

**MLA AWARDS PRIZE FOR A FIRST BOOK TO VIVASVAN SONI FOR *MOURNING  
HAPPINESS: NARRATIVE AND THE POLITICS OF MODERNITY***

New York, NY – 5 December 2011 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its eighteenth annual Prize for a First Book to Vivasvan Soni, of Northwestern University, for *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*, published by Cornell University Press.

The MLA Prize for a First Book was established in 1993. It is awarded annually for the first book-length publication of a member of the association: a literary or linguistic study, a critical edition of an important work, or a critical biography.

The Prize for a First Book is one of eighteen awards that will be presented on 7 January 2012, during the association's annual convention, to be held in Seattle. The members of the selection committee were Claire Colebrook (Pennsylvania State Univ.); Jennifer Fleissner (Indiana Univ.), chair; Andrew Galloway (Cornell Univ.); Ania Loomba (Univ. of Pennsylvania); and Yopie Prins (Univ. of Michigan). The committee's citation for Soni's book reads:

*Mourning Happiness* powerfully transcends the usual field limitations of academic scholarship, making a compelling case for how an ancient Greek construal of happiness could reawaken the radical force of that denuded concept in our own present. Vivasvan Soni begins with a searching exploration of the classical epoch's engagement with Solon's proverb "Call no man happy until he is dead." Later chapters on the fiction, moral philosophy, and political writing of the 1700s show how this holistic and

communally centered understanding of happiness as a judgment on an entire life gives way to a privatized trial narrative, in which happiness is imaginable only as a final reward. This provocative study affirms the importance of narrative form to one of our most upheld and yet least examined ideals.

Vivasvan Soni is an associate professor of English at Northwestern University. He received his PhD from Duke University and was previously affiliated with the University of Michigan and Yale University, where he held a Woodrow Wilson Postdoctoral Fellowship. His articles have appeared in journals such as *Cultural Critique*, *Comparative Literature*, *European Romantic Review*, and *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. He was recently awarded an American Philosophical Society Fellowship to work on his current project, which traces the emergence of a crisis of judgment in a number of eighteenth-century discourses. Portions of this work appear in a special issue of the journal *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* that he edited.

The Modern Language Association of America and its 30,000 members in 100 countries work to strengthen the study and teaching of languages and literature. Founded in 1883, the MLA provides opportunities for its members to share their scholarly findings and teaching experiences with colleagues and to discuss trends in the academy. The MLA sustains one of the finest publication programs in the humanities, producing a variety of publications for language and literature professionals and for the general public. The association publishes the *MLA International Bibliography*, the only comprehensive bibliography in language and literature, available online. The MLA Annual Convention features meetings on a wide variety of subjects; this year's convention in Seattle is expected to draw 8,000 attendees. More information on MLA programs is available at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

Before the establishment of the MLA Prize for a First Book in 1993, members who were authors of first books were eligible, along with other members, to compete for the association's James Russell Lowell Prize, established in 1969. Apart from its limitation to members' first books, the Prize for a First Book follows the same criteria and definitions as the Lowell Prize. Previous winners of the prize have been Steven Justice, Elaine Hadley, Marc Redfield, John

Rogers, Katie Trumpener, Deidre Shauna Lynch, Srinivas Aravamudan, Patricia Cain, Bruce W. Holsinger, Paul Downes, Priya Joshi, Paul K. Saint-Amour, Elizabeth S. Goodstein, Virginia Jackson, Sean X. Goudie, Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, and Andrew Piper. Honorable mentions have been presented to Ian Baucom, Yopie Prins, Zhen Zhang, and Eric Slauter.

The MLA Prize for a First Book is awarded under the auspices of the association's Committee on Honors and Awards. Other awards sponsored by the committee are the William Riley Parker Prize; the James Russell Lowell Prize; the Howard R. Marraro Prize; the Kenneth W. Mildener Prize; the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize; the MLA Prize for Independent Scholars; the Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize; the Morton N. Cohen Award; the MLA Prizes for a Distinguished Scholarly Edition and for a Distinguished Bibliography; the Lois Roth Award; the William Sanders Scarborough Prize; the Fenia and Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies; the MLA Prize in United States Latina and Latino and Chicana and Chicano Literary and Cultural Studies; the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prizes for Comparative Literary Studies, for French and Francophone Studies, for Italian Studies, for Studies in Germanic Languages and Literatures, for Studies in Slavic Languages and Literatures, for a Translation of a Literary Work, for a Translation of a Scholarly Study of Literature; and the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies.