



ANISFIELD-WOLF BOOK AWARDS

PRESENTED BY THE CLEVELAND FOUNDATION

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A Novel Singing Zambia, Poetry from a “Deaf Republic” and a Group Portrait of Anthropology’s Renegades Have All Won the 85th Annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards

CLEVELAND (March 30, 2020) – The Cleveland Foundation today unveiled the winners of its 85th Annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. The 2020 recipients of the only national juried prize for literature that confronts racism and explores diversity are:

- **Eric Foner**, Lifetime Achievement
- **Ilya Kaminsky**, “Deaf Republic,” Poetry
- **Charles King**, “Gods of the Upper Air,” Nonfiction
- **Namwali Serpell**, “The Old Drift,” Fiction

“The new Anisfield-Wolf winners bring us fresh insights on race and diversity,” said Henry Louis Gates Jr. who chairs the jury. “This year, we honor a brilliant, breakout novel that centers Zambia, a book of political poetry 15 years in the making and a riveting history documenting a revolution in Western thought. All is capped by the lifetime achievement of Eric Foner, who has remade our understanding of the Civil War and especially its aftermath.”

Dr. Gates directs the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, where he is also the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor. Joining him in selecting the winners each year are poet Rita Dove, novelist Joyce Carol Oates, psychologist Steven Pinker and historian Simon Schama.

Karen R. Long, manager of the book awards at the Cleveland Foundation, noted the prescience of philanthropist Edith Anisfield Wolf in founding the prize in 1935. “She understood that the best books are fuel to civic justice, as true now as it was during the Great Depression,” Long said. “And just as she and the nation navigated hardship, we hope to learn from them again now. So we are proud to add the 2020 winners to this canon. The new books explore human diversity in riveting style, putting the lie to racism and ableism even as reading them knits us closer together in times when we must be apart.”

Past winners include five writers who later won Nobel prizes – Gunnar Myrdal, Nadine Gordimer, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Toni Morrison and Wole Soyinka. They are among the 248 recipients of the prize.

About the 2020 Winners

Eric Foner is a public intellectual who stands among the most important American historians of the past half century. He is the DeWitt Clinton Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University and only the second person to lead all three major professional organizations in his field: the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association and the Society of American Historians. “Eric Foner is the dean of Reconstruction historians, and is one of the most generous, and genuinely passionate, professors of his generation,” said Dr. Gates. “As a scholar and writer, his footprint is vast.” Three of his books are considered canonical: “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men;” “Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877” and “The Fiery Trial: Abraham

THE JURY

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Rita Dove

Joyce Carol Oates

Steven Pinker

Simon Schama

Lincoln and American Slavery.” This last book won a Pulitzer, a Bancroft and a Lincoln prize; Foner is equally proud of his numerous teaching awards. He retired from the classroom in 2018, continuing to write and lecture. Foner, 77, lives in New York City and in Connecticut with his wife, Lynn Garafola, a dance historian.

Ilya Kaminsky is a celebrated poet, editor and translator whose first book, “Dancing in Odessa,” was published in more than 20 languages. He holds the Bourne Chair in Poetry at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Born in Odessa in 1977, Ilya’s mumps were misdiagnosed by a Soviet doctor who thought the four-year-old had a cold. The mistake left the poet hard-of-hearing. Amid rising antisemitism, Kaminsky’s family won political asylum from the United States in 1993 and resettled in Rochester, New York, where he was fitted with hearing aids. Kaminsky, adept in Russian, Ukrainian and English poetry, became a lawyer first. When “Deaf Republic” arrived, the BBC named Kaminsky “one of the 12 artists that changed the world in 2019.” Anisfield-Wolf Juror Rita Dove said the book haunted her, “a parable that comes to life and refuses to die.” It describes an unnamed country whose citizens can no longer hear one another, set amid political unrest. The book, which contains pictograms of sign language words, became a finalist for the National Book Award. Kaminsky lives with his wife, the poet Katie Farris, in Atlanta.

Charles King is the author of seven nonfiction books, including “Midnight at the Pera Palace” and “Odessa,” which won the National Jewish Book Award in 2011. A professor of international affairs and government relations at Georgetown University, King focuses on nationalism, ethnic politics, the transition from authoritarianism and the relationship between history and the social sciences. It is this last category that animates “Gods of the Upper Air,” a history of five anthropologists who upended many of the racist and sexist verities commonplace a century ago. The title derives from a Zora Neale Hurston phrase. She was among the circle of pioneering social scientists. Under the leadership of Franz Boas they fomented, Anisfield-Wolf Juror Steven Pinker said, “nothing less than one of the epochal changes in the history of Western thought.” He praised the book, also a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle award, as “gripping and beautifully written.” King, 52, lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, the anthropologist and author Maggie Paxson.

Namwali Serpell is a literary critic and fiction writer who spent 18 years working, episodically, on her debut novel, “The Old Drift.” She is a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Born in the Zambian capital of Lusaka in 1980, she grew up near its university, and in Hull, England, and Baltimore. Serpell wrote the opening of “The Old Drift” while a senior at Yale University, and the section about the title settlement along the Zambezi River after she visited the site in 2013. The novel spools out from a fateful collision there in 1904 among a local busboy, an Italian hotelier and a British photographer that Serpell sets reverberating through three generations. The novel romps through Zambian language, politics, history, science and speculative fiction. The novel is “a phenomenal accomplishment, nothing less than a retelling/reimagining of the creation and ‘history’ of Zambia,” observed Anisfield-Wolf Juror Rita Dove. Historian Simon Schama, also a juror, called the book “brave and extraordinarily well done.” Serpell lives in San Francisco, where she is working on a book about her love/hate relationship with the novel “American Psycho.”

The Anisfield-Wolf winners will be honored Oct. 1 in the Connor Palace Theatre in Cleveland, hosted by the Cleveland Foundation and emceed by Jury Chair Gates. The ceremony will be part of the fifth annual Cleveland Book Week slated for Sept. 27-Oct. 4. For additional information, and a complete list of the recipients since 1935, visit www.Anisfield-Wolf.org.

For More Information:

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About the Cleveland Foundation

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