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No coverage to appear in print media before 12 March 2009

## The Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2009

Organised by the Commonwealth Foundation with the support of the Macquarie Group Foundation

### REGIONAL WINNERS ANNOUNCED TODAY

**New Zealand's *Mo Zhi Hong* takes Best First Book Prize**

***for South East Asia and the South Pacific***

**Regional winners for the 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for**

***Best Book* and *Best First Book* have been announced today in London.**

Two regional winners for *Best Book* and *Best First Book* from each of the four global areas were announced today in London. These winners then go on to compete for the overall *Best Book* and *Best First Book* awards. The four regional areas are *South East Asia and the Pacific; Europe and South Asia; Canada and the Caribbean* and *Africa*.

The winning books represent the best of cutting edge fiction written in the English language and reflect current issues and subjects affecting our global society. From the social reverberations from hitting a child at a BBQ in a Melbourne suburban backyard to coping with self-sacrifice and divided family loyalties; from fictionalising the suspicious death in the 1988 plane crash of the Pakistan dictator General Zia ul-Haq to child trafficking, poverty, homelessness, AIDS, religious intolerance and genocide on the African continent - this wealth of writing delves into the intimacy of our lives while reaching out around the globe. It is both a celebration of the craft of writing and beauty of language while the potency of its subject can inform and extend our world view.

**THE WINNERS ARE....**

## Best Book Award: South East Asia and the South Pacific

Christos Tsiolkas

*The Slap*

Allen and Unwin Australia



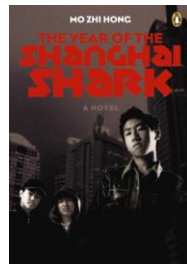
## Best First Book Award: South East Asia and the South Pacific

Mo Zhi Hong

*The Year of the Shanghai Shark*

Penguin

NZ



Best Book Award, South East Asia and the Pacific region, was awarded to *The Slap* by Christos Tsiolkas (Australia). The Best First Book Award was won by *The Year of the Shanghai Shark* by Mo Zhi Hong (New Zealand). *Judges comments:*

*“The Slap* uses the incident of a slap delivered to a child at a family barbecue to chart the tensions within the suburban network of an extended Greek family and their friends. It’s a big, ambitious book which explores the reverberations of this incident through the point of view of eight people, each of whom negotiates the conflicting loyalties and tensions that the slap engenders. It is provocative in its scrutiny of the politics of the family and its portrayal of the raw dynamics and precarious balance in relationships among grown-ups, and between grown-ups and children. Its critique of the family and consumerism unsettles the stereotypes and platitudes of Australian multiculturalism.”

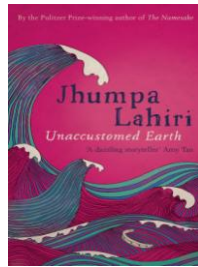
*“The Year of the Shanghai Shark* is the story of young boy’s rite of passage as he enters into the bustling, cosmopolitan street life of the contemporary Chinese cities of Dalian and Shanghai, under the tutelage of his uncle, a professional pickpocket. This superbly realised world brings us a gallery of eccentric and unforgettable characters such as the elderly poet who writes poems in the town square with a brush dipped in a can of water, the local repair man who has ingenious ways of fixing broken things and the cousin who excels at school but discovers that he has to learn English if he is to pursue his dream of emigrating to America. The beguiling voice of the narrator draws us into the shifting world of petty crooks, first-world businessmen, tourists, the NBA and McDonald’s. In this limpid and elegant novel Mo offers the reader a China caught in the vortex of change.”

## Best Book Award: Europe and South Asia

Jhumpa Lahiri

*Unaccustomed Earth*

Bloomsbury Publishing UK



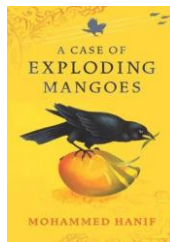
## Best First Book Award: Europe and South Asia

Mohammed Hanif

*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

Vintage

Pakistan



The Best Book Award, Europe and South Asia region, was won by *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri (UK), beating strong competition from former Commonwealth Writers' Prize regional winners (David Lodge and Salman Rushdie) and Booker Prize contenders (Philip Hensher and Rushdie). The Best First Book Award was awarded to *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif.

"Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* emerged as the best book after some very tough competition from some extremely gifted, even extraordinary books, including Hensher's magisterial survey of English suburbia in *Northern Clemency* and Rushdie's fecund and fierce imagination in *The Enchantress of Florence*. But in the end Lahiri's lyrical, meticulously crafted prose, with the moving and memorable treatment of the diasporic experience coupled with her significant achievement in extending the form of the short story, won the day."

"In the first book category, Mohammed Hanif was a clear favourite, with his amazingly detailed and plausible portrayal of historical events, coupled with great political insight and stylistic virtuosity. Fact and fiction merge in this fast-paced page-turner in curious and unprecedented ways. This book is also the first Pakistani novel to be a regional winner."

## Best Book Award: Canada and the Caribbean

Marina Endicott

*Good to a Fault*

Freehand Books

Canada



## Best First Book Award: Canada and the Caribbean

Joan Thomas

*Reading By Lightning*

Goose Lane Editions

Canada



**Best Book Award, Canada and the Caribbean region**, was awarded to *Good to a Fault* by Marina Endicott (Canada). The **Best First Book Award** was won by *Reading by Lightning* by Joan Thomas (Canada). **Judges comments:**

“Marina Endicott’s novel is a superb realization of a morally complex character whose confrontation with suffering leads to a journey of growth and self discovery. With delicate precision, *Good to a Fault* tackles some of the big, eternal questions - love, mortality, God - in a deceptively modest story populated with very ordinary people brought together in extraordinary circumstances. Endicott’s wry, understated prose turns a few surprising months in Clara Purdy’s life into a gripping moral quest, searching to discover what it means to live a truly good life.”

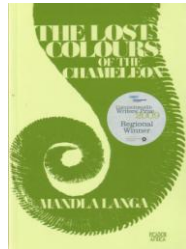
“In fresh, exhilarating, masterful prose, Joan Thomas’s novel explores the question of belonging - in the family, in the land and in amorous relationships. The wit, the wisdom and the quality and generosity of psychological insight make *Reading by Lightning* the unanimous selection of the judges.”

## Best Book Award: Africa

Mandla Langa



*The Lost Colours of the Chameleon*



Picador Africa

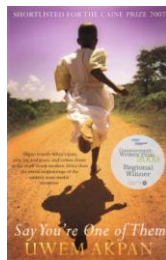
South Africa

## Best First Book Award: Africa

Uwem Akpan



*Say You're One of Them*



Abacus

Nigeria

**Best Book Award, Africa region**, was won by *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* by Mandla Langa (South Africa). The **Best First Book Award** was awarded to *Say You're One of Them* by Uwem Akpan (Nigeria). *Judges comments:*

“Mandla Langa’s *Lost Colours of the Chameleon* emerged as the strongest contender in a field of works of the highest technical proficiency, because of the sustained quality of his prose. In a complex novel that combines allegory and realism, Langa deconstructs the inner workings of a mythical African state, laying bare the frailties of leaders too blinded by power to effectively confront the major challenges of their times. Patiently, Langa threads the characters and their stories into the weave of his overall agenda – to provide every citizen reader/thinker/talker the vocabulary with which to confront the origins of the paralysis at the heart of the failure of the African state. In a South Africa and in an Africa where merely cataloguing the ills of the state has been the norm, this novel dares the reader to read on and imagine the state differently. A triumph of a novel peppered with little doses of humour where humour would be taboo!”

“Child trafficking, extreme poverty, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, religious intolerance, communal violence and genocide – Awem Akpan’s short story collection *Say You're One of Them*, forces the reader to grapple with this litany of woes that bedevil the lives of African children. This could have been just another addition to the endless tales of African victimhood but Akpan’s stories are never didactic. Far from being helpless victims, Akpan’s child protagonists are invested with vitality and agency that

makes them truly memorable. From Nigeria to Ethiopia, from Gabon to Rwanda, Akpan's panoramic vision provides an insight into Africa beyond stereotypes. It was this vision that persuaded the judges to choose this book over all the others, a truly compelling, brilliantly-crafted read."

**The regional winners are invited to take part in a programme of cultural exchange to be held in Hawkes Bay and Wellington May 11 - 14, before coming to Auckland to join the *Auckland Writers & Readers Festival*, May 14-17.**

**Two overall winners, chosen by an international panel of six judges meeting in Wellington, will be announced at the:**

### **Commonwealth Writers' Prize Awards Ceremony**

**16 May ASB Theatre Aotea Centre 7.30 – 9.00pm.**

**The overall *Best Book* winner will receive £10,000 and the overall *Best First Book* winner will receive £5,000, presented by dignitaries at the ceremony.**

**The *Auckland Writers & Readers Festival* (May 14–17) will host the *Commonwealth Writers' Prize* for 2009. Sessions within the festival programme feature the *Best Book* and *Best First Book* regional winners. The *Commonwealth Writers' Best Book* and *Best First Book* sessions and the *Commonwealth Writers' Prize Awards Ceremony* at the *Auckland Writers & Readers Festival* will be free to the general public and all festival attendees.**

***We are awaiting final confirmation of the writers who will visit New Zealand.***

***To date, six of these writers have already confirmed attendance:***

**Marina Endicott, Mandla Langa, Christos Tsiolkas, Joan Thomas,**

**Mo Zhi Hong and Mohammed Hanif.**

The authors are available for interview – either by phone before their visit to New Zealand, or in person during the week May 11 – 17.

For author pictures, book jacket images and biographical information or to arrange phone interviews with the regional winners

please contact:

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For more information please visit the prize website:

[www.commonwealthfoundation.com/cwp](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/cwp)

For information on the Auckland Writer's and Reader's Festival:

<http://www.writersfestival.co.nz/>

### Background Notes:

The *Commonwealth Writers' Prize* is organised and funded by the *Commonwealth Foundation* with the support of the *Macquarie Group Foundation*. The Prize, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, celebrates fiction across the four regions of the Commonwealth: Africa; Canada and the Caribbean; Europe and South Asia and South East Asia and the South Pacific.

The *Commonwealth Foundation* is an intergovernmental body working to help civil society organisations promote democracy, development and cultural understanding in 53 Commonwealth countries. The *Commonwealth Writers' Prize* is part of the Culture Programme of the *Commonwealth Foundation*.

The *Macquarie Group Foundation* is one of Australia's leading philanthropic foundations. In the year to 31 March 2008, the *Macquarie Group Foundation* together with Macquarie Group staff donated \$A23 million to more than 800 not-for-profit organisations around the world. It is the philanthropic arm of Macquarie Group Limited, which is a global provider of banking, financial, advisory, investment and funds management services.

#### Previous Overall Winners: 2008-2001

##### Best Book

**2008** Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes*

(CANADA)

**2007** Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip* (NZ)

**2006** Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*

(AUSTRALIA)

**2005** Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (UK)

**2004** Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (UK)

**2003** Austin Clarke, *The Polished Hoe* (CANADA)

**2002** Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*

(AUSTRALIA)

**2001** Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly*

*Gang* (AUSTRALIA)

##### Best First Book

Tahmima Anam, *A Golden Age*

(BANGLADESH)

D.Y. Bechard, *Vandal Love* (CANADA)

Mark McWatt, *Suspended*

*Sentences* (GUYANA)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (NIGERIA)

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (UK)

Sarah Hall, *Haweswater* (UK)

Manu Herbstein, *Ama*

(SOUTH AFRICA)

Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (UK)