

THE ARTS / A writer looking for an award-winning poet's latest book decries the way artists are treated in this country

Why Canada's talent heads south

BY JUDY KEELER

IRAN into my old friend David Donnell the other day. In 1984, David won the Governor-General's Award, Canada's highest literary award, for poetry, and he told me that his latest book, *China Blues*, has been nominated for this year's City of Toronto Book Award.

The Toronto nomination was news to me. Last year I read who won in a short article in the arts section of *The Globe and Mail*. Michael Ondaatje won the 1988 Toronto Book Award for *In The Skin of A Lion*; last year he won the internationally renowned Booker Prize for *The English Patient*, which shows you what talent we have here. Would there be pictures of the nominees this year? Canadians rarely suffer the fate of being hounded for autographs. Nobody knows who we are. For all the postcards available of famous people, you'd have to dig high and low to find one of Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton, Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler, **Joni Mitchell**, Gordon Lightfoot or Neil Young anywhere in Toronto stores.

I tromped over to a local bookstore that features only Canadian literature and asked for *China Blues*. The clerk brought the title up on the computer.

"Sorry, we had three copies but we're out of stock."

"Did you know the book is up for a Toronto Book Award?"

"Yes. Come back, we'll have some in a couple of weeks. The book is on order."

I suggested (in a completely Canadian polite and non-threatening manner) that books nominated for an award *might* be put in the window. After all, the award is in a few weeks. It could generate sales! The response I got was a repetition of the answer I got the first time. This scenario is common. It is why brains and talent and ambition leave this country. At the time of this writing, I am looking for a publisher in New York.

For my own part, I wish people like Neil Young, **Joni Mitchell** and Leonard Cohen would leave California and come home, but what would they come back to — 50 per cent income tax and a lot of air miles to travel? We fail to appreciate talent. Americans are quick to adopt us and claim us as their own. When I was in Los Angeles, everyone thought **Joni Mitchell** was from California.

Even Margaret Atwood would not be where she is today (she is one of the few Canadian writers who make a living from their writing) had she not made the New York Times bestseller list. This accomplishment was in part due to the



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dogged efforts of her New York agent, Virginia Barber. If talent in Canada gets noticed, an American usually promotes it. The story is people go so far, then they leave. That's Canadian history.

I have been writing for 20 years; my articles have appeared in virtually every prestigious review, newspaper and magazine, but what good does it do me? You are about as likely to find anything by me in a bookstore as you are by David Donnell. When people ask me what I do, I do not tell them I am a writer. Instead I say, "I have a small photography business, Susie Snapshot. I do weddings and bar mitzvahs," which is true. I've also been a publicist, done set decorating, sold flowers on the street, waitressed and been a casual labourer. I have an honours degree. The money I make writing is from speeches for doctors or family archival documentation. At the moment, I'm ghosting the life story of a Holocaust survivor. I hope to sell it to television.

Contrary to popular opinion, writing is not a leisure activity. I am driven to write. It is my vocation. It is what I was put here on Earth to do. As James Michener said, in *The Novel*, "Writing is fiendishly hard work." Writing is a job, it is labour-intensive and lonely. Writers get about as much credit as women who

dare to stay home and raise children. Writing most often is work without pay at the end of the day.

Why isn't Canadian literature not only competitive but visible? Why not promote Canadian books? Why not encourage people to read? In a country where literacy is declining at an alarming rate, you'd think this might be a priority.

The claim that there is no market is mere excuse. This attitude must go the way of the dinosaur. We must embrace our talent, nourish it, and demand the best because we have the best. We must do this if we are to retain any semblance of Canadian culture.

THE truth is Canadians have lacked the savvy Americans possess to a fault. We'll bitch and complain but we still let someone else do it. We'll hate them after and call them imperialists. For Americans are not only smart, they are not ashamed to make money.

When a book comes out by a promising author, why is the writer not plugged into a publicity machine? Writers would sell books if they appeared on television, were heard on radio, and made appearances everywhere from community colleges to conventions. If books are on cas-

ettes, why are they only in the library and not in the convenience store? Why aren't people listening to the great Canadian novel when they are driving? Why aren't interviews and performances in video stores? Why aren't Canadian writers sent to Los Angeles to sign books at Book Soup on Sunset Boulevard when Tom Robbins is?

Americans have voracious and curious appetites. They are big consumers with 20 per cent more to spend. Americans know little about Canada but believe me they are interested in finding out more. The question is, why aren't we?

The bottom line is that a book may or may not make the author rich or be sold to TV. But publishing employs people, from the paper company to the clerk who shelves, from the editor to the artist who does the cover, from the shipper to the distributor to the writer. Last but not least, the writer. In a country where unemployment is inflationary and people have more time then ever to read, why aren't we taking advantage of this to get ourselves on our feet? Oh Canada, say can you see.

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