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Critics circle finalists offer glimpse of 2011's best

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With thousands of new books published each year, it's not easy to figure out what to read. But the annual nominations by the National Book Critics Circle offer a reliable guide for people who appreciate good writing.

The group will name the winners of its awards on March 8, and today, the American-Statesman begins a two-part package. This week, we look at the critics' finalists for fiction, nonfiction and autobiography. Next week, we'll highlight biography, criticism and poetry.

The critics circle, founded in 1974, has about 600 members who are American book review editors and reviewers. The first awards were presented in 1976 to books published in 1975.

Last year, Jennifer Egan won the fiction prize for "A Visit from the Goon Squad." Other fiction finalists were Jonathan Franzen, "Freedom"; David Grossman, "To the End of the Land"; Hans Keilson, "Comedy in a Minor Key"; and Paul Murray, "Skippy Dies."

Here's a look at this year's fiction finalists:

Teju Cole, "Open City." It's unusual for a debut novelist to make the critics circle list, but Cole has done just that. He's a Nigerian American who grew up in Lagos and came to the United States in 1992, when he was 17. He lives in New York, where he's an art history graduate student at Columbia. His main character in "Open City" is Julius, a half-German, half-Nigerian who's in his last year of a psychiatry fellowship and likes to walk around the city, engaging all sorts of people in conversation. James Wood, The New Yorker book critic, has been one of Cole's champions, hailing the novel "as beautiful, subtle and ... original."

Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Marriage Plot." Eugenides, a creative writing professor at Princeton University, was born in Detroit and is well-known to readers for his first two novels, "The Virgin Suicides" (1993) and "Middlesex" (2002), the latter of which won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. He is considered to be one of the leading contenders for the book critics award this year. "The Marriage Plot," essentially a coming-of-age tale,

follows three students leaving Brown University in 1982. Eugenides was at BookPeople in October.

Alan Hollinghurst, "The Stranger's Child." Hollinghurst is yet another leading contender for the fiction prize, having won the Man Booker in 2004 for "The Line of Beauty." He was a finalist for the 2011 Man Booker for "The Stranger's Child" but lost to Julian Barnes for "The Sense of an Ending." With his latest, Hollinghurst explores the life of a fictional, tragic poet, Cecil Valance, who is secretly carrying on an affair with his Cambridge friend, George Sawle, while simultaneously vying for the affections of George's sister, Daphne. Some critics regard "The Stranger's Child" as a bit of a Henry James-style throwback.
Hollinghurst spoke about "The Stranger's Child" at the Texas Book Festival in October.

Edith Pearlman, "Binocular Vision." Pearlman is one of the most honored short-story writers of our time, but she continues to fly under the radar of most readers. Roxana Robinson's New York Times review of "Binocular Vision," in fact, starts out this way: "Why in the world had I never heard of Edith Pearlman? ... It certainly isn't the fault of her writing, which is intelligent, perceptive, funny and quite beautiful." The Los Angeles Times compares Pearlman to Deborah Eisenberg, saying she "crafts densely wrought, at times elliptical, narratives that avoid easy epiphanies." Lovers of short stories will have to be rooting for her this year.

Dana Spiotta, "Stone Arabia." Spiotta's previous novel, "Eat the Document," was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2006. Many critics compare Spiotta's "Stone Arabia" to Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad." And the Los Angeles Times notes: "It's curious that both these clever novels jump off the 1980s punk scene in Los Angeles and then move into the melancholy tones of middle age. Like Jennifer Egan, Dana Spiotta records the smothered dreams of a washed-up musician, but what she's really listening for is the melody of nostalgia that none of us can resist."

The nonfiction finalists

Amanda Foreman, "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War." Foreman tackles the American Civil War from a British perspective, and it has been racking up awards. It was a "Book of the Year" for The New Yorker and The Economist, and The New York Times and The Washington Post named it one of the "10 Best Books of 2011." As Foreman shows, the Civil War divided the British just as much as it did the Americans. And Foreman provides fascinating details about some of the British who backed the South.

James Gleick, "The Information." Gleick is one of the most interesting contemporary writers, providing ways to interpret the world around us. His 1987 book, "Chaos: Making a New Science," deals with patterns that can be discerned in seemingly random situations — with a computer able to detect a design, for instance, in the splashes from a dripping water faucet. His latest book, which spans 5,000 years, tracks the intellectual, scientific and cultural history of information, starting with the invention of writing in Sumer.

Adam Hochschild, "To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918." Hochschild, a co-founder of Mother Jones magazine and a journalism lecturer at the University of California-Berkeley, is a perennial awards contender for his nonfiction. Previous works include "King Leopold's Ghost," "Bury the Chains" and "Finding the Trapdoor." His latest book tracks the wide-ranging opposition to World War I, which Hochschild sees as "needless folly and madness."

Maya Jasanoff, "Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary War." Jasanoff, a professor of history at Harvard, focuses on an unusual minority of Americans during the U.S. War of Independence — those who supported King George III and decided to leave America after the defeat of the British. Jasanoff contends that the so-called Loyalists came from all walks of life and notes that the American Revolution split families, including that of Benjamin Franklin, whose son William was a Loyalist.

John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Pulphead: Essays." Sullivan's collection features writing on all sorts of topics, including Native American cave art and the writer Andrew Lytle. In "Mr. Lytle," Sullivan talks about his time as being the caretaker for the aging Lytle, who was a friend and mentor of Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O'Connor and others. As editor of the Sewanee Review, Lytle was also the first to publish Cormac McCarthy. But some critics, most notably Carolyn Kellogg of the Los Angeles Times, have questioned his pieces on Michael Jackson and Axl Rose, saying they feel "off-balance, undercooked."

The autobiography finalists

Diane Ackerman, "One Hundred Names for Love: A Stroke, a Marriage, and the Language of Healing." Ackerman's "A Natural History of the Senses" inspired the Nova television series "Mystery of the Senses." Her latest deals with her love for fellow writer Paul West, and what happens when an illness complicates the relationship. Writing for Booklist, Donna Seaman described Ackerman's memoir as "a gorgeously engrossing, affecting, sweetly funny, and mind-opening love story of crisis, determination, creativity and repair."

Mira Bartok, "The Memory Palace." Massachusetts writer Bartok also deals with illness in her memoir, but she focuses on her long estrangement from her homeless, schizophrenic mother, Norma Herr, and how she finally found her, dying in a shelter. Bartok has written more than two dozen books for children, and this is her first book for adults.

Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, "Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America." Originally from Houston, Rhodes-Pitts graduated from Harvard in 2000 and is writing a trilogy on African Americans. "Harlem Is Nowhere" is the first. Vogue describes it this way: "Rhodes-Pitts uses photographs, books, and stories of lifetime locals to consider her own place as an observer and inhabitant of what is in many ways the symbolic epicenter of black America." Rhodes-Pitts, who has recently been living in New Orleans, discussed her writing at the Texas Book Festival in October.

Luis J. Rodriguez, "It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions, and Healing." Rodriguez, one of the nation's top Chicano writers, bills his new memoir as a follow-up to 1993's gang life memoir "Always Running." The East Los Angeles writer this time focuses on the challenges he has faced as a husband and father, the difficulties of leaving his past behind, and his fears that his son will succumb to the lure of a gang.

Deb Olin Unferth, "Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War." In a burst of revolutionary idealism, Unferth ran away from college with her boyfriend in the 1980s to join the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. As she begins to realize, her idealism is neither needed nor wanted by the revolutionaries. Unferth, who teaches creative writing at Wesleyan University, talked about writing memoirs at the Texas Book Festival in October.