

Saltire's book of year shortlist includes Swiss-German writer

# Language no barrier to literary prize win

Stephen McGinty

A SWISS-GERMAN author for whom English is a second language has made it to the shortlist of Scotland's most prestigious literary award.

Regi Claire, the author of *Fighting It*, a collection of short stories, is up against established Scottish writers such as AL Kennedy and Janice Galloway at the Saltire Society Literary Awards.

Claire, who was diagnosed with cancer prior to the publication of her new collection but is now in remission, has been shortlisted for the Book of the Year.

Yesterday, she said: "I'm absolutely delighted and quite gobsmacked. I couldn't quite believe it when my publisher called and told me."

A graduate of Zurich University, Claire has lived in Scotland since 1993 and is married to Ron Butlin, Edinburgh's Makar, or official poet. Her stories are wide-ranging, from tales of a Swiss railway track inspector to a would-be transsexual settling in the Borders.

Writing in English has been a liberating experience, she explained. "I wasn't taught the rules of good English like I was taught good German and so I feel I can be more creative."

Kennedy and Galloway, both previous winners of the £10,000 Book of the Year prize, are also shortlisted this year.

Kennedy, who won in 2007 for *Day*, is in the running for her collection of short stories *What Becomes*, while Galloway, who won with *Clara* in 2002, is nominated for her memoir *This Is Not About Me*. There is no place, however, for two of the country's best-known writers, Edinburgh-

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based Alexander McCall Smith and Ian Rankin, who has never featured in the Saltire Society's shortlists.

Stuart Kelly, *Scotland on Sunday's* literary editor said: "That Regi Claire writes with absolute sincerity and emotional intensity is beyond doubt. For this reviewer at least, that combination is both the strength and weakness of her collection of short stories, *Fighting It*."

"Writing in a second language sometimes allows her to manipulate English in an exciting way - coining the word "almostness" for example. At other points there's a slightly too strident and blatant use of capitals and exclamation marks."

By comparison, Kelly said, AL Kennedy's *What Becomes* "pulls the carpet from under the reader's feet at every turn".

Scotland appears to be enjoying an emergence of new female writers, with four

women in five nominations for the First Book of the Year award.

The awards, which have been running for more than 25 years, this year see the introduction of a special Homecoming Prize, backed by the Scottish Government. Seamus Heaney and Jackie Kay are among those

According to the Saltire Society: "The winning book will, in the opinion of the judges, make an outstanding contribution to this year's celebrations, insofar as it shall discuss meaningfully and appropriately matters relevant to Scotland's Year of Homecoming."

The winners will be announced at the National Library of Scotland on St Andrew's Day, 30 November. The prizes will be presented by the minister for culture, external affairs and the constitution, Michael Russell MSP.

Russell said: "Scotland boasts a rich and wonderful literary heritage."

"The shortlist for this year's Saltire Society Literature Awards demonstrates the strength of the creative talent in our country today."

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Collecting herself: writer Regi Claire, pictured with her dog, Leila, is shortlisted in the Book of the Year category for her anthology of short stories, *Fighting It*. Photograph: Dan Phillips

### The other contenders

#### JAMES BUCHAN *The Gate Of Air*

The grandson of the novelist John Buchan, James Buchan's ghost story involves a man who has lost his career relocating to the countryside and beginning to dream of a 60s "It Girl" whose painting hangs in the local manor.

#### ROBERT CRAWFORD *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography*

Crawford's biography of Burns looks set to become the definitive one for a generation. A poet himself, Crawford provides acute readings of the poems, and doesn't shrink from looking full-square at the less admirable aspects of Burns's character.

#### JANICE GALLOWAY *This Is Not About Me*

A stunning memoir by one of the country's most nuanced novelists. Only on a second reading do you understand the full import of Galloway's sparring with her mother and the almost demonic presence of her older sister.

#### ALISON KENNEDY *What Becomes*

Shot through with humour, blistering anger and hard-won redemption, wit and longing, *What Becomes* confirms Kennedy as one of the finest short-story writers in English.

#### REGI CLAIRE *Fighting It*

A second collection of short stories from the author of *Inside Out* and *The Beauty Room*, Claire's work deals with people on the fringes of society and the edges of coping.

#### JOHN MACLEOD *When I Heard The Bell Toll: The Loss Of The Iolaire*

The worst peacetime British disaster at sea since the sinking of the Titanic, the loss of the Iolaire is a story replete with grim ironies. MacLeod's vivid and well-researched book covers the tragedy in which 205 Royal Navy Reservists drowned.

### Other categories

#### FIRST BOOK OF THE YEAR

Jason Donald *Chokechain*

Sarah Gabriel *Eating Pomegranates*

Alison Lang *Cainnt Na Cailleige Caillte*

Kirsten McKenzie *Chapel At The Edge Of The World*

Eleanor Thom *The Tinkin*

#### HOMEcoming AWARD

Robert Crawford *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography*

Seamus Heaney (below) *The Testament Of Cresseid And Seven Fables*

Jackie Kay *The Lamplighter*

Esther Woolfson *Piano Angel*

Donald Worster *A Passion For Nature*

#### RESEARCH BOOK OF THE YEAR

Oxford University Press *The Historical Thesaurus Of The English Dictionary*

Alexander Broadie *The History Of Scottish Philosophy*

Michael Fry *Edinburgh: A History Of The City*

Donald Worster *A Passion For Nature: The Life Of John Muir*

#### HISTORY BOOK OF THE YEAR

Alexander Broadie *The History Of Scottish Philosophy*

James E Fraser *From Caledonia To Pictland Scotland To 795*

Michael Fry *Edinburgh: A History Of The City*

Daniel Gray *Homage To Caledonia*

Ruth Tittensor *From Peat Bog To Conifer Forest*

