



Press Release

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The 2021 International Booker Prize shortlist announced

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#2021InternationalBooker #FinestFiction

- Two-thirds of the shortlisted authors are published in English for the first time, having already won awards in their own languages
- Translator Megan McDowell makes the shortlist for the 2nd time, with all other nominees newly recognised by the prize
- Whether set in 16th-century Europe or 22nd-century outer space, the books share an urgent relevance
 - Independent publisher Pushkin Press has two books on the list

Today, 22 April, the 2021 International Booker Prize announces the six books in the running for this year's prize, which celebrates the finest fiction from around the world, translated into English. The contribution of both author and translator is given equal recognition, with the £50,000 prize split evenly between them.

The six writers on this year's shortlist have been praised by figures as wide ranging as Phillip Pullman, Patti Smith, Sarah Waters, Dave Eggers, Geoff Dyer and Philippe Sands.

Revolutionary in form, in content and in point of view, the books on this year's shortlist are all urgent, energetic and wildly original works of literature. The stories told include: terrifying tales of unruly teenagers, crooked witches, homeless ghosts, and hungry women set in contemporary Argentina; the historical account of two Senegalese soldiers fighting for France during the first world war; the lives of the crew working on the Six-Thousand Ship in the 22nd century; stories of the defining moments from the history of science; the exploration of cultural and personal memory, using the author's Jewish family in Russia as the basis; and a tale of rebellion against power and privilege set during the Protestant Reformation in 16th-century Germany.

The 2021 shortlist is:

Title	Author	Translator	Original language	Author residence	Publisher or Imprint
<i>At Night All Blood is Black</i>	David Diop	Anna Moschovakis	French	France	Pushkin Press
<i>The Dangers of Smoking in Bed</i>	Mariana Enríquez	Megan McDowell	Spanish	Argentina	Granta Books
<i>When We Cease to Understand the World</i>	Benjamín Labatut	Adrian Nathan West	Spanish	Chile	Pushkin Press
<i>The Employees</i>	Olga Ravn	Martin Aitken	Danish	Denmark	Lolli Editions
<i>In Memory of Memory</i>	Maria Stepanova	Sasha Dugdale	Russian	Russia	Fitzcarraldo Editions
<i>The War of the Poor</i>	Éric Vuillard	Mark Polizzotti	French	France	Pan Macmillan, Picador

Award-winners in their own languages, two-thirds of the shortlisted authors are new voices for English speaking readers to discover. The shortlisted books subvert familiar genres, be it reinventions of war stories, science fiction, the gothic or revolutionary political tracts. They probe the nature of memory, ideas and whether human failure masquerades as progress.

The shortlist is again dominated by independent publishers, with two books published by Pushkin Press, as well as books by Granta Books, Fitzcarraldo and Lolli Editions. The latter has never been recognised by the prize before.

The shortlist spans four languages: Danish, French, Spanish and Russian, with settings ranging across Europe, South America and even into outer space.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett, chair of the judges, says:

‘Our six shortlisted books, chosen from 125 submissions, are all extraordinary, and wildly unlike each other. We have the genres of sci-fi and ghost-stories being brilliantly subverted and repurposed. We have biographical essays opening out to become blazingly imaginative testaments to the strangeness of the universe or the cruelty of human injustice. We have a hallucinatory and terrifying vision of the madness of warfare. We have a meditative journey into a family’s history that becomes a profoundly moving story about the way time eventually bears us all away.’

‘To arrive at this list we had - regretfully - to eliminate numerous books we enjoyed and admired. These six, though, seemed to us outstanding. Their differences demonstrate how vital the art of fiction is worldwide. What they have in common is their beauty, their originality and their power to grip the reader and excite new thoughts.’

‘It is a privilege to be part of a prize that spreads the word about such remarkable books to English-speaking readers, that looks beyond national boundaries to honour authors wherever they come from, and that rewards the translators who reveal their work to us.’

The shortlist was selected by the 2021 judging panel consisting of: cultural historian and novelist, **Lucy Hughes-Hallett** (chair); 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**.

This year the judges considered 125 books.

The 2021 International Booker Prize winner will be announced on 2 June 2021, in an online ceremony from Coventry UK City of Culture 2021.

The shortlisted and winning authors and translators will take part in a number of public events before and after the winner announcement. These include:

Edinburgh International Book Festival

29 April, 6 May, 13 May, 20 May, 25 May, 27 May

Beginning on Thursday April 29, the Edinburgh International Book Festival will present a series of free events celebrating the shortlisted writers and translators ahead of the winners' announcement on June 2nd. Please visit edbookfest.co.uk for more information.

Southbank Centre

30 May 2021

The Southbank Centre's Inside Out series includes an event with this year's shortlisted authors and translators, with readings from their books, in both English and the work's original language. More information is available on the Southbank Centre's [website](#).

Hay Festival

7 June 2021

In their first win since the announcement, join the 2021 International Booker Prize winner in conversation with Rosie Goldsmith. More information is available on Hay Festival's [website](#).

- Ends -

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Notes to Editors

- Please find all images of authors, translators and book jackets [here](#).
- The International Booker Prize is awarded annually for the best single work of fiction translated into English and published in the UK and Ireland. 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, which has sold over 50,000 copies of the UK edition and is being translated into 40 languages.
- The Administrator of The International Booker Prize is Fiammetta Rocco - chief culture writer of *The Economist* and *1843*. The Director of The Booker Prize Foundation is Gaby Wood.
- Books under consideration are published in translation into English by UK or Irish publishers between 1 May 2020 and 30 April 2021.
- 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 winner receives £50,000. The 2020 winner was *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart. The 2021 Booker Prize panel is chaired by historian Maya Jasanoff and consists of: writer and editor Horatia Harrod; actor Natascha McElhone; twice Booker-shortlisted novelist and professor Chigozie Obioma; and writer and former Archbishop Rowan Williams.
- For a full history of both prizes 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; Ben Okri - poet and author; MT Rainey - strategist, agency

founder and social entrepreneur; Professor Louise Richardson - vice chancellor of the University of Oxford; Nicki Sheard - digital and social media executive; The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts - writer, former 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; Lamia Dabboussy - executive editor, BBC Arts; James Daunt - managing director of Waterstones; Jonathan Douglas CBE - director of the National Literacy Trust; Adam Freudenheim - publisher, Pushkin Press; Daniel Hahn OBE - 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; 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 - Director, Booker Prize Foundation.
- Crankstart, a charitable foundation, is the exclusive funder of The Booker Prize and The International Booker Prize.
- 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 Archive was given on loan in 2003 to Oxford Brookes University, where it now resides.

2021 International Booker Prize shortlist: Book synopses and biographies

At Night All Blood Is Black

By David Diop

Translated by Anna Moschovakis from French

Published by Pushkin Press

Publisher's synopsis:

At Night All Blood is Black captures the tragedy of a young man's mind hurtling towards madness and tells the little-heard story of the Senegalese who fought for France on the Western Front during the First World War.

Alfa Ndiaye and Mademba Diop are two of the many Senegalese *tirailleurs* fighting in the Great War under the French flag. Whenever Captain Armand blows his whistle they climb out of their trenches to attack the blue-eyed enemy. But one day Mademba is mortally

wounded, and without his friend, his more-than-brother, Alfa, is alone amidst the savagery of the trenches, far from all he knows and holds dear. He throws himself into combat with renewed vigour, but soon begins to scare even his own comrades in arms.

The judges said:

‘Horrifying, cruel and continually present in the action it describes, it is partly a personal report from the front in the first world war by a traumatised Senegalese soldier. Like nothing else in terms of tone and power, it is a blinding revelation, an incantatory work of kinship and terror.

David Diop was born in February 1966 in Paris, France, and grew up in Senegal. He now lives in France, where he is a professor of 18th-century literature at the University of Pau. *At Night All Blood is Black* is Diop's second novel. It was shortlisted for 10 major prizes in France and won the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens as well as the Swiss Prix Ahmadou Korouma. It is currently being translated into 13 languages and has already won the Strega European Prize in Italy.

Anna Moschovakis was born in September 1970 in Los Angeles, California, USA. She is a poet, author and translator, whose works include the James Laughlin Award-winning poetry collection *You and Three Others Are Approaching a Lake* and a novel, *Eleanor: or, The Rejection of the Progress of Love*. Her translations from French include Albert Cossery's *The Jokers*, Annie Ernaux's *The Possession*, and *Bresson on Bresson*. She lives in South Kortright, New York.

The Dangers of Smoking in Bed

By Mariana Enríquez

Translated by Megan McDowell from Spanish

Published by Granta Books

Publisher's synopsis:

Written against the backdrop of contemporary Argentina, *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* is populated by unruly teenagers, crooked witches, homeless ghosts, and hungry women. The stories walk the uneasy line between urban realism and horror, but with a resounding tenderness toward those in pain, in fear and in limbo. As terrifying as they are socially conscious, the stories press into the unspoken - fetish, illness, the female body, the darkness of human history - with bracing urgency. A woman is sexually obsessed with the human heart; a lost, rotting baby crawls out of a backyard and into a bedroom; a pair of teenage girls can't let go of their idol; an entire neighbourhood is cursed to death when it fails to respond correctly to a moral dilemma.

The judges said:

‘An extraordinarily intelligent collection of short stories that knowingly uses the tropes of the horror story, the ghost story and even pulp fiction to think about the Argentina's painful past. In the process, it fashions a ‘Magical Realism Version 2.0’, from a subtly feminist perspective. Smart, political, unputdownable.’

Mariana Enríquez was born in 1973 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She is a novelist, journalist and short-story writer. As well as *Things we Lost in the Fire* and *The Dangers of Smoking*

in Bed, she is the author of a collection of travel writings, a novella and three novels. In 2019 her latest novel, *Our Share of Night*, was awarded the prestigious Premio Herralde de Novela. She is an editor at *Página/12*, a newspaper based in Buenos Aires.

Megan McDowell was born in October 1978 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA. Her translations include books by Alejandro Zambra, Samanta Schweblin, Mariana Enríquez, Lina Meruane and Carlos Fonseca. Her short-story translations have been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, *Granta*, *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*, among others. She has won the English PEN award for writing in translation and the Valle-Inclán prize from the Society of Authors, and has been shortlisted or longlisted for the International Booker Prize three times. She has also won a 2020 Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Santiago, Chile.

When We Cease to Understand the World

By Benjamín Labatut

Translated by Adrian Nathan West from Spanish

Published by Pushkin Press

Publisher's synopsis:

Using extraordinary, epoch-defining moments from the history of science, *When We Cease to Understand the World* exists in the territory between fact and fiction, progress and destruction, genius and madness.

Albert Einstein opens a letter sent to him from the Eastern Front during the first world war. Inside, he finds the first exact solution to the equations of general relativity, unaware that it contains a monster that could destroy his life's work. The great mathematician Alexander Grothendieck tunnels so deeply into abstraction that he tries to cut all ties with the world, terrified of the horror his discoveries might cause. Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg battle over the soul of physics after creating two equivalent yet opposed versions of quantum mechanics. Their fight will tear the very fabric of reality, revealing a world stranger than they could have ever imagined.

The judges said:

'A Sebaldian book of grippingly narrated stories on science and scientists that cumulatively become a meditation on the history of human destruction. "How did we get here?" it asks, and answers in utterly original and unexpected ways.'

Benjamín Labatut was born in September 1980 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and grew up in The Hague, Buenos Aires and Lima. He published two award-winning works of fiction prior to *When We Cease to Understand the World*, which is his first book to be translated into English. Labatut lives with his family in Santiago, Chile.

Adrian Nathan West was born in April 1977 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA. He is the author of *The Aesthetics of Degradation* and the forthcoming *Philosophy of a Visit* and translator of more than 20 books from Spanish, Catalan, and German. His essays have appeared in *The Baffler*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and many other journals in print and online. He lives in Spain.

The Employees

By Olga Ravn

Translated by Martin Aitken from Danish

Published by Lolli Editions

Publisher's synopsis:

Structured as a series of witness statements compiled by a workplace commission, *The Employees* follows the crew of the Six-Thousand Ship which consists of those who were born, and those who were made, those who will die, and those who will not. When the ship takes on a number of strange objects from the planet New Discovery, the crew is perplexed to find itself becoming deeply attached to them, and human and humanoid employees alike start aching for the same things: warmth and intimacy, loved ones who have passed away, shopping, child-rearing and our shared, far-away Earth, which now only persists in memory.

Gradually, the crew members come to see their work in a new light, and each employee is compelled to ask themselves whether they can carry on as before - and what it means to be truly living. Wracked by all kinds of longing, *The Employees* probes what it means to be human, emotionally and ontologically, while simultaneously delivering an overdue critique of a life governed by work and the logic of productivity.

The judges said:

'This beautiful and moving novel, set in a workplace – a spaceship some time in the future – is by turns loving and cold, funny and deliberately prosaic; capable of building a sense of existential horror one minute then quotidian comfort and private grief the next. In deceptively simple prose, threaded on a fully achieved and ambitiously experimental structure, it asks big questions about sentience and the nature of humanity. And about what happiness might be.'

Olga Ravn was born in September 1986 in Copenhagen, Denmark. One of Denmark's most celebrated contemporary authors, she is also a literary critic and has written for *Politiken* and several other Danish publications. Alongside Johanne Lykke Holm, she runs the feminist performance group and writing school *Hekseskolen*. She lives in Copenhagen.

Martin Aitken was born in August 1961 in Carlisle, UK. He has translated numerous novels from Danish and Norwegian, including works by Karl Ove Knausgaard, Peter Høeg, Ida Jessen, and Kim Leine. He was a finalist at the U.S. National Book Awards 2018 and received the PEN America Translation Prize 2019 for his translation of Hanne Ørstavik's *Love*. He lives in Sorø, Denmark.

In Memory of Memory

By Maria Stepanova

Translated by Sasha Dugdale from Russian

Published by Fitzcarraldo Editions

Publisher's synopsis:

In Memory of Memory tells the story of how a seemingly ordinary Jewish family somehow managed to survive the myriad persecutions and repressions of the last century. Following the death of her aunt, Maria Stepanova builds the story out of faded photographs, old postcards, letters, diaries, and heaps of souvenirs left behind: a withered repository of a century of life in Russia.

In dialogue with writers like Roland Barthes, W. G. Sebald, Susan Sontag and Osip Mandelstam, *In Memory of Memory* is imbued with rare intellectual curiosity and a wonderfully soft-spoken, poetic voice. Dipping into various forms - essay, fiction, memoir, travelogue and historical documents - Stepanova assembles a vast panorama of ideas and personalities and offers an entirely new and bold exploration of cultural and personal memory.

The judges said:

‘An unclassifiable, *sui generis* book that begins with what you think is going to be a family history, then opens up, in slow degrees, to allow seemingly the whole world to enter. In its seamless fusion of history, memory, essay, meditation, literary criticism it creates its own indelible form, a new shape in the air. An act of truth-telling like no other.’

Maria Stepanova was born in June 1972 in Moscow, Russia. She is a poet, essayist, journalist and the author of 10 poetry collections and three books of essays. She has received several Russian and international literary awards (including the prestigious Andrey Bely Prize and Joseph Brodsky Fellowship). *In Memory of Memory* won Russia’s Bolshaya Kniga Award in 2018. Her collection of poems, *War and the Beasts and the Animals*, is published by Bloodaxe in Sasha Dugdale’s translation in 2021, and is a Poetry Book Society Translation Choice. Stepanova is the founder and editor-in-chief of the online independent crowd-sourced journal *Colta.ru*, which covers the cultural, social and political reality of contemporary Russia. She lives in Moscow.

Sasha Dugdale was born in February 1974 in Sussex, UK. She is a poet, writer and translator and has published five collections of poems with Carcanet Press, most recently *Deformations* in 2020. She won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2016 and in 2017 she was awarded a Cholmondeley Prize for Poetry. She is former editor of *Modern Poetry in Translation* and is poet-in-residence at St John’s College, Cambridge (2018-2021). She lives in Cambridge, UK.

The War of the Poor

By **Éric Vuillard**

Translated by **Mark Polizzotti** from French

Published by **Pan Macmillan, Picador**

Publisher's synopsis:

The history of inequality is a long and terrible one. And it’s not over yet. Short, sharp and devastating, *The War of the Poor* tells the story of a brutal episode from history, not as well-known as tales of other popular uprisings, but one that deserves to be told. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century takes on the powerful and the privileged. But quickly it becomes more about the bourgeoisie. Peasants, the poor living in towns, who are still being promised that equality will be granted to them in heaven, begin to ask

themselves: and why not equality now, here on earth? There follows a furious struggle. Out of this chaos steps Thomas Müntzer, a complex and controversial figure. Sifting through history, Éric Vuillard extracts the story of one man whose terrible and novelistic life casts light on the times in which he lived - a moment when Europe was in flux. Inspired by the recent *gilets jaunes* protests in France: a populist, grassroots protest movement - led by workers - for economic justice. While *The War of the Poor* is about 16th-century Europe, this short polemic has a lot to say about inequality now.

The judges said:

‘From the very first paragraph of this blazing piece of historical fiction Vuillard has the reader transfixed. Set at a time when religious differences sent nations to war and individuals to the pyre, Vuillard’s account of the life of a largely forgotten visionary is both a dazzling piece of historical re-imagining and a revolutionary sermon, a furious denunciation of inequality.’

Éric Vuillard was born in May 1968 in Lyon, France. He is a writer and filmmaker who has written nine award-winning books, including *Conquistadors* (winner of the 2010 Prix Ignatius J. Reilly), and *La bataille d’Occident* and *Congo* (both of which received the 2012 Prix Franz-Hessel and the 2013 Prix Valery-Larbaud). He won the 2017 Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious literary prize, for *L’ordre du jour*. He lives in Rennes, France.

Mark Polizzotti was born in July 1957 in New York, USA. He has translated more than 50 books from French, including works by Gustave Flaubert, Patrick Modiano, Marguerite Duras, André Breton, and Raymond Roussel. His translation of Éric Vuillard’s *The Order of the Day* was a finalist for the French-American Foundation Translation Award. A Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and the recipient of a 2016 American Academy of Arts & Letters Award for Literature, he is the author of 11 books, including *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Best Nonfiction; *Luis Buñuel’s Los Olvidados*; *Bob Dylan: Highway 61 Revisited*; and *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*. He directs the publications programme at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and lives in Brooklyn.

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