



**The Royal Society
of Literature**



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Videos: [Emma Thompson](#); [Gary Younge](#); [Edmund de Waal](#); [Sharmaine Lovegrove](#);
[Paul Muldoon](#)

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- **ROYAL SOCIETY OF LITERATURE ANNOUNCES 44 APPOINTMENTS OF FELLOWS AND HONORARY FELLOWS AND THE 2021 BENSON MEDALLIST**
- **ALSO ANNOUNCED: *LITERATURE MATTERS: READING TOGETHER* - A 3-YEAR PROJECT SUPPORTED BY THE OLD POSSUM'S PRACTICAL TRUST**



RSL Fellows and Honorary Fellows 2021

The Royal Society of Literature (RSL), the charity that represents the voice of literature in the UK, has today announced 44 appointments and a new project: Literature Matters: Reading Together.

FELLOWS

29 new Fellows have been announced. To be nominated, a writer must have published two works of outstanding literary merit, and nominations must be seconded by an RSL Fellow or Honorary Fellow. The following are announced today: **Anne Applebaum** (*Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine; Gulag: A History*); **Zawe Ashton** (*for all the women who thought they were Mad; Harm's Way*); **Sally Bayley** (*Girl with Dove; No Boys Play Here*); **Homi Bhabha** (*The Location of Culture; Nation and Narration*); **Anna Burns** (*Milkman; No Bones*); **Cressida Cowell** (*How to Train Your Dragon; The Wizards of Once*); **Robert Crawford** (*The Scottish Ambassador; The Bard: Robert Burns*); **Margreta de Grazia** (*The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare; Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*); **Edmund de Waal** (*The Hare with Amber Eyes; The White Road*); **Will Eaves** (*Murmur; The Alphabet Therapist*); **Reni Eddo-Lodge** (body of award-winning journalism; *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*); **Patrick Gale** (*Mother's Boy; A Place Called Winter*); **Vesna Goldsworthy** (*Chernobyl Strawberries; Gorsky*); **Jen Hadfield's** (*The Stone Age; Nigh-No-Place*); **Jeremy Hooker** (*Selected Poems 1965–2018; Art of Seeing: essays on poetry, landscape painting and photography*); **Alison Light** (*Mrs Woolf and the Servants; Common People: The History of an English Family*); **Tessa McWatt** (*Shame On Me: An Anatomy of Race and Belonging; Higher Ed*); **Justin Marozzi** (*Islamic Empires: Fifteen Cities that Define a Civilization; Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*); **Gita Mehta** (*Karma Cola; A River Sutra*); **Maggie O'Farrell** (*Hamnet; After You'd Gone*); **Peter Pomerantsev** (*Nothing is True and Everything is Possible; This is Not Propaganda*); **David Runciman** (*The Confidence Trap; How Democracy Ends*); **SF Said** (*Varjak Paw; The Outlaw Varjak Paw*); **Anne Sebba** (*Battling for News; Les Parisiennes*); **Jean Sprackland** (*These Silent Mansions; Sleeping Keys*); **Rebecca Stott** (*Ghostwalk; The Coral Thief*); **Emma Thompson** (Peter Rabbit stories; screenplays including *Sense and Sensibility*); **Verna Wilkins** (*Dave and the Tooth Fairy; The Life of Stephen Lawrence*) and **Gary Younge** (*Another Day in the Death of America, A Chronicle of Ten Short Lives; The Speech, The Story Behind Martin Luther King's Dream*).

Maggie O'Farrell said: *'It's an absolute joy to be a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. It was such a thrill to receive the invitation. I think the key word for me is that it's a Society, it's a fellowship. Being a writer is quite a solitary life: for the most part, it's just you and your characters, or you and your page, or you and your computer. So, the idea that there's this fellowship, a group of people who are all joining together with one purpose - to promote and cultivate literary excellence - is wonderful. It's a really lovely counterbalance to the solitude of being a writer.'*

HONORARY FELLOWS

15 new Honorary Fellows are announced: esteemed literary agents **Clare Alexander** and **Jenny Brown** and **Gill Coleridge**; critic and academic **Jon Cook**; CEO of the National Literacy Trust **Jonathan Douglas**; renowned publishers **Kadija Sesay**, **Christopher MacLehose**, **Alistair Niven**, **Ruthie Petrie**, **Simon Prosser** and **Sharmaine Lovegrove**; founder and Executive Director of Give A Book **Victoria Gray**; founder of the Hosking Houses Trust **Sarah Hosking**; journalist and literary editor **Fiammetta Rocco** and Director of the Booker Prize Foundation **Gaby Wood**.

Sharmaine Lovegrove said: *'I am so deeply honoured to be elected as an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. It means that there is a true understanding of the work I've*

been doing over the past not just four years as a publisher but twenty years throughout my career in the publishing industry, where I've focussed on championing under-represented voices and great literature, and those things are really important to the RSL so it's just an amazing honour to be part of that.'

BENSON MEDAL

Founded in 1916 by scholar, author and RSL Fellow A.C. Benson, the Benson Medal honours service to literature across a whole career. This year the Benson Medal has been awarded to **Alastair Niven**. Born in Edinburgh, Alastair has held academic positions at the Universities of Ghana, Leeds, Stirling, Aarhus, London and Oxford. He was Director General of the Africa Centre for six years. Uniquely he was Director of Literature at the Arts Council of Great Britain, Arts Council England and the British Council. For twelve years he was Principal of Cumberland Lodge, Windsor. He was President of English PEN, 2003-7. He has written critical books and articles on many authors, including Chinua Achebe, Mulk Raj Anand, D. H. Lawrence, and Raja Rao. His autobiography was published in 2021.

Alastair Niven said: *'It never occurred to me that I might myself become a recipient of an award like this and to be part of that lineage stretching right back to the early days of Lytton Strachey and then through people like Forster, who I incidentally met when I was at Cambridge, very briefly, a shy and rather delightful man who you used to see shuffling into dinner every evening. And then later people I'd met and written on like R.K. Narayan, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka. I love to see that I am in the company of Susheila Nasta, Liz Calder, Boyd Tonkin and Margaret Busby, a very long-standing friend, and so many others. It means a huge amount to me to get this Medal. I feel really, really honoured by it.'*

Dame Marina Warner, President of the RSL said: *'There is cause for celebration in spite of the horrors of the last year: 44 new Fellows and Honorary Fellows have been elected to join us in 2021. As President and on behalf of the whole Fellowship, I congratulate and welcome them all very warmly indeed. Everyone in the RSL is delighted by the range and brilliance of their work, and looks forward to saluting them in person as soon as we can. During lockdown and its aftermath, books – in every format across media - have proved a lifeline for thousands of readers and, in spite of the difficulties for many of us, public awareness has grown about how much literature really matters.'*

Daljit Nagra, Chair of the RSL *"In everything we do, the RSL works to bring writers and readers together, to draw people together in a shared love of literature, and through that sharing of great writing to enrich each other's lives. The new Fellows and Honorary Fellows announced today, alongside our Reading Together programme for young people, all pay testament to the vitality of writing in the UK and give a sign of what literature can do to shape society, and to change lives."*

LITERATURE MATTERS: READING TOGETHER - A THREE-YEAR PROJECT SUPPORTED BY THE OLD POSSUM'S PRACTICAL TRUST

Supporting young people to read for pleasure in difficult times.

With data showing that children who are engaged with reading are three times more likely to have positive mental wellbeing than children who don't, the RSL wants to make recreational reading accessible to young people across the UK.

National Literacy Trust research has shown that 1 in 11 disadvantaged children in the UK say that they don't have a book of their own. Additional research shows that the longer children keep an enjoyment of reading going, the greater the benefits are in the classroom; and children who enjoy reading are three times more likely to have good mental wellbeing than children who don't.

In a year that has challenged us all, we want to recognise the power books have to help us through times of hardship. **Prominent RSL Fellows and Honorary Fellows – including those newly elected in 2021 – will be matched with year 8/9 classes in the most deprived areas of the UK.** The Fellow will select a text that impacted their life when they were a young person, and physical copies will be sent out to every pupil in the class, supported by UK publishers. Alongside the books, each student will receive a goody bag to support them in their reading as well as weekly video updates from their Fellow throughout the summer break. On returning to school in the autumn, each school's Fellow will host an informal virtual book club to discuss the text and give the young people the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions. The students and their families will also be offered free spaces at the RSL's events. The RSL aims for those young people who are experiencing the most significant 'learning gap' due to the pandemic to be supported in reading purely for enjoyment, and finding their own way into the UK's literary culture.

Schools include **Mulberry Schools in London, Kirkby High School in Merseyside, Q3 Academy Tipton in the West Midlands, Newport High in Newport and Malone College in Belfast.** This programme has been supported by publishers including Faber & Faber MacMillan Collector's Library and Penguin Random House, who have kindly donated copies of the chosen texts to schools.

'All at Newport High are thrilled to be taking part in the Literature Matters: Reading Together programme. The students are excited to discover who our Fellow will be and we are grateful to the Royal Society of Literature for providing us with the opportunity to enjoy reading together through the summer.' Sarah Cocchiara, Teacher at Newport High

Literature Matters: Reading Together Ambassadors and their chosen texts are:

- Emma Thompson – *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* by Alan Garner
- Daljit Nagra – *Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake
- Paul Muldoon – *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson
- Edmund De Waal – *The Art Book* edited by Phaidon
- Kadija Sesay – *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe
- SF Said – *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- Patrick Gale – *Metamorphosis* by Kafka

Emma Thompson said: *'I was no less than astonished to be invited to become a Fellow of the RSL and thrilled to be taking part in the Reading Together programme which reminded me that reading and then talking about books can be one of life's greatest pleasures. I shall never stop being grateful for the part books of all kinds have played in my life, for what I've learnt from them and what I hope to learn in the future.'*

Paul Muldoon said: *'There are many books we read when we're 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 that impress us at that age. We come back to them when we're 23 or 33 and, actually, we find they're not quite as good as we remember. We keep changing as people; we move on, our tastes change. We become a little more sophisticated; maybe we become less sophisticated. One way or another, things change. Treasure Island is a book that deepens as I get older — in its depiction of characters, of scenes, of human relations. It's a book that gets better the more one reads it.'*

RSL 200 Initiatives Update

Following the launch of three new initiatives – **RSL Open**, **RSL International Writers** and **Sky Arts RSL Writers Awards** - in the RSL's 200th year, open submissions for recommendations have now closed and are being assessed by the panels.

Over two years, the **RSL Open** programme will elect an unprecedented 60 new Fellows from communities, backgrounds and experiences currently under-represented in UK literary culture, including writers of colour, LGBTQ+ writers, writers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, disabled writers and writers outside of London, to ensure the diversity of the UK's literary culture is reflected in their Fellowship. Readers and writers from across the UK were asked to recommend writers for nomination who are now being considered by a panel made up of some of the UK's most prolific writers. **Bernardine Evaristo** is Chair alongside **Jay Bernard**, **Vahni Capildeo**, **Ian Duhig**, **Cynan Jones**, **Val McDermid**, **Daljit Nagra** (RSL Chair), **Nikesh Shukla**, **Ali Smith**, **Sinéad Morrissey**, **Jack Thorne**, **Colm Tóibín** and **Eley Williams**. The writers elected to Fellowship in the first year of the programme will be announced in summer 2022.

RSL International Writers programme will recognise the contribution of writers across the globe to literature in English, and the power of literature to transcend borders and cultures to bring people together. As with RSL Open, readers and writers were asked to recommend writers outside the UK for nomination. **Daniel Hahn** is Chair alongside a panel of Fellows and Honorary Fellows including **Lisa Appignanesi**, **Bibi Bakare-Yusuf**, **Syima Aslam**, **Max Porter**, **Sasha Dugdale**, **Philippe Sands**, **Sophie Collins** and **Elif Shafak**. The panel will nominate the RSL International Writers, who will then be elected by Council in the autumn.

Sky Arts RSL Writers Awards, offering one year of mentoring from RSL Fellows to emerging writers of colour, will be announced in July 2021. The initiative is led by Sky Arts Ambassador **Bernardine Evaristo**, and mentors across screenwriting, fiction, non-fiction, poetry and playwriting are RSL Fellows **Tanika Gupta**, **Irenosen Okojie**, **Colin Grant**, **Pascale Petit** and **Roy Williams**.

ENDS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

BIOGS

Full biographies for all of this year's Fellows, Honorary Fellows and the Benson Medal Award winner are available to download [here](#).

The Royal Society of Literature (RSL)

Founded in 1820, the RSL is the UK's charity for the advancement of literature. We act as a voice for the value of literature, engage people in appreciating literature, and encourage and honour writers. <https://rsliterature.org/>

The RSL is grateful to the Old Possum's Practical Trust for supporting these programmes.