

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S LITERARY AWARDS (HAVE YOU READ ANY?)

As in so many endeavours, Canadians seem to delight in dismissing their national literary award. John Meier warns critics and gasbags to do their reading first.

SINCE THE FIRST Governor General's Literary Awards were presented almost 70 years ago, they have had many critics. These include the expected reviewers and journalists, but they also arrive—unexpectedly—at literary events across the country. Since Canadian literature is a passion of mine, the topic often comes up at business and social functions. When someone declares that the Governor General's Literary Award is given out purely based on politics, I ask, How many of the award-winning titles have you read? Did you read the recent winning title? My question usually is either sidestepped or the respondent says they based their statement on a review they'd read. I only value an opinion if it is based on something concrete—like actually having read the book. I will go even farther: I only value someone's opinion on this topic if they not only read the book they are criticizing, but also read all of the other titles that didn't win.

In 1937, with the approval of the Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir, the Canadian Authors Association launched the Governor General's Literary Awards. The awards were given for the best books published by a Canadian writer in the previous year. Initially only books in English, or ones translated from French, were eligible. The prize consisted of a bronze medal, but in 1942 silver medals began to be awarded. In 1959, the Canada Council agreed to administer the awards and provide prizes of \$1,000 each for awards in both French and English. Today there are 14 Governor General's Literary Awards, seven in English and seven in French. Categories include fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction, children's literature text, illustrations, and translation, each carrying a \$15,000 prize.

One of the earliest award controversies involved Igor Gouzenko's novel *The Fall of a Titan*, which won in 1954. Gouzenko was a Russian cipher clerk who defected in Canada after the Second World War. Before the award was even made public one juror, C.T. Bissell, vice-president of the University of Toronto, quit as a juror over the decision to give it to Gouzenko. After the announcement Bissell was quoted in the *Globe and Mail*: "The Fall of a Titan was, admittedly, a potent pot-pourri of journalism and politics with some skillful literary echoes. It was not, by any standards, a good novel, and I am convinced that

future historians will look upon it as a literary curiosity." Even if one agrees with Bissell the book was very successful, selling over 200,000 copies in the Cassell and Norton editions in less than a year.

Another controversial choice was M.T. Kelly's *A Dream Like Mine*, which won in 1987 over Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. I have read and enjoyed both of these novels. Kelly's is a dark chronicle of native revenge for the white man's destruction of the environment, a very moving story that really made my blood boil. Ondaatje's semi-historical novel of an immigrant's experience in 1920s Toronto is some of his best work. In 2002, CBC hosted a series of discussions called Canada Reads, to select one book for the nation to read. Four titles were championed by Canadian celebrities. *In the Skin of a Lion* was the winner that year, which resulted in sales of the book increasing by approximately 80,000 compared to 2001. Unfortunately, Kelly's book is rarely discussed anymore.

Clearly, winning the award does not ensure best seller status. Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* (1969) are two more examples. Munro's first collection of short stories was published by Ryerson Press in a single printing of 2,675 copies. Even after the book won the award, its first printing did not sell out for years. Kroetsch's novel still sold less than 1,000 copies a year after winning the award; sales did not pick up until the University of Alberta decided to teach the book in a course.

What many Canadians don't realize is how truly rich our literary heritage is and how well it is received worldwide. When the Governor General's Literary Awards were introduced, very few Canadian titles were even being printed in Canada. We were a growing country both economically and culturally. Many of the winning titles reflect this in subject matter (a complete list of winners can be found at www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggla). It has taken years, but I believe our literature has achieved a maturity that has only recently been recognized. I encourage all Canadians to read from the winning list of our oldest and most important literary award.

John Meier is a Vancouver bookseller. He is working on the first comprehensive bibliography of Governor General's Award winners.