

Literary fiction given pride of place

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By Rebecca Wigod, Vancouver Sun January 17, 2009

There's a never-seen-before catalogue among those that have arrived from Canadian publishers, promising good reading for spring. It's a slim pamphlet in two shades of blue and its name is Hamish Hamilton Canada.

Penguin Canada has high hopes for this new imprint, an extension of a hallowed name in British publishing, under which it has begun to publish literary fiction.

"We figured that we needed a storied literary imprint, which had published some of the world's greatest authors, to distinguish our most literary authors," David Davidar, a novelist and the publisher of Penguin Canada, said from his office in Toronto.

"We have been attracting a number of completely marvelous literary writers and we figured we needed to showcase them better."

The first title in the catalogue, which should already be in bookstores, is *The First Person and Other Stories*, by smart British writer Ali Smith. Each of her 12 short fictions in the collection illustrates an aspect of the writing process. They have titles like "The First Person," "The Third Person" and "Present."

The next two books, scheduled to appear in March, are by Canadians: Colin McAdam's *Fall*, a tragicomic romance about late adolescent love, and Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared*, an ambitious novel with the killing fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia as a backdrop.

Nicole Winstanley, executive editor at Penguin Canada, said the plan is for Hamish Hamilton Canada to publish three books per season, for a total of nine a year.

Before joining Penguin three years ago, Winstanley was a literary agent. One of the authors she brought with her was Joseph Boyden, whose novels *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce* (last year's Giller Prize winner) have helped restore the company's reputation as a publisher of literary fiction.

In recent years, it's been better known for its commercial and middle-of-the-road fiction and its non-fiction.

"It's just one of those things. It's cyclical," said Davidar. "When I was brought in [from Penguin India] five years ago, one of my mandates was to restore Penguin's literary-

fiction credentials. Joseph Boyden was the first big Canadian fiction writer we acquired, and hiring Nicole was in keeping with that."

The newspaper The Independent commented last summer that it's curious to see the name Hamish Hamilton, a name associated with Britain since 1931, resurfacing in Canada at a time when "old Commonwealth ties mean less and less and publishers in countries once coloured red on the map seek more autonomy."

Davidar said Penguin USA won't be launching a Hamish Hamilton line because it already has many imprints. However, other Penguin subsidiaries, such as Penguin Australia, should be able to acquire HH authors jointly with Penguin Canada.

The resurgence of serious fiction during a recession is certainly heartening. Winstanley conceded that "literary publishing is no walk in park." But Davidar said that while the economy is precarious, "if you publish the finest literary writers, they will always find an audience."

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Half of American adults have read at least one novel, short story, poem or play in the last 12 months, according to Reading on the Rise, a report released Monday by the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts. The exact figure, derived from census data, is 50.2 per cent -- a spike since 2002, when the proportion was 46.7 per cent. Maybe fiscal belt-tightening is causing people to stay home and read, or perhaps Oprah, J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer are behind the rediscovery of print.

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