

Course A Canadian Novels: GGs, Gillers, and Other Winners

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This course examines contemporary (1980s-present) Canadian novels that have won one or more literary prizes, Canadian or international. In addition to studying some of the most important Canadian fiction of the past few decades, we will also consider issues such as why certain books win over others, trends in Canadian literature, and the impact of literary prizes on the publishing and bookselling industries.

Week 1: Sept. 15 The Governor General's Awards: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

We will begin by looking at the inauguration of the Governor General's Awards for Literary Merit in 1937, including the criteria for the prizes and a brief history of some of the winners in the fourteen different categories. We will then turn to the winner of the 1985 Governor General's Award for English Language Fiction, Margaret Atwood's dystopian classic, *The Handmaid's Tale*. More than 30 years later, Atwood's novel, which imagines a future America as a fundamentalist police state in which women's fertility is controlled and commodified, still resonates, as evidenced by the recent television adaptation.

Week 2: Sept. 22 International Awards - The Pulitzer Prize: Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*

We will continue by exploring Canadian authors' emergence onto the international literary awards scene. Although the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is restricted to American authors, Carol Shields, American-born, but widely recognized as a Canadian author, won in 1993. *The Stone Diaries*, which is written as the fictional autobiography of an average woman, follows Daisy Goodwill Flett through the various phases of her life – birth, childhood, marriage, motherhood, old age, and death – as she attempts to understand her role in the world. This novel is as much about the limitations of autobiographical narrative as it is about the remarkable life of a seemingly unremarkable woman.

[SEPT. 29 – NO CLASS BECAUSE OF GLENDON CONFERENCE IN A100]

Week 3: Oct. 6 International Awards - The Man Booker Prize: Yann Martel's, *Life of Pi*

Founded in 1969, the Man Booker Prize for Fiction (formerly the Booker McConnell Prize) is one of the most prestigious literary awards in the world, with winners practically guaranteed instant international acclaim and increased sales. The prize was limited to members of the Commonwealth until 2014, and in 2003 Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* became the third Canadian winner of the prize (after Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*). Martel's novel tells the unlikely story of a young boy who survives 227 days at sea in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger after being shipwrecked. Presented as a true story that was told to the author, *Life of Pi* examines questions of faith and belief, and the stories we tell ourselves in order to survive.

Week 4: Oct. 13 The Giller Prize: MG Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

In 1994, Jack Rabinovitch established a new Canadian literary award, The Giller Prize, in honour of his late wife, literary journalist Doris Giller. The initial monetary prize of \$25,000 grew to \$50,000, and then to \$100,000, surpassing even the Man Booker. The Giller quickly became Canada's preeminent literary award, and winners can expect to see an increase in sales of over 500 percent. A jury that included Alice Munro and Mordecai Richler selected Vassanji's 1994 novel, *The Book of Secrets*, for the inaugural prize. The novel, set in an Asian settlement in East Africa, alternates between 1913 and 1988, exploring the nature of history and the search for meaning through narrative.

Week 5: Oct. 20 Shared Prizes: David Adams Richards' *Mercy Among the Children*

For the first and only time in the history of the award, the 2000 Giller Prize was split between two novels, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, and David Adams Richards' *Mercy Among the Children*. Both novels explore what it is like to live in a world of oppression, injustice, and terror – the former in Sri Lanka, and the latter in the Miramichi area of northern New Brunswick. Richards' novel follows a father and son as they respond to the evil around them with either passivity or violence.

Week 6: Oct. 27 Canada Reads: Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*

In 2002, CBC Radio debuted a new literary contest, in which Canadian celebrities each choose a book and argue why it should be the one book that all Canadians should be reading. In 2006, musician John K. Samson successfully defended Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, which also won the Governor General's Award that year. The novel explores the conflicted desires of teenaged Nomi Nickel, as she struggles against the restrictions of her repressive but loving Mennonite community and contemplates running away to New York.

Week 7: Nov. 3 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour: Terry Fallis' *Best Laid Plans*

One of the oldest literary awards in Canada, The Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour was founded in 1947. It is presented every year, along with a cash prize of \$15,000, to the author of the best English-Canadian book of humour. In 2008, the Leacock Medal was awarded to the political satire *Best Laid Plans* by Terry Fallis, a former Liberal Party strategist. Fallis' novel follows a political aide whose attempt to quit politics by managing a seemingly unelectable candidate in a federal election is thwarted when the candidate proves popular with the voters. All five of Fallis' novels have been shortlisted for the Leacock Medal, and he has won twice.

Week 8: Nov. 10 Small Presses and the Giller Prize: André Alexis' *Fifteen Dogs*

The Giller Prize is frequently awarded to novels published by major presses, such as Random House or McClelland and Stewart; however, in recent years, novels published by small presses such as House of Anansi, or Gaspereau Press have taken home the prize. In 2015, the Giller went to *Fifteen Dogs*, by André Alexis, published by Coach House Press. In this novel, Alexis examines the joys and dangers of human consciousness through a parable about a group of dogs granted human intelligence as part of a drunken bet between Apollo and Hermes.

Week 9: Nov. 17 The Most Recent Giller Prize: Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

In the most recent novel to have been awarded the Giller Prize, in 2016, Thien tells an intergenerational story of an extended family in China, linking the older generation's experiences of Mao's Cultural Revolution to the younger generation's experiences of the protests in Tiananmen Square.