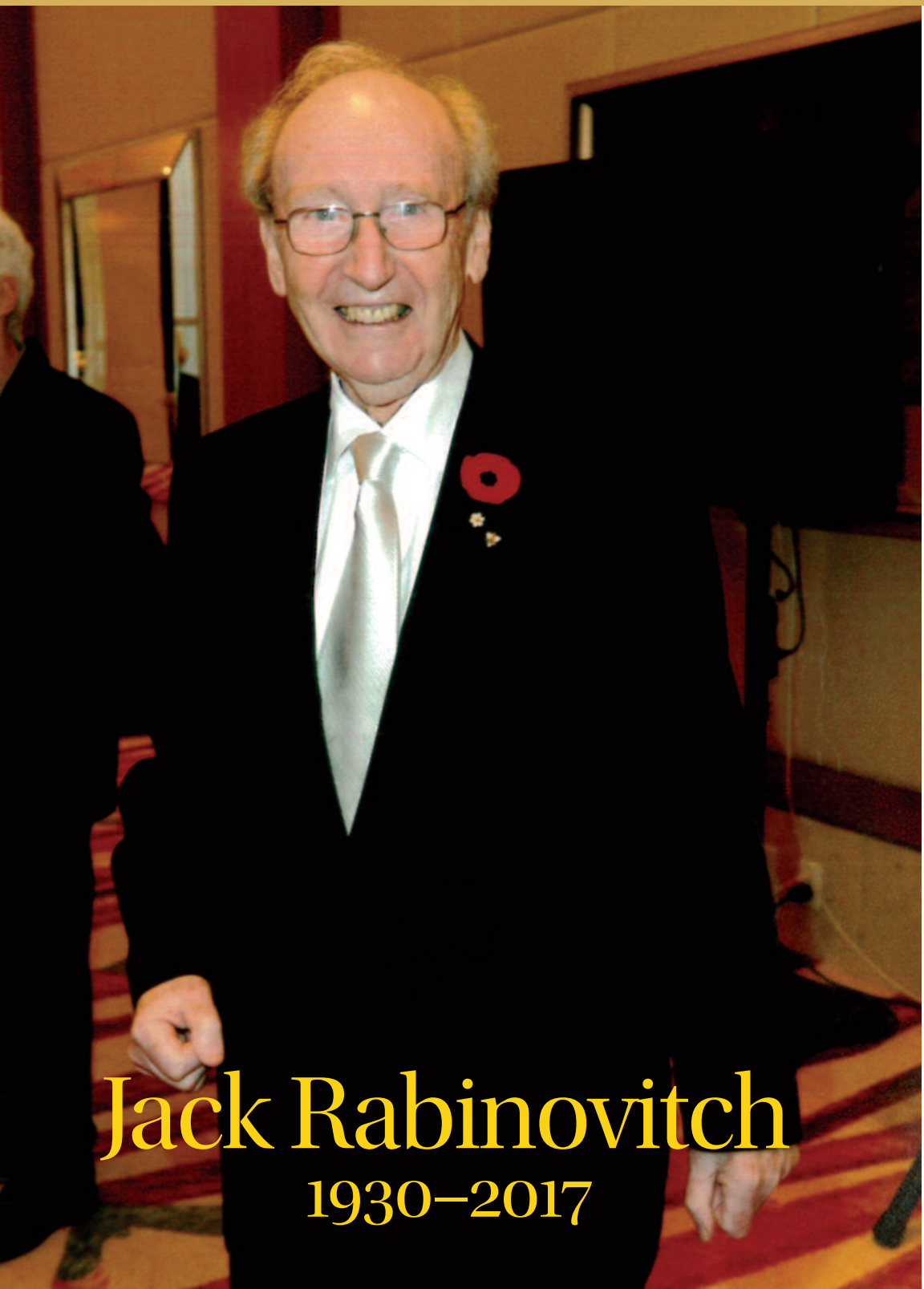


Jack Rabinovitch

1930–2017

Perhaps the most enduring and notable event in the book business these last two decades has been the Giller Prize, given to the best English-Canadian fiction work published in the previous year. It was established by Jack Rabinovitch in 1994. We became friends that year. Jack had a unique talent for friendship. I loved his ability to size up people and situations, his enthusiasms, his silly jokes, his delight in new discoveries – and, most of all, I loved his stories.

Jack's father had been a ballroom dancing instructor in Bucharest. He was a dapper man with dark hair, charm, fast feet, and a determination to do better. Jack's mother and aunt had escaped across the Ukrainian border to Romania when another wave of Cossack pogroms promised to put an end to their youthful ambition to stay alive. The two sisters were barefoot in the snow, but they had the family's wealth in jewels sewn into the linings of their threadbare coats.

Had Jack's parents not married and had two children so soon after they both arrived in Canada, Jack's father might have had a bright future as a businessman. As it was, he worked as a newspaper vendor on a Montreal street corner to support his family.

Jack hawked newspapers at his father's stand. Later, when his father opened a fast-food restaurant, Jack and his brother served meals, and they ate well. Otherwise, it was his mother's cooking. She had an unerring talent for serving burnt, soggy, greasy, colourless food. When Jack's father bought a toy store, his mother was the guard, patrolling the premises, making sure no one would steal. Unfortunately, she continued to cook.

Jack and his brother Sam went to school with the kids of other immigrants. All except two families in Jack's neighbourhood were Jewish. The Catholic kids ran with their own crowd and provided lively exercise for Jack and his friends, who would run the gauntlet of their battle-scarred fists and metal-heeled boots on the way to school. It was a quick, if not painless, method of learning French, and Jack spoke a fine *joual.* Jack's nickname was *'ti carotte,* or "little carrot," because he was a redhead.

His best friend then was a kid called Archie, a small boy with big dreams about joining a band. He danced along the streets and up and down stairs, as if he could hear music. Archie's father was a bookie, and his older brother, a tank of a man, was the enforcer. One day, after Archie was bashed in the face by Tarzan, one of the school's "repeaters," Archie's brother showed up at school and decked the guy. After that, Tarzan never touched Archie again. It was a timely lesson for Jack on how to survive as a scrawny kid: ally yourself with a large protector. From then on, he traded his reading and math skills for protection. It was a great incentive to stay ahead of the class.

“She was the love of Jack Rabinovitch’s life. They were inseparable. They had big parties, long sun-drenched holidays, went dancing, frequented the clubs, read books together. Doris died in 1993, and Jack never stopped mourning.”

Without that incentive, Jack was not sure he would have made it to Baron Byng High School, where he first met Mordecai Richler. Mordecai’s sole interest in Jack was that Jack was close friends with “Lefty” (or Hyman Berger, as the teacher insisted on calling him), the best ball player, track and field athlete, and pool player at school. There was no better way to acquire prestige than to be connected with Lefty.

When Jack went to McGill to study literature, he lost touch with both Lefty and Mordecai. He worked for the Steinbergs, became executive VP of Trizec; he became an independent developer and builder, and along the way he acquired some wealth. As a volunteer, he helped build the new Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto, “on time and under budget.”

It was only after Mordecai became a friend of Jack’s wife, Doris Giller, that the two men reconnected.

I first met Doris near the end of the ’70s at the rooftop bar of Toronto’s Park Plaza Hotel. She was a fast-talking, opinionated, hard-drinking, hard-swearing buddy of Jack McClelland’s. She was also curvaceous, strikingly beautiful, flamboyant, funny – a chain-smoking wonder of a woman, who insisted that Canada needed better, more serious, less mealy-mouthed book reviewers, and McClelland agreed with her on everything. I saw her again when she was assistant books editor at the *Toronto Star*. She was impatient with much of what she considered “the Toronto elite.” Jack Rabinovitch said she had an unfailing nose for bullshit.

She was the love of Jack’s life. They were inseparable. They had big parties, long sun-drenched holidays, went dancing, frequented the clubs, read books together.

Doris died in 1993, and Jack never stopped mourning.

The Giller Prize was to honour her memory.

Jack first tried the idea on Mordecai at Woody’s on Rue Bishop, in Montreal. Woody’s used to be one of Montreal’s most famous pubs, a dark room with “wooden seats in narrow booths,” a hangout for writers and other creative types. Though he was not enamoured of literary prizes, Mordecai liked this one because he had been very fond of Doris and shared her discerning nose for the “fraudulent.” He agreed to be one of the

Doris Giller, 1931–1993.

judges. For the first year of the awards, Mordecai was joined by Alice Munro and literary critic and university professor David Staines.

The year 1994 saw the first Giller evening. Doris's friend Joey Slinger was the MC. The prize, then, was $25,000. There were fancy invitations with red roses. Jack looked splendid in his tuxedo, as did everyone else – writers, editors, booksellers, many of whom hadn't worn a tux or a long dress until that night. Yet, despite the formal wear the party was, somehow, less formal and more relaxed than other literary get-togethers because Jack put all of us at ease.

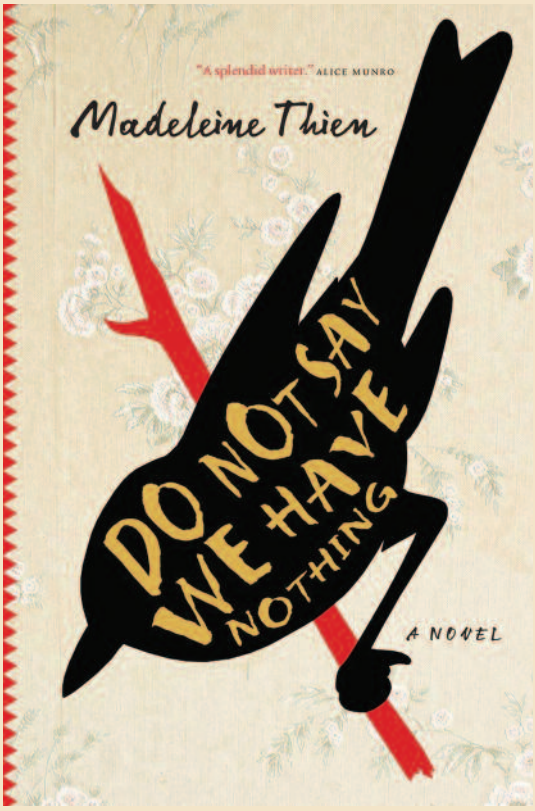
From the very start, the Giller represented literary quality. The first three winners were M.G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, and Margaret Atwood. Mordecai did not win until 1997 when he was no longer a judge. Alice Munro followed a year later. Rohinton Mistry, the 1995 winner, commented after the evening that the crowd had swelled to 500, that the tables had been moving closer and closer together to make room for more guests, and now also for the television cameras bobbing about filming the evening. No one minds, he said, because they are also here to celebrate literature.

I read Rohinton's winning book, *A Fine Balance,* while travelling in India and called to tell Jack that the book had ruined what I had planned as a relaxing, sightseeing journey. All I could think about each day as we visited temples and bazaars and tea plantations was the fate of the two benighted characters at the heart of the novel. Later, we travelled to many places with Jack and his partner Judy, but never to India

In 2005, the Giller was renamed Scotiabank Giller, and now the award for the winner has increased to $100,000. People talk of the Giller effect. The awards ceremony is viewed by 1.3 million people. There is even an anti-Giller faction and a big Giller Light Bash, in which people in different cities gather to watch a live big-screen broadcast of the gala.

EVERY YEAR, at the Giller gala, Jack has repeated the same simple suggestion: "For the price of a dinner in this town, you can buy all the nominated books. So, eat at home and buy the books."

ANNA PORTER is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent books are *The Appraisal* and *Buying a Better World: George Soros and Billionaire Philanthropy*. She has also been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail.*


"A splendid writer." ALICE MUNRO
Madeleine Thien
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A NOVEL


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