

The Philosophical Society of Texas

For Immediate Release

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Philosophical Society of Texas Presents the Kempner Family Book Prizes for Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry

AUSTIN, Texas – The Philosophical Society of Texas announced its annual Kempner Family Book Prizes for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry during the Society’s Annual Meeting, held this year in Houston, Texas on February 7, 2026. The prizes announced this year were for books published in 2024 and reviewed by the prize committees in 2025.

The Fiction Prize was awarded to Rudy Ruiz for his novel *The Border Between Us* (Blackstone Publishing). John Steinbeck reminds us that “External reality has a way of being not so external after all.” Crafting the tender memories of childhood into story has inspired many of our best authors. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, William Faulkner and Toni Morison wove impressions of their early years into prose that connects us in a dreamy fellowship of shared recollections. Such is the case with Rudy Ruiz’s *The Border Between Us*, a novel set in the author’s hometown of Brownsville, Texas. Protagonist Ramón López is coming of age in a community formed between two nations, two languages and two cultures. Not only is Ramón establishing his identity as a young man, but as an artist, an American, a Mexican and a Mexican American, not necessarily in that order. We are all fortunate when authors such as Ruiz put into words the impressions of youth - what readers long to describe and try hard not to forget.

The winner of the Nonfiction Prize was Karen Valby for *The Swans of Harlem: Five Black Ballerinas, Fifty Years of Sisterhood, and Their Reclamation of a Groundbreaking History* (Vintage Books / Penguin Random House). In *The Swans of Harlem*, Karen Valby brings to light the intertwined lives of five extraordinary dancers from the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Through patient research and vivid storytelling, she restores to history these pioneers who expanded both the art of ballet and the meaning of representation in American life. Her book becomes at once a social chronicle, an artistic biography, and a testament to beauty upheld against adversity. It is a work of reclamation and grace.

The Poetry Prize went to Kurt Heinzelman for his outstanding collection *Pollen, Salt and Chimes* (Pinyon Publishing). The poetry committee’s vote for *Pollen, Salt and Chimes* was an emphatic one. If, as Frost is alleged to have said, the purpose of poetry is to remind us what it would impoverish us to forget, then Heinzelman's virtuosity is more than just learning plus a

certain facility. Rather in his hands, it is an empowering gift that enables him to expand his poetic perceptions to a vastness that encompasses the awesome variety of our vulnerabilities.

Honorable mentions for fiction were given to Natalie Musgrave Dossett for *Sarita* (Atmosphere Press) and to Bret Anthony Johnston for *We Burn Daylight* by (Random House). For nonfiction, honorable mentions were given to James Aalen Bernsen for *The Lost War for Texas: Mexican Rebels, American Burrrites, and the Texas Revolution of 1811* and to Victoria H. Cummins and Light T. Cummins for *Making the Unknown Known: Women in Early Texas Art, 1860s-1960s*, both from Texas A&M University Press.

The Philosophical Society of Texas congratulates the authors and their publishers on these splendid works.

Each award carries a \$2,500 prize for the author. Fiction and nonfiction books, as well as volumes of poetry, are submitted each year to the Society's book prize committee. Submissions must relate to Texas or be written by a current or past Texas resident. Books about Texas receive special consideration. For the purpose of the awards, Texas is defined as having the borders of the Republic of Texas as set forth by the Congress of the Republic in 1836, extending into parts of what are now New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. The book prizes are generously underwritten by a gift from the family of the late Harris L. Kempner, Jr. of Galveston, a 50-year member of the Society, past president, and treasurer.

Information about submitting titles for the 2026 Book Prizes (books published in 2025) can be found on the Society's website - PSTX.org. For more information, please contact Society director, Dawn Orsak, directly at (512) 825-2249 or dorsak@pstx.org.

The Philosophical Society of Texas was founded December 5, 1837, in Houston, the capital of the Republic of Texas. The goal was to unite the efforts of the modern-day philosophers to collect and disseminate knowledge. The Society was incorporated as a nonprofit educational institution in 1936.

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