

Celebrating its 40th anniversary of recognizing Mississippi's artists, writers, and musicians, the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters announces this year's winners for works first published, performed, or shown in 2018. The award winners, chosen by out-of-state judges prominent in their fields, will be honored at the 40th Anniversary Awards Gala on Saturday, June 8, in Meridian at the Mississippi Arts+Entertainment Experience. At 1:30 p.m. that same day, readings and signings by MIAL award winners will take place at the Meridian Museum of Art.

The Noel Polk Lifetime Achievement Award winner is John Ruskey. Described by *Southern Living* as an "environmental evangelist for the wonders of the Mississippi River," Ruskey is a musician, writer, diarist, watercolorist, canoe maker, and river guide. A graduate of St. John's College with a Philosophy of Mathematics degree and of the University of Vermont with a B.A. in English and music, this Colorado native moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1991 to become the first curator of the Delta Blues Museum. While there, he founded the Delta Blues Education Fund, a non-profit that pairs area children with master Delta blues musicians to continue the tradition of Delta Blues. Ruskey himself plays guitar, bass, banjo, piano, and accordion. His musical career has included stints with the band J.B. and the Midnighters, the Wesley Jefferson Band, and Tater Music Maker. He established Quapaw Canoe Company in 1998 to provide guided expeditions of the Lower Mississippi River and some of its tributaries and has become the most knowledgeable guide on the Lower Mississippi River. In addition to individuals to whom he has introduced the river and its fragile ecosystems, Ruskey has guided National Geographic Adventure, ESPN Outdoors, the BBC, and other groups. He is also a master cypress-strip voyageur-style canoe maker. In 1999 he founded the Mighty Quapaws Apprenticeship Program for disadvantaged youth of the Mississippi Delta to teach canoe building, canoe safety and rescue, and wilderness leadership and survival. On the "Ruskey and Clark" expedition the length of the Missouri River, he daily uploaded journals, photographs, and sketches to schools across the country. In 2011, he began compiling

*Rivergator*, a document that upon its completion will be more than a thousand pages long. A mile by mile guide to the Lower Mississippi, it includes history and stories to introduce America to its longest river. Through his writing, his music, his watercolors, his environmental efforts, his work with young Mississippians, and his knowledge of Mississippi's great river, John Ruskey has earned this Lifetime Achievement Award.

Square Books of Oxford is a winner of an MIAL Citation of Merit in recognition of its forty years of contributing to the literary life of Mississippi. Opened in September, 1979, by Lisa and Richard Howorth, Square Books quickly established itself as a center of reading and writing for the state. Originally focused on the literature of Mississippi and the South, the small bookstore grew to three storefronts and a wide selection of books on all topics. Its earliest signing event was for Mississippi novelist Ellen Douglas followed the next month by Mississippi poet Etheridge Knight. The arrival of Bill Ferris and Willie Morris to Oxford opened the doors for many other prominent authors to visit the new store. Square Books now hosts over 150 events a year including Thacker Mountain Radio and signings for the Oxford Conference for the Book. It has become an essential stop on book tours and thus provides Mississippians the opportunity to meet and hear prominent authors weekly. Named Bookstore of the Year in 2013 by *Publishers Weekly* and called "one of the most influential independent bookstores in the United States" by the *New York Times*, Square Books has served as both an anchor and a catalyst for reading and writing in Mississippi. A launching pad for writers, a sanctuary for readers, a supporter of literacy and civic engagement, Square Books with its knowledgeable and dedicated owners and staff is a Mississippi treasure. Richard Howorth stated, "The initial vision is still very much what the store is today. I wanted it to serve the community." That it does and that is why it is being awarded the MIAL Citation of Merit.

Winner of the Contemporary Music Composition Award is John Milham for *Arden's Garden*. A culmination of twenty years of recording and traveling the world as a professional musician, this album is a blend of avant-garde jazz, blues, New Orleans funk, and electronica. Milham, who

studied at Berklee College of Music, plays with his own band, the Inner Mission Band, as well as performing with other groups such as Molly Thomas and the Rare Birds, Johnny Sansone, and the Bodhi Trio. Milham is also in demand as a studio drummer. He devotes time and energy to teaching music to children in Laurel and hosting kids' percussion camps in Laurel and the Mobile-Fairhope area. Each year Milham and his band perform "The Charlie Brown Jazz Christmas Concert" with all proceeds donated to local charities.

Steve Rouse, a native of Moss Point and currently Professor of Theory and Composition at the University of Louisville School of Music, is the winner of the Classical Music Composition Award for *This Dream*. A Rome Prize winner, Rouse has also won an NEA Composition Fellowship, two awards from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, three Al Smith Fellowships, and a Meet the Composer Residency. While serving as Composer in Residence for Meet the Composer, he composed music for all levels of public school music ensembles and developed musical outreach programming. Rouse received his B.M. degree from the University of Southern Mississippi and both a master's and doctorate from the University of Michigan. His compositions have been performed and heard around the world. A previous recipient of this MIAL Award, Rouse is included in the millenium edition of Baker's *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Classical Musicians*.

The Fiction Award goes to Tiffany Quay Tyson for *The Past Is Never*, a Southern Gothic novel combining local legends, magical realism, family secrets, and the search for a missing child. A faculty member at Lighthouse Writers Workshop and the Lighthouse Young Writers Program, Tyson is a native of Jackson and a graduate of Delta State University. Her first novel was *Three Rivers*, and she has also published pieces of short fiction and humor. She worked briefly in the Mississippi Delta as a journalist and received the Frank Allen Award for Journalism. The *New Orleans Review of Books* states that in her winning novel she creates "an eerie atmosphere similar to that of William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and William Gay's *Twilight*."

Julian Rankin of Ocean Springs is the winner of the Nonfiction Award for *Catfish Dream: Ed Scott's Fight for His Family Farm and Racial Justice in the Mississippi Delta*. His work tells the biography of a person and a place as it explores Scott's life as a farmer and the first nonwhite owner and operator of a catfish plant in the nation. A native Mississippian, Rankin received his degree in English and Creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He currently serves as the Executive Director of the Walter Anderson Museum of Art and was the founding Director of the Mississippi Museum of Art's Center for Art and Public Exchange, which uses artworks to address issues of racial equity and to create new narratives in modern Mississippi. Rankin is also part of the Jekyll Island Management Institute for 2019.

The Poetry Award winner is Aimee Nezhukumatathil for her work *Oceanic*, described by the publisher as "a sensuous love song to the earth and its inhabitants describing what it means to love a world in peril." A professor of English in the MFA program at the University of Mississippi, Nezhukumatathil is the author of four books of poetry and a winner of the Pushcart Prize and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts among other honors. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *Best American Poetry* anthology, and other publications. Her collection of nature essays is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. Nezhukumatathil serves as poetry editor for *Orion* magazine. She received both her undergraduate degree and her M.F.A. from the Ohio State University.

Rory Doyle of Cleveland is the winner of the Photography Award for *Delta Hill Riders*, his ongoing project on African-American cowboys and cowgirls. The project, which sheds light on a band of horse riders historically overlooked, was featured in the Half King Photo Series in New York and in The Print Space Gallery in London. A graduate of Delta State University, Doyle was the recipient of the 2019 Zeiss Photography Award, and he won the 16th Annual Smithsonian Photo Contest. Doyle is a 2019 Mississippi Visual Arts Fellow through the Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. He also was awarded a South Arts

State Fellowship for Mississippi in 2019. In the 2018 Eye Em Awards in Berlin, Germany, Doyle won the photojournalism category. He has been published in the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *ESPN* among many others.

The Visual Arts Award winner is Coulter Fussell of Water Valley for *New Work-Textiles*. Working out of her studio/workshop/quilting supply shop called YaloRUN, Fussell produces her textile art that often combines quilting and painting. Fussell's work combines the freedom of contemporary painting with the order of operations and functionality of traditional quilting. It has been featured in *Art Forum* and in the *New York Times*. Fussell received her B.F.A. from the University of Mississippi. Through quilting, Fussell's work relays the reality of poverty, ideas on the relationship between commerce and physical work, the disparity of luck, and the universal beauties of time and touch. Her work is featured in the Run Home Collection out of Thompson Street Studio and has been shown at the Bridget Donahue Gallery.

For more information about attending the Awards Gala and related events, visit the MIAL website at [www.ms-arts-letters.org](http://www.ms-arts-letters.org).