



**Embargoed** until 20:00 BST 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014

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**Joan Hessayon Award winner Jo Thomas  
triumphs with debut novel *The Oyster Catcher***

Jo Thomas has triumphed with her contemporary novel *The Oyster Catcher*, published by Accent Press, for which she has been awarded The Romantic Novelists' Association's (RNA) prestigious Joan Hessayon Award for new writers. Jo was presented with her award and a cheque for £1,000 at the RNA's Summer Party held today at the Royal Over-Seas League in London.

The Joan Hessayon Award is generously sponsored by gardening expert Dr David Hessayon OBE, in honour of his late wife Joan, who was a longstanding member of the RNA and a great supporter of its New Writers' Scheme.

The award was judged by RNA Chair, Pia Fenton, and Vice Chair, Sue Moorcroft, together with adjudicator and former RNA Chair Anthea Kenyon. They found the final decision difficult to arrive at, as the standard of entries was very high, and this year there were a record seventeen contenders from all over the UK and abroad.

However, the judges agreed that the winning novel was outstanding, and said, "The sense of place in this charming tale is superb, and the reader really feels as though they are there in that godforsaken place village with the constant rain. A truly wonderful read!"

Pia Fenton said, “All the contenders should be proud of their books, as it is a huge achievement to become a published author. The RNA committee and I are delighted to have such a bumper crop of graduates from our New Writers’ Scheme this year, and we congratulate them all.”

She continued, “We offer our special congratulations to Jo Thomas for her heart-warming and un-put-downable tale,”

Set in rain-soaked Galway in Ireland, the *The Oyster Catcher* features runaway bride Fiona Clutterbuck. When she crashes the honeymoon camper van, she doesn’t know what to do or where to go. Embarrassed and humiliated, Fiona knows one thing for sure – she can’t go home. Finding a job on an oyster farm seems both a lifeline, and the answer to her prayers. But nothing could prepare her for the choppy ride ahead or her new boss, the wild and unpredictable Sean Thornton.

As the oyster season approaches, will there be love amongst the oyster beds of Galway Bay? Or will the circling sharks finally close in? According to a champion shell shucker, when learning how to shuck an oyster from its shell, first you have to understand what’s keeping it closed. But will Fiona ever be able to come out of her shell and find love again?

To research this story, Jo had to eat a lot of oysters, watch an oyster seller shuck oysters, and go on a seafood cookery course at the Galway Seafood Centre while she lived in Ireland, but she found it wasn’t enough – she needed to get her feet wet, literally. After returning to live in Wales, she spent a dark, cold weekend in November at an oyster farm in Scotland. Dressed in wet weather gear, she experienced the real life of an oyster farmer – wet, cold and uncomfortable. But later that evening, eating the oysters she had picked from the sea herself, Jo felt that nothing had ever tasted quite so good – “it was perfection.”

Jo, who now lives in the Vale of Glamorgan, said of her inclusion in the shortlist, “I’m delighted to be a contender for the Joan Hessayon Award.

Finally becoming a published writer is down to the friendship and support I have found in the RNA.”

The full shortlist for 2014 was:

Celia J Anderson	<i>Sweet Proposal</i>	Piatkus Entice
Elaine Everest	<i>Gracie's War</i>	Pulse
Helena Fairfax	<i>The Silk Romance</i>	MuseltUp
Sue Fortin	<i>United States of Love</i>	Harper Impulse
Kathryn Freeman	<i>Too Charming</i>	Choc Lit
Jessica Gilmore	<i>The Return of Mrs Jones</i>	Harlequin Mills & Boon
Laura E James	<i>Truth or Dare?</i>	Choc Lit
Jennie Jones	<i>The House on Burra Burra Lane</i>	Harlequin Australia
Alison May	<i>Sweet Nothing</i>	Choc Lit
Teresa F. Morgan	<i>Plus One is a Lucky Number</i>	Harper Impulse
Jane O'Reilly	<i>Once a Bad Girl</i>	Escape
Helen Phifer	<i>The Ghost House</i>	Carina UK
Jill Steeples	<i>Desperately Seeking Heaven</i>	Carina UK
Jo Thomas	<i>The Oyster Catcher</i>	Accent Press
Lin Treadgold	<i>Goodbye Henrietta Street</i>	Safkhet Publishing
Susan Willis	<i>Yes Chef, No Chef</i>	Endeavour
Jennifer Young	<i>Thank You For the Music</i>	Tirgearr Publishing

Cover images for all the novels, together with author photographs, can be found at:

[http://www.romanticnovelistsassociation.org/news/media\\_centre](http://www.romanticnovelistsassociation.org/news/media_centre)

### **About the Romantic Novelists' Association (RNA) and the New Writers' Scheme**

The RNA was formed in 1960 to promote romantic fiction and encourage good writing and now represents more than 700 writers, agents, editors and other publishing professionals.

The New Writers' Scheme has been run by the RNA since 1962 and is unique among professional writing associations. It aims to encourage fresh talent in the writing of romantic novels that reflect all aspects of love and life, contemporary or historical.

Manuscripts submitted under the scheme are from unpublished authors and are read by an experienced writer or editor who provides invaluable feedback.

Any manuscript that is subsequently published as a debut novel is eligible for the Joan Hessayon Award. All eligible books are judged by a panel of experienced RNA members who are already published authors.

Winner of the 2013 award was Liesel Schwarz with *A Conspiracy of Alchemists* (Del Rey, Ebury Press).

A list of past winners of RNA awards can be found at

[www.romanticnovelistsassociation.org](http://www.romanticnovelistsassociation.org)

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