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Winner Reads All

Uncategorized



by Barbara Bloom

Nine months ago, I had never heard of House of Anansi Press or its A List (classics) imprint. An ad in *Publishers Weekly* soon changed that: In an effort to introduce American readers to its titles on the occasion of its golden anniversary, the publisher was offering the A List collection to one lucky reader through a random drawing. The straightforward entry didn't require divulging one's life history, so I entered and immediately forgot about it. When an Anansi email showed up in my inbox a month later, I first thought it was spam but then remembered the contest and wondered, *Did I win? And how.*

Anansi's marketing director explained that I had won the drawing and that *two* boxes of books would be headed my way—one immediately, the second in a few months with a handful of forthcoming releases. I was overjoyed.

When the first box arrived, I felt like the proverbial kid in the candy store. Is there anything better than free books? Actually, yes: really good, beautifully designed free books.

After removing the books from the carton, taking in the A List as a whole, admiring the cover art, and sorting fiction and nonfiction (okay, I'm a little OCD), I picked up a novel by Gaétan Soucy. With its Balthus-like cover and Stieg Larsson-esque title (though published five years before Larsson's Millennium Trilogy), *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches* intrigued me. I'm no stranger to Canadian literature—having enjoyed works from the likes of Margaret Atwood, Wayson Choy, Joan Clark, Barbara Gowdy, Wayne Johnson, Joseph Kertes, Mitch Moxley, Michael Ondaatje, Mordecai Richler, Nancy Richler, Cordelia Strube, Jane Urquhart, and Guy Vanderhaeghe—but Soucy was entirely new to me. I was blown away.

I keep a book log, and the entry for 24 April reads as follows:

“ Upon realizing their father (who raised them on Bible stories, medieval folktales, and Spinoza’s *Ethics*), is dead, the older of two siblings ventures, for the first time ever, past the family estate and pine forest to the neighboring village . . . The appearance of the youngster puts into motion a rapid chain of events that flips the children’s notions about gender; at the same time it reveals a number of dark family secrets surrounding the death of their mother and what constitutes “fair punishment.” Tense, brilliantly original and chilling.

I was so excited about the novel that I shared my feedback with Anansi. Then I kept reading. Other A List titles wended their way onto the nightstand pile—Michael Winter’s *This All Happened*, Gwendolyn MacEwen’s *Mermaids & Ikons: A Greek Summer*, which now has me seriously considering a trip to Greece; Helen Weinzwieg’s *Passing Ceremony*. It’s worth adding that James Polk’s introduction to *Passing Ceremony* is reason enough to applaud the art of the essay and to pick up this provocative, prismatic story.

Taking a spread-the-wealth approach, I’ve donated some of the books I’ve read to our public library for inclusion in the permanent collection. A friend visiting from Minneapolis told me her book club was reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*, so I promptly gave her Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* . . .

My husband just completed writing a manuscript about Vietnam draft resisters. While we were in Vancouver meeting some of them, the conversation turned to Mark Satin’s *Manual for Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada*. We’d not heard of it, yet imagine our surprise when we returned home, found the second box of A List books waiting for us, and Satin’s anniversary edition among the goodies.

Next on my A List is Roch Carrier’s *The Hockey Sweater and Other Stories* for the silly reason that Genevieve Simms’ cover illustration of a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater pinned to a clothes line reminds me of a hand-knit doll-size Detroit Red Wings sweater that hangs at our neighborhood bar. Thank you, House of Anansi Press, for your generous introduction to the A List. Echoing your tagline, you truly do “publish very good books.”

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