

2025



# INSIDE

LITERARY PRIZE



# Inside Literary Prize

## Do you believe in the power of books?

**"I survived solitary, and rediscovered a sense of freedom, because someone slid *The Black Poets* edited by Dudley Randall into my cell one day. I realized that a poem can give somebody a whole world of hope. And after reading that book, I dedicated myself to helping other prisoners, and people outside of prison, discover the freedom blueprint that poetry, literature, and other arts can provide."**

**Reginald Dwayne Betts,**  
Founder & CEO of Freedom Reads

The Inside Literary Prize is a national honor that will be bestowed on one exceptional book by a jury of 300 incarcerated individuals voting at a dozen prisons across the country.

Originating from discussions between Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts; bookstore owner and podcaster Lori Feathers; the Center for Justice Innovation; and the National Book Foundation, the Inside Literary Prize provides a national platform to honor the insights of incarcerated people who, by reading literature that is shaping our current era, participate in America's shared cultural conversation.

### The Inside Literary Prize aims to:

Inspire hope and joy by connecting people to books in new and meaningful ways.

Provide opportunities to engage in profound and sustained discussion about books representing the best of contemporary literature published in the United States.

Raise national public awareness about the experiences of readers who are incarcerated and the value of their contributions to cultural conversations.



National Book Foundation



# Embark on a Literary Adventure

## Freedom Reads is seeking judges for the second Inside Literary Prize.

The Inside Literary Prize fosters meaningful connections and thought-provoking discussions about acclaimed books. Freedom Reads will visit every participating prison where judges reside and will bring engaging authors to host readings and lead discussions.

Whether you are picking up a book for the first time or you are a lifelong reader, we invite you to join us in this collective endeavor.

Judges will read, discuss, and vote on the winning book. It's a chance to come together, share insights, and celebrate the transformative power of literature.

**"Reading is such an integral part of my life and when I come across bright minds who share a love of literature I light up with enthusiasm. Novels and writing have led me to many impromptu book clubs with the most interesting people filled with suggestions, reviews, and unlikely friendships."**

**Ramelle Kamack,** Correctional Training Facility, Soledad, California

By the  
Numbers

1

Winner

4

Books

300

Judges

12

Prisons

6

States &  
Territories

## How to Get Involved

1

### Read

**Read four books.**

25 judges at each prison will be selected to participate. Each judge will receive four brand new, paperback books to read in February and March.

2

### Discuss

**Discuss and vote.**

Between April and May, the Freedom Reads team will visit every participating prison to host live discussions and voting. We look forward to seeing you there!

3

### Discover

**Discover and read the winning book.**

Freedom Reads will provide 15 additional copies of the winning title to each prison.

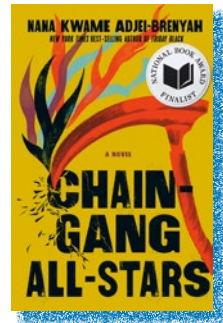
**Not selected to be a judge?**

Don't worry. Freedom Reads will provide an additional five copies of each book to your facility's library so that everyone can take part in the journey.

# Shortlist

## Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah *Chain-Gang All-Stars*

Pantheon Books /  
Penguin Random House



**Finalist, 2023  
National Book Award  
for Fiction**

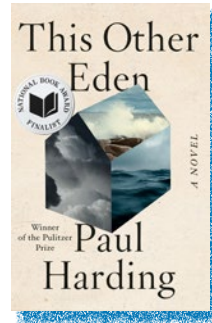
**Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah** was a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree, and is the winner of the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize for Best First Book. Raised in Spring Valley, New York, he now lives in the Bronx.

### 2022 National Book Awards Judges Citations

"Drawing inspiration from the brutality of both the gladiator arenas of ancient Rome and modern professional sports, *Chain-Gang All-Stars* is a fusion of action, social commentary, and literary grace. This inspired tale shines light on the inhumanity of our carceral system in a way only fiction can, displaying the complex intersections of race and gender, of entertainment and morality. In an evocative and immersive style, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah keeps readers on the edge of their seats as they bear witness to a relentless battle against systemic oppression and humanity's worst impulses, eagerly anticipating the fate of these resilient characters."

## Paul Harding *This Other Eden*

W. W. Norton & Company



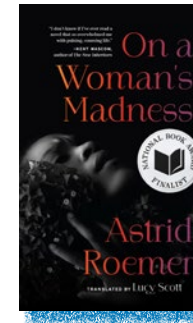
**Finalist, 2023  
National Book Award  
for Fiction**

**Paul Harding** is the author of three novels, *Tinkers*, which won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *Enon*, and *This Other Eden*. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and PEN America. He has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Michener Center for Writers, and Harvard University. He currently teaches at Stony Brook University.

"*This Other Eden* is a powerful historical novel about the last days of a tiny, racially integrated community off the coast of Maine, as its inhabitants are noticed, then hated, then evicted by the mainland government. The islanders are poor, hungry, lawless, and incestuous, the children vulnerable to neglect and abuse. They are also resilient and tight knit, taking care of each other in ways the outside world doesn't bother to understand. Paul Harding renders their flawed paradise with penetrating insight and boundless imagination. The book is full of marvels, thrilling prose, and scene after scene of exquisite pain and beauty."

## Astrid Roemer *On a Woman's Madness*

Translated from the Dutch by Lucy Scott  
Two Lines Press



**Finalist, 2023  
National Book  
Award for Translated  
Literature**

In 1966, at the age of 19, **Astrid Roemer** emigrated from Suriname to the Netherlands. She was awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize in 2016, and the Dutch Literature Prize (Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren) in 2021.

"*On a Woman's Madness* is a journey through the psyche of a woman who will not conform to her world's expectations. With sensual prose punctuated by dreams and memories, Astrid Roemer paints both a portrait of queer survival and a landscape of Suriname, a setting unfamiliar to many English-language readers. Lucy Scott's translation captures the shifting tones of this provocative and relevant story, giving us a novel with all the makings of a new classic."

## Justin Torres *Blackouts*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux /  
Macmillan Publishers



**Winner, 2023  
National Book Award  
for Fiction**

**Justin Torres** is the author of *We the Animals*, which won the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, was translated into 15 languages, and was adapted into a feature film. He was a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree, a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University, and a Cullman Center Fellow at the New York Public Library.

"*Blackouts* is a novel of aesthetic complexity, multiplicity, and beauty. Justin Torres responds to the literal, metaphorical, and historical erasures of queer sexuality, slowly unfolding more and more inventive "blackouts"—revealing, divulging, or re-elaborating mainstream narratives and thus creating newer and truer meanings. In the process of balancing fact and fiction, Torres creates a boldly original novel that both challenges and satisfies, and ultimately becomes an inventive artistic polysemy, inspirational and breathtaking."

# Inside Prize Timeline 2025

## Feb–Mar

**Read the four shortlisted books.**

## Apr–May

**Attend an author reading.**

The Inside Literary Prize tour will visit all 12 participating prisons.

**Each stop on the tour will include:**

- A reading, Q&A, and book signing with an acclaimed writer (General attendance)
- A live discussion and ballot voting (Attendance open to prize judges only)

## June

**Stay informed to discover the winning book.**



# About Freedom Reads



Freedom Reads  
Founder &  
CEO Reginald  
Dwayne Betts

**Amidst the chaos** and control that characterizes prison, it is difficult to bring into focus the intellectual, cultural, and emotional loss that incarcerated people experience. While there are many organizations dedicated to decreasing the number of people in prison, few focus on the burdens of prison for those imprisoned.

Founded in 2020 with a \$5.25 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, Freedom Reads is the only organization in the nation creating transformative experiences for people in prison to meaningfully elevate the dignity of the millions of people in this country touched by the criminal legal system.

### **Vision**

A Freedom Library in every cellblock in every prison in America. Freedom Reads envisions a society that acknowledges and nurtures the basic dignity and humanity of people in prison.

### **Mission**

Freedom Reads' mission is to bring joy, inspire hope, and help those Inside confront what prison does to the spirit.

We bring beautiful, handcrafted bookcases into prisons, transforming cellblocks into Freedom Libraries. The Freedom Library is a physical intervention into the landscape of plastic and steel and loneliness that characterizes prison. In an environment where the freedom to think, to contribute to a community, and even to dream about what is possible is too often curtailed, Freedom Reads reminds those Inside that they have not been forgotten.

# Freedom Library

A three-shelf Freedom Library in American Black Walnut reflecting the curved design filled with the 500-book collection. (Photo: Karen Pearson)



**The Freedom Library** is a physical intervention into the landscape of steel and suffering that characterizes prison. In an environment where the freedom to think and contribute to a community is limited, the Freedom Library unites people through conversation, art, and literature.

Every element of the Freedom Library's design is aimed at interrupting the chaos and isolation of prison. To bring nature into the lives of people who may not have touched a tree in years or decades, we carve the Freedom Library from solid wood: maple, cherry, walnut, or oak. Instead of leaning against a wall, the bookcases curve and are positioned in the middle of an open space because, as Alberto Manguel argues in *The Library at Night*, "a circular library more generously allows the reader to imagine that every last page is also the first."

With books on each side of the bookcase, Freedom Libraries transform cellblocks into spaces that welcome and invite conversation and engagement.

# Stay Connected

**Be a part of Freedom Reads.**  
There are many ways to get involved.

**Write to us, we'll write back.**  
Share your thoughts on the Inside Literary Prize books. We are committed to responding to every letter we receive.

**Freedom Reads**  
2666 State Street, Suite 5A  
Hamden, CT 06517

**Share with your family and friends.**  
We encourage families and friends to visit our website ([freedomreads.org](http://freedomreads.org)). Learn about our mission, discover how we collaborate with organizations for positive change, and more.

**Sign up for our monthly newsletter.**  
Join our monthly newsletter. Write to us if you would like to receive our monthly newsletter to stay informed about all of our work and initiatives—from the Inside Literary Prize to the Freedom Library.

**At Freedom Reads,** we encourage connections with your loved ones. We have included two bookmarks designed for you to keep and share. One bookmark represents your literary journey with the Inside Literary Prize. One bookmark is to share with a friend or loved one.



Shortlist 2025

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Adjai-Brenyah  
**Chain-Gang All-Stars**

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**This Other Eden**

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**On a Woman's  
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[freedomreads.org](http://freedomreads.org)

The logo graphic consists of three dark blue, curved, overlapping shapes that resemble a stylized 'F' or a series of connected arches. The rightmost shape is the largest and contains the text 'Freedom Reads'.

**Freedom  
Reads**

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