

2023 Cinnamon Literature Award Adjudication

31.01.2024.

Once again the literature award has brought in an extraordinary number of diverse entries, making the reading a pleasure and the decisions difficult. We are always looking for manuscripts that show inventiveness and ambition, which doesn't mean they have to come with loud bells and whistles, but that linguistic dexterity, fully-realised characters, attention to detail... matter. And we are always aware of the pitfalls of 'judging' writing that that covers such a huge spectrum of form and genre. Ultimately, we want to be convinced by a manuscript that is coherent within itself, the character novel whose characters haunt us when we finish reading, the poetry collection that opens up a perspective that is at once lucid and deeply resonant, the short story collection that invites new ways of looking at the world. Of course, on any given Tuesday we might have decided slightly differently, but the manuscripts on the long list all impressed us because they were not only well-crafted but also taking some risks, using language in fresh ways, leaving gaps for the reader to immerse in them rather than bludgeoning us with over-writing, communicating with passion and energy and, above all, they rang true. As readers we want to meet another creature—whether human or mythical or a mountain telling his story. We want to feel that the world created for us is authentic, even if it is also fantastical or futuristic. The manuscripts that made it to the short-list in particular had all of this in abundance.

But what if your manuscript isn't on the short list or the long list?

Keep writing! Keep honing your craft, keep trying different opportunities, keep the faith. Writing takes a huge amount of commitment and to produce a novel or poetry collection or short story collection or hybrid work is not easy. A lot of people mentioned in their synopsis that this was their first novel or collection. Some of these were already impressive. Some of them are on this list. But some of us take longer and there is nothing wrong with that.

We are grateful to everyone who entered. Thank you for supporting Cinnamon Press in this way and for trusting us with your work.

If you made it to the long list, congratulations. These works caught our attention, had a sense of voice and engaged us. We hope to read more of your work in future and if you haven't mentored with Cinnamon Press we would be happy to have a submission from you and to offer you a 10% discount on the fees as a thank you for supporting the work we do.

The longlist:

Brian Baker *Oona, the Sky*

Deb Baker *Prayer to See with Clarity*

Yvonne Baker *Light still, light turning*

Sarah Barr *Family in the Museum*

Carol Baxendale *White Space*

Sylvia Bluck *The Ministry of Time*
Sara Boyes *Another World to Walk In*
Dianne Bown-Wilson *The Incompatibility of Fish*
Denise Bundred *Oils in the Blood*
Elaine Briggs *Cusp*
Kate Carne *Undercover Kid*
Stephanie Carty *Homesick*
Radostina Christova *The Fabergé Girl*
Guinevere Clark *Gift of Venus*
Jean Colonomos *Unmoored*
Irene Cunningham *Albatross*
Andrew Dutton *Outsiders*
Tim Dwyer *Luke Nilan Writes Again*
Jenny Epstein *This I Have Done For You*
Lizzie Fincham *Desire Paths*
Stephen Ford *No Free Speech For Hate*
Alison Gorman *A Woman Talks to Her Tongue*
Louis Hall *Ezrock*
Sophie Holland *Can I Start at the Beginning*
Karen Howard *The Search Identity Thieves*
Christopher M James *Vanishing Points*
Susan Jordan *Belonging*
Sue Lee *The Bellagio Secret*
Arathi Menon *Da*
Claire Mitchell *Felled*
Sue Moules *Numinous*
Mary Neal *Tundra*
Audrey Niven *Home*
Christopher North *Lauds*

Evangelina Opoku-Nyarko *House of Guinea and Mina*
David Pearson *Seeds of Love*
Rick Phelps *The Tall Tale of Little Nothing*
Diana Powell *The Keepers of Hand-me-down Tales & The French Artist's Daughter*
Sarah Reader Harris *Sightings*
Joanne Rush *The Girl in the Locket*
Pnina Shinebourne *This Is How the Evil Eye Does It*
Paul Simeï-Barton *From the Hollow of a Sling*
Jacqueline Thompson *Tadrowski Needlework*
Andrea Turner *Rewilding*
Gail Webb *Nancy's Blushes*
Robin Lindsay Wilson *Lullabies for Grown-ups*

Honing this down to a reasonably sized short list was no easy feat. Even though decisions had to be made with a lot of careful reading, we produced a rather longer short list this year because we felt it was important to recognise the quality of the writing rather than have an artificial cut-off point.

So the (not very) short list:

Brian Baker *Oona, the Sky*
Yvonne Baker *Light still, light turning*
Carol Baxendale *White Space*
Sara Boyes *Another World to Walk In*
Denise Bundred *Oils in the Blood*
Elaine Briggs *Cusp*
Radostina Christova *The Fabergé Girl*
Guinevere Clark *Gift of Venus*
Irene Cunningham *Albatross*
Andrew Dutton *Outsiders*
Jenny Epstein *This I Have Done For You*
Lizzie Fincham *Desire Paths*
Alison Gorman *A Woman Talks to Her Tongue*
Sophie Holland *Can I Start at the Beginning*

Karen Howard *The Search Identity Thieves*

Mary Neal *Tundra*

Pnina Shinebourne *This Is How the Evil Eye Does It*

Paul Simeï-Barton *From the Hollow of a Sling*

Andrea Turner *Rewilding*

Robin Lindsay Wilson *Lullabies for Grown-ups*

Having a longer short list naturally made the final honing to a list of finalists extremely difficult. The titles on this list are extremely strong and it was a privilege to read the manuscripts. These are writers who have honed their craft but also gone deeper and we often found ourselves in awe at a beautiful phrase or eagerly wanting to know what happened next. They took us around the globe and showed us humanity in so many guises with prose or poetry that was observant, precise and had all its senses open. Every one of these manuscripts deserves to be published and find readers, but we still had to go on making choices. So here is our list of the five finalists:

Brian Baker *Oona, the Sky*

Yvonne Baker *Light still, light turning*

Elaine Briggs *Cusp*

Guinevere Clark *Gift of Venus*

Paul Simeï-Barton *From the Hollow of a Sling*

The final decision was so hard and we went back and forth many times. If we had endless time and resources we would have scooped up all five of these excellent manuscripts. And this is why we loved them:

Brian Baker, *Oona, the Sky*

Tracking Oona from childhood on the Essex marshes in 1925 to Bardsey Manor, where she becomes a radar operator in the 40s, and on to Jodrell Bank Observatory in the 60s, this is a narrative collection of extraordinary range and inventiveness. The form moves with ease across lyric free verse, prose fiction, and intertextual sources that take us from how malaria is transmitted to the folklore of Oona's native Essex and East Anglia and beyond. *Oona, the Sky* is one of the most formally innovative collections I've encountered, willing to take risks and able to pull them off. A remarkable collection that gives a fresh perspective on voice and listening.

Yvonne Baker *Light still, light turning*

Tonally beautiful with a quality that bridges exterior and interior worlds, *Light still, light turning* is full of exquisite phrases and lucid images. Shifting with ease from lyrical narrative poems to contemplative pieces that never become abstract, Yvonne Baker writes with light touch, that belies the skill and control at work in every poem. There is not a false note here. Form and content support one another and we are immersed

in world that aches and delights and carries us on its rhythms of loss and love and its bittersweet acknowledgment of change. This is a finely-honed collection, at once elegant and searching.

Elaine Briggs *Cusp*

There is a density of imagery in *Cusp* that speaks to a wonderful exuberance of spirit and a lively mind. A crowd of ideas jostles in these pieces, but the rhythm and imagery goes far beyond mere ideas. The poems sing off the page, create worlds, make leaps of imagination and delight us with their confident voice and assured tone. We find ourselves unsure of whether we are in the real or another world, yet always in safe hands. This is an original collection, full of linguistic acrobatics and perspectives that give us pause. The emotional charge of every poem is vivid, but not performative. We are asked to engage, to think, to upend expectations, to delve as deeply into our own unconscious as the poet has into her own. We are asked to care. In this liminal space on the *Cusp*, it's a challenge we should rise to.

Guinevere Clark *Gift of Venus*

In a collection that explores motherhood with a kaleidoscopic eye, Guinevere Clark constantly finds fresh perspectives. Inhabiting the borders between motherhood and the natural world, particularly through the edge-spaces of the coastline of south-west Wales, she delivers precise and surprising imagery in poems that are formally deft and linguistically dexterous. There are big themes at play here: questions of fertility and gender, of domestic abuse and the extremes of suffering and joy, but there is nothing didactic at work. Instead we are invited in to the experience at the heart of each piece. A deeply embodied and highly accomplished collection.

Paul Simei-Barton *From the Hollow of a Sling*,

Paul Simei-Barton's novel is as impressive as it is ambitious. Taking two historical figures, the brilliant philosopher of science, Karl Popper, the equally impressive thinker, Gershom Scholem, a pioneering Zionist who looked to forgotten traditions of Jewish mysticism to suggest ways of co-existing with the Palestinian people, the novel moves from Vienna in 1918, to the Weimar Republic in Berlin between the Wars, where Popper's sister Hanya becomes a cabaret dancer after the breakdown of a relationship and from there to New Zealand, where Popper takes refuge as an academic after becoming disillusioned with the socialist utopian politics that he has seen brutally repressed. This is a novel of huge passions: passion for ground-breaking, scientific thinking; for esoteric Kabbalah; for Zionism; for the arguments between these positions and the passion between Hanya and her lover, Max, whose relationship is made and broken and made again as the Gestapo close in and flight becomes increasingly perilous. Written in supply prose, there is an immediacy here that holds attention, that makes the reader hold their breath as the stakes are raised and hard decisions are made. A love story, a novel that resonates deeply with contemporary political polarisation and suffering, and a story of huge intelligence and range, *From the Hollow of a Sling* is a significant achievement.

How could we possibly choose between such talented and dedicated finalists? In one sense, we couldn't get it wrong, they all deserve to be published. But we also owed it to these writers to make a decision. So we are delighted to congratulate Elaine Briggs as this year's winner. *Cusp* is so fresh, so distinctive, so

bursting with life while willing to touch the depths that we couldn't walk away from it. *Cusp* will be published in Spring 2025 during Cinnamon Press's 20th anniversary year.

And an addendum

Last year we short listed Mark Wagstaff's *Mascara*. We loved the novel and it was so close so we asked Mark if he would be happy to do some more honing and bring it back to us after a year. He did and the novel will also be published by Cinnamon in 2025, our 20th anniversary year. This is what we wrote about the novel in the adjudication last year:

“There is not an ounce of complacent memesis in *Mascara*. Self-aware and gently satirical, this is quintessentially transgressive avant-pop at its riotous best—a million miles an hour, yet always under the author's control. In this high octane story the protagonist is pure post-modernism—how does a woman function as a killer in the business world while becoming the perfect wife and mother, especially when she actually *is* a contract killer? Immersed in her story, we feel we're watching a Yakuza movie, yet this is London—the familiar defamiliarised. Loud, bright and brash on the surface, *Mascara* raises deep questions about corruption at the heart of society and the gender expectations that go along with this. Hugely entertaining and deadly serious, this is an unstoppable novel.”

Watch out for it and get your copy when it comes out.