



The PG's Top 10 in fiction, nonfiction

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By Bob Hoover, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Not all "best" lists are created equal, but many are the products of prejudice, agendas, the herd mentality and desperation.

The Post-Gazette strives to eliminate those factors from its choices. We only peek at the other lists after we've decided on our choices, drawn from the newspaper's collection of reviews, then maybe make a few adjustments, but only a few.

We do admit to an agenda by calling attention to books with a regional angle, ones that our readers will appreciate and we hope find useful.

In no particular order, then, here are the 10 finalists in fiction and nonfiction for 2011:

FICTION

"The Submission" by Amy Waldman (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26).

This debut by journalist Waldman ambitiously reaches to illuminate the cultural and political sides of 9/11's aftermath in the New York City area.

"Lost Memory of Skin" by Russell Banks (Ecco, \$25.99).

The wide-ranging Mr. Banks is adept at finding the bigger picture of America in small scenes like the lives of sex offenders after they are freed. The real-life parallel to the Sandusky story is eerie.

"Emily, Alone" by Stewart O'Nan (Viking, \$25.95).

Mr. O'Nan creates drama in the ordinary life of a Pittsburgh widow.

"The Cat's Table" by Michael Ondaatje (Knopf, \$26).

Worth reading for his poetic writing alone, this Canadian novelist tells a semi-autobiographical and magical story of Ceylonese boys sailing to Britain.

"Say Her Name" by Francisco Goldman (Grove Press, \$24).

Also with autobiographical overtones, journalist/novelist Goldman reflects on the accidental death of a young woman writer much like his late wife.

"The Tiger's Wife" by Tea Obreht (Random House, \$25).

The youthful Ms. Obreht has crafted a moving novel of Balkan life with the poise of a veteran writer.

"Swamplandia" by Karen Russell (Knopf, \$24.95).

Another debut by a youngster, the novel is an offbeat story of a family-run animal park in the Everglades.

"Faith" by Jennifer Haigh (Harper, \$25.95).

A priest, his sins and his sister make a moving novel with overtones of Ms. Haigh's own life growing up in Cambria County.

"Caleb's Crossing" by Geraldine Brooks (Viking, \$26.95).

The Pulitzer Prize winner ("March") again calls on American history to examine the struggles of women to gain equal footing in Colonial America.

"Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes" by William Kennedy (Viking, \$26.96).

At 83, Mr. Kennedy can still find the creative spark in his hometown of Albany, N.Y., this time as the city braces for race riots in 1968.

NONFICTION

"The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris" by David McCullough (Simon & Schuster, \$37.50).

His numerous histories and honors haven't dimmed Mr. McCullough's enthusiasm for his latest subject -- those Yankees in the City of Light in the 19th century, including another Pittsburgher, artist Mary Cassatt.

"Steve Jobs" by Walter Isaacson (Simon & Schuster, \$35).

Published three weeks after his death, this biography of the digital industry pioneer is instructive and informative.

"The Paper Garden: An Artist (Begins Her Life's Work) at 72" by Molly Peacock (Bloomsbury, \$30).

Here's the fascinating story of Mary Delaney, an 18th-century aristocrat who found her true calling in widowhood, told in lively prose by the poet Molly Peacock.

"A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" by Amanda Foreman (Random House, \$35).

The overlooked struggle to keep our English cousin from sticking her nose into the country's internal conflict.

"Stan Musial: An American Life" by George Vecsey (ESPN Books, \$26).

Mr. Musial emerged from the gloom of Donora to become the finest hitter in the National League in 22 years with the St. Louis Cardinals (remind Albert Pujols). The author, a New York Times sports writer, excels at writing the history of postwar baseball.

"Palace of Culture: Andrew Carnegie's Museum and Library in Pittsburgh" by Robert J. Gangewere (University of Pittsburgh Press, \$35).

The longtime editor of the Carnegie Institute's magazine chronicles Western Pennsylvania's major center for art and natural history. It's a valuable addition to our region's history.

"Chatham Village: Pittsburgh's Garden City" by Angelique Bamberg (University of Pittsburgh Press, \$29.95).

A scholarly and lively history of the unique planned community quietly thriving on Mount Washington since 1932.

"Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention" by Manning Marable (Viking, \$30).

The life's work of the late Mr. Marable, a Columbia University professor, this biography should stand as the definitive one about the African-American political and religious leader.

"Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Lost, 1934-1961" by Paul Hendrickson (Knopf, \$30).

Long in Cuban dry dock, the Pilar was once the writer's world at sea. A journalist relates the boat's story and the people who went aboard in careful detail.

"Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth" by Frederick Kempe (Putnam, \$29.95).

German-born journalist Mr. Kempe adds new background to the Cold War jousting between the superpowers in the early days of JFK's presidency.

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