

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Books About Love, Death, War, and a Small Baptist Church Have All Won the 86th Annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards

CLEVELAND (April 5, 2021) – The Cleveland Foundation today unveiled the winners of its 86th Annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. The 2021 recipients of the only national juried prize for literature that confronts racism and explores diversity are:

- **Vincent Brown**, “Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of An Atlantic Slave War,” co-winner, Nonfiction
- **Victoria Chang**, “Obit,” Poetry
- **Samuel R. Delany**, Lifetime Achievement
- **James McBride**, “Deacon King Kong,” Fiction
- **Natasha Trethewey**, “Memorial Drive,” co-winner, Nonfiction

“The new Anisfield-Wolf winners bring us fresh insights on race and the human condition,” said Henry Louis Gates Jr., who chairs the jury. “This year, we honor a brilliant military history, a breakout poetry collection that wrestles with mortality, a novel bursting with love and trouble centered around a Brooklyn church, and a memoir by a daughter reclaiming her mother’s story. All of which is capped by the lifetime achievement of Samuel R. Delany, who has broadened our humanity and sharpened our minds through his groundbreaking science fiction.”

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 justice, as true now as it was during the Great Depression,” Long said. “We are proud to add the 2021 winners to this canon. The new books explore human diversity in riveting style, giving us new ways to understand and see each other, knitting us together by reading into some of our national strife.”

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 253 recipients of the prize.

About the 2021 Winners

Vincent Brown is an innovative scholar who combines impeccable historical research with mapping and visual tools. He is the Charles Warren Professor of American History and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. “Tacky’s Revolt” is a groundbreaking investigation into the roots, combatants, cartography and reverberations of the largest slave revolt in the 18th Century British Atlantic world. The book, and its accompanying website, has reached readers in 184 countries. Calling it brilliant, Gates notes that “Tacky’s Revolt” tracks the strategy and agency of the uprisers in Jamaica. Brown, 53, also wrote the acclaimed “The Reaper’s Garden” and created a one-hour documentary, “Herskovits and the Heart of Blackness,” which aired on PBS in 2010. He lives with his family in Cambridge, Mass.

Victoria Chang is a celebrated poet, children’s book author and professor who grew up in Detroit and now lives with her family in Los Angeles. Her first two degrees, from the University of Michigan and Harvard University, are in Asian Studies, then she earned an MBA at Stanford University. Restless in the financial sector, Chang earned an MFA at Warren Wilson College and now serves on Antioch University’s faculty. In “Obit,” she distilled her grief after her mother died into a series of prose poems, structured like obituaries, for all she had lost in the world. Anisfield-Wolf juror Rita Dove wrote, “somehow Chang, 51, manages to bring in the Chinese diaspora, her own

THE JURY

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Rita Dove

Joyce Carol Oates

Steven Pinker

Simon Schama

motherhood, the existential divide between mother/daughter/father/grandchildren and the infernal circuitry of hospitals. As a reader, I feel hollowed out and full to bursting.”

Samuel R. Delany is a pioneer of gay literature and a science fiction icon, as comfortable at academic conferences as he is at comic book conventions. His gifts as a novelist and critic put him on the creative writing faculties of the University of Massachusetts and Temple University. Born in New York City, Delany had won four Nebula Awards and a Hugo prize by the time he was 27. The Lambda Literary Report named him one of the 50 most important people in changing the culture’s view of gayness over a half century. His books include the novels “Babel-17,” “The Einstein Intersection,” “Dhalgren” and the memoir “The Motion of Light in Water.” Anisfield-Wolf juror Steven Pinker observed that the writer’s “ambition, scope and creativity are extraordinary.” Delany, 79, lives in Philadelphia with his partner Dennis Rickett.

James McBride is the first Anisfield-Wolf winner in nonfiction, for “The Color of Water,” to be honored in fiction. A celebrated novelist, musician, composer, Spike Lee collaborator and a National Humanities Medalist, McBride was praised by Barack Obama for “displaying the character of the American family.” A fictionalized version of his parents’ Baptist church in Brooklyn, N.Y., anchors and animates “Deacon King Kong,” a rollicking tale set spinning in 1969 when an elderly, alcoholic deacon shoots off the ear of a notorious drug dealer. “It is robust and funny, confronting tragedy with an ebullient comic spirit that repudiates disaster and resounds just right,” said Anisfield-Wolf juror Joyce Carol Oates. McBride, 63, teaches at New York University, lives in New Jersey, is a “choir dad” and the father of three grown children.

Natasha Trethewey is a former U.S. Poet Laureate and a 2007 Pulitzer winner for “Native Guard” who wrote “Memorial Drive” to reclaim her mother, born Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough, from becoming a footnote to her daughter’s more prominent story. Born in Mississippi on Confederate Memorial Day to a Black mother and a white father, the poet explores how she embodies some of the Civil War’s persistent contradictions. “Memorial Drive” investigates the life and death of Turnbough, killed when her daughter was 19 by a man she had divorced. “This book is a compelling portrait of race in America, from the 1960s on, and a thrilling addition to American literature,” writes Anisfield-Wolf juror Simon Schama. Trethewey, 54, lives with her husband in Evanston, Ill., where she is on the Northwestern University faculty.

The Anisfield-Wolf winners will be honored during the first week of October, details to follow. The awards will anchor the sixth annual Cleveland Book Week. For additional information, a complete list of the recipients since 1935 and to learn more about The Asterisk* podcast featuring previous winners, visit www.Anisfield-Wolf.org.

For More Information:

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About the Cleveland Foundation

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