

# Governor General of Literature

University of Alberta librarian ROBERT DESMARAIS explores a collection of award-winning fiction with its shepherd, British Columbia's John H. Meier Jr.

JOHN H. MEIER JR., PRESIDENT and founder of the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation, was recently in Edmonton, Alberta, to open his exhibition of all the titles that have won Canada's prestigious Governor General's Literary Awards for fiction (the GGs). The books were on display until January 14, 2011, at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections Library.

While in Edmonton, Meier met with the media and offered numerous tours of the exhibition to enthusiastic groups of students, faculty and the general public. He was also on hand to greet local Governor General's award authors at a special event hosted by the University of Alberta's Canadian Literature Centre.

Throughout the visit, Meier spoke passionately about his nearly 40 years of book collecting and especially the 11 years he's devoted to collecting the Governor General's award-winning books. For those who missed the exhibition opening, a video of Meier introducing the collection is available on the Bruce Peel Library's Web site, at [www.library.ualberta.ca//specialcollections](http://www.library.ualberta.ca//specialcollections) (click on "Current Exhibits").

Meier's goal has always been to take his collection on a national tour to raise awareness of Canada's literary heritage, so expect to see the collection at universities and museums across the country. This is the first time the collection has been on public display, so it was with considerable pleasure that I interviewed Meier about the depth, completeness and national significance of his work.

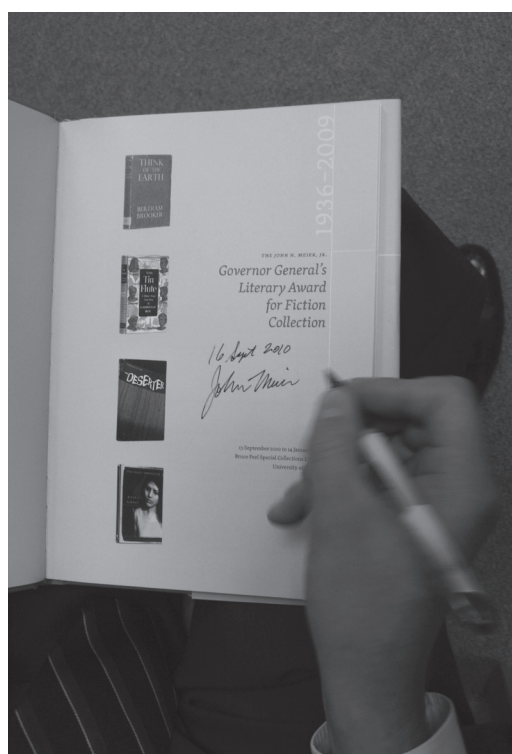
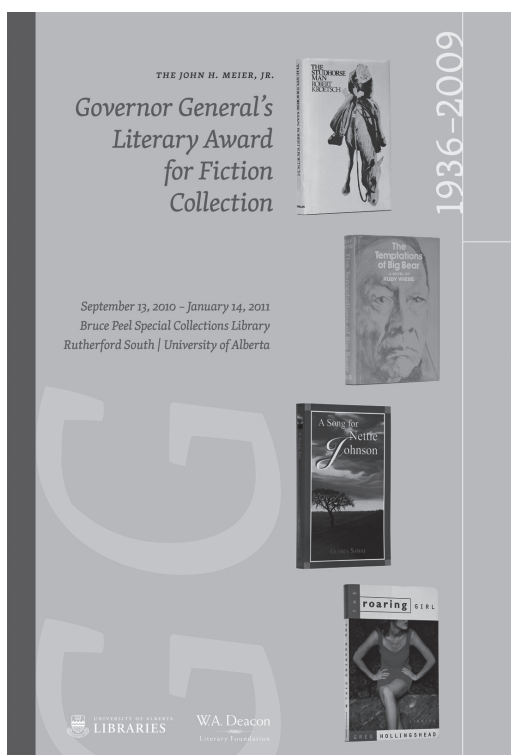
Have you ever been described as a bibliomaniac?

No, but I have been described as obsessed by many people. I sometimes believe I have some traits of a bibliomaniac. The difference between a bibliomaniac and me is that I am collecting books for a reason. I am very selective on what I purchase. I have spent my life savings on building this collection, including travelling for almost six months to conduct research at every major publisher's and author's archives across Canada and the United States. Over the past 25 years every holiday I have taken was book related.

When did you develop a passion for collecting first-edition copies of the Governor General's award-winning books? Do you collect in all categories and in both languages?

I began collecting the GGs for fiction and poetry in late 1999. After many years of collecting, chasing after the same books everyone else was chasing after, I began looking for neglected or overlooked areas of collecting. I researched various awards in Canada until I came upon the GGs. Further research found that no one else was serious about collecting our country's oldest literary award. From the beginning I have focused my time and resources on collecting primarily the first English-language editions of fiction and poetry.

I have collected the early French-language editions of titles that won for English translation.



The poster for the Edmonton exhibit of John Meier's collection (left); and Meier signing a copy of the exhibition catalogue (right). The following pages show some of the award-winning titles in Meier's collection.

Prior to 1959 there were no French-language categories. I have for example collected copies, mostly in their original paper bindings, still in glassine, of Ringue's *Trente arpents*, Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, Germaine Guèvremont's *Le survenant* and Roy's *Rue Deschambault*. Some of these are very rare. The Ringue is one of 85 copies and Roy's *Rue Deschambault* is one of 25 copies.

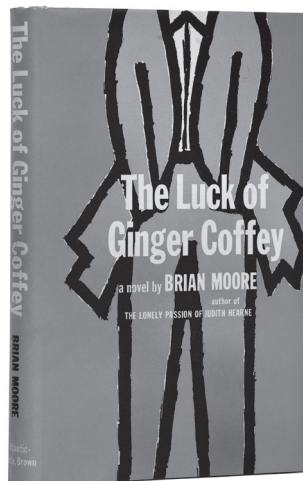
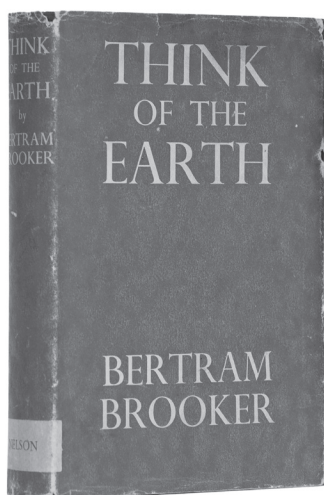
I know that you have been collecting and promoting your GG collection for over a decade, so naturally I'm curious to know if you have ever received support from government agencies.

Sadly, the federal government has not supported the project. I wrote Karen Kain, chair of the Canada Council for the Arts, in 2006 requesting support for my travel research. I was turned down. My first fellowship grant came from the Bibliographical Society of America in New

York. They understood the significance of my research and the importance of Canadian literature. So I had to leave the country for financing some of my travel research.

In early 2009 I wrote the Canada Council for the Arts again, this time suggesting we partner on the national tour of the collection. As suggested by Karen Kain, I addressed my letter to Janet Riedel Pigott, Program Officer for Endowments and Prizes. After six months without receiving a response I wrote the chair of the Canada Council again. I eventually received a form letter from someone else thanking me for my interest in the GG awards.

I made several additional attempts to find someone in the Canada Council who might be interested in the project. I eventually spoke with John Goldsmith, as suggested by one of my advisors, who asked me what I wanted. I told him that my understanding of the Canada Council was that it supports our



country's authors. On this occasion I asked them for \$10,000 that we would use exclusively for the authors' travel and accommodation. I was again turned down. He claimed that the Canada Council doesn't have any money.

Canada Heritage also does not share in my desire to promote our literary heritage. They have bluntly told me to give the collection to the Library and Archives [LAC] in Ottawa and to stop promoting Canadian literature. When I told them the collection represented my life savings and a decade of research, they repeated that I should give the collection to the LAC.

Can you explain the significance of your project and in what ways it might inspire interest in book collecting and, indeed, Canada's literary heritage?

Quite simply, the collection represents some of the best writing in Canada over a 72-year period. It also represents a publishing history of Canada and graphic design over an extended period. I am aware of at least half a dozen individuals who I have influenced enough to begin their own collections. This has given me a great deal of pleasure. We need to preserve this material.

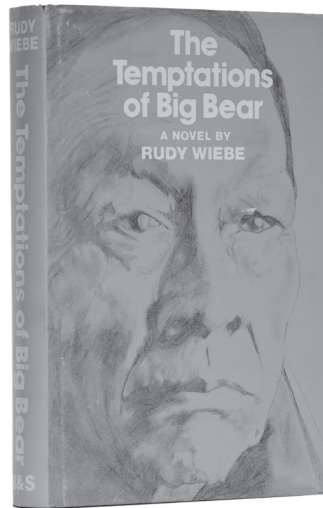
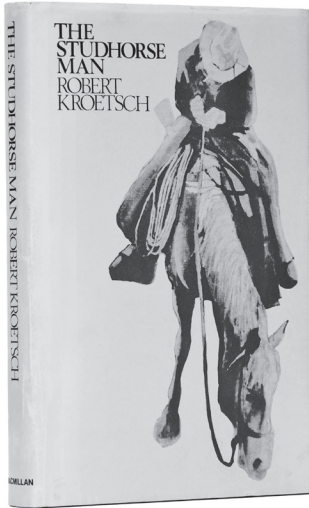
Tell us about your 2004 visit with the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson when she occupied the office of Governor General. I understand she spent an entire afternoon with you at your home after you invited her to see your collection.

Did she have any favourite authors or stories?

I wrote Madame Clarkson in early 2004 inviting her to visit me to see the collection. I received a very kind response within weeks of my letter. She praised me for taking the initiative to build the ultimate collection of the fiction titles. She promised me she would visit me within the year. That next September, true to her promise, she visited me. We spent an afternoon at my home looking at the collection and sharing stories about the authors and their works. I was very impressed with her knowledge of and passion for Canadian literature. She asked me on several occasions what she could do for me. At that time I had yet to begin my travel research and was only contemplating a possible national tour. I really appreciated her taking the time to visit me. I am convinced she will be remembered as one of the best Governor Generals this country has ever had.

I understand that you have read most of the collection. Who are your favourite authors and why?

Over the past decade I have read over 50 of the fiction titles. There are many great books that have won the award. Some of my favourites include, for various reasons, Ringue's *Thirty Acres* (1940), Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch That Ends the Night* (1959), Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), Mordecai Richler's *St. Urbain's Horseman*



(1971), Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980), Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* (1990), Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* (1999), and Gloria Sawai's *A Song for Nettie Johnson* (2002), to name a few. I particularly like the historical novels.

You were invited to the 2009 Governor General's Literary Awards for English and French fiction presentation at Rideau Hall. Did you have an opportunity to talk about your collection with the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean? What was her reaction?

I was delighted to attend last year's awards presentation. I had a lengthy conversation with Jean-Daniel Lafond, the Governor General's husband, who appeared to be very interested in the collection and my planned national tour. He requested I send him a package of material outlining the project and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation. I complied within days of my return but never received a response. I briefly met the Governor General Michaëlle Jean that same evening. I told her of the project and she responded by saying that my enthusiasm was contagious. She introduced me to her assistant for special projects. Unfortunately nothing ever came of my meeting them or my follow-up correspondence.

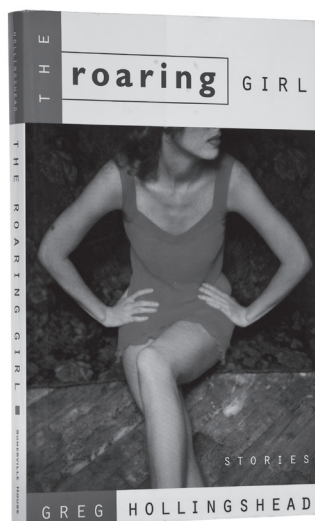
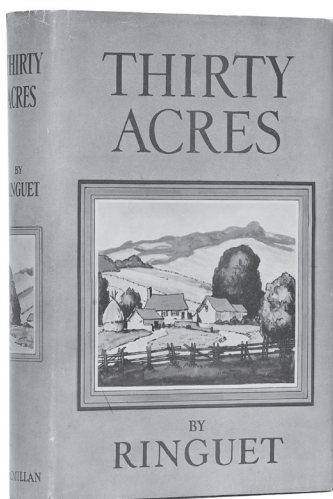
Do you expect to meet Governor General David Johnston at the 2010 award presentation?

What would you like to say?

I do hope to attend this year's presentation of the awards. I understand our new Governor General is very passionate about reading and education. I love it that his grandchildren call him "Grandpa Book." If I do meet him I intend to present him with a copy of the GG exhibit catalogue. I also hope that he has some influence with the Canada Council for the Arts and Canada Heritage.

I know you have spent a significant part of your life assembling this collection and tracking down books that are otherwise impossible to find through regular channels. Tell us a little about the obstacles that you encountered. Do you have any regrets?

I was told from the very beginning by several collectors and booksellers that I would not locate some of the early titles since they were printed in such small numbers. Some of these early titles are very elusive and rare. To overcome this I tracked down the families of some of the authors. I have also employed every method available to locate books, including lengthy road trips, sending out "want lists" to dealers, attending book fairs and searching the Internet daily. The only regrets I have were missing half a dozen rare titles. I recall an inscribed copy of Munro's first short story collection came onto the market inscribed to her stepmother. When I attempted to purchase it, it had already been sold.



What is your most memorable collecting story?

There are many stories behind building this collection. A couple that stand out was tracking down the family of the first award recipient and ultimately purchasing the author's reading copy. Another was locating the GG presentation copy of [Douglas] LePan's *The Deserter*, signed by Georges Vanier, at an antique shop in Ontario. I may someday write a book devoted to my collecting for nearly 40 years.

Will you ever part with the collection? What are the ideal circumstances?

After touring the collection and completing a descriptive bibliography on the fiction and poetry, I would like to see the collections, both fiction and poetry, ultimately reside in an institution. I could not have conducted the research that I have without the aid of publishers' and authors' archives. I would like to make the collection available to future scholars and researchers of the awards.

The ideal situation would be that an institution line up an individual to purchase the collection from me with the stipulation, agreed in advance, that they donate it to the institution and they receive the tax benefit.

Tell us how it felt to open the inaugural exhibition at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special

Collections Library and to be asked to sign copies—first edition copies!—of your first publication.

I cannot praise the University of Alberta Bruce Peel Special Collections Library enough. It was a great pleasure working with them on the first exhibit. The hundred highlights we currently have on exhibit look stunning in the display cases. At the launch of the exhibit I felt emotionally overwhelmed. It was a dream come true.

The exhibit catalogue is beyond my original vision. It was fun signing copies of the catalogue. After almost 40 years of collecting, requesting authors to sign my copies of their works, it was surreal being on the other side of the table.

.....  
~ Robert Desmarais is head of the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta. John H. Meier Jr. is a book collector and independent scholar residing in Delta, BC.

The John H. Meier, Jr. Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction Collection is on display at the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, Rutherford South (lower level), University of Alberta, Edmonton, until January 14, 2011, Monday to Friday, noon to 4:30 p.m. Exhibition catalogues are available for purchase from the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library (\$25 softcover, \$40 hardcover). Phone (780) 492-5998 or e-mail [bpsc@library.ualberta.ca](mailto:bpsc@library.ualberta.ca).