Robin Coste Lewis, a doctoral student at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, has won the National Book Award for Poetry, one of the nation’s most prestigious literary prizes. Lewis received the award for her first book, *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*.

The honor was announced at the 66th National Book Awards held on Nov. 18 in New York City. Lewis, a Provost’s Fellow in the PhD in Creative Writing & Literature program and a teaching assistant in the Thematic Options program, said she was stunned and astonished by the award.

“As a student of literature, and African-American poetry specifically, I understand the historical significance of this award,” Lewis said. “I understand that it is a very profound honor, and that I stand at the end of a long, long line of a remarkable and rich poetic tradition that reaches back to the 18th century. This award marks yet another accomplishment for African-American poetry, and I am very honored to stand in this place.

“And personally, of course, I am overwhelmed with joy and incomprehension.”

Established in 1950, the National Book Award is presented to authors in five categories. The poetry prize has gone to some of the country’s most celebrated poets, including W.H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell. Presented by the National Book Foundation, this year’s award was open to American authors who published books from Dec. 1, 2014 to Nov. 30, 2015.

It is only the third time in the National Book Award’s history that a debut collection of poetry has taken the top prize. The last time was in 1974.

Lewis’ book is a triptych with the title poem, the 79-page *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, bookended by two sections of lyrical poems that are autobiographical or ekphrastic.

“All three sections either address visual culture and various projections onto black female bodies or they deal with desire and race — how history impacts or ruptures those experiences,” Lewis said.

**Race: ‘the urgent subject we can’t ignore’**

David St. John, professor of English and comparative literature and chair of English, said the intellectual edge of Lewis’ book “pares away at our cultural lies and those assumptions that have helped to frame a historical justification and sustained tolerance of racial injustice.

“Perhaps the best way to describe Robin’s book is to think of it as the frame of a mirror in which the reader has no choice but to see him or herself in the clarity of our present historical moment,” he said.

“In much the same way as Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, this book demands that race be the urgent subject we can’t ignore,” St. John added.

Rankine, who joined USC Dornsife this year as holder of the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, is the author of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, an award-winning prose poem written in the second person about experiences of everyday racism. She echoed St. John in praising Lewis.

“It is beyond thrilling to have the National Book Award recognize the groundbreaking, innovative work done by Robin Coste Lewis,” she said. “Our friendship allowed me to know the brilliance of her prodigious intelligence. Her lyric imagination has forever reshaped the Black Feminine in the 21st century.”

**A remarkable poet and a gifted scholar**

Lewis’ doctoral adviser Kate Flint, Provost Professor of Art History and English, described Lewis as not merely a remarkable poet, but also a gifted scholar.

“Indeed, the two intersect,” Flint said.

“Her research is full of curiosity about the world and the love of ideas that run throughout *Voyage of the Sable Venus*. I
look forward to every thought-provoking, original word that she writes.”

Amy Ogata, professor and chair of art history, said her department was thrilled that Lewis had won this enormous honor. “The Department of Art History, along with the Visual Studies Research Institute housed at USC Dornsife, advocates for precisely this kind of interdisciplinary study,” Ogata said. “Robin’s book, especially her poem *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, shows how profoundly the visual arts and writing can intersect, and what that confluence reveals is astonishing.”

Lewis edited the book during her first year at USC Dornsife. “Kate [Flint] and Percival [Everett, Distinguished Professor of English] stood on either side of me and gave me their time and feedback. They were incredible mentors,” Lewis said. “Most importantly, they gave me space to engage the revision. That’s what I’m really thankful for.”

Lewis also acknowledged Rankine’s support. “Claudia walked with me through the whole book,” Lewis said. “It’s so fantastic that now we are both at USC.”

Lewis’ poetry recently received a glowing review from *The New Yorker*, describing her “arresting book” as “a many chambered and remarkable collection.” It also received a rare and coveted starred review from *Publishers Weekly*.

Lewis currently is writing her doctoral dissertation on the visual representations of Oscar Wilde in the United States. She is also working on a new book on the intersection of the history of black photography and black poetry.

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**The Washington Post**

**The National Book Award finalists in poetry**

*An excerpt of this story appears below.*

By Elizabeth Lund

*“Voyage of the Sable Venus: And Other Poems”* (Knopf, $26) is the surprising debut by Robin Coste Lewis, whose ambitious triptych considers the nuances of race and identity from ancient times to the present. The first section begins with a family secret that spurs the speaker to examine what it means to be female and how various cultures express or oppress that strength. The second section is a complex narrative created from the titles, catalogue entries or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects that include a black female figure. Those pieces, intricately woven together, create an alternate collection of images that challenges hundreds of years of stereotypes. The final section features more intimate views, as the speaker considers places and people closer to home, including grandparents, aunts and an ancestor who makes her wonder if “Perhaps she is the answer/ to this sensation/ I’ve had for years/ that of another body/ hovering inside me/ waiting for address.” The most resonant poems appear in this section, where the poet’s sharp intelligence is matched by remarkable insight and the audacity to confront even her own painful history.