[Author's note: In the 11 days since this article was first published, a number of generally reliable pre-Oscar-nomination indicators have seen the light, including the nominees for several guild awards and the British Academy of Film & Television Awards (BAFTA), and the overall mood of the rooms during the Critics Choice Awards and Golden Globes ceremonies. Consequently, with less than 40 hours to go before the Academy Awards nominations are announced, I've changed my official predictions in a number of categories. Let's see if I turn out to be smarter or stupider in the wake of my last-minute changes! My new picks, along with some commentary, will follow the originally published predictions.]

No novelty with a newly expanded field of 10 nominees for the big prize. No ex-spouses dueling for the Best Director trophy. No nutty, left-field Best Picture contenders along the lines of *Star Trek* a nd *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *The Hangover* . Where's the fun in reading predictions about this year's field of Oscar nominees?

Why, in the possibility of Mike falling flat on his precognostic face, that's where!

The following are my best guesses – subject to immediate change, I'm sure – for this year's Academy Awards nominations, which will be announced January 25. (The ceremony will be held on February 27.)

BEST PICTURE

Black Swan

The Fighter

Inception

The Kids Are All Right

The King's Speech

127 Hours

The Social Network

The Town

Toy Story 3

True Grit

What a difference a year makes! At this point in 2010, it was widely presumed that five films were assured of Best Picture recognition (*Avatar, The Hurt Locker, Inglourious Basterds, Precious,* and *Up in the Air,* all of which *did* get recognized), while the category's remaining slots would be filled by five out of roughly a dozen reasonable options. (And the eventual inclusion of *The Blind Side* was *still* a surprise.) This year, however, not only are there really only 11 conceivable Best Picture contenders, but it's nearly impossible to guess which one is going to be left hanging.

To be sure, *The Social Network* and *The King's Speech* are completely safe, and the Directors' Guild of America (DGA) acknowledgment of *Black Swan* 's, *The Fighter* 's, and *Inception* 's helmers pretty much guarantees the inclusion of those three titles. Despite it being totally ignored by the Golden Globes, the acclaim and rather staggering box office for *True Grit* make that one a done deal, while *Toy Story 3* will have no trouble filling the quickly-becoming-annual Pixar slot. The Critics' Choice Awards (CCA) left *The Kids Are All Right* off its Best Picture short list, but recognition by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and Producers Guild of America (PGA), plus its inevitable Best Picture (Comedy or Musical) victory at this Sunday's Golden Globes ceremony, should ensure placement here.

Which leaves us with two slots open for three possibilities: *127 Hours, The Town,* and *Winter's Bone.* If you presume that the PGA lineup will match the Academy's lineup 10 for 10, the one that gets the shaft is the low-grossing, if critically adored, indie *Winter's Bone* , and that's what I'm predicting will happen. But while it's assured of a James Franco nomination, will *127 Hours* prove to be too tough a sit for the majority of voters? (All those reports of people fainting during screenings can't sit well with more squeamish Academy members.) And while it seems assured

of a Jeremy Renner nomination, will
The Town
be considered a little too good-but-not-great to make this year's Best Picture roster? (Autumn's genre hit would've been a shoo-in last year, when the category boasted
several
good-but-not-great films.) Expect a photo finish. And if any title beyond the aforementioned 11 makes the cut – specifically
Another Year, Blue Valentine,
or
Shutter Island –
expect Oscar bloggers to go absolutely insane.

(Update: I'm sticking with my 10, with a caveat - *nothing* will be nominated beyond the 11 front-runners. If any other picture does sneak in, I'll officially be one of those Oscar bloggers who'll go absolutely insane.)

BEST DIRECTOR

Darren Aronofsky, *Black Swan*

Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, *True Grit*

David Fincher, *The Social Network*

Tom Hooper, *The King's Speech*

Christopher Nolan, *Inception*

Man, until the January 10 announcement of the Directors' Guild nominees, I was feeling *so* confident about this category. But while the widely expected Aronofsky, Fincher, Hooper, and Nolan nominations did indeed come to pass, the fifth – David O. Russell for *The Fighter* – was more than a little unexpected; like many, I just presumed that Russell's reputation would have preceded him all the way to a DGA dissing. (Surely you've seen the YouTube clips?) My prediction, and the one I'm sticking with for the Oscars' Best Director category, was the sibling team from *True Grit*, a movie that may have simply popped up on the collective DGA radar too late to usurp Russell's – or anyone else's – slot.

Still, there's no denying that *The Fighter*'s director has a more secure shot at an Oscar nod now than he did before Monday. And besides, as it stands, this category seems almost tailor-made for a surprise or two; Fincher may be a lock, but you can't exactly say the same for anyone else. Hooper's film could be easily (and correctly) perceived as more of an actors' showcase than a director's, while Aronofsky's movie, hearty hit though it is, could still prove a tad alienating. (I doubt it, though: The Academy's directors' branch, after all, was responsible for the only nominations received by David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Dr.*) As for Nolan, it's worth remembering that while he's been recognized by the DGA twice prior to *Inception*, Best Director Oscar nominations for *Memento* and *The Dark Knight* didn't follow. What do voters have *against* this guy?

So while these six (well, with the Coens, *seven*) Best Director possibilities are your best bets, don't discount the chances of six others, all of whom, for added cred, also either wrote or co-wrote their films: Ben Affleck for *The Town*, Danny Boyle for *127 Hours*

, Lisa Cholodenko for
The Kids Are All Right,
Debra Granik for
Winter's Bone,
Mike Leigh for
Another Year
, and Roman Polanski for
The Ghost Writer
. Don't scoff. The Academy loves previous Best Director winner Polanski, even if the judicial system doesn't.

(Update: As with the DGA, the Coens were ignored by BAFTA, despite *True Grit* receivin g a Best Picture nomination. There just doesn't seem to be much heat behind the siblings in this category. So I'm switching my Coen-brothers guess in favor of one for Russell, even though it would be incredibly strange for the DGA lineup to match the Academy's two years in a row ... . I haven't followed the pattern through the decades, but I don't think that's
ever
happened before.)

BEST ACTOR

Jeff Bridges, *True Grit*

Robert Duvall, *Get Low*

Jesse Eisenberg, *The Social Network*

Colin Firth, *The King's Speech*

James Franco, *127 Hours*

In my opinion, the acting categories are *fascinating* this year, because I'd argue that each one of them features three performers who are certain nominees, one who's an almost-sure thing, and one who's gonna squeak by with a nod over two or three equally likely contenders. Given their recognition by the CCA, SAG, and Golden Globes, I'd venture that Eisenberg, Firth, and Franco have nominations in the bag, while Oscar engravers have probably already carved Firth's name on the Best Actor statuette. Like everything else about his film, Bridges was strangely shunned by the Globes, but *True Grit*'s popularity – to say nothing of his SAG and CCA nominations and the Dude's *own* popularity – makes him a tough choice to deny.

And for slot number five? Well, Ryan Gosling (*Blue Valentine*) and Mark Wahlberg (*The Fighter*) both received Globe nominations – with Gosling also a CCA nominee – and are both definite threats. Yet I'm thinking the former's film might be too indie-scrappy and too sad (and the recipient of too many middling reviews from major critics), while the latter's performance, though wonderfully low-key, is largely forgettable in a movie that finds so much *Acting!* going on around him. Javier Bardem's foreign-language portrayal in *Biutiful* has passionate support – including a Best Actor win at the Cannes Film Festival and public endorsement by Sean Penn and Julia Roberts – but he's been completely shunned by the precursors, and those who don't like the film seem to re-e-e-eally not like the film. Consequently, I'm going with Duvall, a SAG nominee whose *Get Low* turn kind of has career-capper written all over it. Happy 80th birthday, Bob!

(Update: No BAFTA nod for Duvall, yet enthusiastic audience recognition for Wahlberg at the Golden Globes. Plus Christian Bale's rightful acknowledgment, during his acceptance speech, that you can't give a performance as loud as his without a quiet center to bounce it off, and Wahlberg's excellent performance was nothing if not a quiet center. I'm going with Wahlberg over Duvall, although you should watch out for Bardem,

who was nominated at BAFTA.)

BEST ACTRESS

Annette Bening, *The Kids Are All Right*

Nicole Kidman, *Rabbit Hole*

Jennifer Lawrence, *Winter's Bone*

Julianne Moore, *The Kids Are All Right*

Natalie Portman, *Black Swan*

Best Actress is perhaps the performance category with the strongest number of potential nominees ... and how refreshing it is to be able to make *that* claim! In other, weaker years, a case could've easily be made for the inclusion of numerous women who I don't even consider among the top eight contenders in 2011: Halle Berry for
Frankie & Alice
, Anne Hathaway for
Love & Other Drugs,
Diane Lane for
Secretariat
, Noomi Rapace for
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,

and Naomi Watts for
Fair Game
. (And I'm no doubt missing a few.) Still, amidst exceedingly tough competition, expect sure-thing nods for Bening, Lawrence, and Portman, and an almost-sure-thing nod for Kidman, all of whom were short-listed by the CCA, SAG, and Globes; only the thus-far-miserable box office for
Rabbit Hole
makes Kidman's inclusion even somewhat questionable.

Regarding the fifth slot, I'd say that *Blue Valentine*'s Michelle Williams (a CCA and Globe nominee) has a good shot; SAG nominee Hilary Swank, for
Conviction
, has a slightly lesser one; and
Another Year
's Lesley Manville was considered an inevitability before she was ignored by damn near every Oscar precursor under the sun. Instead, I'm going with Moore, who many assumed wouldn't make the roster because she'd split the
Kids
vote and subsequently derail presumed front-runner Bening's chances. But now that it's clearly Portman's Oscar to lose, what's the harm in including her? Aside from the performers I've listed, the only other remote possibility I can see is someone who, like Moore herself, could be considered for either Best Actress or Best
Supporting
Actress this year ...

(Update: Considering the rousing ovation she received after her acknowledgment by Golden Globe winner Bening – plus her BAFTA Best Actress nod – I'm feeling *very* confi dent about Moore's chances here. And after being cited as a Best Actress contender by BAFTA, just as Kate Winslet was for
The Reader
after reams of previous Supporting Actress citations, I'm thinking young Hailee Steinfeld will find her
True Grit
recognition in this category instead of Best Supporting Actress. Whose name does she usurp? I'm thinking Nicole Kidman's, whose movie might just be too marginal for recognition this year.)

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY

BEST COSTUME DESIGN

BEST VISUAL EFFECTS