The Southern African History Book Prize

The Southern African History Book Prize, run jointly by the Southern African Historical Society (SAHS) and the Historical Association of South Africa (HASA), shines a light on the very best in regional historical scholarship. The award honours peer-reviewed monographs published by southern African presses that make original contributions to our understanding of the past through rigorous research, thoughtful interpretation and impressive use of sources.

The prize rewards books that open new questions or new angles on familiar subjects, elegantly argued and well written. Judges look for clear, cogent prose, breadth and imaginative use of archival and other sources (newspapers, letters, oral testimony, material culture), and work that will shape future conversations in southern African historiography.

Presented annually and alternating between the two societies' biennial conferences, the prize also carries a financial award of R20 000 (HASA and SAHS contribute R10 000 each). Beyond the monetary value, the prize is intended to raise the profile of regional academic publishing and to celebrate work that is both scholarly and accessible to a broad readership.

The inaugural prize in 2024 went to Natasha Erlank (University of Johannesburg) for *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in Early-Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Published by Wits University Press.
The shortlisted books that year were:
• *History of South Africa* — Thula Simpson
• *Dear Comrade President* — Andre Odendaal
• *Marikana: A People's History* — Julian Brown

The judges found *Convening Black Intimacy* to be an outstanding and distinctive book: written with an ethnographic sensibility and an authoritative voice, it brings deep knowledge and a palpable sense of materiality to its subjects.
They praised Erlank's elegant language and the importance of the argument she makes about the role of Christianity in South African history. Her command of the literature and historiography for the period was repeatedly commended, as was her careful

selection of photographs. Equally striking was her imaginative and disciplined use of a wide range of sources, novels and letters alongside newspapers, which allows her to access voices and subjects that have too often been marginalised in political histories. Particularly notable was the judges' appreciation of how Erlank uses black newspapers not simply to report politics but to recover female voices and intimate practices such as lobola. This careful, multifaceted use of sources, and the book's refusal of simple arguments, places *Convening Black Intimacy* in a new field of research: it opens up questions of intimacy and puts Christianity at the centre of Southern African historiography in a way that both deepens and reshapes our understanding of the period.

NATASHA ERLANK (CENTRE) WITH PRINISHA BADASSY (LEFT) AND CYNTHIA KROS (RIGHT) – BOOK PRIZE COMMITTEE

TSHEPO MOLOI (PAST PRESIDENT SAHS), NATASHA ERLANK, JOHAN WASSERMAN (PRESIDENT HASA)

In 2025, the prize was awarded to Sandra Swart (Stellenbosch University) for *The Lion's Historian: Africa's Animal Past*. Published by Jacana.
Shortlisted books:
• *Can Themba: The Making and Breaking of the Intellectual Tsotsi* — Siphiwo Mahala
• *Eskom: Power, Politics and the (Post)apartheid State* — Faeeza Ballim
• *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902* — Garth Benneyworth

The four books all made exciting and valuable contributions to the historiography, with a very diverse range of subjects such as the South African War, state-owned corporations, black writers, and animal histories. The judges were impressed with the scholarship and the wide range of sources that were used to craft these histories. Judges were unanimous in choosing *The Lion's Historian* as the winning entry, a truly original and generative contribution to South African historiography.

In their view, Swart produced a radically new way of looking at South African history through including animals - not from their perspective, as she explains, but in ways that are "animal sensitive" – and she includes: cattle, horses, dogs, quaggas, ants and baboons. "Animal sensitive" does not mean sentimental. She retains, for example, a completely realistic attitude to lions who will, given the chance and the disposition, most certainly not avoid eating people in the most indelicate ways imaginable. But her inclusion of animals and their relationships with people, hostile or otherwise, offers original perspectives and both affective and scholarly layers to the history she examines. They also highlighted that every single one of her chapters provides outstanding examples of how the past can be re-interpreted by considering the histories of animals and human beings together. These intertwined histories enrich standard narratives and demonstrate how the historian's craft can yield insights that speak to present and future concerns.

The judges praised her work as not only sensitive to class, race and gender, but her addition of species to understanding the past will surely shape future historiography. They singled out her reworking of Sol Plaatje's rhetorical gambit about cattle and her treatment of Van Riebeeck's encounters with Khoekhoe groups as especially powerful examples of how animal histories can illuminate long-standing human conflicts and injustices. She impressed with the breadth of her research, often straddling the early times with contemporary times within paragraphs and moving to a variety of regions across the globe. The panel was impressed by Swart's deep and considered engagement with environmental history rises to a new level in a book full of surprises, delights, and intellectual challenges. This original, career-defining, book makes us rethink the world and the animals we share it with. This is a historian at the peak of her career who is not afraid to ask big questions and answer them with such fluidity of prose and a great sense of humour.

The judges' concluding remarks were that *Lion's Historian* is brilliant - highly original, based on very extensive research over two decades, and written with a beautiful and rare touch.

Across shortlists and winners, the prize highlights the diversity and vitality of southern African historical scholarship. By recognising books that combine rigorous evidence with nuanced arguments, the Southern African History Book Prize contributes to a richer, more dynamic understanding of regional pasts.

Stellenbosch Staff And Students Accept The Southern African History Book Prize On Behalf Of Sandra Swart, With Edwin Smith And Ian Macqueen (Book Prize Committee)

SAHS/HASA Committee

Julie Parle
Laura Phillips
Thembisa Waetjen
Ian Macqueen
Edwin Smith
Prinisha Badassy