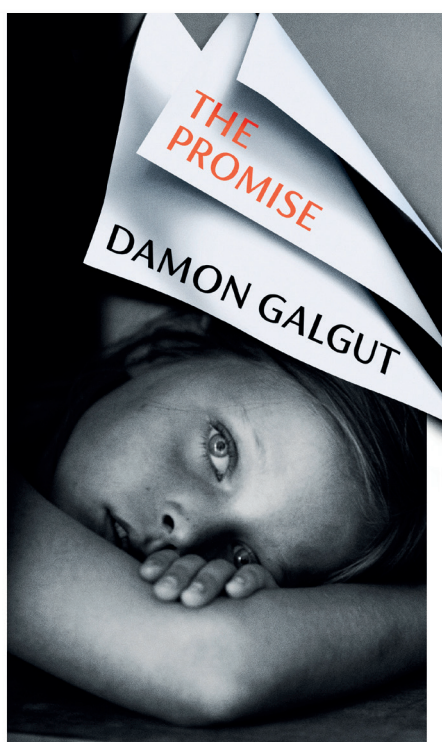


The
2021
Booker
Prize

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

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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

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- The 'promise' of the title is both a literal one and a figurative one about the characters', or the country's, potential. Can you explore that idea?
- What do you make of the narrator's voice: the way it shifts and swoops and becomes almost like a movie camera with its alternating perspectives?
- How does the Swart family stand for what is happening more broadly in South Africa?
- Discuss the supernatural elements of the book
- Towards the end we are faced with the question, not only of whether the original promise can be kept, but whether it was a flawed promise all along. Where do you stand?

About the book

Brutal emotional truths hit home in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, a deft, powerful story of a diminished family and a troubled land.

The narrator's eye shifts and blinks, deliciously lethal in its observation of the crash and burn of a white South African family. On their farm outside Pretoria, the Swarts are gathering for Ma's funeral. The younger generation detests everything the family stands for, not least the failed promise to the Black woman who has worked for them her whole life. After years of service, Salome was promised her own house, her own land, yet somehow, as each decade passes, that promise remains unfulfilled.

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*