

Live from the GILLERS

**A celebration of Canadian litera...Whoa!
Would you get a load of that dress!**

It's a nice font, as fonts go, and this was my first opportunity to examine the Richler typeface up close and personal as it graced the pages of the Giller Prize program at Jack Rabinovitch's swanky dinner party Tuesday night. Also noticed Mordecai Richler's brand of Scotch behind the bar. Noticed it too much perhaps, several times too much, but it goes to show that though he is no longer among us — and we really do miss his rumpled presence at these things — he is definitely not forgotten.

Same now with M.G. Vassanji, who, though he is very much alive, hadn't really been heard from since winning the first Giller in 1994 for *The Book of Secrets*, though he did release *Amriika* a few years back. That didn't gain much notice, at least not as much as he got this week at Toronto's Four Seasons Hotel, and I can only assume this was a long-awaited blessing. Then again, maybe not. About four hours before he became the first repeat winner in the Giller's 10-year history (for the two people who haven't heard, his winning novel is *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*), he looked as if he were awaiting a root canal.

"It's not easy," he said, of being a nominee at a big expensive gala. "You don't know how to respond. My main concern is my next book."

He was standing next to his wife, cradling a glass of wine, white or red, I can't remember. Too many of the aforementioned Scotches. "This is nice," he said, gesturing around him, "and it's a tremendous thing for publishing and writing. But from the point of view of a person who writes, my main concern is to write. I just want to go back to my office and continue with the writing."

You've started a next novel? "I'm working around something. But you know, even staring into darkness or staring at my computer, for me is work." Hey, me too!

Anyway, by this time, I had been distracted by Carolyn Weaver, a leggy brunette who hosts the show *Fine Print* on Book TV. She was wearing a rather distracting dress, made for the Gillers by a Montreal designer. It had a bare back — OK, there was a very light, black mesh thing happening, but her back was exposed — was made of red silk, and had written on it all the winners of the past nine Gillers, not to mention the nominees of this year's award. Quite fetching it was, and she was gosh darn proud to wear it.

"I'm really pleased with it," she gushed. "I picked red because of the red rose and the red invitations and also, red is for red hot, and that's what I think of when I think of —" Herself! Did she say herself? Did she think she was red hot? Is she one of those self-absorbed TV types?

— this party and what Canadian writers have accomplished in the world — we're on the forefront. I think it's amazing that Jack puts together an evening like this that celebrates that Canadians are on the forefront in the international literary scene and that we celebrate that at home and that's really important."

If I had a dime for the number of times people talked about the importance and significance of the Giller celebrating Canadian literature, I'd be able to host a 491-person party at the Four Seasons myself. So let's not talk about it any more. Let's say the Giller is a great prize, that Canadians can write great books, and move on.

SPEAKING OF WHICH, THERE'S Margaret Atwood. Hmmm, she's looking kinda frail. Perhaps it's the endless rounds of endless questions, though one of her assistants assures me she has infinite patience. When I talk to her myself, Atwood tells me, as she has told everyone, that she can't quite believe she had been selected for the short list, certain that people are sick and tired of her

being nominated for these things. So should we just put you in the hall of fame and stop nominating you? "Well, I may be dead soon, and then you can, you know, have a shrine."

What? Is this some kind of announcement? Am I breaking huge news? "No, you're not," she said, with a small chuckle and a small smile. "I'm fine." Still looks more frail than I remember.

No matter, let's move on to Ann-Marie MacDonald, who recently announced her retirement from writing. Like, what's up with that?

"I just can't imagine starting anything as long and involved as these two novels have been," she said, speaking of *Fall On Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies*. "But maybe that's not the kind of thing I would write again anyway. Maybe the kind of thing I would write again is something that doesn't take years and isn't so involved. You never know, you can't predict. I do know that I want to spend more time with my baby."

That would be her nine-month-old daughter, who she and partner Alisa Palmer adopted in January. "But she might get really bored of me in a couple of years. She might want to have a life of her own." So there's hope, all you MacDonald fans.

Now, back to M.G. Vassanji. When his name was announced he seemed stunned. Sure he stood up, but he didn't leave his table. He stood ... and stood ... and stood until a Bravo! employee swooped down and manhandled him to the stage. Poor man. Little did anyone know he was desperate to get to the washroom.

See, last time he won, in 1994, he was actually using the facilities when his name was called. His publicist, cognizant of this fact, wanted to make sure it didn't happen again, so she barred the door. Guess all that sweat dampening his forehead wasn't from the camera lights after all.



GLEN LOWSON, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

"I'm really pleased with it," TV host Carolyn Weaver said of her Giller-inspired frock. Apparently she was not the only one.



AARON HARRIS, THE CANADIAN PRESS

"You never know, you can't predict," Ann-Marie MacDonald says of her plans to 'retire' from writing.

It's all a woman can do to boil a pot of water by using a forever foreign language of knobs. After preparing a whole supper, she lies exhausted on the couch, from somewhere in her mind a thought turns over a stone on Pluto.

From *Ottawa Poetry Now: Arc 51, Winter 2003*, an issue featuring new work by 35 local poets including Elisabeth Harvor, Rob McLennan and Tom Henighan. Consider this your invitation to the gala launch Nov. 13 at 7 p.m. at Arts Court. Admission is free. The issue includes 10 of the works on exhibition in the OAG's *The Bigger Picture: Portraits from Ottawa*.



ELIZA GRIFFITH'S ARTWORK GRACES THE COVER OF ARC 51.



Margaret Atwood, who apparently has no plans to slow down, expressed delight at making the Giller short list.