

NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS



NOMINATIONS: Books are highlighted as author and radio show host Garrison Keillor announces the finalists for the National Book Awards during a ceremony Wednesday, in St. Paul, Minn.

9/11 report a finalist for literary prize

BY JEFF BAENDEN
Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — What could have been a dry, impassioned government document — the final report of the 9/11 Commission — has been honored as a finalist for a National Book Award.

The commission's report was among five finalists in the nonfiction category. The authorized edition published by W.W. Norton has been praised as a compelling narrative and has appeared on best seller lists, with more than 1.5 million books in print.

The selection was the most surprising in a group of mostly lesser-known writers chosen Wednesday as finalists by the National Book Foundation.

Republican Thomas Keen, the 9/11 commission's chairman, said members of the bipartisan panel were determined that the work be written as clearly as possible.

"From the beginning, I took our mandate to report to the American people very seriously, and you cannot report to the American people with language that is either dull or obtuse," Keen told The Associated Press. "And so we were determined to make a report that was readable. Unless people read the report, they wouldn't understand the problems and support our recommendations."

The report concluded that the United States failed to grasp the seriousness of the terror threat before the Sept. 11 attacks, and that bureaucratic problems contributed to the nation's vulnerability. The report made several recommendations, including creating a new intelligence center and high-level intelligence director.

Though the commission has since disbanded, its members have continued to press their suggestions publicly.

Philip Zelkow, the commission's executive director, said he's often asked if the commission hired outside writers for the project. "I always smile and say, 'Folks, it was just us.' There was no outside person overseeing the writing of this."

Government reports have traditionally been considered bland and unreadable, so the inclusion is unusual if not unprecedented. In 1973, a report by a special commission in New York on a deadly riot at the state prison in Attica two years earlier was nominated but did not win.

Among the other nominations, read by author and radio show host Garrison Keillor at a ceremony here, was Donald Justice, in the poetry category. Justice, who died earlier this year, was nominated for *Collected Poems*.

Notably absent from the list were several big-name authors, including Philip Roth, whose *The Plot Against America* was well-received

by critics. Rob Dylan, whose memoir, *Chronicles*, was also praised, wasn't on the list, either. Nor was Ron Chernow's lauded biography of Alexander Hamilton.

Also passed over in the fiction category were Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, and Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.

It was the first time the finalists have been announced in a city other than New York. National Book Foundation spokeswoman Camille McDuffie said the group wanted to make the announcement outside New York and Keillor's involvement made St. Paul a logical choice.

It also was the first time in the 55-year history of the awards that all the finalists for fiction — including two first-time novelists — are women.

"I don't know how much it says other than this year, there seems to be a terrific group of women writers," Harold Augenbraum, executive director of the National Book Foundation, said.

Augenbraum said the awards also help bring attention to great writing.

"Whether it's new or whether it's some older writers or well-established writers, it's just supposedly the best stuff that appears that year," he said.

The National Book Foundation will present author Judy Blume with an honorary award for distinguished contribution to American letters.

Winners will be named at a dinner Nov. 17 in New York, which Keillor will host. Each winner receives \$10,000 plus a bronze statue; finalists get a bronze medal and \$5,000.

— THOMAS KEEN
9/11 commission's chairman

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