



**Fact:** 1920 marked the first year in recorded human history when the average lifespan of a human being was longer than the average lifespan of a wild goldfish (which lives for about 50 years).

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Opening Worlds

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

# U of A English professor wins Governor General's Award

AMANDA ASH  
Arts & Entertainment Editor

On 26 February, an Edmonton writer and University of Alberta professor emeritus was awarded one of Canada's most prestigious non-fiction awards for his work *Of This Earth*. Although many recipients of such a prize would immediately delve into how thrilled they are to be recognized, 72-year-old Rudy Wiebe couldn't wait to elaborate on how glad he was he'd gotten a haircut before the ceremony, and how everyone got a chuckle out of his magical shoes—the same shoes he wore to accept his Governor General's Award in 1974 for *The Temptations of Big Bear*.

"Did you hear all the stories about the shoes? Every newspaper ran a story about those shoes," Wiebe says over the phone. "They looked at them and said they were very classy shoes. Actually, they are. I think they'll come back into style again."

Wiebe had picked up the other Charles Taylor finalists' books beforehand—*Citizen of the World* by John English and *The Judgement of Paris* by Ross King—and after reading them, Wiebe said that his "story of a little bush kid" didn't stand a chance.

*Of This Earth* documents the first twelve years of Wiebe's life. Wiebe describes his book as a silly, simple idea that challenged his memories of being born and raised on a northern Saskatchewan homestead farm. But



ANDREW RURAK

**A MAN OF HIS WORDS** Rudy Wiebe's writing grabs country's top award.

judging from what the adjudicators had to say, that little bush kid's tale wasn't an ordinary one.

"[The judges] made a couple of comments later and one of them was that it took them into a different world that most people don't [know] anything more about. But [that world] existed for many Canadians for a long time—you know, that pioneering world of clearing land and making the hunting world into an agricultural world," Wiebe says.

Professor Garrett Epp, Chair for the Department of English and Film

Studies, couldn't have been happier about Wiebe's win. Epp says that the Department has been doing extremely well in the area of creative non-fiction, earning the Governor General and other award nominations regularly for the past few years.

"[Creative non-fiction] is a field that's attracting an awful lot of students and bringing a lot of recognition to our program," Epp says. "Creative non-fiction, in particular, is a field that's growing in importance."

# Re-examining two of the three Rs

Canadian education ministers say adult illiteracy rates need to be addressed

RACHEL HENDRICKS  
News Writer

Canadians need to brush up on their reading and writing skills, if the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has anything to say anything about it. And in pursuit of this aim, CMEC is now re-examining and revamping their Literacy Action Plan.

In 2003, Canada conducted the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLSS), which positively correlated literacy with employment and community engagement. The survey also found that the literacy performances of Aboriginal and immigrant populations were lower than the average Canadian's.

The Literary Action Plan was formed in 2005 to address literacy performances across all demographics. And on 13 February, CMEC made it a primary focus when the council met in Toronto. Ministers will now be gathering more research, developing their own policy frameworks on literacy, and creating networks that they hope will improve collaboration between jurisdictions.

"Every one of the provinces and territories are focused on literacy. We know that in order to be successful in terms of the economy, in order to be [a] successful democracy, we must have people that are literate," said Dr Emery Dosdall, Deputy Minister of Education for British Columbia.

A main focus of the Literacy Action Plan is to prepare adults for the

workforce. Dosdall said that immigrants are a particular concern, and officials need to question whether enough is being done to help them acclimatize and become literate in English.

"There are a lot of people in the workforce today as adults [that are] not necessarily illiterate, but people in jobs that can't read manuals," Dosdall added.

However, Harvey Krahn, professor and chair of sociology at the University of Alberta, specializes in social inequality, education and immigration, and while he agrees that illiteracy is a problem, he's concerned that the whole story isn't being told.

**"There are a lot of people in the workforce today as adults [that are] not necessarily illiterate, but people in jobs that can't read manuals."**

**DR EMERY DOSDALL,  
BC DEPUTY MINISTER  
OF EDUCATION**

"If you came to Canada as an immigrant 20 years ago as an adult, on average it took ... ten years to catch up and be earning as much as a Canadian-born person who has the same education. The research today

shows that immigrants who arrived recently aren't catching up as fast," Krahn said.

Krahn then pointed to Canada's immigration point system, which now favours those highly educated and proficient in English and French. To qualify for entry into the country, one must earn 67 points. The maximum amount of points is 100; 49 of those may be earned in the education and language categories alone.

"The paradox is this: in a way we're putting more emphasis on [language] skills today when we pick our immigrants, and yet immigrants today are having more trouble catching up. So it doesn't seem that, on average, literacy or English skills may be the main problem," Krahn argued.

Krahn suggested that more significant hurdles for immigrants are a lack of connections in their fields and getting Canadians to recognize their credentials.

"We don't want to ignore the literacy thing, but in some ways it's too easy to simply say [integration issues are] literacy problem[s]," Krahn said.

Krahn said, however, that for refugees, not chosen on the point-system, literacy is likely a very significant problem.

But whether illiteracy is the crux of employment woes or just one of many variables, there are two committees currently working on the Literacy Action Plan and communication networks should be springing up by the council's next meeting in September.