

Bringing home the gold

 As our publishing series continues, **SANDRA MARTIN** reports on how tax dollars have gone into making CanLit one of the world's hottest properties. Money well spent? **HAL NIEDZVIECKI** thinks so — although he worries whether, as a not-for-profit creative type, he qualifies as grantworthy

BY SANDRA MARTIN

What counts in any country's literary culture are its writers and readers. They have to connect. Sales are a dead-reckoning commercial measure of success, and literary prizes are their artistic equivalent.

Local and national prizes define success on a national scale, of course, but moving beyond home-grown celebrity to the international podium requires a much higher level of achievement. On that score, Canadian literature has long since broken out of the domestic stakes. In fact, if writing were an Olympic sport, Canada would be bringing home the gold.

Imagine a giant scorecard of international prizes and you would see Canadians in all of the top categories. In the past several weeks alone, Margaret Atwood won Britain's Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*, and Michael Ondaatje received France's Prix Medicis, and shared the Kiriama Pacific Rim Book Prize, for *Anil's Ghost*. Another Canadian, Michael David Kwan (*Things That Must not be Forgotten*) shared the \$30,000 (U.S.) Kiriama prize with Ondaatje, while Vancouver author Anita Rau Badami (*The Hero's Walk*) was a finalist. Still to come is Dublin's IMPAC Award, worth \$172,000. Five Canadians are in the running for that one: Alistair MacLeod (*No Great Mishchief*), Bonnie Burnard (*A Good House*), Gail Anderson-Dargatz (*A Recipe for Bees*), Audrey Thomas (*Isobel Gunn*) and Lillian Bouzane (*In the Hands of the Living God*).

Gordon Platt, head of the writing-and-publishing section of the Canada Council, which doles out about \$18-million annually to nurture writers and help create an audience for them, agrees. "If you look at the Canadian track record in supporting publishing and literature," he says, "it is an incredible investment, and we have wonderful success stories that are recognizable and undeniable."

The premise behind the Canada Council's largesse is the belief that writers and readers in all regions of the country have to connect on a spiritual and artistic level. Publishers, booksellers, teachers, journalists and librarians are major transportation corridors in this pro-

cess. But in a country as geographically and culturally diverse as Canada, there are many voices, many ears and many sensibilities. And there is a great deal of cultural interference emanating from the huge, noisy and vibrant society to the south.

The Canada Council, and its provincial and municipal counterparts, sees its mandate as helping this process through a complicated system of grants, subsidies and prizes. "What the grants do," says Platt, "is to allow publishers to take risks on titles." Publishing literature, as opposed to simply putting books out there in the marketplace, is not commercially viable, according to Platt, unless you have a huge population base and a well-established and fortified stall in the marketplace. The British and the Americans protected their publishing industries with copyright and manufacturing clauses for hundreds of years for this very reason.

The average sale of a fiction title in Canada is about 2,500 to 3,000 copies — cut that by at least a third for poetry — if you factor out enormous sellers like Atwood and Ondaatje. Support from the Canada Council allows publishers to produce and price these small print runs as though they were publish-



TARAS KOVALIV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Atwood: recipient of the Booker Prize and other major literary awards.



ED ANDKILDE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

MacLeod: one of five Canadians in the running for the IMPAC Award.



CANADIAN PRESS

Ondaatje: *Anil's Ghost* was the winner of the Prix Medicis and co-winner of the Kiriama Pacific Rim Book Prize.

ing into a market such as the United States, where print runs are typically in the 50,000-to-100,000 range. Sales of these taxpayer-supported titles (again excluding best-selling authors such as Atwood and Ondaatje) have increased 73 per cent in non-fiction and 105 per cent in fiction in the decade from 1985 to 1995. "What we believe," continues Platt, "is that for literature to flourish, you need to have a functioning ecosystem." By that, he means that the country needs small-circulation literary magazines where beginning writers can test their skills and their imagina-

tions, and literary festivals and readings where they can connect with other writers and perform their works for potential readers.

Then you need small publishers, based in local communities, from St. John's to Victoria, that are willing to take risks on emerging writers. The next step is mid-sized publishers to up the ante for writers and to provide them with a larger market. Finally you need major publishers who are able to expose writers to an even higher level of editing and marketing expertise. That is how you bring home the gold.