

BOOKS NOVEMBER 19, 2015

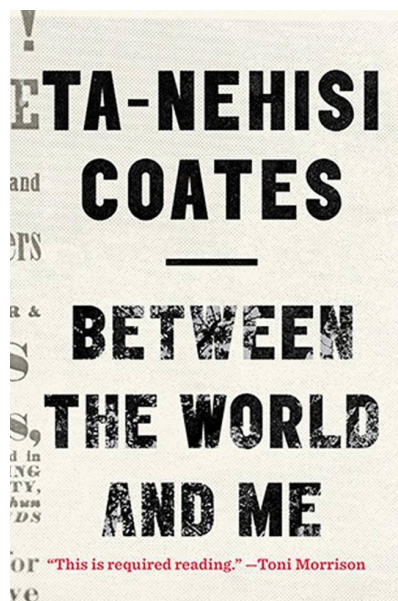
Ta-Nehisi Coates, Adam Johnson win National Book Awards

HIGHLIGHTS

'Challenger Deep' wins young people's prize

Robin Coste Lewis' debut collection wins poetry prize

Winners, finalists appear Friday at Miami Book Fair



BY HILLEL ITALIE
AP National Writer

Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me," a brief, unflinching address to his teenage son on race and police violence that is well on its way to a lasting place in American letters, won the National Book Award for nonfiction Wednesday night. The fiction prize was given to Adam Johnson's "Fortune Smiles," an eclectic and edgy story collection set everywhere from the former East Germany to a Louisiana community reeling from Hurricane Katrina.

Highly praised and intensely debated, on best-seller lists for months, "Between the World and Me" is among the most uncompromising works in recent memory to gain such a wide following and Coates' acceptance speech – as blunt as any given at a book awards ceremony – was a stirring expression of gratitude and frustration. He dedicated his honor to his friend Prince Jones, who was killed by 15 years ago when police mistook him for a criminal and whose tragedy is at the core of "Between the World and Me."

"'Between the World and Me' comes out of that place," said Coates, adding that similar shootings keep happening "over and over and over again" and that the officer who shot Jones was never punished.

"I'm a black man in America. I can't punish that officer: 'Between the World and Me' comes out of that place," he said. "What I do have the power to say is that you won't enroll me in this lie. You won't make me a part of it."

Another winning book Wednesday also involved the author's teenage son. The young people's literature prize went to Neal Shusterman's "Challenger Deep," inspired by the struggles with mental illness endured by his then-adolescent boy, whom Shusterman brought to the stage. Robin Coste Lewis' debut collection "Voyage of the Sable Venus" was cited for poetry.

All winners received \$10,000. Johnson, Coates and Lewis were published by Penguin Random House.

Earlier during the ceremony at Cipriani Wall Street, Don DeLillo received a lifetime achievement medal for his contributions to literature. James Patterson was honored for his advocacy of reading and literacy.

Johnson's award follows the Pulitzer Prize he received for his previous work, "The Orphan Master's Son." Both were edited by David Ebershoff, a longtime Random House executive who is leaving for a full-time writing career. Moviegoers may know him for the upcoming adaptation of his novel "The Danish Girl."

Fiction judges had highlighted five works with contemporary settings, touching upon everything from race and class in Angela Flournoy's Detroit-based "The Turner House" to the chronicle of marriage in Lauren Groff's "Fates and Furies" to the economy in Karen E. Bender's story collection "Refund." Flournoy, in an email sent earlier in the week, observed that fiction "grants us access to lives and experiences that are different from our own, but it also shows the ways in which human experience has commonalities."

"Fiction makes it clear that while the particulars of our lives vary, we're all dealing with the same sorts of emotions, the same desires to be loved and seen and heard," she wrote.

Some of the night's speakers are known for their takes on current events, but their tone was more personal and the jokes mostly about publishing.

Host Andy Borowitz, who routinely turns out political satires for The New Yorker, had nothing to say about the presidential campaigns but instead mocked the presumed obscurity of the awards' sponsor, the National Book Foundation, and the presumed self-absorption of the literary community.

"If you're not in the mood to hear people talking about themselves, you're in the wrong place," he said.

DeLillo's speech came just days after the attacks in Paris, the kind of horror he had imagined in "Mao II" and so much of his work. But DeLillo, who turns 79 on Friday, instead talked about books and old friends, mourning such peers as E.L. Doctorow and James Salter, ruminating about the shelves down the hall from where he writes and listing not just the books but their publishers and list prices. (50 cents for Dostoevsky's "The House of the Dead," a Dell paperback from 1959.)

"Here are the shelves with the old paperbacks, books still in their native skin," he said. "And when I visit the room I'm not the writer who has just been snaking his way through some sentences on a sheet of paper, curled into an old typewriter. That's the guy who lives down the hall. Here, I'm not the writer at all. I'm the grateful reader."

AT MIAMI BOOK FAIR

What: An Evening With Winners and Finalists of the National Book Award

When: 6 p.m. Friday


Where: Chapman Conference Center, Miami Dade College, 300 NE Second Ave.

Cost: \$15; www.miamibookfair.com



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