

LITERATURE AWARDS

Writer makes history

By TARA BRADBURY

THE TELEGRAM

Don McKay made history Thursday, as the first writer presented with the BMO Winterset Award for a collection of essays.

McKay, known as an accomplished poet as well as a teacher, was presented with the prestigious literary prize for "The Shell of the Tortoise" during a ceremony at Government House in St. John's. He was one of three finalists selected for the award, along with renowned poet Mark Callanan for "Gift Horse" and award-winning author Edward Riche for "Easy to Like."

The BMO Winterset Award, designed to celebrate Newfoundland and Labrador writers and writing, is open to published works in any genre written by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, whether native or resident. Thirty-nine entries were received this year, and this is the first time in the award's 12-year history it's been awarded for a series of essays, though juror Noreen Golfman insisted it wasn't the novelty of McKay's genre that influenced his

win. It wasn't something she and her fellow jurors — writers Lisa Moore and Kevin Major — even realized until after they had selected McKay.

"Don is really a very established, acknowledged and awarded writer. He really gets at something very fresh, very intelligent and very accessible, and he's also really witty — those essays keep you awake," she told The Telegram after the ceremony. "He's got a kind of sensitivity to his reading audience about very difficult ideas. He's talking about science, but bringing science into line with poetry, and none of us had ever read anything like that."

McKay has published about a dozen books in his 40-year career. He has won the Governor General's Literary Award for poetry twice, and was the 2007 recipient of the Griffin Poetry Prize for "Strike/Slip." An Ontario native who's been living in St. John's for the past six years, McKay, an Order of Canada member, is known for his geopoems, based on scientific and wilderness themes.

Accepting his plaque and \$10,000 prize, McKay said he was at a loss for words. "I'm just so honoured to have

been nominated for this award in the first instance," he said. "I know how vibrant and how rich ... Newfoundland literature; it indeed really sets the mark, not just for Canadian literature, but for literature everywhere."

He echoed the same thoughts after the presentation.

"I feel like I'm participating in the world's greatest literature, especially considering our population," he said. "There's an incredible productivity and creativity out of Newfoundland and I've benefited enormously. The culture has been so supportive, it's such an embracing and stimulating culture to belong to. I just feel deeply honoured to have this award."

Callanan and Riche will each receive \$2,500 as Winterset finalists.

The BMO Winterset Award is composed of a partnership between BMO Financial Group, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council and writer Richard Gwyn, who founded it in memory of his late wife, author and social historian Sandra Fraser Gwyn.

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The Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council presented its 2011 BMO Winterset Award for excellence in Newfoundland and Labrador writing Thursday afternoon in a ceremony hosted by Lt.-Gov. John Crosbie at Government House in St. John's. Above, Crosbie (left) presents author Don McKay with the \$10,000 award as Winterset Award founder Richard Gwyn (centre) looks on.

— Photo by Joe Gibbons/The Telegram