

BRITISH COLUMBIA ACHIEVEMENT FOUNDATION

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For Immediate Release

Finalists Named for National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction

VANCOUVER – The 2013 shortlist for the BC National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction was announced today by Keith Mitchell, chair of the BC Achievement Foundation. The BC Award is one of the largest non-fiction book prizes in the country.

2013 marks the ninth year for the annual award, the previous winners of which include Charlotte Gill, John Vaillant, Ian Brown, Russell Wangersky, Lorna Goodison, Noah Richler, Rebecca Godfrey, and Patrick Lane.

This year's finalists for the \$40,000 prize are George Bowering for "Pinboy," Modris Eksteins for "Solar Dance: Genius, Forgery, and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age," Robert R. Fowler for "A Season in Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara With Al Qaeda" and Candace Savage for "A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape."

"This shortlist exemplifies how crucial the best Canadian non-fiction is to the ongoing construction of our national identity," said Mitchell. "We thank the jury for their work in selecting these excellent finalists from the field of 143 books nominated for this year's prize."

The shortlist was chosen by jury members Paul Whitney, who served as City Librarian at Vancouver Public Library until his retirement at the end of 2010; Martin Levin, books editor of the *Globe and Mail* since 1996; and Jan Whitford, whose long history in publishing has included positions as editorial director, literary agent, and lecturer at the SFU Masters in Publishing Program, York University Creative Writing Program, and Humber School for Writers. The jury will announce the winner of the 2013 prize at a special presentation ceremony in Vancouver in February, 2013.

The finalists are described in the following citations from the jury:

George Bowering

Pinboy

Out of a single sunlit season in B.C.'s Okanagan in the mid-1950s, George Bowering has crafted a unique memoir of adolescence, of his adolescence, that is by turns charming and self-deprecating, funny and perceptive, raunchy and sensitive. Bowering reaches back almost 60 years to capture brilliantly the experience of a particular boy in a particular place and time, picking peaches and apples, setting pins at a bowling alley, immersed in western novels as a form of literary apprenticeship, constrained by the remnant Christian morals of the time.

But *Pinboy* is also a universal portrait of the pains and yearnings of the teenage years: family, future prospects, friends, an obsession with baseball and, especially, girls. And it is in the treatment of boy George's awakening interest in, and desire for, girls, that Bowering is at his best, and the memoir acquires a fine novelistic sheen. Three females dominate George's thoughts, all of them both specific and archetypal: the older schoolteacher, aptly named Miss Verge, who gradually inculcates him into the not guiltless pleasures of sex; the virginal girlfriend, Wendy, object of romantic desires and future plans; and the mysterious and wounded Jeanette, a sharp girl who stirs the St. George in Bowering—he imagines rescuing her but, clumsily and hilariously, ends up stalking her. And that is ultimately *Pinboy's* triumph, an old man looking back at what actually happened to him, what he fantasized could happen and how all that bursting sexual desire began to transform itself into something like empathy.

Modris Eksteins

Solar Dance: Genius, Forgery, and the Crisis of Truth in the Modern Age

Solar Dance is a fascinating work of cultural history, and a provocative analysis of the roots of the modern era as it developed in the social and political turmoil of the early 20th century. At the heart of this analysis is an account—clear, suspenseful and surprising—of the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. This inner story is not so much a biography of the artist or an assessment of his artistry as it is an explanation for van Gogh’s rise to celebrity and his dominance in the market for modern art right up to the present day.

While the life and work of the artist are given sufficient attention to establish his qualifications for iconic status in modern art, Eksteins’ interest is more in the posthumous van Gogh, his embrace by the leading gallerists and dealers in Weimar Germany against the backdrop of sexual, social and political revolution, and his pulp celebrity as the result of the extraordinary case of Otto Wacker, modern dancer turned art dealer and salesman of van Gogh forgeries. Within a breathtaking sweep of historical connections, Eksteins relates the celebrity cult of van Gogh to the cultural and psychological underpinnings of the Nazi rise to power, and the issues of reproduction, forgery and expert witness in the Wacker trial to the broader crisis of truth in our world today.

Solar Dance is as rich in imaginative speculation as it is in its wealth of detail. It will provoke deep thinking about the nature of genius, about authenticity in life and art, and about the contradictions of our age. Perhaps also, given the excitement of such thinking, it will reinstate imaginative speculation—based always on the most rigorous of research—as a virtue in the writing of history.

Robert R. Fowler

A Season in Hell: My 130 Days In the Sahara With Al Qaeda

In the fading sunlight of a quiet Sunday afternoon in mid-December 2008, Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, the UN Secretary-General’s special Envoy for Niger and an experienced Africa hand, along with his colleague Louis Guay and their driver, were kidnapped in a “slick, violent, well-coordinated and impeccably executed grab” by the notorious Al Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM.) In severe pain, profoundly disoriented, sleep-deprived, desperate and virtually robbed of sight when his eyeglasses are ripped from his face, Fowler is nevertheless the consummate observer of his surroundings, and the reader experiences with him, day by day, the physically and psychologically punishing months of his “Season in Hell” in the vast and hostile Sahel.

We come to know the terrifying quirks of his captors: often unpredictable and nervous, reckless and even foolish, but always menacing and vigilant; we come to learn about—if not exactly understand—the extreme fatalism of these *jihadi* warriors, the depth of their religious beliefs and commitments, rooted in the 7th century but practiced in this 21st century world. And because the reader sees only what the author sees, and knows only what Fowler knows, the book reads with the tension and pacing of a fictional thriller, despite the fact that we know from the outset what the eventual outcome will be.

Fowler’s gripping account, from the moment of his abduction, is astonishingly detailed, at times chillingly detached and at times heart-wrenchingly moving, but always nuanced and thoughtful, never maudlin or self-aggrandizing. And while never bogging down in unnecessary background or context, Fowler poses critical questions about foreign policy and security issues, and gives the reader a powerful insight into an unknown but strategically crucial part of the world.

Candace Savage

A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape

Candace Savage’s moving exploration of the natural and human history of the Cypress Hills begins with a brief stay at the Wallace Stegner House in Eastend, Saskatchewan. Against the backdrop of her extended sojourns in the area over the following decade, *A Geography of Blood* recounts the author’s increasing awareness of the tragic history that lies just beneath the surface

of the beautiful landscape. Walks in the hills slowly reveal more than the diverse and abundant wildlife. Tipi rings demarking spectral villages are the first hint of “the nightmare side of the national dream,” and Savage moves beyond her engagement with natural history to research the ghosts she senses around her. The devastating account of the calculated extermination of the massive buffalo herds, “a butchery of unparalleled rapacity and rage...by the white vandals,” pales alongside her documentation of the conscious policy of forced starvation and betrayal suffered by the Plains Indian tribes at the hands of governments on both sides of the border. This ecological and humanitarian atrocity leaves Savage feeling that she is “surrounded by desperation and the nameless bodies of the dead.” Filled with shame and sadness, she sets out to “honor this land and its stories” in the belief that “telling the truth about the past could be a road to healing.”

A Geography of Blood takes the reader on a surprising journey, haunting and melancholy, but one that ultimately begins to overcome the “decades of mistrust, sharp as razor wire” that stand between us and the tens of thousands of “displaced people, refugees in their home and native lands.”

The BC Award is an annual national prize established and endowed by the British Columbia Achievement Foundation, an independent foundation endowed by the Province of British Columbia in 2003 to celebrate excellence in the arts, humanities, enterprise, and community service.

For more information on the award and this year's finalists, please call 604 261-9777 or visit www.bcachievement.com.

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