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STEPHEN O'CONNOR WINS \$5000 CROOK'S CORNER BOOK PRIZE

Chapel Hill, NC, January 8, 2018— Stephen O'Connor's *Thomas Jefferson Dreams of Sally Hemings*, published by Viking, has won this year's Crook's Corner Book Prize for best debut novel set in the American South. The book is O'Connor's first full-length fiction. He was in Chapel Hill to accept the award at the announcement party at Crook's Corner Café & Bar.

Thomas Jefferson Dreams of Sally Hemings is a contemporary imagining of the connection between Jefferson and the enslaved woman who was the mother of six of his children, provoking questions about how to reconcile his idealistic proclamation that “All men are created equal” with his lifelong ownership of slaves. O'Connor's fictional immersion into the lives of Jefferson and Hemings is informed by meticulous historical research, as well as a mix of fantasy and dreamscape that occasionally transports the characters out of their century and into such venues as the Manhattan subway. Nothing less than a re-invention of the historical novel, the book is a psychological tour de force, offering possible ways of understanding the complicated link between Jefferson and Hemings.

In addition to two collections of short fiction, O'Connor's work has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, as well as in a broad variety of literary journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*. His nonfiction books have explored issues relating to teaching children in inner city schools, and the history of the "orphan trains" of the 19th and early 20th centuries that transported

parentless children from New York City to families in the Midwest. O'Connor currently teaches in the Sarah Lawrence MFA writing program.

Elizabeth Cox, this year's book prize judge, says she was "knocked out by this book," in which the author's inventiveness serves to augment "the sense of moral weight carried throughout this story." Cox is the prize-winning author of poetry, short story collections, and five novels, the latest of which, *A Question of Mercy*, was published in 2016.

The prize, established as a collaboration between the iconic Southern restaurant, Crook's Corner Bar & Café and the Crook's Corner Book Prize Foundation, was inspired by the prestigious book awards long given by famous "literary" cafés in Paris. "Our purpose is to encourage emerging writers in today's challenging publishing environment," says Anna Hayes, president of the foundation. "As far as we know, this is the only café or restaurant-sponsored literary prize in the U.S., but we are hoping to start a trend." The prize is open to self-published as well as traditionally published authors. Winners receive a \$5000 cash prize and, in the tradition of the Café de Flore in Paris, a complimentary glass of wine at Crook's each day of his/her prize year.

Thomas Jefferson Dreams of Sally Hemings was one of three books on the shortlist, which included *Rabbit Cake*, by Annie Hartnett (Tin House) and *The Infinite* (HarperCollins), by Nicholas Mainieri. Previous judges are Jill McCorkle, Randall Kenan, Lee Smith, and Tom Franklin.

Submissions are open for next year's prize. Eligible books must be the author's first published novel for adult readers, published between January 1, 2017 and May 15,

2018. Regardless of the author's residence, the book must be set predominantly in the American South. For details, visit www.crookscornerbookprize.com.

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