

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

BOOKS

The 2009 Globe Books 100

Canadian fiction



The best-reviewed Canadian fiction releases of the year

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THE ALMOST ARCHER SISTERS

By Lisa Gabriele, Anchor Canada, 272 pages, \$19.95

While her older sister Beth is living the dream in Manhattan, Peachy is sorting socks in a Belle River laundromat and looking after two little boys. Until the day she catches her husband having sex with Beth. Peachy decides to leave her sister in charge of the laundry and cooking and a little boy's seizures and takes off for a weekend of shopping and dining in New York, including a blind date with the man Beth loves. Smart and funny. *Joan Thomas*

THE DISAPPEARED

By Kim Echlin, Hamish Hamilton Canada, 235 pages, \$29

In 1979 Montreal, 16-year-old Anne Greaves falls in love with a Cambodian musician named Serey. Ten years later, she travels to Cambodia during a period of unrest, trying to track down her former lover. When she does find him, the reunion is not what she expects – nor is Cambodia itself. The book was nominated for the Scotiabank-Giller Prize. *Charles Foran*

FALL

By Colin McAdam, Hamish Hamilton Canada, 368 pages \$32

Colin McAdam's Giller-nominated second novel is set in a tony Ottawa boarding school 12 years in the past, and the subject matter conjures up ghosts of other novels with similar, rarefied settings and, to a lesser extent, plots. There's a smattering of *Lord of the Flies*, more than a touch of *A Separate Peace* and an undercurrent of *Catcher in the Rye*, though McAdam writes for adults, not youth. *William Kowalski*

COME THOU TORTOISE

By Jessica Grant, Knopf Canada, 431 pages, \$29.95

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Audrey Flowers, the main character of this novel, is brilliant. She's hilarious. I could read about her all day. The same goes for the tortoise. Oh, and the talking fruit fly. *Come, Thou Tortoise* is a somewhat sprawling but well structured comic novel with many serious messages and much marvellous insight. It's extraordinary, original and simultaneously both deep and lightheartedly charming. *Diane Baker Mason*

THE COLOR OF LIGHTNING

By Paulette Jiles, HarperCollins, 350 pages, \$22.95

The great horsemen of the Texas plains, the Comanche and the Kiowa, are inscrutable to the whites who slowly begin to encroach on their territory around the time of the American Civil War. With the war grinding to a close, the bureaucrats of Washington and Philadelphia decide that the time has come to herd the western Indians onto reservations. But what if these people do not wish to be limited to a reservation? *Aritha van Herk*

THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD

By Terry Griggs, Biblioasis, 224 pages, \$19.95

Chockablock with winks and digs at the literary set, *Thought You Were Dead* is a gleeful Russian doll of a novel. Reading it, one trips along, revelling in its wordplay, its wit, its puns and allusions, and its jokes. Then there are the characters: the inventors, writers, realtors and reputation-management specialists who people the antic "sleepy town" of Farclas, Ont. The story is equal parts comic murder mystery, hero's journey and layered intellectual puzzle, and it satisfies on every level. *Sally Cooper*

THE FACTORY VOICE

By Jeanette Lynes, Coteau, 285 pages, \$21

In *The Factory Voice*, set in the midst of the Second World War, Jeanette Lynes tells a rollicking good tale that shows regular ol' Canadians making the best of the worst of times. It's a fictional slice of Canadian history about a boxcar-manufacturing plant in Northern Ontario that won one of the biggest airplane commissions of the Second World War, the engineering pioneer who ran it, and the motley cast of players who were drawn there for guaranteed employment and shelter. *Carla Lucchetta*

THE INCIDENT REPORT

By Martha Baillie, Pedlar Press, 195 pages, \$21

The Incident Report is maddening. Inter-textual head nods run a dizzying gamut from Erik Satie to Giuseppe Verdi, the Brothers Grimm to Thomas A. Milne. Baillie is a Bernhard, Marc Chagall to Mark Rothko, Ray Bradbury to A. subtle portraitist, and in Miriam Gordon creates an engaging heroine with rich psychological nuance. Baillie's unsettling dreamscape seems to speak to a host of unsaid violations. But all is not darkness: *The Incident Report* is also very funny. *Karen Luscombe*

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FEBRUARY

By Lisa Moore, Anansi, 308 pages, \$29.95

February is the account of how one Newfoundland family carries on after the Ocean Ranger disaster, the sinking of the offshore oil rig on Valentine's Day, 1982, that killed all 84 men aboard, including the fictional Cal O'Mara. Cal leaves behind his wife, Helen, and four children. How Helen manages on her own, and doesn't, and the effect the loss of his father has on John, Cal and Helen's firstborn, amounts to a meditation on grief. *Caroline Adderson*

THE BISHOP'S MAN

By Linden MacIntyre, Random House Canada, 399 pages, \$32

In his Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning novel, Linden MacIntyre tackles the disturbing topic of sexual abuse of children, a subject easily given to theses and tirades, lectures and judgments, all thinly veiled as fiction. MacIntyre, his engrossing tale told through the eyes and experiences of Father Duncan MacAskill, sidesteps these pitfalls to deliver a serious examination of the theme with the page-turning energy of a thriller. *Frank Macdonald*

THE GOLDEN MEAN

By Annabel Lyon, Random House Canada, 276 pages, \$32.95

As the book opens, Aristotle has been appointed tutor to the sons of his childhood friend, King Philip of Macedon. One is a "violent, snotty boy" who is also a genius and will eventually be known as Alexander the Great. While this Aristotle is an unpleasant man, he is also extremely believable. *The Golden Mean*, which has just won the Writers' Trust Award for fiction, is a crisply written, painstakingly researched book, and Annabel Lyon ably inhabits "the greatest mind of all time" – hardly a mean feat. *Cynthia Macdonald*

GALORE

By Michael Crummey, Doubleday Canada, 356 pages, \$32.95

The novel opens with a group from the fictional Newfoundland outpost of Paradise Deep slaughtering a beached whale. The body of a man, pale and stinking, is cut from the whale's belly, and it turns out he's alive, though he cannot speak a word. He never does utter a word and he never loses his stench, but his presence ignites a spark in Paradise Deep that sustains the story for generations. *Steven Galloway*

TOO MUCH HAPPINESS

By Alice Munro, McClelland & Stewart/Douglas Gibson, 303 pages, \$32.99

Too Much Happiness is, to my mind, one of Alice Munro's strongest collections. Memory is a great and moral tool for this writer, the way it allows our past to be freshly revealed to us by events in the present. Because of memory, our lives shift and make sense at the same time. This might be a definition of what it is to grow; it may also be why Munro's stories are living things that refuse to be still on the page. *Anne Enright*

THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

By Margaret Atwood, McClelland & Stewart, 434 pages, \$32.99

This is a work of fearless imagination. Margaret Atwood never quails in the face of the future she has conjured. Or, rather, that we have conjured. For what distinguishes her imagined world is that it looks over the brink of our shared present and is marked by knowledge that we try to ignore. From the first page, we are in the grip of a storyteller who drives us on to fresh understanding and – amazingly – fresh enjoyment. *Gillian Beer*

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THE LAST SHOT

By Leon Rooke, Thomas Allen, 229 pages, \$24.95

Leon Rooke is a national treasure. He eschews the dreary wet wool blanket of conventional realism, salting his stories with magic, myth, vituperation and improbability. Often, out of the darkest and most moribund situations, he wrestles a startling and uncanny beauty. Like his contemporary, Alice Munro, he writes outside the box; he writes to push the idea of story to the limits and beyond. *Douglas Glover*

DAVID

By Ray Robertson, Thomas Allen, 292 pages, \$32.95

The title character of Ray Robertson's complex and haunting novel is a light-skinned African-American man with green eyes and a good deal of anger: "My father owned my mother. By Louisiana law, my mother was my father's to rape." A white preacher saves the boy and his mother by leading them to the extreme southwestern part of what will soon become Ontario. The story takes David from his teenage years to his late 40s, through careers as a resurrectionist and a speakeasy keeper. *George Fetherling*

THE PLAYERS

By Margaret Sweatman, Goose Lane, 332 pages, \$22.95

In this historical novel, set in 1660s England and Northern Canada, Lilly Cole, whose mother has recently died, survives by working at her aunt's London brothel. There she meets playwright Bartholomew, who teaches her stagecraft and presents her to the king, Charles II, who takes the pretty, 16-year-old Lilly as his mistress. But when she kills a rapist in an alley, she must flee to Canada. Sweatman creates a memorable female character making her way in a world of men: Lilly Cole, player, survivor, early Canadian. *Mark Frutkin*

SUDDENLY

By Bonnie Burnard, HarperCollins, 317 pages, \$34.99

Suddenly tracks a middle-aged woman living through the final stages of breast cancer. "Living" is the key word: Burnard delivers a novel about death teeming with life that is "pressed down, shaken together and running over." We meet Sandra Rusano at her cottage on Lake Huron after she has packed her husband and their grandchildren off home. She wants to be alone with her private knowledge – and a glass of scotch. She knows what is coming. *Donna Bailey Nurse*

8X10

By Michael Turner, Doubleday Canada, 164 pages, \$27.95

Turner is known for his multimedia approach to literature, pasting together scripts, diaries, poems and various forms into his fiction. In *8X10*, each section, rarely more than a few pages, is narrated in the third person. Characters do not have proper names, specific towns and cities are avoided, and things like race are not mentioned explicitly. *8X10* is an unsettling and daring work, a tangible symbol of our anxious world and the stark emotional devastation of war. *Zoe Whittall*

THE WINTER VAULT

By Anne Michaels, McClelland & Stewart, 336 pages, \$32.99

This is a book that proposes great themes: a critique of progress, an exploration of the nature of human suffering, an interrogation of the relationship between past and present. And yet, for all of that, it remains at bottom a deeply affecting love story about intimacies and distances that grow, shift and dissolve between people – and about how we all carry within us a secret

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place where we store our wounds until the world thaws enough for us to bury them. *Steven Hayward*