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Democracy Dies in Darkness

The 2020 National Book Awards finalists are a strikingly fresh group

By **Ron Charles**

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Books about race and the struggle for equality feature prominently among the finalists for the National Book Awards announced Tuesday. The 25 honored titles include a satire of Hollywood's Asian American stereotypes, a history of the forced relocation of Native Americans, a biography of Malcolm X and a YA novel about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Selected from almost 1,700 submissions in five categories — fiction, nonfiction, poetry, young people's literature and translated literature — the finalists are a strikingly fresh group: None of the authors has been a finalist for a National Book Award before, and almost a third are debuts. One of those debut authors, Scottish American writer Douglas Stuart, has impressed judges on both sides of the Atlantic. Stuart's novel, "Shuggie Bain," about a family in Glasgow, is now a finalist for a National Book Award, a Kirkus Prize *and* the Booker Prize.

Due to the pandemic, the National Book Awards ceremony, usually the country's glitziest literary event, will be conducted entirely online on Nov. 18. The winners will receive \$10,000 each (for the Translated Literature prize, the money is split with the translator); the finalists will receive \$1,000 a piece. During the ceremony, novelist Walter Mosley will formally receive the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the late Simon & Schuster CEO Carolyn Reidy will be honored with the Literarian Award for Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community.

Here is the complete list of finalists:

Fiction

- “Leave the World Behind,” Rumaan Alam (Ecco) ([review](#))
- “A Children’s Bible,” by Lydia Millet (W.W. Norton) ([review](#))
- “The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,” by Deesha Philyaw (West Virginia Univ. Press)
- “Shuggie Bain,” by Douglas Stuart (Grove) ([review](#))
- “Interior Chinatown,” by Charles Yu (Pantheon) ([review](#))

Nonfiction

- “The Undocumented Americans,” by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio (One World)
- “The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X,” by Les Payne and Tamara Payne (Liveright)
- “Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory,” by Claudio Saunt (W.W. Norton) ([review](#))
- “My Autobiography of Carson McCullers,” by Jenn Shapland (Tin House)
- “How to Make a Slave and Other Essays,” by Jerald Walker (Mad Creek)

Young People’s Literature

- “King and the Dragonflies,” by Kacen Callender (Scholastic)
- “We Are Not Free,” by Traci Chee (HMH)
- “Every Body Looking,” by Candice Iloh (Dutton Books for Young Readers)
- “When Stars Are Scattered,” by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed (Dial Books for Young Readers)
- “The Way Back,” by Gavriel Savit (Knopf Books for Young Readers)

Poetry

- “A Treatise on Stars,” by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (New Directions)
- “Fantasia for the Man in Blue,” by Tommye Blount (Four Way)
- “DMZ Colony,” by Don Mee Choi (Wave)
- “Borderland Apocrypha,” by Anthony Cody (Omnidawn)
- “Postcolonial Love Poem,” by Natalie Diaz (Graywolf)

Translated Literature

- “High as the Waters Rise,” by Anja Kampmann, translated from the German by Anne Posten (Catapult)
- “The Family Clause,” by Jonas Hassen Khemiri, translated from the Swedish by Alice Menzies (FSG)
- “Tokyo Ueno Station,” by Yu Miri, translated from the Japanese by Morgan Giles (Riverhead) ([review](#))
- “The Bitch,” by Pilar Quintana, translated from the Spanish by Lisa Dillman (World Editions)
- “Minor Detail,” by Adania Shibli, translated from the Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette (New Directions)

Ron Charles writes about books for *The Washington Post* and hosts TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com.

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