

The Seattle Times

4 good reads from National Book Critics Circle awards' finalists

A roundup of four great books — all finalists in the National Book Critics Circle awards — from biography ("George F. Kennan: An American Life" by John Lewis Gaddis) to fiction ("The Stranger's Child" by Alan Hollinghurst).

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Lit Life

Every year for the past six years, this has been my routine in January and February: I shut myself in a room with a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers, say goodbye to my family, and read the finalists for the National Book Critics Circle awards.

I'm on the board of the NBCC. One of our duties is to read five finalists in each of six award categories — fiction, nonfiction, biography, autobiography, criticism and poetry — in the two months between the time the finalists are announced in January and the winners are chosen in March (since I was on the committees for nonfiction and biography, I had a head start with those).

Overwhelmed by this cascade of literary riches, I always have the same thought: there are so many great books out there, but everybody keeps reading the same book! (1. "The Help." 2. "The Hunger Games.") So, as Monty Python would say, now for something completely different. Crack one of these books and you'll learn a lot, maybe even think differently when you're done:

"George F. Kennan: An American Life" by *John Lewis Gaddis* (*Penguin Press*). By coming up with the "containment" strategy that kept the U.S. and the Soviet Union from taking up weapons against each other after World War II, American diplomat Kennan kept the Cold War from turning into a hot one (think thermonuclear weapons). Lessons learned from the story of Kennan, a brilliant strategist temperamentally unsuited to politics: 1. Even great people have bad days, and 2. All human beings, even very smart ones, are to some degree at war with themselves. A biography finalist.

"The World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the Civil War" by *Amanda Foreman* (*Random House*). Confederate spies (some in hoop skirts) plotting in the streets of London. English lords, ladies and politicians battling in the parlor and Parliament over whether the Union or the

Confederacy held the higher moral and tactical ground. And a whole cast of British eccentrics who blithely signed up to fight on both sides, and learned the true, horrible cost of war. Foreman is gorgeous, has five children and still writes informative, breathtakingly readable books. I should hate her, but oddly, I don't. Nonfiction finalist.

"**Pulphed: Essays**" by *John Jeremiah Sullivan* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This brilliant young essayist made me actually enjoy pondering the deeper meaning of rock icon Axl Rose. Nonfiction finalist.

"**The Stranger's Child**" by *Alan Hollinghurst* (Knopf). This novel by British author Hollinghurst, who won the Man Booker prize for "The Line of Beauty," tells the story of a randy, larger-than-life World War I poet whose life story becomes glossed over and eventually ossified by succeeding generations determined to freeze his image in amber. This book, among others, has solidified my conviction that the Brits are really, truly, smarter than we are, at least when it comes to turning a phrase. Fiction finalist.

You can find the complete list of finalists at <http://bookcritics.org/blog/archive/press-release-draft>. Winners will be announced on March 8.