

MEDIA RELEASE | **STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 19.20 GMT, TUESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2020**

## ZADIE SMITH, BEN LERNER AND VALERIA LUISELLI MAKE WIDE-RANGING SHORTLIST FOR RATHBONES FOLIO PRIZE 2020



*Rathbones, Finsbury Circus* – The fiction, poetry and non-fiction on the shortlist for the Rathbones Folio Prize 2020 – announced in London tonight – speaks to the #MeToo movement with a bold evocation of Zeus and delivers a radical new take on the American family saga; journeys through the female body in essays and tackles the US border crisis in a committed piece of autofiction; dives into the dark corners of the male psyche and aims to understand why women join the Islamic State.

**Zadie Smith** – shortlisted for her first collection of short stories – joins previous Folio Prize shortlistee **Ben Lerner** alongside acclaimed novelist **James Lasdun** and rising star **Valeria Luiselli**. The poet **Fiona Benson**, winner of the 2019 Forward Prize for Best Collection, is shortlisted next to non-fiction from journalist and writer **Azadeh Moaveni**, the author and critic **Laura Cumming**, and debut writer **Sinead Gleeson**. The list features an American, an Iranian-American, an Irishwoman and a Mexican, alongside four British authors, with three novels, three works of non-fiction, a poetry and a short story collection now in the running for the £30,000 prize.

**Paul Farley, chair of the judges, said:** “The books shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize 2020 tell stories and ask questions about how and why stories get told. They speak to their moment and take soundings from fellow writers, past and present. They record, investigate and explore.

### 2020 SHORTLIST

**Azadeh Moaveni**  
*Guest House for Young Widows* (Scribe)

**Ben Lerner**  
*The Topeka School* (Granta)

**Fiona Benson**  
*Vertigo & Ghost* (PRH/Cape)

**James Lasdun**  
*Victory* (PRH/Cape)

**Laura Cumming**  
*On Chapel Sands* (PRH/Chatto)

**Sinead Gleeson**  
*Constellations* (Picador)

**Valeria Luiselli**  
*Lost Children Archive* (4th Estate)

**Zadie Smith**  
*Grand Union* (PRH/Hamish Hamilton)

*They navigate their way through various storms, they allow for doubts and uncertainties. Common themes might echo through their collective pages, but in the end each book is irreducibly its own craft and vessel.”*

The Rathbones Folio Prize – also known as the Writers’ Prize – is the only prize governed by an international academy of distinguished writers and critics, the Folio Academy. It is borderless and open to all genres – fiction, non-fiction, and poetry – which means it reflects a greater diversity and variety of voices present in our literary culture and society as a whole.

For *Guest House for Young Widows* (Scribe), the journalist, writer and academic **Azadeh Moaveni**, who was born in Iran and raised in the US, has extensively travelled the Middle East, often with unprecedented access, to report on the women who decided to leave comfortable lives behind to join the Islamic State. **Ben Lerner**’s third novel, *The Topeka School* (Granta), delivers a radical take on the American family saga in a perspective-shifting, experimental and poetic work of fiction.

The prize-winning British author and critic **Laura Cumming** uses the mystery of her mother’s disappearance as a child to take a closer look at her family story for *On Chapel Sands* (Chatto). **Fiona Benson**’s poetry collection *Vertigo & Ghost* (Cape), which was awarded the 2019 Forward Prize for Best Collection, is a bold take on misogynistic violence, ancient myth and motherhood.

*Victory* (Cape), by **James Lasdun**, is a novel written in two novellas, exploring male sexual violence, power and corruption. *Constellations* (Picador) – the debut collection of Irish essayist, critic and fiction writer **Sinéad Gleeson** – is a journey, in essays, from pregnancy to first love, from motherhood to terrifying sickness, from old age to death itself.

**Valeria Luiselli**, who was born in Mexico and lives in the US, was inspired by her work with young migrants on the Mexico-US border to write *Lost Children Archive* (4th Estate), her third novel, and the first she has written in English, which interweaves two journeys into a teasingly autobiographical work of fiction. **Zadie Smith** is shortlisted for her first ever collection of short stories, *Grand Union* (Hamish Hamilton), which moves from the historic to the slyly dystopian as it tackles time and place, identity and rebirth.

**Paul Stockton, Rathbones CEO, said:** “At Rathbones, we invest internationally across a broad range of genres and try to pick the best there is to offer. The Rathbones Folio Prize mirrors this approach in the literary world, allowing us, and society as a whole, to benefit from novels, poetry and short stories that eloquently tackle some of the political and personal issues of today. This shortlist reflects why Rathbones is proud to sponsor such a unique prize. Backed by an Academy of writers that assures the breadth and the quality you see in these eight books, it won’t be easy for the judges to choose their winner.”

This year’s prize is being judged by the multi award-winning poet and non-fiction writer **Paul Farley**, the Desmond Elliot Prize-winning novelist **Nikita Lalwani** and **Ross Raisin**, Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year winner and a Granta Best of Young British Novelists.

The 2020 winner will be announced at the British Library on **Monday, March 23rd**.

On Sunday, March 22nd, the prize returns with its annual, day-long festival, also held at the British Library: *How to Write a Book in a Day – The Rathbones Folio Sessions 2020* will see last year's winner, Raymond Antrobus, the 2020 judges, and selected shortlisted authors join writers including Alice Jolly, Nikesh Shukla, Sharlene Teo, Lucy Caldwell and Kate Clanchy. The day anchors the year-round Rathbones Folio Sessions, a series of dynamic literary events featuring members of the Folio Academy at venues across the UK.

For further information, and to join the conversation please visit:

[www.rathbonesfolioprize.com](http://www.rathbonesfolioprize.com) | [@RathbonesFolio](https://twitter.com/RathbonesFolio)

## **Notes to Editors**

### **About the 2020 shortlist**



#### **Azadeh Moaveni**

##### *Guest House for Young Widows*

(Scribe)

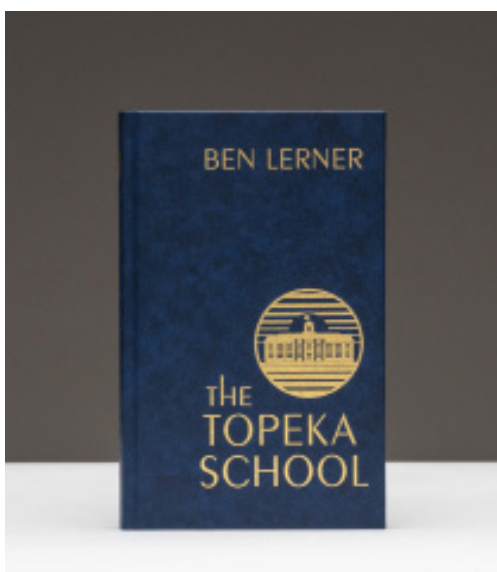
An intimate, deeply reported account of the women who made a shocking decision: to leave their comfortable lives behind and join the Islamic State. In early 2014, the Islamic State clinched its control of Raqqa in Syria. Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, urged Muslims around the world to come join the caliphate. Having witnessed the brutal oppression of the Assad regime in Syria, and moved to fight for justice, thousands of men and women heeded his call. At the heart of this story is a cast of unforgettable young women who responded. Emma, from

Germany; Sharmeena, from Bethnal Green, London; Nour, from Tunis: these were women — some still in school — from urban families, some with university degrees and bookshelves filled with novels by Jane Austen and Dan Brown; many with cosmopolitan dreams of travel and adventure. But instead of finding a land of justice and piety, they found themselves trapped within the most brutal terrorist regime of the twenty-first century, a world of chaos and upheaval and violence. What is the line between victim and collaborator? How do we judge these women who both suffered and inflicted intense pain? What role is there for Muslim women in the West? In what is bound to be a modern classic of narrative nonfiction, Moaveni takes us into the school hallways of London, kitchen tables in Germany, the coffee shops in Tunis, the caliphate's OB/GYN and its 'Guest House for Young Widows' — where wives of the fallen waited to be remarried — to demonstrate that the problem called terrorism is a far more complex, political, and deeply relatable one than we generally admit.

**Azadeh Moaveni** is a journalist, writer, and academic who has been covering the Middle East for nearly two decades. She started reporting in Cairo in 1999 while on a Fulbright fellowship to the American University in Cairo. For the next several years she reported from throughout the region as Middle East correspondent for Time magazine, based in Tehran, and also covering Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. She is the author of *Lipstick Jihad* and *Honeymoon in Tehran*, and the co-



author, with Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, of *Iran Awakening*. In November 2015 she published a front-page article in *The New York Times* on ISIS women defectors that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist as part of the Times's ISIS coverage. Her writing appears in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The London Review of Books*. She teaches journalism at NYU in London, is a former New America Fellow, and is now senior gender analyst at the International Crisis Group.



## Ben Lerner

*The Topeka School*  
(Granta)

Adam Gordon is a senior at Topeka High School, class of 97. His mother, Jane, is a famous feminist author; his father, Jonathan, is an expert at getting “lost boys” to open up; they both work at The Foundation, a well-known psychiatric clinic that has attracted staff and patients from around the world. Adam is a renowned debater and orator, expected to win a national championship before he heads to college. He is an aspiring poet. He is—although it requires a great deal of posturing, weight lifting, and creatine supplements—one of the cool kids, passing himself off as a “real man,” ready to fight or

(better) freestyle about fighting if it keeps his peers from thinking of him as weak. Adam is also one of the seniors that brings the loner Darren Eberheart—who is, unbeknownst to Adam, his father's patient—into the social scene, with disastrous effects. Deftly shifting perspectives and time periods, *The Topeka School* is the story of a family, its struggles and its strengths: Jane's reckoning with the legacy of an abusive father, Jonathan's marital transgressions, the challenge of raising a good son in a culture of toxic masculinity. It is also a riveting prehistory of the present: the collapse of public speech, the trolls and tyrants of the new right, the ongoing crisis of identity among white men.



**Ben Lerner** was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1979. He has received fellowships from the Fulbright, Guggenheim, and MacArthur Foundations, and is the author of two internationally acclaimed novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*. He has published the poetry collections *The Lichtenberg Figures*, *Angle of Yaw* (a finalist for the National Book Award), *Mean Free Path* and *No Art* as well as the essay *The Hatred of Poetry*. Lerner lives and teaches in Brooklyn.





## Fiona Benson

### *Vertigo & Ghost*

(PRH/Cape)

Violence hangs over this book like an electric storm. Beginning with a poem about the teenage dawning of sexuality, *Vertigo & Ghost* pitches quickly into a long sequence of graphic, stunning pieces about Zeus as a serial rapist, for whom woman are prey and sex is weaponised. These are frank, brilliant, devastating poems of vulnerability and rage, and as Zeus is confronted with aggressions both personal and historical, his house comes crumbling down. A disturbing contemporary world is exposed, in which violent acts against women continue to be perpetrated on a daily – hourly – basis. The book shifts, in its second half, to an intimate and lyrical document of depression and family life. It sounds out the complex and ambivalent terrain of early motherhood – its anxieties and claustrophobias as well as its gifts of tenderness and love – reclaiming the sanctuary of domestic private life, and the right to raise children in peace and safety. *Vertigo & Ghost* is an important, necessary book, hugely impressive in its range and risk, and dramatic in its currency: a collection that speaks out with clarity, grace and bravery against the abuse of power.

**Fiona Benson** won an Eric Gregory Award in 2006 and a Faber New Poets Award in 2009. She lives in Mid Devon with her husband and their two daughters. Her first collection, *Bright Travellers*, was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. It won the 2015 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the 2015 Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry Prize for First Full Collection.



## James Lasdun

### *Victory*

(PRH/Cape)

Love and hate, desire and guilt, friendship and betrayal form the coordinates of these two intensely dramatic stories of men and women caught between their irrational passions and the urge for control. In *Feathered Glory* the seemingly happy marriage of a school principal and his artist wife reveals dangerous fault-lines as an old lover reappears in the husband's life and the wife, fascinated by a charismatic wildlife rehabilitator, brings an injured swan into their home. The poignant denouement leaves



every character irreversibly transformed. The past also haunts the present in *Afternoon of a Faun*, where an accusation of historic sexual assault plunges Marco Rosedale, an English journalist in New York, into a series of deepening crises. Set during the months leading up to Trump's election, this is at once a study of our shifting social and sexual mores, and a meditation on what makes us believe or disbelieve the stories of other people. These gripping, darkly comic novellas reflect and complement each other, offering a sharply observed vision that will resonate with anyone interested in the clash of power and desire in our embattled contemporary lives.

**James Lasdun's** books include *The Fall Guy* and *Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked*. He teaches creative writing at Columbia University and reviews regularly for the Guardian. His work has been filmed by Bernardo Bertolucci (*Besieged*) and he co-wrote the films *Sunday*, which won Best Feature and Best Screenplay awards at Sundance, and *Signs and Wonders*, starring Charlotte Rampling and Stellan Skarsgård.



### Laura Cumming

*On Chapel Sands*  
(PRH/Chatto)

Uncovering the mystery of her mother's disappearance as a child: Laura Cumming, prize-winning author and art critic, takes a closer look at her family story. In the autumn of 1929, a small child was kidnapped from a Lincolnshire beach. Five agonising days went by before she was found in a nearby village. The child remembered nothing of these events and nobody ever spoke of them at home. It was another fifty years before she even learned of the kidnap. The girl became an artist and had a daughter, art writer Laura Cumming. Cumming grew up enthralled by her mother's strange tales of life in a seaside hamlet of the 1930s, and of the secrets and lies perpetuated by a whole community. So many puzzles remained to be solved. Cumming began with a few criss-crossing lives in this fraction of English coast – the postman, the grocer, the elusive baker – but soon her search spread right out across the globe as she discovered just how many lives were affected by what happened that day on the beach – including her own. *On Chapel Sands* is a book of mystery and memoir. Two narratives run through it: the mother's childhood tale; and Cumming's own pursuit of the truth. Humble objects light up the story: a pie dish, a carved box, an old Vick's



jar. Letters, tickets, recipe books, even the particular slant of a copperplate hand give vital clues. And pictures of all kinds, from paintings to photographs, open up like doors to the truth.

**Laura Cumming** has been chief art critic of the Observer since 1999. Her book, *The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velázquez*, was Book of the Week on Radio 4, Wall Street Journal Book of the Year and a New York Times bestseller. It won the 2017 James Tait Black Biography Prize and was published to critical acclaim ('A riveting detective story: readers will be spellbound' Colm Tóibín). Her first book, *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits*, was described by Nick Hornby as 'Brilliant, fizzing with ideas not just about art but human nature' and by Julian Barnes as 'that rare item: an art book where the text is so enthralling that the pictures almost seem like an interruption'.



## Sinéad Gleeson

### *Constellations*

(Picador)

How do you tell the story of a life in a body, as it goes through sickness, health, motherhood? How do you tell that story when you are not just a woman but a woman in Ireland? In the powerful and daring essays in *Constellations* Sinéad Gleeson does that very thing. All of life is within these pages, from birth to first love, pregnancy to motherhood, terrifying sickness, old age and loss to death itself. Throughout this wide-ranging collection she also turns her restless eye outwards delving into work, art and our very ways of seeing. In the tradition of some of our finest life writers, and yet still in her own spirited, generous voice, Sinéad takes us on a journey that is both uniquely personal and yet universal in its resonance. Here is the fierce joy and pain of being alive.



**Sinéad Gleeson's** debut collection *Constellations*:

*Reflections from Life* (Picador 2019) won Non-Fiction Book of the Year at 2019 Irish Book Awards. Her essays have been published by Granta, Winter Papers and Gorse, and broadcast by BBC and RTÉ. Her short stories have been featured in several anthologies including *Being Various: New Irish Short Stories* (Faber, 2019) and *Repeal the 8th* (Unbound, 2018). She has edited the award-winning anthologies *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* and *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland*, with *The Art of Glimpse: 100 Irish Short Stories*, forthcoming from Head of Zeus in October 2020. She is currently working on a novel.





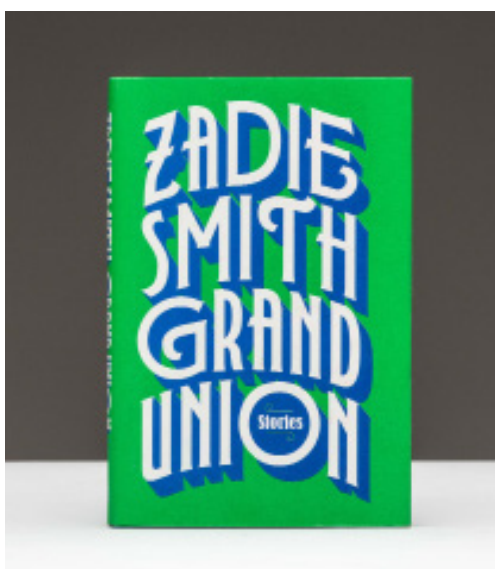
## Valeria Luiselli

### *Lost Children Archive*

(4th Estate)

In Valeria Luiselli's fiercely imaginative follow-up to the American Book Award-winning *Tell Me How It Ends*, an artist couple set out with their two children on a road trip from New York to Arizona in the heat of summer. As the family travels west, the bonds between them begin to fray: a fracture is growing between the parents, one the children can almost feel beneath their feet. Through ephemera such as songs, maps and a Polaroid camera, the children try to make sense of both their family's crisis and the larger one engulfing the news: the stories of thousands of kids trying to cross the southwestern border into the United States but getting detained—or lost in the desert along the way. A breath-taking feat of literary virtuosity, *Lost Children Archive* is timely, compassionate, subtly hilarious, and formally inventive—a powerful, urgent story about what it is to be human in an inhuman world.

**Valeria Luiselli** was born in Mexico City in 1983. She is the author of the novels *Faces in the Crowd* and *The Story of My Teeth*, which won the 2016 LA Times Book Prize for Fiction; the essay collection *Sidewalks*; and *Tell Me How It Ends*, an essay about the situation facing children arriving at the US-Mexico border without papers. *Lost Children Archive* is her first novel written in English.



## Zadie Smith

### *Grand Union*

(PRH/Hamish Hamilton)

In the summer of 1959, an Antiguan immigrant in north west London lives the last day of his life, unknowingly caught in someone else's story of hate and division, resistance and revolt. A mother looks back on her early forays into matters of the human heart- and other parts of the human body- considering the ways in which desire is always an act of negotiation, destruction, and self-invention. A disgraced cop stands amid the broken shards of his life, unable to move forward into a future that holds



no place for him. Moral panic spreads like contagion through the upper echelons of New York City - and the cancelled people look disconcertingly like the rest of us. A teenage scion of the technocratic elite chases spectres through a premium virtual reality, trailed by a little girl with a runny nose and no surviving family. We all take a much-needed break from this mess, on a package holiday where the pool's electric blue is ceaselessly replenished, while political and environmental collapse happen far away, to someone else. Interleaving eleven completely new and unpublished stories with some of her best-loved pieces from the New Yorker and elsewhere, Zadie Smith presents a dizzyingly rich and varied collection of fiction. Moving exhilaratingly across genres and perspectives, from the historic to the vividly current to the slyly dystopian, *Grand Union* is a sharply alert and prescient collection about time and place, identity and rebirth, the persistent legacies that haunt our present selves and the uncanny futures that rush up to meet us.



**Zadie Smith** is the author of the novels *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW* and *Swing Time*, as well as a novella, *The Embassy of Cambodia*, and a collection of essays, *Changing My Mind*, and editor of *The Book of Other People*. Zadie was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2002, and was listed as one of *Granta's* 20 Best Young British Novelists in 2003 and again in 2013. *White Teeth* won multiple awards including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Guardian First Book Award. *On Beauty* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the Orange Prize for Fiction, and *NW* was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. Zadie Smith is currently a tenured professor of fiction at New York

### About the Rathbones Folio Prize

The Folio Prize was established in 2013 as the first major English language book prize open to writers from around the world. It is the only prize in which all the books considered for the prize are selected and judged by an academy of peers. When new sponsors, Rathbone Investment Management, came on board the prize was expanded to include all works of literature, regardless of form. Previous winners were George Saunders in 2014, Akhil Sharma in 2015, Hisham Matar in 2017, Richard Lloyd-Parry in 2018 and Raymond Antrobus in 2019. [www.rathbonesfolioprizem.com](http://www.rathbonesfolioprizem.com)

### About The Folio Academy

The Folio Academy is a community of 300+ writers who represent excellence in literature. Academicians include: **Margaret Atwood**, **Carol Ann Duffy**, **Ian McEwan**, **Salman Rushdie**, **Zadie Smith** and **Sir Tom Stoppard**. The Academy recently recruited members including **Amanda Foreman**, **William Dalrymple**, **Jon Ronson**, **Alan Johnson** and **Andrew Marr**. Between them, Academicians have won thousands of literary awards, including 16 Man Booker Prizes. Academicians may be called upon to comment on literature matters in the media, to appear at festivals and public events, and may volunteer to mentor young writers in association with the charity First Story, which runs 320 residencies in secondary schools serving low-income communities.

## About The Literature/Folio Prize Foundation

The Literature/Folio Prize Foundation is a registered charity committed to bringing the most outstanding works of English language literature to public attention through the awarding of the Prize and other initiatives. Overseen by its trustees, the Foundation seeks to engage readers and writers throughout the English-speaking world in cultural debate and in the celebration and sustainment of the art of literature, which it believes has the capacity to enrich and change people's lives.

# Rathbones

Look forward

## About Rathbone Investment Management

Rathbone Investment Management is one of the UK's leading providers of high-quality discretionary investment management services. It manages over £43 billion\* of funds for individuals, charities and trustees, and is part of Rathbone Brothers Plc, an independently owned company with a listing on the London Stock Exchange. Investment

management services are offered in Aberdeen, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Chichester, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Kendal, Liverpool, London, Lymington, Newcastle and Winchester. Offshore investment management services are offered by subsidiary Rathbone Investment Management International in Jersey. *\*As at 31 December 2019, includes funds managed by Rathbone Unit Trust Management*

# Rathbones

---

# Folio Prize

MENTORSHIPS

## About the Rathbones Folio Prize Mentorships

Four Rathbones Folio Academicians are selected from a pool of nearly 100 writers who put themselves forward for the annual Rathbones Folio Mentorship scheme. They will be paired with one of four students who take part in First Story writing residencies in 70 different schools across the country. In 2017/18, the mentors were AL Kennedy, Ross Raisin, Kamila Shamsie and Evie Wyld, in 2018/19 Francesca Beard, Joe Dunthorne, Louise Doughty, and Adam Foulds were paired with students.