

# The 2018 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction Shortlist Announced

**(July 29, 2019; New York, NY)**--The Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction announced its shortlist today. The annual award is given to a writer whose work is set in the South, exemplifies the tenets of Southern literature—quality of prose, originality, and authenticity of setting and characters—and reflects, in the words of its namesake, Willie Morris, “hope for belonging, for belief in a people’s better nature, for steadfastness against all that is hollow or crass or rootless or destructive.”

The award comes with a \$10,000 cash prize and an all-expense paid trip for the winner to New York City for the reception and ceremony, which will be held on Monday, October 21st, 2019. The award is sponsored by Reba and Dave Williams.

**This year’s finalists are:**



**Minrose Gwin, *Promise* (William Morrow)**

**Silas House, *Southernmost* (Algonquin)**

**Tayari Jones, *An American Marriage* (Algonquin)**

**Tiffany Quay Tyson, *The Past is Never* (Skyhorse Publishing)**

“We are pleased and proud of this year’s shortlist for the Willie Morris Award,” says Reba White Williams, founder of the annual prize. “Each year—and this is our twelfth—proves the breadth of talent producing contemporary Southern fiction.”

This year's reception and award ceremony will introduce the winner of a new award, The Willie Morris Award for Southern Poetry. Susan Kinsolving, director and judge of the poetry award, will introduce the winner who will present her prize-winning poem.

**Shortlisted books: author biographies and synopses:**

**Minrose Gwin, *Promise* (William Morrow)**



Minrose Gwin grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi. She began her writing career working in Mobile, Atlanta, Nashville, and Knoxville, as a newspaper and wire service reporter. Gwin is the author of several novels, a memoir, and many cultural and literary studies, focusing on American history and racial injustice. Her civil rights era novel, *The Queen of Palmyra*, was a finalist for the John Gardner Fiction Award and Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers pick. Her memoir, *Wishing for Snow*, uses humor and inquiry to tell the story of her mentally-ill poet mother. Gwin currently resides in Chapel Hill, North

Carolina, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

*Promise* is set in Tupelo, Mississippi, during the deadly 1936 tornado, which was documented to have killed 233 residents and injured nearly 1,000. Unfortunately, those numbers do not include the toll the storm had on the African-American community of Tupelo. In Gwin's novel, two families, one black, another white, are torn apart after both lose babies in the storm. Dovey is a wash woman who lives on Elephant Hill where the water tower "casts a shadow" over the African-American residents. The storm destroys Elephant Hill, and Dovey barely survives, thrown into a nearby lake. From another part of Tupelo, Jo McNabb also survives. Jo is from a white family largely known for their abject bigotry and racism. As Dovey and Jo struggle through the aftermath of the tornado—journeying to find loved ones and shelter—they also face the deeply rooted problem of race in the South. It is a time when relying on the embrace of strangers, regardless of their race or class, could be a matter of life or death.

**Silas House, *Southernmost* (Algonquin)**



Silas House is a nationally bestselling author of six novels—including The New York Times Bestseller *A Parchment of Leaves* (2003). He was born in Laurel County, Kentucky, and spent much of his childhood there. House's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Garden and Guns*, *Oxford American*, and *Salon*. He is the recipient of several awards including the E.B. White Award, Appalachian Book of the Year, and Hobson Medal for Literature. He was also long-listed for the 2019 Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. House is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers and a former commentator for

NPR's *All Things Considered*. He also serves as the Berea College NEH Chair of Appalachian Studies and teaches fiction at Spalding University.

***Southernmost*** is a deeply moving tale of love and reconciliation. In the Cumberland Valley of Nashville, Tennessee, Pentecostal preacher Asher Sharp extends shelter to two gay men during a deadly flood. In a small town where many residents believe the flood is God's vengeance for same-sex marriage, Asher's kindness toward the gay couple is frowned upon. When Asher invites the couple to church, he is chided by his wife and his parishioners, who vote him out as lead pastor. Asher's riveting response is recorded on video and goes viral on the internet. A journey ensues, one with life-changing consequences. In this exhilarating and cinematically charged novel, *Southernmost* confronts homophobia and religious bigotry, telling the story of Asher's attempts to right wrongs and to endure consequences.

### **Tayari Jones, *An American Marriage* (Algonquin)**



New York Times best-selling author Tayari Jones hails from Atlanta, Georgia. She is the author of four novels: *Leaving Atlanta*, *The Untelling*, *Silver Sparrow*, and *An American Marriage*. Jones received the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for her debut novel in 2003. Her second novel was awarded the Lillian Smith book Award, and her latest novel, *An American Marriage*, was an Oprah Book Club selection. It also appeared on Barack Obama's summer reading list. *An American Marriage* recently received the Women's Prize for Fiction. Jones is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers. She graduated from Spelman College, University of Iowa, and Arizona State University. Jones currently teaches creative writing at Emory University.

***An American Marriage*** powerfully explores the ways mass incarceration of black men in America destroys black families. A year in a half into their marriage, Roy and Celestial, a happy young couple, college educated and well-off financially, are living out the American Dream in Atlanta. Ready to expand their family with a baby, something devastating happens, and their life plans are drastically altered. On a Labor Day weekend, they travel to Roy's hometown in Elie, Louisiana, to visit his parents. The family trip changes everything. In the end, the novel questions whether love and generosity will win in the face of injustice and racism. Focusing on a Southern marriage and family, Jones's novel dramatizes the trickle-down effects of the prison industrial complex and personalizes a devastating American problem.

**Tiffany Quay Tyson, *The Past is Never* (Skyhorse Publishing)**



Tiffany Quay Tyson was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She has worked as a Mississippi Delta news reporter and received the Frank Allen Award for Journalism. Tyson is the winner of two Heartland Emmy Awards— one of which was for a children’s public television program. Her first novel, *Three Rivers*, was a finalist for Colorado Book Award for Literary Fiction and the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Fiction. *The Past is Never* is the winner of the 2019 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Fiction. Tyson currently resides in Denver, Colorado.

***The Past is Never*** chronicles two siblings’ attempt to solve a family mystery in the late 1970s in White Forest, Mississippi. Their younger sister, Pansy, was last seen swimming in a haunted quarry on a smothering hot summer day. Their father, Earl, is a charming wanderer known for a counterfeit money scheme. Is he also somehow responsible for Pansy’s disappearance? Tyson’s novel is a suspenseful, riveting, and beautifully written tale about family, history, and loss. Through chapters that shift between the ghostly past and the indeterminate present—Tyson evokes the widely referenced William Faulkner quote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” *The Past is Never* is an audacious addition to the genre of contemporary Southern gothic fiction.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION about The Willie Morris Awards for Southern Fiction and Poetry, please visit <https://williemorrisaward.org>

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