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PRESS RELEASE
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Famed boxer, Chechen child and the existence of Israel are the focus of the 79th annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards

Two lifetime achievement winners forge Caribbean identity

CLEVELAND, Ohio (March 26, 2014) – The Cleveland Foundation today announced the winners of its 79th annual [Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards](#). The 2014 recipients of the only national juried prize for literature that confronts racism and examines diversity are:

- **Anthony Marra**, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, fiction
- **Adrian Matejka**, *The Big Smoke*, poetry
- **Ari Shavit**, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, nonfiction
- **Sir Wilson Harris**, Lifetime Achievement
- **George Lamming**, Lifetime Achievement

Past winners include five writers who went on to win Nobel prizes – Nadine Gordimer, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott.

“The 2014 Anisfield-Wolf winners are exemplars who broaden our vision of race and diversity,” said Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who chairs the jury. “This year, there is exceptional writing about the moral complexity of Israel, a transporting first novel set in war-torn Chechnya and a collection of poems on the myth and unapologetic masculinity of the first African-American heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson.”

Gates is the Founding Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research at Harvard University, where he is also the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor. He praised the indispensable forging of Caribbean identity through the literature of two prolific giants: Guyana’s Sir Wilson Harris, 93, and Barbados’ George Lamming, 87. Poet Rita Dove, novelist Joyce Carol Oates, psychologist Steven Pinker and historian Simon Schama complete the Anisfield-Wolf panel of judges.

Cleveland Foundation President and Chief Executive Officer Ronald B. Richard said the global scope of this year’s winners is gratifying, and reflects founder and donor Edith Anisfield Wolf’s belief in the unifying power of the written word.

“The Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards rose from the philanthropic vision of one woman who realized that literature could advance our thinking and beliefs about race, culture, ethnicity, and our shared humanity,” Richard said. “In our centennial year, we are proud to showcase the literature that sets the national – and international – table for our conversations about race and cultural difference.”

About the Winners

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena is an intoxicating first book about intersecting lives in war-torn Chechnya. The novel begins as Russian officers burn down a Muslim home and “disappear” the father Dokka but can’t find his daughter Haava. A neighbor hides the 8-year-old girl in a barely-functioning hospital. Novelist Anthony Marra sets this story over five taut days, as the child is hunted and the adults around her try to navigate radically different circumstances. Marra teaches at Stanford University.

“*The Big Smoke*” is a nuanced, polyphonic book that explores the life of boxer Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight world champion. A fan of the sport, Adrian Matejka (Ma TEA ka) was moved by this son of emancipated slaves – born in Texas just 13 years after the end of the Civil War – who loved Shakespeare, Verdi’s operas, travel abroad and a series of white women. *The Big Smoke* follows Johnson until 1912 in 52 poems. Matejka spent eight years researching and writing this book. He teaches at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Ari Shavit, a columnist for Jerusalem’s daily newspaper Haaretz, spent five years writing *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* in English and Hebrew simultaneously. A former Israeli paratrooper, peace advocate and great-grandson of Victorian-era Zionists, Shavit carefully examines a fraught and difficult history, interweaving family memoir, multiple documents and hundreds of interviews with Arabs and Jews. This important, clarifying book asks why Israel was created, what it has achieved, what went wrong and if it can survive.

Sir Wilson Harris is a Guyanese writer who lives outside London. He began his professional career 70 years ago as a government surveyor of the vast interior of Guyana, an experience that informs all 25 of his novels, the first of which, *Palace of the Peacock*, was approved for publication by T.S. Eliot.

George Lamming, who spent decades as a leader of the Caribbean literary Diaspora, writes deeply political books that critique colonialism and neo-colonialism. His first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, drew accolades from Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright. Lamming lives in Barbados.

The Anisfield-Wolf winners will be honored by The Cleveland Foundation Sept. 11 at a ceremony at the Ohio Theatre in Cleveland. Jury Chair Gates will host. To find additional information, and a complete list of winners since 1935, visit www.Anisfield-Wolf.org.

About the Cleveland Foundation

Established in 1914, the Cleveland Foundation is the world’s first community foundation and one of the largest today, with assets of more than \$2 billion and 2013 grants of \$89 million. For more information on the Cleveland Foundation, visit ClevelandFoundation.org/Purpose and follow us at Facebook.com/ClevelandFoundation or [@CleveFoundation](https://Twitter.com/CleveFoundation) on Twitter.

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