



The Portico Library & Gallery

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PRESS RELEASE

THE PORTICO PRIZE FOR LITERATURE 2008

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PORTICO PRIZE-WINNERS ANNOUNCED AT LITERATI EVENT IN MANCHESTER TOWN HALL. SALLIE DAY FOR HER NOVEL 'PALACE OF STRANGE GIRLS' SET IN BLACKPOOL AND CATHERINE BAILEY FOR 'BLACK DIAMONDS' A HISTORICAL MYSTERY BROUGHT TO LIFE.

Two prize-winners for the 2008 Portico Prize were announced at a literary dinner set in the sumptuous surroundings of Manchester Town Hall's on the evening of Thursday 13 November. Both winners are first time authors and fought off competition from a field of 115 books with some very distinguished writers as contenders. Nine out of the twelve short-listed authors attended the event with their publishers and agents and this made the celebration of the prize all the more special this year.

Sallie Day, from Burnley, only started writing after her last child left home for University and she found herself at a 'loose end'. Encouraged by her husband, Sallie embarked on a Creative Writing course which led to an MA at Manchester University's Centre for New Writing. Her agents auctioned the book and it was actually sold on her 55th birthday. As the winner of the Portico Prize Fiction category, Sallie was presented with a cheque for £4,000 for 'Palace of Strange Girls' set in Blackpool in 1959. The novel is powerfully evocative of Lancashire in the 1950s, a time when cotton mills were closing and people were trying to get back to a normal life after the war but were unable to escape the past.

In the Non-Fiction category, Catherine Bailey also collected a prize of £4,000. Catherine gave up her full-time job in London as a maker of successful television series and documentaries and turned down offers of work to carry out research for her newly commissioned book about Wentworth House and the generations of the Fitzwilliam family who owned the vast estate. Catherine first came across Wentworth in 1995 when she was researching a television documentary. The great house with its shuttered windows seemed totally neglected and unknown to most people outside the immediate area of South Yorkshire. Catherine admits that the house came to 'haunt me' and says that 'the more I discovered, the more intriguing it became'. Another draw to the project was the story of the link between the later Fitzwilliam's wealth and the coal industry. Having lived in a mining community for several months when working on a documentary about miners she felt close to the people who lived in these close-knit but poverty-stricken families. Just as fascinating is the history of the Fitzwilliam family itself that includes inheritance fights, rumours of a changeling earl, war heroism and a tragic connection to the Kennedy family.

The judges of The Portico Prize were greatly impressed by the high standard of the books this year which can be partly attributed to the extension of the prize to include entries from the whole of the North of England.

The complementary and lively panel of judges this year have been Mike Harding, writer, photographer and musician amongst other attributes; Paul Magrs, award-winning young and adult fiction author and Senior Lecturer in creative writing; Libby Tempest, Cultural Services Manager for Manchester Libraries and Regional Manager for the National Year of Reading events. Although guided by the rules of the competition the judges made several innovations. The generosity of the sponsors The Zochonis Trust and Lane-Smith Shindler allowed them to make two prizes each worth £4,000 to the best Fiction and Non-Fiction. The guidance that the books should be of 'literary merit and of general interest' led the judges to make an interesting and eclectic selection. The sheer variety of the books short-listed was a real tribute to the quality of writing that is taking place in the context of the North and all the authors should be celebrated for their skill and craftsmanship.

'The Times' described 'The Damned United' by David Peace as 'probably the best novel ever written about sport'. It controversially takes us into the mind of Brian Clough during the forty four days in 1974 that he was manager of Leeds United. This book is being made into a film starring Martin Sheen. 'Sweet Mandarin' by local restaurateur Helen Tse tells the story of the courageous true story of three generations of Chinese women who have made Manchester their home. This a beautifully written account of immigration and integration. 'Rebel Girls' by Jill Liddington tracks the story of the campaigners who took the message of female suffrage across the North. It was commended as being meticulously researched and tells the story of previously unsung heroines.

The Fiction shortlist had seen three debut novels... Judith Allnatt, Ross Raisin and Sallie Day. Both Judith Allnatt's 'A Mile of River' and Ross Raisin's 'God's Own Country' are set in the countryside but neither book espouses the Romantic notion of rural idylls and contented people. Both books deal with the effects of rural isolation and disturbed adolescence. Each has won critical

acclaim. Michael Morpugo has described 'A Mile of River' as 'A novel of rare insight, exquisitely written.' "God's own Country" has drawn praise from JM Coetzee and Colm Toibin. Judith Allnat, on her return to Manchester after twenty seven years was thrilled with the occasion and with the success of 'A Mile of River'. 'Not bad for a first novel', she commented. Ross Raisin is surely a literary star of the future. He hasn't given up his day job as a waiter in London but was fresh from The Dylan Thomas prize in Wales (worth £60,000) where he was one of the six finalists.

Crime writing barrister John Connor, author of 'A Childs Game', was short-listed for his latest novel 'Falling', which sees the fourth instalment of a series about a female DC. Her character is based on a real life undercover police operative who was rumoured to have fallen in love with a man she was supposed to be targeting. John Connor came across this story when he was working as a prosecutor in London. There was a buzz of excitement as Judge Mike Harding read from 'Falling' and there were more than a few criminal lawyers who bought the book on the evening and were looking forward to reading their copy signed by the author.

Helen Walsh won the Betty Trask Prize for her first novel 'Brass' and when this young and beautiful Warrington born author came to the Portico Fiction readings during The Manchester Literary Festival those in the audience made it clear that her books have a constituency that transcends class, age and race. Her second book 'Once Upon A Time in England' opens in 1970s Warrington. It tells the story of Irish Robbie, his Malaysia-born wife Susheela and their children Vincent and Ellie, as they grow up amid the menace of unemployment and the BNF. She admits that it is semi-autobiographical and as such reflects the difficulties of growing up caught between cultures and attracted to the drug and music scene of the eighties. Helen also said that she considered it primarily as a tale of thwarted love and had been urged by her editors to change the ending as it was too bleak. Admirably she resisted that suggestion and the ending remains powerfully effective, moving many to tears.

Refuting the old adage, 'It's grim up North' broadcaster, writer and journalist Stuart Maconie travels with humour and affection through the North in a well written and funny 'Pies and Prejudice'. Another unusual entry was Bryan Talbot's 'Alice in Sunderland' which is a lavish graphic novel which wittily and cleverly leaves readers 'wondering about the magic that's to be unlocked' in the place where they live.

Professor Michael Schmidt OBE, writer and Founder of Carcanet Press made a welcome return to The Portico Prize as a speaker on Thursday night. The last time he had been Prize speaker was in 1990 when he championed the cause of regional publishing and he did so again. He applauded the aims of the Portico Prize and the quality of the entries but was naturally disappointed that no poetry had made it to the shortlist. However he was fulsome in his praise of another finalist, Jenny Uglow This Prize-winning biographer's scholarly and, at the same time, eminently readable life of Thomas Bewick, the farmer's son from Tyneside who in the eighteenth century revolutionised wood engraving is the book in question and Michael paid tribute to Jenny as a writer, editor and publisher. He also reminisced about the time when he was a judge of The Prize alongside His Hon. Judge Michael Lever QC who did not want a book on Popular Music to win because he had sent down a number of people associated with that particular industry! That judging panel must have been an interesting meeting of minds! Professor Schmidt's speech was erudite and the audience were enthralled.

The whole evening was excellent and although it was a pity that there could only be two winners, Sallie Day and Catherine Bailey were certainly deserving of their success. Everybody there seemed to enjoy this occasion and it is a pity that regretted that we have to wait another two years for the next Portico Prize.

FICTION

Judith Allnatt, *A Mile of River* (Doubleday, 2008)
John Connor, *Falling* (Orion Books, 2007)
Sallie Day, *Palace of Strange Girls* (HarperCollins, 2008)
David Peace, *The Damned United* (Faber & Faber, 2006)
Ross Raisin, *God's Own Country* (Viking, 2008)
Helen Walsh, *Once Upon a Time in England* (Canon gate, 2008)

NON-FICTION

Catherine Bailey, *Black Diamonds* (Penguin, 2007)
Jill Liddington, *Rebel Girls* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2006)
Stuart Maconie, *Pies & Prejudice* (Ebury Press, 2007)
Bryan Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland* (Jonathan Cape, 2007)
Helen Tse, *Sweet Mandarin* (Ebury Press, 2007)
Jenny Uglow, *Nature's Engraver* (Faber &

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

1. Please contact Emma Marigliano on tel. 0161 236 6785 or email librarian@theportico.org.uk.
2. For **Judith Allnatt**, please contact **Nuala O'Neill** at **Doubleday**, tel. 020 8231 6619 or email n.oneill@transworld-publishers.co.uk
3. For **John Connor**, please contact **Natalie Braine** at **Orion Books**, tel. 020 7420 5643 or email Natalie.braine@orionbooks.co.uk
4. For **Sallie Day**, please contact **Susan Davies** at **HarperCollins**, tel. 020 8307 4295 or email susan.davies@harpercollins.co.uk For **David Peace** and **Jenny Uglow**, please contact **Rebecca Pearson** at **Faber & Faber**, tel. 020 7465 7555 or email rebecca.pearson@faber.co.uk
5. For **Ross Raisin** or **Catherine Bailey**, please contact **Melissa Scarlet** at **Penguin Group UK**, tel. 020 7010 3387 or email melissa.scarlet@uk.penguingroup.com
6. For **Helen Walsh**, please contact **Dan Franklin** at **Canongate**, tel. 020 8969 6011 or email dan.franklin@canongate.co.uk
7. For **Jill Liddington**, please contact **Nathalie Morse** at **Little, Brown Book Group**, tel. 020 7911 8035 or email Nathalie.morse@littlebrown.co.uk
8. For **Stuart Maconie** or **Helen Tse**, please contact **Sarah Townsend** at **Ebury Press**, tel. 020 7840 8843 or email stownsend@eburypublishing.co.uk
9. For **Bryan Talbot**, please contact **Alex Bowler** at **Jonathan Cape**, tel. 020 7840 8575 or email abowler@randomhouse.co.uk

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1. The prize was founded in 1985 and is awarded biennially for a book published between the two closing dates (currently 31st August 2006 and 31st August 2008), of general interest and literary merit and set wholly or mainly in the North of England.
2. The prize is organised by The Portico Library on Mosley Street, Manchester, is one of the oldest surviving independent subscription libraries in the country. It still occupies its original city centre building. It was founded in 1806 by, among others, Roget (of Thesaurus fame) and its members included Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel and its readers included writers De Quincey and Elizabeth Gaskell and now Val McDermid and Alan Garner.