

Literary fiction roars - er, waddles - again

Martin Levin, *Shelf Life, The Globe and Mail* March 4, 2009

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Off last night to the launch party for Hamish Hamilton, the new literary (about which more in a bit) imprint of [Penguin Canada](#), a launch party at which my friend G. proffered the following advice: "You'll need to begin more blog posts with the likes of "Off last night to the launch party for Hamish. ..." As you can see, I have listened.

It was a good and lively party, with mercifully brief and to-the-point speeches, and it's especially warming to see a new imprint from a major publisher (the last such introduced in Canada, if I heard correctly, was some time back in the Cenozoic era). For those of you who may not know, [Hamish Hamilton](#) is a venerable and selective eponymous imprint founded in London in 1931. (Actually, it's not precisely eponymous, since the founder's name was Jamie Hamilton, but since Hamish is a Gaelic version of same, eminently and alliteratively understandable.)

The series begins promisingly this spring with titles from the Scot [Ali Smith](#) (reviewed in *The Globe* already) and Canadians [Colin McAdam](#) and [Kim Echlin](#) (both to be reviewed in the next few weeks). A firmly international sensibility will guide the project, as will the more than capable stewardship of Nicole Winstanley. Look for the likes of the brilliant and fierce [Zadie Smith](#) as the series unfolds.

I think it's enormously brave - some might say foolhardy - to launch such an ambitious series in a climate that seems uncondusive to serious reading. And yet ... By all accounts, or by Booknet's accounts anyway, book-buying Canadians are either indifferent to world economic chaos, or in winter-deep denial. We are, against all odds, buying more books. I'm just not sure what sorts of books we're buying more of. Is it serious fiction or timely titles such as *How to Use Your Pet as Insulation*, or *Chaste Vampires I Have Known*.

Of course, the Penguins should be feeling their oats: a tremendously successful 2008 all over, including Canadian Publisher of the Year. I applaud their boldness, as well as the books HH (as it's affectionately known in this blog) will bring to Canadians.

A note on "literary" fiction. I'm not quite sure what it is. Does it now comprise its own genre, like mysteries and gardening? Is there a snobbishness to the term, as if those who read anything but, were somehow deficient? Those who know me know my views - on the term, if not the product. "Literary fiction" says to me: "Big book with sepia cover. Read at your own peril." And I will, penguins. I will.