From Judging Room to Living Room
A Discussion Guide for Readers

Featuring discussion prompts from this year's judging panel

The Promise
Damon Galgut
Chatto & Windus
What the judges decided

'The Promise' is an expansive family novel that explores the interconnected relationships between members of one family through the sequential lens of multiple funerals. Death assumes here both a closing but also an opening into lives lived. It is an unusual narrative style that balances Faulknerian exuberance with Nabokovian precision, pushes boundaries, and is a testament to the flourishing of the novel in the 21st century. In 'The Promise', Damon Galgut makes a strong, unambiguous commentary on the history of South Africa and of humanity itself that can best be summed up in the question: does true justice exist in this world? The novel's way of tackling this question is what makes it an accomplishment and truly deserving of its place on the shortlist.'

- Chigozie Obioma

About the author

Damon Galgut is a South African playwright and novelist, who wrote his first novel aged 17 and has now been shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize.

His ninth novel, 'The Promise', is on the 2021 Booker shortlist. Galgut is a multi-award-winning author, and two films have been made of his book The Quarry. He grew up in Pretoria, where 'The Promise' is set, and now lives in Cape Town. When asked why he became a writer, he reveals he had lymphoma as a child, during which time he 'learned to associate books and stories with a certain kind of attention and comfort'. He is currently working on a collection of short stories.

The author says...

'No person can stand in for a whole country, especially not this one. But I do feel qualified to say a few things about white South Africa by now. The Swart family is a kind of amalgamation of everything I grew up with in Pretoria, I guess. They’re a mix of English and Afrikaans, and a hodge-podge of creeds and beliefs too. Not unusual for this part of the world. But what makes them ‘representative’ isn’t their characters, it’s the times they’re living through. The book is structured around four funerals, each in a different decade, with a different president in power and a different spirit reigning over the land. Although most of that material is background, it conjures a sense of time passing, and of the larger country changing too.'

Further reading

- Damon Galgut, In a Strange Room
- Damon Galgut, The Good Doctor
- J.M. Coetzee, Disgrace
- Nadine Gordimer, The Conservationist
- William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying
- E. M. Forster, Howards End