and Brandon Taylor – make the list; all six shortlisted authors are new to the prize
- Four of the shortlist are women; two are men
- Books from four independent publishers have been chosen, including *Real Life* from Daunt Books Originals, an imprint founded in February

Diane Cook, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Avni Doshi, Maaza Mengiste, Douglas Stuart and Brandon Taylor are today, Tuesday 15 September, announced as the six authors shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize for Fiction.

The shortlist was revealed at lunchtime by the 2020 Chair of Judges Margaret Busby during a virtual press conference. It will be celebrated this evening in a Shortlist Watch Party for readers around the world on The Booker Prize's Facebook and YouTube pages at 5pm BST.

The shortlist was selected from 162 submitted books. Readers of the six chosen books will explore the tender story of a mother's battle to save her daughter in a dystopian city made inhospitable by the climate crisis; witness a woman confronting the realities of life and morality in Zimbabwe as she descends into poverty; travel to India to unpick an unsettling mother-daughter relationship redefined by dementia; uncover the extraordinary tales of the African women who went to war during Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia; find humanity and humour in the harsh realities experienced by a marginalised family in 1980s Glasgow; and question what 'real life' is in a fresh take on the campus novel, which offers a nuanced account of racism and homophobia.

The 2020 Booker Prize for Fiction is open to writers of any nationality, writing in English and published in the UK or Ireland between 1 October 2019 and 30 September 2020.

The 2020 shortlist is:

Author (country/territory)	Title (imprint)
Diane Cook (USA)	<i>The New Wilderness</i> (Oneworld Publications)
Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe)	<i>This Mournable Body</i> (Faber & Faber)
Avni Doshi (USA)	<i>Burnt Sugar</i> (Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House)
Maaza Mengiste (Ethiopia/USA)	<i>The Shadow King</i> (Canongate Books)
Douglas Stuart (Scotland/USA)	<i>Shuggie Bain</i> (Picador, Pan Macmillan)
Brandon Taylor (USA)	<i>Real Life</i> (Originals, Daunt Books Publishing)

The shortlist was selected by a panel of five judges: [Margaret Busby](#) (chair), editor, literary critic and former publisher; [Lee Child](#), author; [Sameer Rahim](#), author and critic; [Lemn Sissay](#), writer and broadcaster; and [Emily Wilson](#), classicist and translator.

Margaret Busby, Chair of the 2020 judges, says:

‘As judges we read 162 books, many of them conveying important, sometimes uncannily similar and prescient messages. The best novels often prepare our societies for valuable conversations, and not just about the inequities and dilemmas of the world – whether in connection with climate change, forgotten communities, old age, racism, or revolution when necessary – but also about how magnificent the interior life of the mind, imagination and spirit is, in spite of circumstance. The shortlist of six came together unexpectedly, voices and characters resonating with us all even when very different. We are delighted to help disseminate these chronicles of creative humanity to a global audience.’

‘The novels on this year’s shortlist range in setting from an unusual child growing up in working-class Glasgow in the 1980s, to a woman coping with a post-colonial nightmare in Zimbabwe. Along the way we meet a man struggling with racism on a university campus, join a trek in the wilderness after an environmental disaster, eavesdrop on a woman coping with her ageing mother as they travel across India and in an exploration of female power discover how ordinary people rose up in 1930s Ethiopia to defend their country against invading Italians. It’s a wondrous and enriching variety of stories, and hugely exciting as well.’

Gaby Wood, Literary Director of the Booker Prize Foundation, adds:

‘Every year, judging the Booker Prize is an act of discovery. What’s out there, how can we widen the net, how do these books seem when compared to one another, how do they fare when re-read? These are questions judges always ask themselves, and each other.’

‘This year there has perhaps been more discovery than usual, both in the sense that debut novels are in the majority, and due to the fact that the judges themselves were surprised to find that was the case. Why were they surprised? They were focussing on the books. No one wins the Booker Prize because of who they are. A book wins because of what it does. What has transpired is a testament to the judges’ faith in – among other things – first fictions: they have found these writers to have much to say, and found them to have said it in a way that became even richer on a second reading.’

The four female authors on the shortlist are Diane Cook, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Avni Doshi and Maaza Mengiste. The two male authors are Douglas Stuart and Brandon Taylor.

Four of the shortlisted books come from independent publishers represented by the Independent Alliance: Canongate Books, Daunt Books Publishing, Faber & Faber and Oneworld Publications.

Facts about the 2020 shortlisted authors:

- **Diane Cook**, a critically acclaimed short-story writer and former producer for the radio show 'This American Life', is shortlisted for her debut novel, *The New Wilderness*. She is currently writing a screenplay based on the novel and Warner Bros. Television has acquired the rights to develop it as a television series. Her first short story collection *Man V Nature* won the Guardian First Book Award.
- **Tsitsi Dangarembga's** *This Mournable Body* is the third book in a trilogy following *Nervous Conditions* (1988) – winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize – and *The Book of Not* (2006). Dangarembga is a filmmaker and playwright. She was recently arrested in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, during a peaceful protest against government corruption. She is due to be in court on 18 September. English PEN and PEN International are calling for the immediate dropping of all charges.
- **Avni Doshi**, who is based in Dubai, wrote eight drafts of her debut novel, *Burnt Sugar*, before it was first published in India under the title *Girl in White Cotton*. It won the 2013 Tibor Jones South Asia Prize. There are a number of parallels between her life and the book: it's set in Pune, where her family is from; both she and her character experienced postpartum depression, although she gave birth after submitting the novel; and she wrote about Alzheimer's disease after her grandmother was diagnosed with the illness, explaining that she made sense of it through writing the novel.
- **Maaza Mengiste** was born in Ethiopia and is a professor in the MFA in Creative Writing & Literary Translation programme at Queens College, City University of New York. She is the first writer from Ethiopia to make the shortlist. (Under the original Booker Prize rules, Ethiopian writers would not have been eligible.) She drew on her family history to write *The Shadow King*: she knew her grandfather had fought against the Italians during the invasion of Ethiopia and she later discovered that her great-grandmother had gone to war too.
- **Douglas Stuart**, who grew up in Glasgow, moved to New York to start his career in fashion design. His writing has appeared in LitHub and *The New Yorker*, including a recently published short story 'The Englishman'. He has made the shortlist with his debut novel *Shuggie Bain*. He says the 1994 Booker winner *How Late It Was, How Late* by James Kelman changed his life as it was one of the first times he saw his people and dialect on the page. He is currently finishing his second novel, *Loch Awe*.
- **Brandon Taylor**, who attended the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and is a staff writer at *Literary Hub*, is shortlisted for his debut novel *Real Life*. He describes academia – the setting for his book and somewhere he's spent a lot of time – as full of human drama and intrigue, but quite hostile at times with 'people who had a problem with my blackness or queerness'. He has a short story collection called *Filthy Animals* due out in the USA next year.

The 2020 winner announcement and shortlist events

The 2020 winner will be announced on Tuesday 17 November in an event broadcast from London's Roundhouse in collaboration with BBC Arts. The ceremony has been re-imagined, transposing the traditional dinner at the Guildhall to a globally accessible ceremony without walls. In light of the pandemic, the newly formatted event aims to creatively engage readers across the world with the shortlisted books, authors and the overall winner. It will be a multi-platform offering, including a one-off BBC Two programme in the run-up, a Live Page on BBC Arts, coverage on BBC News in the UK and BBC World News and the live announcement of the winner on BBC Radio 4's Front Row.

In the meantime, BBC Radio 4's Front Row is running its successful Booker Prize Book Group for a second year with each of the six shortlisted books and authors. There will also be a series of digital public events featuring the authors, including a Guardian Live event on Wednesday 11 November and a regional event on Friday 13 November held in partnership with Doncaster Creates.

The winner will take part in their first digital event in partnership with Southbank Centre on Saturday 21 November as part of its 'Inside Out' series. More information about the events programme will be announced soon.

The shortlisted authors each receive £2,500 and a specially bound edition of their book. The winner will receive a further £50,000 and can expect instant international recognition.

The 2019 Booker Prize for Fiction was won jointly by *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. In the week following the announcement, sales of *The Testaments* rose from 11,955 to 13,400 copies while *Girl, Woman, Other* sold 5,980 copies, more than double its lifetime sales up to that point and a 1,340% increase week on week. The UK edition alone of *The Testaments* has now sold more than 850,000 copies. *Girl, Woman, Other* has now spent 25 weeks in *The Sunday Times* Top Ten in hardback and paperback, several at number one and its combined sales in all editions and formats are heading towards half a million. It will be published in 32 territories internationally and TV rights have been optioned by Potboiler. After its Booker Prize win it was shortlisted for the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction and won the best fiction book at the 2020 British Book Awards, while Evaristo was named Author of the Year.

The leading prize for quality fiction in English

First awarded in 1969, The Booker Prize is recognised as the leading prize for literary fiction written in English. The list of former winners features many of the literary giants of the last five decades: from Iris Murdoch to Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan to Hilary Mantel.

The Booker Prize is supported by Crankstart, a charitable foundation.

The Booker Prizes podcast series will be releasing a shortlist podcast, featuring judges Lee Child and Emily Wilson, available from Friday 18 September.

By the time of the winner announcement all shortlisted titles will be available in braille, giant print and audio editions, produced by RNIB and funded by the Booker Prize Foundation.

Shortlisted books: judges' comments

Lemn Sissay on *The New Wilderness* by Diane Cook

'Journeys through the wilderness are as old as the hills but this is the 'New Wilderness', created by humans to preserve us from extinction. It is a clever idea. *The New Wilderness* is a many-layered dystopian fiction set in the not-too-distant future. It's a novel taking on the greatest story of our times – climate change – but through the intimate relationships of a select group who, as an experiment, are living in it. The cause of the novel is not lost because the novel is not lost in its cause. The characters are driven by each other and their environment. They get wilder and wilder. At its centre is the intense loving and punishing relationship between mother and daughter, Bea and Agnes. We loved the writing and sensed ourselves in the wilderness of *The New Wilderness*. An urgent novel reflective of what is happening in society now.'

Margaret Busby on *This Mournable Body* by Tsitsi Dangarembga

'We found *This Mournable Body*, set in late 20th-century Zimbabwe, both heartbreaking and haunting - a compelling novel in which the breakdown of the female protagonist, Tambu, and the breakdown of a country are inextricably linked. Written in an eloquent, cinematic style that with each page rewards the reader's commitment, *This Mournable Body* is also an acute observation of the absurdities and indignities endured as a result of the foibles of the tourism industry in Africa; but at heart it is a universal story, of an intelligent person enmeshed in mediocrity and injustice, forced to swallow the pill of disillusion while being kept going by hope.'

Sameer Rahim on *Burnt Sugar* by Avni Doshi

'*Burnt Sugar* explores the complex relationship between a mother and daughter in contemporary India. Precisely written, and told from a resolutely unsentimental perspective, Avni Doshi's novel explores what happens when a difficult mother starts to fade into illness. As the title indicates, this is a novel that often leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. That is a deliberate and often bracing effect: the author bravely pushes the limits of the reader's sympathy. It is a compelling book, beautifully written and with startling imagery—emotionally wrenching and poignant in equal measure.'

Lee Child on *The Shadow King* by Maaza Mengiste

'As a fellow writer I was bowled over by Mengiste's effortless management of an epic and ambitious structure. As a hungry reader I loved the way she found within that structure a personal, intimate and tragic story centered on luminous, living, breathing characters. As a Booker judge I was completely convinced by the end result, which is both huge in its sweep and personally owned by Hirut, the fierce and resourceful protagonist, who is dealing with wild events well beyond her previous experience. The story is important - really the opening shots of the Second World War - but rarely told before, and the whole is wrapped in gorgeous, lyrical prose of the highest quality. Its place on the shortlist merely confirms its status as one of the great novels of the year.'

Emily Wilson on *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart

‘Douglas Stuart’s debut creates an amazingly intimate, gripping portrait of addiction, courage and love. *Shuggie Bain* is a heart-breaking, heart-warming yet unsentimental novel which gives a vivid glimpse of a marginalized, impoverished community in a bygone era of British history. Set in working class Glasgow in the Thatcher years, the book evokes the relationship of a mother and son, both of whom reach for sparkle, glamour and adventure that are hard to find in their economic and social circumstances. Stuart manages to treat his characters with an impressive level of dignity, humour and compassion, as well as an unsparing clarity of vision. We admired the book’s immersive, nuanced portrait of a tight-knit social world, its people and its values, and we were deeply moved by the portrait of the mother, Agnes, in her only-partly-futile battle against alcoholism, poverty and the rigid gender norms of her culture. *Shuggie Bain* is a desperately sad, but almost-hopeful examination of family and the destructive powers of desire.’

Margaret Busby on *Real Life* by Brandon Taylor

‘*Real Life* held our attention and admiration as a fresh take on the campus-novel - the story of Wallace, an introverted young man whose Alabama background has not prepared him for what he must deal with as he works his way towards a degree in a Midwestern college town. A beautifully written debut, this alchemy of identity and sexuality in the seemingly hermetic halls of academia is a quietly moving and nuanced account of micro-aggressions, racism, trauma, grief and alienation. The book evokes daily, repetitive action as well as memory and fantasy to get at its profound central question: what is “real life” anyway?’

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More information about the prize is available at:
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Notes to Editors

- Shortlisted book synopses, author biographies, author images and jacket images are available to download [here](#)
- Readers who are interested in applying to join the Front Row’s Booker Prize Book Groups should email frontrow@bbc.co.uk. The Booker Prize W/T is a BBC Studios Production. The Executive Producer is Tanya Hudson and the Producer Director is Gabriella Meade.

- The 2020 shortlist consists of six books. UK and Irish publishers may submit novels written in the English language and published in the UK or Ireland between 1 October 2019 and 30 September 2020. The number of books a publisher can submit will depend on that publisher's inclusion in longlists over the previous five years, as follows:
 - Publishers with no longlistings - 1 submission
 - Publishers with 1 or 2 longlisting(s) - 2 submissions
 - Publishers with 3 or 4 longlistings - 3 submissions
 - Publishers with 5 or more longlistings - 4 submissions

This means that the number of submissions for each publisher may change from year to year. A new work by any author who has previously been shortlisted for The Booker Prize (pre-2002 or post-2018) or Man Booker Prize (2002-2018) is automatically eligible.

In addition, the judges 'call-in' a number of novels each year: in addition to their main submission(s), a publisher may provide a list of up to five titles for consideration, accompanied by a justification from the editor. The judges are required to call-in no fewer than eight and no more than 12 of these titles. The judges are also permitted to call-in other books published within the requisite dates, even if the book has not been submitted through any other route.

Novels published in Ireland have been eligible since 2018.

- The Booker Prize for Fiction was first awarded in 1969 and was called The Man Booker Prize for Fiction when sponsored by Man Group from 2002 - 2018.
- The International Booker Prize is awarded annually for the best single work of fiction translated into English and published in the UK. It was known as the Man Booker International Prize when sponsored by Man Group. The £50,000 prize is divided equally between the author and the translator. Each shortlisted author and translator receives £1,000. The 2020 winner was *The Discomfort of Evening* written by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld and translated by Michele Hutchison. The 2021 judging panel is chaired by Lucy Hughes-Hallett, cultural historian and novelist, and also consists of: journalist and writer, Aida Edemariam; Man Booker shortlisted novelist Neel Mukherjee; Professor of the History of Slavery, Olivette Otele; and poet, translator and biographer George Szirtes.
- For the current Booker Prize shortlist, as well as a full history of the prize including previous winners, shortlisted authors and judges visit the website: www.thebookerprizes.com
- The Booker Prize Foundation is a registered charity (no 1090049) established in 2002. It is responsible for the award of The Booker Prize for Fiction and for The International Booker Prize. The trustees of the Booker Prize Foundation are: Mark Damazer (chair) - freelance journalist and former broadcast executive; Nick Barley - director, Edinburgh International Book Festival; Bidisha SK Mamata - writer, critic and broadcaster; Carol Lake - managing director, Philanthropy Executive at JPMorgan Chase; James Naughtie - broadcaster; Ben Okri - poet and author; Professor Louise Richardson - vice chancellor of the University of Oxford; The Rt Hon. Lord David Willetts - writer, ex-minister and advocate of fairness between the generations.
- The Booker Prize Foundation Advisory Committee, which advises on any changes to the rules and on the selection of the judges, represents all aspects of the book world. Its members are: Nic Bottomley - co-founder, Mr B's Emporium of Reading Delights; Jamie Byng - publisher, Canongate Books; Jonty Claypole - head of arts, BBC; James Daunt -

managing director of Waterstones; Jonathan Douglas - director of the National Literacy Trust; Adam Freudenheim - publisher, Pushkin Press; Daniel Hahn - writer and translator; Peter Kemp - chief fiction reviewer, The Sunday Times; Sharmaine Lovegrove - publisher, Dialogue Books; Emma Paterson - agent, Aitken Alexander Associates; Fiammetta Rocco - senior editor and culture correspondent, *The Economist* and *1843* and The International Booker Prize Administrator; Michal Shavit - publishing director, Jonathan Cape; Eve Smith - Secretary, Booker Prize Foundation; Boyd Tonkin - writer and critic; Helen Williams - Legal Counsel of Booker Group plc. It is chaired by Gaby Wood - Literary Director, Booker Prize Foundation.

- Crankstart, a charitable foundation, is the exclusive funder of The Booker Prize and The International Booker Prize.
- The Literary Director of the Booker Prize Foundation is Gaby Wood. The Administrator of The International Booker Prize is Fiammetta Rocco, senior editor and culture correspondent of *The Economist* and *1843*.
- Four Culture handles PR, comms and event management for the prizes and provides all events and administrative back-up.
- Booker Group is the UK's leading food & drink wholesaler with branches nationwide and a delivery network. It serves over 400,000 catering customers and 100,000 independent retailers.
- The Booker Prize Foundation has a longstanding partnership with RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People). The Foundation funds the production of the shortlisted titles in braille, giant print and audio, which the RNIB produces by the date the winner is announced. The accessible versions are then made available to the tens of thousands of blind and partially sighted members of the RNIB Library. People with sight loss have a limited choice of books in accessible formats and often have to wait much longer than their sighted peers for titles to be made available to them - and there are many more books that they will never have the chance to read. The Foundation is working with RNIB to change this story. For further information contact the RNIB PR Team on 020 7391 2223 or pressoffice@rnib.org.uk
- The Booker Prize Foundation has partnered with the National Literacy Trust since 2012 to deliver Books Unlocked. The Foundation funds the programme, which has transformed the lives of prisoners and young offenders in the UK by helping them develop a love of reading. Prisoners are able to engage with high-quality writing as copies of Booker Prize shortlisted titles are sent out to prison reading groups. These same titles are also serialised as audiobooks on National Prison Radio, which is broadcast into c.80,000 cells, enabling still more prisoners to experience these exceptional stories. Authors go into prisons to discuss their writing directly with reading groups and many also record interviews on National Prison Radio. The shared vision for Books Unlocked is to bring about positive change in prisoners' life chances. Since 1993, the National Literacy Trust has led the campaign to transform the future of the UK's most disadvantaged young people by improving their literacy levels: literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/books-unlocked/
- The Booker Prize Archive was given on loan in 2003 to Oxford Brookes University, where it now resides.