

A new breed of Penguin

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Aaron Lynett/National Post

(Back Row, From left) Author and publisher David Davidar, author Reif Larsen, author Lee Henderson, author Michael Winter, author Colin McAdam, with (Front Row, From Left) author Damian Tarnopolsky, Editor of Hamish Hamilton Canada Nicole Winstanley, author Kim Echlin, and Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the publishers The Penguin Group John Makinson, pose at the launch party for Hamish Hamilton Canada, the first major publishing imprint to launch in Canada in nearly two decades.

This is the fourth instalment of a monthly series examining the ecology of books, the complex interrelationships that, taken together, form Canada's publishing industry - from small-press proprietors to the biggest houses, from booksellers to book bloggers to book reviewers. We continue the series with this week's launch of the first new imprint in Canada since 1991.

The date has been circled in calendars and saved on BlackBerry's for weeks. It's Tuesday night, and industry types have packed Nyood, a restaurant on Toronto's Queen West strip, for the launch of Hamish Hamilton Canada, the first new imprint since Knopf Canada in 1991. Headed by Nicole Winstanley, a rising star in the literary firmament - she edited Joseph Boyden's Giller Prize-winning novel, *Through Black Spruce* - Penguin Canada's high-end publishing offshoot blends snooty British traditions, New York brashness and Canada's more muted attitude toward selling books. It already boasts a formidable line-up of authors; CanLit all-stars, American upstarts and revered prizewinners. Whether it turns out to be

a big success or spectacular failure, on this night everyone seems to be having fun.

"Sensational, isn't it?" asks an exuberant John Makinson, Penguin's London-based global CEO. "I can't help thinking if old Hamish Hamilton was looking down on us tonight, he'd be thinking 'Wow, that's a fantastic list.' "

Several authors on that list are here. Vancouver's Lee Henderson mingles with New York buzz kid Reif Larsen. Newfoundland transplant Michael Winter carries his young son through the crowd. Kim Echlin signs a copy of her new book, *The Disappeared*, for a fan. Makinson chats with Penguin Canada CEO David Davidar, and Winstanley makes the rounds, talking to her authors. One writer wonders if we'll ever see a launch like this again.

Indeed, the timing of this endeavour seems odd. The publishing news from New York reads like an industry obituary, replete with layoffs, buyouts and outright closures. Launching an imprint seems about as good an idea as starting up a newspaper.

"This is what I'm asked the most," says Winstanley, over coffee at a small café near the Penguin offices in uptown Toronto a few weeks before the party. "But what better time to really celebrate the finest books?"

Maybe she's right. BookNet Canada figures suggest Canadians are reading more: In the first six weeks of 2009, the sales of books increased 9% over the previous year.

There's also unintended symmetry to launching Hamish Hamilton Canada during what some are fearing is the Second Great Depression.

"The parallel that everybody is making right now is with the 1930s, right?" says Makinson. "That's why we're all reading Galbraith's *The Great Crash* in our spare time. And what reassures me are that the 1930s were in fact the Golden Age of literary publishing in Britain. It's when Jonathan Cape and Victor Gollancz and Michael Joseph and Hamish Hamilton all created their own imprints. Allen Lane founded Penguin. And these brave souls, in the teeth of the most serious

depression in history, all created publishing companies that are still with us today. So I think we need a little fortitude in these circumstances.

"And I also think that literary writing doesn't blow around too much in the economic weather. People who read literary fiction are not normally dissuaded by the economic circumstances."

Hamish Hamilton was founded in London in 1931 by Jamie Hamilton - Hamish being the Celtic version of James. Over the years, he published Raymond Chandler, Jean-Paul Sartre, Truman Capote, Albert Camus and, in 1951, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Hamilton died in 1988, but the imprint - which now also includes an Australian version, while an Indian offshoot is forthcoming - has continued his proud tradition over the years. The press's Canadian roots go back to 1965, when it was sold to the Thomson Organization, the media giant, which sold it to Penguin in 1986.

When Davidar left Penguin India and came to Toronto in 2004, one of his jobs was to rebuild the fiction program. Hamish Hamilton, he says, was always at the back of his mind. "Penguin Canada needed, I think, a great literary brand." He hired Winstanley about three years ago - she had been an agent at Westwood Creative Artists - and her first assignment was to spend a month in London working with Simon Prosser, the publisher at Hamish Hamilton U.K. "Indirectly, I guess I indoctrinated her with our values," chuckles Prosser over the phone from London, adding mischievously, "It makes it sound like a cult."

Those values, he says, include publishing the best available literary fiction and literary non-fiction - a maximum of 20 titles a year. "We respond very strongly to people who write with ambition," says Prosser, who has been with Hamish Hamilton for 11 years. "We care passionately about original writing. And by that I mean writing that seems absolutely necessary."

In 2006, under Prosser's direction, the imprint won all three of the major U.K. prizes: the Orange Prize, the Whitbread and the Man Booker.

Andrew Wiley, the influential New York agent, explains that the limited number of books published by Prosser is the imprint's great strength. Prosser, says Wiley, chooses his books "with great judgment and considerable flair. He publishes very,

very well. So to be on the Hamish Hamilton list is to be treated very specially, and probably to do pretty well." When he heard the imprint was coming to Canada, Wiley, who represents several of its authors, says, "It took me less than two seconds to think it was a good idea."

But it took much longer to bring to life. The idea had been discussed for years, in conversations between Prosser and Davidar, and Davidar and Makinson. It took 18 months of intense planning after getting the green light from head office in London.

"The economic downturn was unexpected, but it didn't make us change our plans," says Davidar.

But there was some hesitation, admits Makinson. Penguin had to be sure the quality remained high and the Canadian arm remained true to Hamish Hamilton traditions. To his mind, two conditions had to be met. First, the Canadian imprint had to have local roots and not simply publish authors from elsewhere. That was eminently possible - Canadian writers on the list include Colin McAdam, Michael Winter, Kim Echlin and Lee Henderson. The second condition was that it required "a publisher with the sort of sensitivity, sensibility, judgment, to make a success of it. Which with Nicole we have."

Both Davidar and Prosser certainly sing the praises of their 35-year-old star. "You need to have that combination of optimism and the gambling instinct, which I think she does have," says Prosser, while Davidar contends, "I think she's a world-class talent, and I don't use that word lightly ... She's well on her way to becoming one of the great editors of her generation."

The reaction in the industry has been generally positive. Winstanley says some of her colleagues in the industry "have been jealous," recalling one editor in particular who called to ask how she'd managed to become executive editor of an imprint after only three years on the job - it's usually something that takes years of work. One veteran publisher told me she wasn't even aware of its launch. But most industry insiders were generous.

"I think it's good news for the Canadian publishing industry - and for everybody - because when something like this comes along, every publisher has to take note

and respond accordingly, which, I dare say, means they have to pull up their socks a bit and become a bit more aggressive," says Toronto agent Dean Cooke, who is Larsen's Canadian representation. "When a publisher decides to launch an imprint like this they are going to pour a lot of resources into it. And so when I discussed this with Reif and with his American agent, Denise Shannon, my position was, 'Look, it's good to be on an inaugural list of this kind. Penguin has a lot at stake here. They've got to make this work, they want to make this work. So you're going to get money, there's no question, in the form of marketing dollars, but you're also going to get a lot of hard work and creative thinking and a real investment of blood and sweat.'"

According to Davidar, Hamish Hamilton Canada will be small and exclusive, publishing nine books a year, a boutique imprint within the larger Penguin machine. Viking will be the commercial arm of Penguin, focusing on commercial fiction and non-fiction. The 18 authors on Hamish Hamilton Canada's roster include winners of the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Booker, the Orange Prize, "and shortly there will be Giller Prize winners as well, we hope," says Davidar.

This year, Hamish Hamilton Canada will publish debut novels from Toronto writer Damian Tarnopolsky and director David Cronenberg. International names include Philip Roth, Nadine Gordimer, Zadie Smith and Ali Smith, whose short story collection, *The First Person and Other Stories*, is already in stores.

"It's not just about getting the big names," says Winstanley. "It's also trying to be the leader in discovering [new authors]. And that's the thing I missed a lot about agenting when I first made the shift. When you're an agent, you're out there looking for the talent before anybody else discovers it. And that's supposed to be part of your job as a publisher."

Later in the evening, before the open bar runs dry and people make their way into the Toronto night, the room quiets while, first Davidar, then Makinson, address the audience. Then the mic is turned over to Winstanley.

I ask her later how it felt to look out over the room - at the writers, editors, journalists and colleagues - to see the culmination of her months of work.

"There's been a lot of concern in the industry, and fearfulness, about what's going to come in the year ahead," she says, "and none of that was there. It was a true celebration of publishing and great books."

Already, Winstanley has tentatively scheduled Hamish Hamilton Canada releases as far down as 2012 - an ambitious and optimistic bit of planning, all things considered.

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