

**\*\*Embargoed until 00:01 BST on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June\*\***

## TRIO OF “STRIKING, INTIMATE” COMING-OF-AGE STORIES MAKE DESMOND ELLIOTT PRIZE SHORTLIST

The National Centre for Writing has today (Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June) announced the three titles shortlisted for the 2020 Desmond Elliott Prize. *The Girl with the Louding Voice* by Abi Daré, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* by Okechukwu Nzelu and *That Reminds Me* by Derek Owusu are all in the running to win the £10,000 prize and be named the year’s best debut novel from across the UK and Ireland.

For the first time this year, the Desmond Elliott Prize is being run by NCW as the flagship in its Early Career Awards portfolio, a new year-round platform of support and mentorship, alongside financial assistance for exceptional early career writers.

All three titles on the shortlist grapple with questions of identity and belonging as their young protagonists navigate the maze of modern-day life. Each of these coming-of-age stories also shares an interest in explorations of class difference, faith versus secular life, and the creation of new forms of family, among other major contemporary themes.

Chairing the panel of judges for 2020 is writer, academic and former Desmond Elliott Prize winner Preti Taneja, who is joined by Chief Lead Writer at *The Observer* Sonia Sodha and writer Sinéad Gleeson. Collectively the three judges are tasked with finding the novel they believe is most deserving of being designated the best debut novel of the last 12 months.

**Of the shortlist, Preti Taneja said:** “These three outstanding debuts approach narrative form in very different and exhilarating prose, each mining the possibilities of language to give exceptional voice to unforgettable characters. From Ghanaian story myths to Nigerian patriarchy; from the violence within Cambridge’s ivory towers to the bonds of London’s streets and the longed for liberation of a night out in Manchester’s gay village, each writer pays careful attention to the nuances of speech between people of different generations, cultures and class and succeeds in making worlds we do not want to leave. These novels are striking, intimate studies of bodies in flux and transit through our linked histories; they show us how to seek new families and ways of being whole. They stand as powerful testimonials to individual and collective survival against institutional violence, and the current deprivations of our world.”

The protagonist of Abi Daré’s debut novel, *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, is 14-year-old Adunni, a Nigerian girl who is relentless in her quest to attain an education, the one thing her mother once told her would give her a voice. As a yielding daughter, a subservient wife, and a powerless servant, Adunni is repeatedly told that she is nothing. But armed with the courage, strength and determination to overcome adversity, Adunni has a plan to escape. **About the novel, Preti Taneja**

**said:** “*The Girl with the Louding Voice* is a virtuosic study of female loss, determination, and of the subversive potential of words: it magnificently reveals how language constructs us as humans. With immense skill, Daré creates an irresistible energy and powerfully sustains it on every page.”

In *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* Okechukwu Nzelu tells the story of a half-Nigerian teenager, Nnenna, living in modern-day Manchester with her mother Joanie. As Nnenna approaches womanhood she begins to question her identity; in particular her feelings about being black and brought up by her white single mother. As Nnenna tries to connect with her Igbo-Nigerian identity, her once close and tender relationship with her mother becomes strained. **Preti Taneja said:** “*The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* offers the rare gift of writing that is both poignant and very funny. From race to religion to sexuality, nothing is off-limits in this nuanced celebration of contemporary families, told with great compassion and verve.”

Rounding off the shortlist is *That Reminds Me* by Derek Owusu, a vivid and semi-autobiographical tale of a boy called K, who is fostered as a very young child and grows up in the countryside. At age 11, K is suddenly returned to his birth family and to the very different context of working-class British Ghanaian life in 1990s Tottenham. **Preti Taneja said:** “The traumatised fragments of *That Reminds Me* weave myth with taught observation, juxtaposing violent reality and profound love in moving, surprising sentences. A groundbreaking work of sheer grace and raw honesty that demands – and rewards concentration.”

The Early Career Awards portfolio also includes the University of East Anglia (UEA) New Forms Award, worth £4,000, for an innovative and daring new voice in fiction, and the Laura Kinsella Fellowship, also worth £4,000, to recognise an exceptional writer who has experienced limiting circumstances. The shortlistees for the UEA New Forms Award are Taylor Beidler, Michael Salu and James Smart. The shortlistees for the Laura Kinsella Fellowship are Salli Hansell, K Patrick and Michelle Perkins.

**Peggy Hughes, Programme Director at the National Centre for Writing, said:** “We’re delighted to reveal the shortlisted names for the Desmond Elliott Prize, the Laura Kinsella Fellowship and the UEA New Forms Award: a hugely talented, innovative and exciting set of writers. Alongside our suite of Early Career Awards, thanks to the support of Arts Council England we are creating packages of resources designed to help anybody embarking on the thrilling and consuming act of writing fiction. Advice and camaraderie are priceless and vital to writers on their journey to publication and recognition, and we hope and expect that these resources will help pave the path for future prize-winners.”

The winners of all three awards will be announced on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, and all will benefit from a tailored programme of support from the National Centre for Writing, supported by Arts Council England.

@WritersCentre #DEP20 #EarlyCareerAwards

**For further information please contact Beatrice Edwards at Riot Communications on**



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## Notes to Editors

### 1. About the National Centre for Writing:

The National Centre for Writing (NCW) is a place of discovery, exchange, ideas and learning for writers, literary translators and readers. It champions artistic experimentation, cross-sector collaboration and literary translation to support a vibrant and diverse literary environment in the UK.

Based in the restored and extended 15th century Dragon Hall in the heart of Norwich, England's first UNESCO City of Literature, it explores how writing can inspire and change the world we live in. Its year-round programme of events, festivals and courses reaches over 14,000 people a year with an additional 110,000 engaged online. Through its learning and participation programme it supports 20,000 young people a year and has a commitment to working with those in the most disadvantaged areas. NCW's patrons include Margaret Atwood, JM Coetzee, Kei Miller and Elif Shafak. Its key funders are Arts Council England, Norwich City Council and University of East Anglia.

[www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk](http://www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk)

### 2. About the Desmond Elliott Prize:

The Desmond Elliott Prize is an annual award for a first novel written in English and published in the UK. Worth £10,000 to the winner, the Prize is named after the literary agent and publisher, Desmond Elliott, in memory of his passion for discovering and nurturing emerging authors.

First awarded in 2008, the Prize has a track record of spotting outstandingly talented novelists at the beginning of their careers, with former winners including Eimear McBride for *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* and Claire Fuller for *Our Endless Numbered Days*, as well as Preti Taneja for *We That Are Young*.

Visit [www.desmondelliottprize.org.uk](http://www.desmondelliottprize.org.uk) for more on the history of the Desmond Elliott Prize and [www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/early-career-awards/](http://www.nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/early-career-awards/) for information on the 2020 Prize.

### 3. The Desmond Elliott Prize 2020 shortlist in detail (alphabetically by author surname):

- ***The Girl with the Louding Voice* by Abi Daré – Sceptre**

Adunni is a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl who knows what she wants: an education. This, her mother has told her, is the only way to get a "lounding voice"—the ability to speak for herself and decide her own future. But instead, Adunni's father sells her to be the third wife of a local man who is eager for her to bear him a son and heir. When Adunni runs away to the city,



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hoping to make a better life, she finds that the only other option before her is servitude to a wealthy family.

## **About the Author**

Abi Daré grew up in Lagos, Nigeria and has lived in the UK for eighteen years. She studied law at the University of Wolverhampton and has an M.Sc. in International Project Management from Glasgow Caledonian University as well as an MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck University of London. Abi lives in Essex with her husband and two daughters, who inspired her to write her debut novel.

- ***The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* by Okechukwu Nzelu – Dialogue Books**

As Nnenna Maloney approaches womanhood she longs to connect with her Igbo-Nigerian culture. Her once close and tender relationship with her mother, Joanie, becomes strained as Nnenna begins to ask probing questions about her father, who Joanie refuses to discuss. Nnenna is asking big questions of how to 'be' when she doesn't know the whole of who she is.

## **About the Author**

Okechukwu Nzelu is a writer and teacher. He was born in Manchester in 1988, read English at Girton College, Cambridge and completed the Teach First programme. His work has been published in *Agenda*, *PN Review*, *E-magazine* and *The Literateur* and his essay 'Troubles with God' will be published in the anthology *Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space* (Trapeze, 2019). In 2015 he was the recipient of a New Writing North Award for *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, which is his debut novel.

- ***That Reminds Me* by Derek Owusu - #Merky**

*That Reminds Me* is the story of one young man, from birth to adulthood, told in fragments of memory. It explores questions of identity, belonging, addiction, sexuality, violence, family and religion. It is a deeply moving and completely original work of literature from one of the brightest British writers of today.

## **About the Author**

Derek Owusu is a writer, poet and podcaster from north London. He discovered his passion for literature at the age of twenty-three while studying exercise science at university. Unable to afford a change of degree, Derek began reading voraciously and sneaking into English Literature lectures at the University of Manchester. Derek edited and contributed to *Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*. *That Reminds Me* is his first solo work.

4. **The previous winners of The Desmond Elliott Prize have successfully continued their writing careers and have published further work to great acclaim.**



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- **2019: *Golden Child* by Claire Adam (Faber & Faber)** has since been listed as the one of the 100 most influential novels by BBC News, has won the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers awards for fiction and has been longlisted for the 2020 Jhalak Prize.
- **2018: *We That Are Young* by Preti Taneja (Galley Beggar Press)** has since been published in the U.S. and Canada by A.A Knopf, in India by Penguin Random House, in Germany by CH Beck and in France by Les Éditions de l'Observatoire. It is currently being adapted for television by producer Dina Dattani for Gaumont US.
- **2017: *Golden Hill* by Francis Spufford (Faber & Faber)** was the author's first work of fiction following a number of successful non-fiction titles. It received critical acclaim and also won the 2016 Costa First Novel Award and the 2017 Ondaatje Prize.
- **2016: *The Glorious Heresies* by Lisa McInerney (John Murray)** was also awarded the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction Book of the Year and has been optioned for television by boutique drama production company Fifty Fathoms. McInerney's second novel, *The Blood Miracles*, was published in 2017 and won the Encore Award.
- **2015: *Our Endless Numbered Days* by Claire Fuller (Fig Tree)** has been published to great acclaim in nine countries. Fuller's second novel, *Swimming Lessons*, published in 2017, was shortlisted for the Encore Award. Of her third novel, *Bitter Orange*, the *Guardian* said, 'Fuller is an accomplished and serious writer who has the ability to implant interesting psychological dimensions into plotty, pacy narratives'.
- **2014: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride (Galley Beggar Press/Faber)** was also awarded the inaugural Goldsmiths Prize in 2013, the 2014 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and the 2014 Geoffrey Faber prize. Her second novel, *The Lesser Bohemians*, was published in 2016 and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.
- **2013: *The Marlowe Papers* by Ros Barber (Sceptre)** was also awarded the 2013 Author's Club First Novel Award and longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her second novel, *Devotion*, was published in 2015 and was shortlisted for the Encore Award.
- **2012: *The Land of Decoration* by Grace McCleen (Chatto & Windus)** was shortlisted for the National Book Awards and selected by Richard and Judy for their book club. McCleen has since published *The Professor of Poetry* in 2014 and *The Offering* in January 2015, both with Sceptre. *The Professor of Poetry* was lauded by Hilary Mantel, who called it 'an astonishing and luminous novel... every line is newly felt and freshly experienced'.
- **2011: *Saraswati Park* by Anjali Joseph (Fourth Estate)** also won the Betty Trask Prize and the Vodafone Crossword Book Award for Fiction in India. Her most recent novel, *The Living*, was published in 2016.
- **2010: *The Girl with Glass Feet* by Ali Shaw (Atlantic Books)** was shortlisted for the Costa First Book Award 2009 and longlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award 2009 and the Dylan Thomas Prize 2010. Shaw's most recent novel, *The Trees*, was published in 2016.



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- **2009: *Blackmoor* by Edward Hogan (Simon & Schuster)** was followed by *The Hunger Trace* in 2011, *Daylight Saving* in 2012 and *The Messengers* in 2013. *The Hunger Trace* was shortlisted for the 2012 Encore Award and *Daylight Saving* was shortlisted for the 2013 Branford Boase.
- **2008: *Gifted* by Nikita Lalwani (Viking)** was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2007, shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and nominated for the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year. Lalwani's second novel, *The Village*, was published by Viking in 2012 and was selected as part of the 2013 Fiction Uncovered promotion.