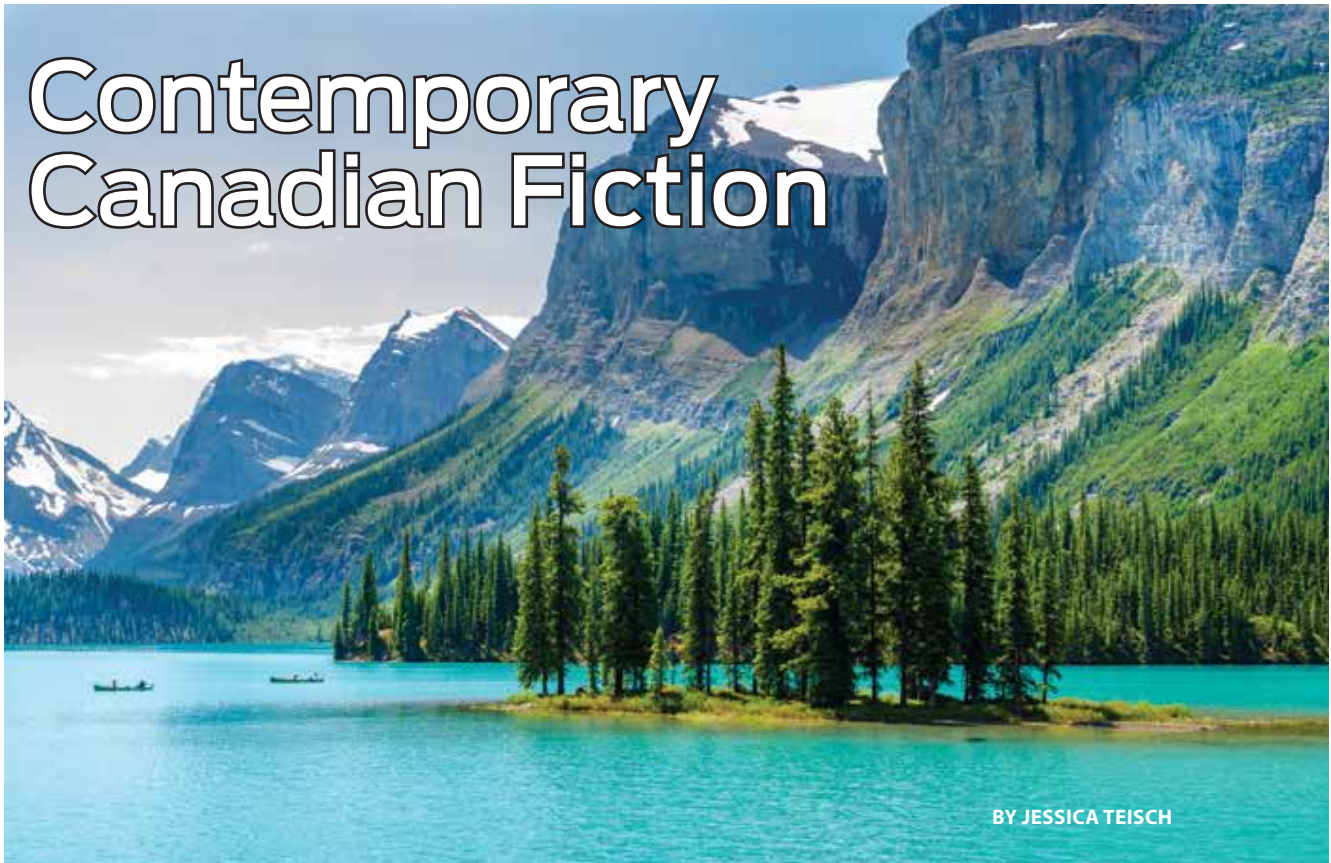


# Contemporary Canadian Fiction



BY JESSICA TEISCH

“When I began writing,” said 2013 Nobel Laureate Alice Munro, “there was a very small community of Canadian writers and little attention was paid by the world. Now Canadian writers are read, admired and respected around the globe.”

Certainly, we’ve read (or at least heard of) the literary heavyweights: Munro, Mordechai Richler, Margaret Atwood, and Robertson Davies, to name a few. Canadian literature is easily as diverse as American fiction, and every bit as sophisticated, urbane, intimate, wide-ranging, and even transgressive. Some of the best Canadian fiction, such as many of Margaret Laurence’s novels, are overtly about Canadian identity; other novels, like Michael Ondaatje’s masterpiece *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), are preoccupied, either to a positive or a negative extent, with the United States; still other Canadian writers look to the wider world for their subject matter, such as David Bezmozgis, who writes about the late 20th-century immigrant experience.

Despite Canadian writers’ broad scope, many of the authors are not well known outside their country. Below, we spotlight Munro, and then we highlight important contemporary and up-and-coming Canadian writers. The list is by no means comprehensive; we’ve selected popular authors and titles, keeping our focus on literary fiction. We admit to having no unifying theme, but all the writers we mention have books that are easily accessible to American readers.

## ALICE MUNRO

The 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature finally went to a household name: Alice Munro, “master of the contemporary short story.” On winning the prize, Munro said, “I would really hope this would make people see the short story as an important art, not just something you played around with until you got a novel” (*New York Times*, 10/10/13).

In her 14 short story collections of psychological realism, Munro, considered the Canadian Chekhov, writes of fox farming and tree felling; of memory and the human heart; of the battle for authenticity and the battle of aging; but most of all, of the lives of middle-class girls and women as they navigate sex and desire, work and domesticity, and their alternatives in life. Munro’s rural, small-town upbringing in Huron County, in southwest Ontario, provides the setting; the repressed towns, renamed Jubilee or Hanratty, reflect the busybodies, the social prejudices, the artistic types, the self-delusions, and the rather surprising unpredictability of conservative, small-town life.

Munro’s fine-tuned short stories possess the scope and density of larger stories. Yet each is an intricate construction that weaves back and forth in time, meshes memory and reality, and distills human existence down to singular moments and revelations. “People’s lives ... were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen

linoleum,” Munro writes in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), a book of linked short stories.

Born just outside Wingham, Ontario, in 1931, to a fox farmer and teacher, Munro attended college for a few years before marrying fellow student James Munro in 1951 and settling in Victoria, British Columbia, where they had three daughters and opened Munro’s Books in 1963 (still in operation). Since then, she has drawn from her life in rural Ontario to cast her characters and stories, many of which initially appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Harper’s*. In 1968, she published her first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won the Governor General’s Award, one of Canada’s most prestigious literary honors. Five years later, restless and embracing the women’s liberation movement, Munro left her husband. Over the next few years, she taught creative writing, met another man, and returned to Clinton, Ontario, not far from Wingham.

For the next four decades—from classic volumes like *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1978, ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S LITERARY AWARD), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998; ♦ GILLER PRIZE, ♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD), *Too Much Happiness* (★★★★★ Mar/Apr 2010), and the recent *Dear Life* (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2013)—Munro has explored women amid changing cultural mores. At times, society’s expectations of domesticity are stifling; at other times, women tend to their families; yet many manage to follow their own hearts. But in some stories, women remain in limbo, not quite sure how to end their own tales: “I may have got it wrong,” says the narrator about her story in “Menese-teung,” a faux biographical tale of a Victorian-era female poet.

But in naming Munro the Nobel Laureate, the Nobel Prize Committee got it right.

## MUNRO: WHERE TO START

### Runaway: Stories

★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2005

♦ GILLER PRIZE

In these eight stories, Munro chronicles entire lifetimes of misfit women who chafe against sexual and cultural repression. Set between the 1920s and the present, they take place in Canada—from small towns in Ontario to Vancouver and the wild coast. Three linked stories, “Chance,” “Soon,” and “Silence,” paint a psychological portrait of the same woman as she experiences love, loss, and estrangement at three junctures in her life. In the title story, a brutal man keeps a hard eye on both his wife and neighbor—but the runaway doesn’t know how to escape. In “Tricks,” Robin reflects back on a man she met 40 years earlier at a Shakespeare festival. “Something,” she says, “though not what she was expecting—had changed her life.” In each story, Munro fine-tunes ideas about love, freedom, and survival.



Alice Munro

### Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage (2001)

These nine stories all feature women from small, insular Canadian towns who choose to stay or to leave and embrace the feminism of the 1960s; few, however, control their fates. In “Family Furnishings,” a woman wins a college scholarship, leaves her ailing mother, and becomes a writer. The woman in “Queenie” marries an abusive widower and runs away. In one of Munro’s finest stories, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (adapted into a film, *Away from Her*), a philandering, long-married husband puts his wife—who may or may not have Alzheimer’s—in a nursing home, where she forms an unexpectedly deep attachment. Whether or not all the characters escape their upbringing or expectations, they all experience disappointment and sorrow.

### Dear Life

★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2013

Set in Ontario, these short stories, like Munro’s previous collections, speak to sex, romantic longing, and marriage; courageous women and damaged men; the disappointment of expectations; and the tempests of life. The first part contains ten of Munro’s new stories, each depicting the fragility of the status quo. In “Amundsen,” an impressionable school teacher suffers a broken heart after an all-business doctor coldly breaks their engagement. In “Gravel,” a woman reflects on how quickly her sister’s life was taken from her. And “Dear Life” features two young mothers, each punished for marital transgressions. Munro describes her final four stories, which chronicle a childhood in Ontario, as “autobiographical in feeling though not, sometimes, entirely in fact.”

## CANADA'S MAJOR CONTEMPORARY WRITERS

### ROBERTSON DAVIES

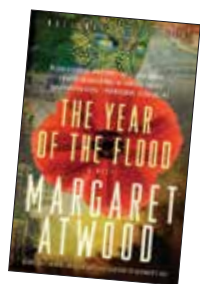
A Canadian-born novelist, journalist, essayist, professor, playwright, and media/newspaper publisher, Robertson Davies (1913–1995) remains one of Canada's most popular authors. He explored small-town journalism, patronage, and culture in the fictional town of Salterton, Ontario, in his satirical first three novels, *The Salterton Trilogy*. Among his near-dozen novels written in witty, delightful prose, Davies is best known for *The Deptford Trilogy*, a gem that includes *Fifth Business* (1970). In *Fifth Business*, schoolteacher Dunstan Ramsay looks back on his life—one marked by spiritual pursuits and magic, strange relationships, outsider status, and guilt over a terrible tragedy that occurred in youth. *The Manticore* (1972; Governor General's Literary Award), a commentary on Toronto's upper crust that focuses on the son of one of the characters in *Fifth Business*, continues the story. Another book not to miss is *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985), the second novel in Davies's Cornish Trilogy after *The Rebel Angels* (1981).



### MARGARET ATWOOD

One of the era's most versatile, prophetic writers, Margaret Atwood (1939–), born in Ottawa, has written more than four dozen books in various genres. Many of her novels feature modern urban women, often with creative impulses, fighting to define themselves in society. Deep moral and ethical inquiries underpin much of her work. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD, ♦ ARTHUR

C. CLARKE AWARD), a critique of contemporary feminism, offers a dystopian vision of the politics of reproduction and totalitarian regimes. *Alias Grace* (1996) reimagines a real-life murder, and the Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000) explores universal issues—from good and evil to freedom of expression, environmental devastation, sexual politics, and feminism. Atwood recently penned a



postapocalyptic trilogy about genetic technology, cataclysmic climate change, and social upheaval: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2009), and *MaddAddam* (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2013).

### MICHAEL ONDAATJE

Born in Sri Lanka in 1943 and a Canadian citizen since 1962, Michael Ondaatje is best known as a novelist, though his oeuvre also includes poetry, memoir, and film. He challenges conventional forms with works that combine circuitous storytelling, history, and myth. His novel/poem, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD FOR POETRY), casts the legendary, violent Wild West outlaw as a lover and poet through poetry, period photographs, and other media. *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), a more conventional novel, explores the lives and changing identities of immigrants to Toronto in the early 1900s. *The English Patient* (1992; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE, ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD), a nonlinear novel that was made into an Academy Award-winning film, reprises some of the characters from *In the Skin of a Lion* as it explores four diverse lives affected by the North African and Italian campaigns of World War II. See also *Anil's Ghost* (2000; ♦ GILLER PRIZE, ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD), *Divisadero* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007), and *The Cat's Table* (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2012).



### MORDECAI RICHLER

In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), Mordecai Richler's classic novel of Jewish life in 1940s Montreal, a young man with few resources beyond his wits and a notable lack of morals tries to overcome the hardships society sets in his path. Born in Montreal, Richler (1931–2001), a screenwriter, novelist, essayist, and critic of French Québec nationalists, spent time in Paris and London before returning to his roots to portray, sometimes controversially, the Jewish community and its history in Montreal. A love affair with a young married woman Richler met on his wedding



night inspired his satirical novel *Barney's Version* (1997; ♦ GILLER PRIZE, ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE), narrated by an elderly man who meets his true love at the most inopportune time—and then is charged with the murder of his best friend. See also Solomon Gursky Was Here (1989; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT-LIST), which skewers Canadian history (and the rich, the religious, and the greedy) in its irreverent telling of the mythical, criminally minded Gursky family.

## MARGARET LAURENCE

Margaret Laurence (1926–1987), one of Canada's preeminent literary figures, is a writer born of the 20th-century Canadian frontier prairie experience. *The Stone Angel* (1964), her best-known work and considered one of the best Canadian novels of all time, is set in a fictional Manitoba town; it is the first in the Manawaka cycle, which features various Canadian women and their “awakenings” in a small town based on Laurence's hometown of Neepawa, Manitoba. Narrated retrospectively by the 90-year-old Hagar Shipley, the novel chronicles one woman's stormy marriage to a homesteader, her break with her family, and the hardships of the frontier experience. In the classic *The Diviners* (1974; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD), the fifth and last of the Manawaka cycle, a middle-aged writer on the Canadian prairie struggles to maintain her independence while accepting her role in her 18-year-old daughter's life.



## DOUGLAS COUPLAND

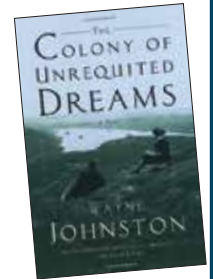
Douglas Coupland (1961–), a literary and design artist, has his pulse on the times. Born in West Germany on a Royal Canadian Air Force Base, Coupland and his family relocated to West Vancouver. He studied design and sculpture in Vancouver, Milan, and Sapporo, Japan, before returning to Vancouver and writing for magazines to support his art. In his 13 novels, two short story collections, nonfiction, and dramatic works, Coupland interweaves sexuality, technology, and pop culture while offering brilliant commentary on consumerism and our digital world. His seminal first novel, the international best seller *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), portrays the lives of three educated, underemployed 20-something friends in 1990 Southern California. Growing up in the fallout of divorce, recession, Reagan, consumerism, and nuclear waste, they tell stories, take “McJobs,” and navigate life—or don't. His second



novel, *Shampoo Planet* (1992), involves a younger crowd. Other titles include *Microserfs* (1995) and, more recently, *Generation A* (2009), which, though set in the future, mirrors the style of *Generation X*.

## WAYNE JOHNSTON

Born in a small town in Newfoundland, novelist and short fiction writer Wayne Johnston (1958–) writes about life in Newfoundland and Labrador and the regions' multilayered histories as his eccentric characters navigate formative moments in different eras. His first novel, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* (1985), a witty novel about the only son of the local weatherman and a schoolteacher, earned critical acclaim. It wasn't until publication of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998; ♦ NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARIES PRIZE FOR BEST NOVEL, ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD SHORT LIST) that Johnston rose as a literary star. That novel charts the life of Joe Smallwood, the real-life controversial political figure who pulled himself up from his boot strings to become Newfoundland's first premier. Johnston's recent novel, *The Son of a Certain Woman* (2013), features Percy Joyce, born in Newfoundland in the 1950s and defined by his alluring, unwed mother, a repressive Catholic community, a physical disfigurement, and the secrets he and his mother, aunt, and male boarder share.



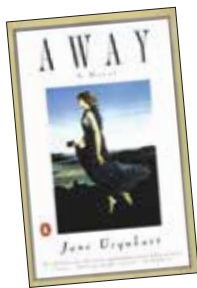
## JOY KOGAWA

Born in Vancouver, Joy Kogawa (1935–), a poet and novelist, writes about World War II-era Japanese internment camps from personal experience; she was sent with her family to the internment camp for Japanese Canadians at Slocan. Although revered for her poetry, Kogawa is best known for her powerful semiautobiographical *Obasan* (1981), which explores, through the eyes of Naomi Nakane, a schoolteacher looking back as a young child, the persecution of Canada's citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II, their relocation, and her own painful experiences, including the loss of her mother. The novel weaves together Naomi's past and present through letters and dream sequences as she struggles to confront and accept the events that altered her life. Kogawa later adapted *Obasan* into a children's book, *Naomi's Road* (1986). In the sequel to *Obasan*, *Itsuka* (1992) (later retitled *Emily Kato*), Naomi becomes involved in the Japanese Canadian battle for redress.



## JANE URQUHART

Novelist and poet Jane Urquhart (1949–), born in a small town in northern Ontario and raised in Toronto, is the beloved author of seven award-winning novels, short fiction, and poetry. She conducts extensive historical research and draws on her rich heritage—her mother’s ancestors were Irish immigrants who came to Canada during the potato famine and witnessed both world wars—to craft her stories. *The Whirlpool* (1992) was the first Canadian book to win France’s Best Foreign Book Award. Set in 1889, it offers colorful images of Canada’s history through the story of a young widow (Urquhart’s first husband died after only a few years of marriage; she later married a famous artist) who works at Niagara Falls as an undertaker. *Away* (1993), her third novel, which sat on the *Globe and Mail’s* best seller list for 132 weeks, built on her family’s Irish ancestry to chart the story of four generations of women in Ireland and Canada. Urquhart’s fourth novel, *The Underpainter* (1997; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD), explores the relationship between life and art. The international best seller *The Stone Carvers* (2001; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE LONG LIST), set in a village in Ontario, chronicles the story of a German immigrant family of wood carvers and their passions of the heart.



### FURTHER READING

- BEAUTIFUL LOSERS** | LEONARD COHEN (1966)  
**THE STUDHORSE MAN** | ROBERT KROETSCH (1969; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD)  
**BEAR** | MARIAN ENGEL (1976; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD)  
**THE WARS** | TIMOTHY FINDLAY (1977; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD)  
**THE STONE DIARIES** | CAROL SHIELDS (1993; ♦ PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD)  
**A FINE BALANCE** | ROHINTON MISTRY (1995)  
**CLARA CALLAN** | RICHARD B. WRIGHT (2001; ♦ GILLER PRIZE, ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD)  
**FALL ON YOUR KNEES** | ANN-MARIE MACDONALD (2002; ♦ OPRAH BOOK CLUB SELECTION, ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE)  
**THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL** | M. G. VASSANJI (2005)  
**THE BOOK OF NEGROES** (PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES AS *SOMEONE KNOWS MY NAME*) | LAWRENCE HILL (2007; ♦ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS’ PRIZE)  
**LATE NIGHTS ON AIR** | ELIZABETH HAY (2007; ♦ GILLER PRIZE)  
**A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING** | RUTH OZEKI (★★★★ July/Aug 2013)

## A FEW CANADIAN WRITERS TO WATCH

### JOSEPH BOYDEN

Joseph Boyden (1966–), who currently teaches Canadian literature at the University of New Orleans and writes about First Nations heritage and culture, entered the literary world with a splash. His debut novel, *Three Day Road* (2005), won the Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize. Inspired by the life of a legendary World War I sniper, the novel—at heart a conflict between native and European culture—recalls the experiences of a wounded aboriginal soldier, Xavier Bird, who returns to Ontario after the war. His tale intertwines with that of his aunt Niska, who tries to keep him alive as they paddle home through the wilderness. Boyden’s second novel, *Through Black Spruce* (2008; ♦ GILLER PRIZE), features Will Bird, a wounded Cree bush pilot, and his niece, a trapper, who chronicles their life stories—from the isolated Canadian wilderness to glamorous New York. Boyden’s most recent novel, *The Orenda* (2013), is the third in this loose multigenerational trilogy about the Bird family.



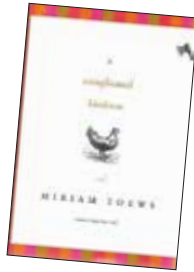
### DAVID BEZMOZGIS

David Bezmozgis (1973–), the youngest of this group, is a newly acclaimed Canadian writer and filmmaker who earned a spot on the *New Yorker* magazine’s 2010 top 20 fiction writers under the age of 40 for his writing on the Jewish immigrant experience, which he faced firsthand. Born in Latvia, he emigrated with his family to Canada as a young boy. In *Natasha and Other Stories* (2006), his award-winning first book of interconnected “autobiographical fiction,” Bezmozgis explores the boyhood and adulthood of Mark Berman, who emigrates with his Jewish parents from Latvia to Toronto in 1980. The title story explores Mark’s sexual initiation with a teenage cousin by marriage; other tales consider universal adolescent angst, loneliness, drugs, suburbia, and the lasting shackles of oppression. Bezmozgis’s acclaimed first novel, *The Free World* (2011; ♦ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK), takes place in Italy in 1978 and chronicles the experiences of three generations of Soviet Jews who escape the Iron Curtain.

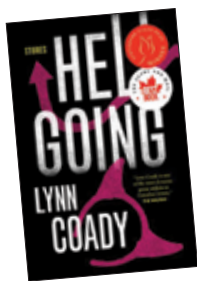


## MIRIAM TOEWS

Born in 1964 into a Mennonite family in Manitoba, Miriam Toews isn't exactly a writer to watch; she has already received the Writers' Trust Engel/Findley Award for her body of award-winning work: six books, most of which showcase the comedy of everyday life, no matter how painful; most set in southern Manitoba; and most featuring women at odds with their lives. But Toews is still relatively early in her career, so we included her here. Her third novel, *A Complicated Kindness* (2004; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD), involves a rebellious teenage girl in a small Mennonite town whose mother and sister have disappeared, who bucks the town's fundamentalism, and who dreams of experiencing "real" life in New York City. *The Flying Troutmans* (2008), a road-trip novel, features a family of misfit Manitobans as they meander across the Western United States and discover themselves and each other.



## LYNN COADY



A novelist, short story writer, playwright, and journalist residing in Alberta, Lynn Coady (1970–) earned the Canadian Authors Association/Air Canada Award for the best writer under 30. Her work to date humanizes bizarre human relationships, alienation, and private shames, some drawn from her own life. Coady first earned acclaim for her breakthrough novel *Strange Heaven* (1998), about a single teen mother

who enters a psychiatric ward and comes to terms with her eccentric family, a story she structured around her real-life experience as a pregnant teen; her second novel, *Play the Monster Blind* (2000), a collection of short fiction, was a national best seller. Coady's most recent short story collection, *Hellgoing* (2013), which mines diverse human relationships, such as that between a nun and an anorexic girl, won the Giller Prize. Other titles include *Saints of Big Harbour* (2002) and *Mean Boy* (2006).

## ANDREW PYPER

Trained as a lawyer, the Toronto-based Andrew Pyper (1968–) published his meditative first collection of short stories, *Kiss Me* (1996), to great acclaim. His first novel, *Lost Girls* (1999), a literary and legal thriller and ghost story, centers on a disappearance in a small town riddled by a strange legend; it was a national best seller in Canada as well as a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book. Each of Pyper's novels since then has been chosen as a "best of" selection by prestigious newspapers in Canada and the United States. His most recent novel, *The Demonologist* (2013), reached #1 on the *Globe and Mail's* best seller list. A literary horror story, the novel features a renowned Milton scholar whose knowledge leads him down a dark path to Venice, where he strives to save the entire world.



### FURTHER READING

**THE LUMINARIES** | ELEANOR CATTON (2013; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD, BOOKER PRIZE)

**THE SISTERS BROTHERS** | PATRICK

DEWITT (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2011; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST)

**LIFE OF PI** | YANN MARTEL (2001; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE)

**WATER FOR ELEPHANTS** | SARA GRUEN (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2006)

**THE BIRTH HOUSE** | AMI MCKAY (2006)

**HALF-BLOOD BLUES** | ESI EDUGYAN (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2012; ♦ GILLER PRIZE)

**STANLEY PARK** | TIMOTHY TAYLOR (2004)

**THE LAW OF DREAMS** | PETER BEHRENS (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD)

**THE MISTRESS OF NOTHING** | KATE PULLINGER (2009; ♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD)

**MONKEY BEACH** | EDEN ROBINSON (2002)

**COME, THOU TORTOISE** | JESSICA GRANT (2009)

**THE CROOKED MAID** | DAN VYLETA (2013)

**TOUCH** | ALEXI ZENTNER (2010)

**ATMOSPHERIC DISTURBANCES** | RIVKA GALCHEN (2008)

**THE LION SEEKER** | KENNETH BONERT (2013)

**INSIDE** | ALIX OHLIN (2012)

**Y** | MARJORIE CELONA (2013)

**COCKROACH** | RAWI HAGE (2010)

**419** | WILL FERGUSON (2012; ♦ GILLER PRIZE) ■