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'Triple Crown' shakes up CanLit landscape



Three major literary prizes within weeks of each other are keeping scribes in the spotlight and helping sales

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Snap quiz: Who won the 2009 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize?

The fact that somebody might actually know the answer to such a question represents a real achievement for Canadian writers and publishers, who habitually fret that an image-addled world has forgotten them. Fifteen years of heavily publicized, open-bar galas have made a name for the winner of the annual Giller Prize, but this year the charmed circle of recognizable Canadian authors magically expanded.

Douglas Coupland would call it a "syzygy," which is what happens when three celestial bodies line up to make an argument. Bettors would call it a "Triple Crown." The effect is similar: Awarding three national literary prizes on consecutive Tuesdays every November has added new dimensions of drama to what was formerly a one-night coronation.

The answer to the question above is Annabel Lyon, author of *The Golden Mean*, who dominated literary buzz and fall sales before the coveted Giller, which she lost to Linden MacIntyre. Her distinction lay in earning nominations for all three — the Giller, the Governor-General's and Writers' Trust awards — and the drama was her failure to win one until this week.

"It made such a huge difference to have the triple nominations," says Denise Bukowski, Lyon's Toronto-based agent, who had struggled to attract interest for a quirky first novel about the life of Aristotle. "She had wonderful reviews, but the sales were modest until she had the nominations."

"The fact remains that there are too many books and the reading public has deputized jurors to do the reading for them"—Richard Bachmann, owner of Different Drummer Books in Burlington, Ont

Not only did Lyon's hat trick push *The Golden Mean* to near the top of the Canadian bestseller lists before any actual winners emerged, it made a big impression on foreign publishers. "They weren't willing to take the leap until the writers on the juries actually read the book and proclaimed it wonderful," Bukowski says. "This week's win was just gravy."

Lyon's greatest coup of the season was selling U.S. rights to fiction wizard Sonny Mehta of Knopf Doubleday in New York. By contrast, MacIntyre's *The Bishop's Man*, winner of the 2009 Giller Prize, remains a purely local phenomenon.

Canada's new literary syzygy first took shape last year when the Writers' Trust moved its annual awards presentation from March to November, unabashedly hoping to share the glow created by the Giller and Governor-General's contests. The new alignment made its first impression last year when *Cockroach*, a novel by Montreal's Rawi Hage, was nominated by all three juries but failed to win an award.

Lyon's consecutive losses in the first two contests generated speculation about a potential hex, while her final victory supplied a happy ending for the dark-horse storyline her nominations set up. Either way, the book talk never stopped.

"The numbers are starting to show that we're having an influence as a group on book sales in the fall, and that's great for all the prizes," says Don Oravec, executive director of the Writers' Trust.

"It's like everybody's now paying attention. They're referring to the Big Three, and we just love that."

The Gillers are happy to share the attention, according to organizer Elana Rabinovitch. "It does feel like a real season of the book," she says, welcoming all comers to the common cause of supporting Canadian writers.

But the crowded running for the Big Three makes it even more difficult for non-nominated books to succeed, according to some observers. "It's very hard to work against a popular notion that a winning book is the best book," says Richard Bachmann, owner of Different Drummer Books in Burlington, Ont.

"I think we all know that that's not really true," he added, but the belief is strong enough that bookstores are full of titles that never move for lack of nominations.

"The fact remains that there are too many books," Bachmann says, "and the reading public has deputized jurors to do the reading for them."

Few are complaining. The only wrinkle in the otherwise smooth running of this year's Triple Crown was a matter of too much publicity, when English author and Giller judge Victoria Glendinning criticized the worst of the contest's entries in the British press. As a member of the Man Booker Prize committee and veteran literary judge, Glendinning's badinage was "completely de rigueur as far as where she came from," Rabinovitch says. "None of the niceties apply there. But the process here is a lot milder."

Oravec agrees. "This is a very collegial business," he says. "People really like and support each other." And with as many as 15 finalists competing in closely spaced heats, the new November alignment, he says, is good for all writers.