

TRILLIUM BOOK AWARD 2025

Jury Citations



Trillium Book Award

OVERALL CITATION

Our time spent with the hundreds of entries for this year's Trillium Book Award reminded us of the richness of story, curiosity, argument, and sense of play across Ontario's writing landscape. With so many outstanding works to consider, narrowing the selection to a shortlist was an incredibly difficult task. We arrived at five books of exceptional quality. A witty and compelling multi-generational memoir with a deeply personal vantage point on Black history in Canada and the U.S. A literary crime novel set in rural Ireland, and rendered in exquisite, darkly-comic prose. A funny and poignant graphic memoir charting the personal and artistic growth and struggles of a queer man from a religious family. A daring, poetic linked work that nods to Modernism while fearlessly probing into the future of Black lives and formal boundaries. And an invigorating collection of stories, interwoven with myth and deep questions of what home really means, set in Zimbabwean and Toronto.

Wild Houses

Colin Barrett

McClelland & Stewart / Penguin Random House Canada

Brimming with dark humour, heart-squeezing suspense, and deep thoughtfulness, *Wild Houses* is a novel that excels on every level. The prose is as crisp, measured, and musical as poetry. The characters are so authentically drawn that even a lapdog named Georgie seems vibrantly alive. The propulsive plot—centered on a kidnapping—keeps the reader eagerly turning pages. And the meticulously rendered setting makes the Irish town of Ballina feel like a fully-realized character in itself. Underpinning it all is a thematic exploration of alienation and escape that is both profound and moving. With *Wild Houses*, Colin Barrett has given us a literary crime novel of the highest order.

My Fighting Family: Borders and Bloodlines and the Battles That Made Us

Morgan Campbell

McClelland & Stewart / Penguin Random House Canada

With great affection, humour, and insight, Morgan Campbell tells of the rifts and battles that shaped his family. Tracing his ancestors' migration from the American south, up to Chicago, and into Canada, Campbell's hugely entertaining memoir introduces us to a wonderful cast of characters, including his grandfather, Claude, a jazz pianist who performed six nights a week for fifty years, and his mother, Jeanie, who single-handedly vanquished a group of male bullies. In exploring his background, Campbell shows that if a Black family wanted something—freedom, voting rights, a safe place to raise their kids—they would have to fight for it. *My Fighting Family* is both a warm hug and a powerful punch.

Trillium Book Award

Code Noir

Canisia Lubrin

Alfred A. Knopf Canada / Penguin Random House Canada

Canisia Lubrin's *Code Noir* starts with a simple premise: 59 fiction fragments based on the 59 articles of the historical "Code Noir," the set of laws put forth by France's King Louis XIV which, in effect, created a blueprint for slavery. But this is not a simple book. In a skillful weaving together of many different voices, Lubrin creates a cohesive counter-voice to colonialism that is innovative in form and daring in scope. *Code Noir* engages with Black histories and futures, and challenges the reader to do the same, inviting participation in an audacious act of imagining and re-imagining. Powerful, lyrical, and prismatic, this is a work that pushes the boundaries of what fiction can do.

Who Will Bury You? And Other Stories

Chido Muchemwa

Astoria / House of Anansi Press

In *Who Will Bury You*, Chido Muchemwa has crafted a collection of uncommon depth and insight into the human condition. These stories follow a multi-layered cast of linked Zimbabwean characters - from a second-hand coffin salesman, to a mother struggling to come to terms with her daughter's queerness, to a journalist forced to contend with the impossibilities of mermaids and grief alike. Muchemwa's prose elevates everyday interactions to reveal the profound, punctuated by music, folklore, and moments where memory and hope collide. The titular question of "who will bury you?" resonates throughout the collection, as characters strive for survival, connection, and belonging; ultimately leaving us with a masterful debut that is heart-wrenching and joyous in equal measure.

I'm So Glad We Had This Time Together

Maurice Vellekoop

Random House Canada / Penguin Random House Canada

I'm So Glad We Had This Time Together is a coming-of-age memoir that is both intimate and epic. Spanning the life of author Maurice Vellekoop from his early childhood in 1970s Toronto to his fraught adult life as a successful but privately struggling artist, this shakingly honest account explores complex relationships with family, friends, potential partners, and intimacy itself. At once an exhilarating reminiscence of discovering the transformative power of art, and a detailed dissection of being a gay man from a religious household, Vellekoop's assured grip on prose, image and design makes for a vivid account of a life that is by turns hilarious and painful, but always strikingly and deeply human.

Trillium Book Award for Poetry

OVERALL CITATION

These three books, while aesthetically different from one another, each represent a writer at the top of their craft. They lean deeply into the personal, creating tangible worlds to which the reader is invited. Each, in their own way, renders their experiences through a telescopic lens that effortlessly zooms in and out from the universal to the particular, the historical to the present, the interior life of the mind to the phenomenon of the everyday, in a manner that unites these crucial dimensions. These books build something genuinely intimate: vulnerable, risky, fraught, and wonder-filled places where meaning, where new possibility, can be discovered.

The Seventh Town of Ghosts

Faith Arkorful

McClelland & Stewart / Penguin Random House Canada

Faith Arkorful's *Seventh Town of Ghosts* is a witty and razor-sharp book packed to the brim with emotional clarity, whose potent truths pull at the edges its own poetic restraint. This is a controlled and tender look at the everyday, the familial, all while panning towards the ancestral and historical. Arkorful crafts an uncanny and tenuous kind of comfort through delving into the unreal, past and present, unsettling both ghostly and modern vantage points with a masterful eye for continuity.

DADDY

Jake Byrne

Brick Books

Emotionally affecting, smart, and propulsive, Jake Byrne's *Daddy* uses poetry as an act of intimate world building.

When I was born, I did not anticipate that I would feel these sorts of feelings.
Roaming the stacks of the universal library, searching for the book of my life.
That is pretty much the entire plot of the book of my life.
My father's too.
That's why he calls so much.
He calls because he believes if he can recite the book of his life
over the telephone he will reach me...

By synthesizing different modes of writing – dialogic constructions, theatrical forms of address, an essayistic expository voicing, Byrne creates a contemporary mode of writing – one that does that evasive thing: it accommodates the full dimensions of a life.

Trillium Book Award for Poetry

Terrarium

Matthew Walsh

Icehouse poetry / Goose Lane Editions

Matthew Walsh's *Terrarium* accomplishes stunning forays into observational poetry, inviting the reader on an adventure of viewership, of existential voyeurism, as the poet proffers up the lens through which they surmise and reconnoitre the world. There is a fluid ease in the movement of line and language in these poems, as they dance like consciousness over the objects of their attention. But this nimbleness belies a shrewd choreography and craft at the base of Walsh's work. At turns wry, laconic, humorous, always richly layered and imagined, the poems remain astute and laser-focussed on the poignant details of a life lived. Nothing escapes Walsh's gaze. Refreshingly, it is a gaze constantly inflected with a melancholy tenderness for the view it surveys, and above all else one that is unapologetically human, unapologetically humane.

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Prix Littéraire Trillium

OVERALL CITATION

The 2025 shortlist for the Trillium Book Award highlights Franco-Ontarian literature that is both deeply rooted and dynamic, bringing together established voices and emerging talents. It features a wide range of works, from novels to plays, all exploring social, cultural and identity issues. These books are distinguished by their lively language and unique perspective on the world, touching both the heart and the mind. Each work seeks to amplify distinct and nuanced voices, contributing to a buzzing literary ecosystem. The Trillium Book Award thus becomes much more than a mere distinction: it offers writers a platform from which to share their worldviews, promoting intergenerational and imaginative exchange. It is an invitation to discover and celebrate the richness of Ontario's French-speaking community through vibrant and inspiring stories.

Céline au Congo
Aristote Kavungu
Les Éditions du Boréal

Céline au Congo gives deep thought to the idealized legacy of Céline, a figure marked by racism and anti-Semitism. Aristote Kavungu weaves a web of deep empathy through the voices of people of African descent, migrants and those with multiple identities. He subtly invites readers to reconsider the figures and values that have shaped our history, stirring emotions and reactions. His incisive style and simplicity call for a new awareness, awakening readers to the complexity of cultural heritage and the need to question the past. A riveting and essential book.

Toronto jamais bleue
Marie-Hélène Larochelle
Leméac Éditeur

Marie-Hélène Larochelle explores with sharp lucidity the violence perpetrated against women in a Toronto that is both familiar and oppressive. The city becomes a character, vibrant and chilling, moving through bodies and minds. *Toronto jamais bleue* reveals the female experience in all its raw brutality, isolation and objectification. A sense of unease sets in, intentional, accepted, necessary. The precise, unsettling writing is disturbing in order to stir the reader's consciousness. This is a powerful work that pulls no punches in its condemnation, questioning our collective silence and forcing us to face our society's blind spots. A captivating, disturbing, essential novel.

Prix Littéraire Trillium

Le prince africain, le traducteur et le nazi

Didier Leclair

Éditions David

Le prince africain, le traducteur et le nazi is a brilliantly written novel that combines narrative tension with historical depth. In it, Didier Leclair weaves a captivating plot that explores racial and colonial dynamics and the rights trampled under the Occupation. The novel follows a prince of the Kingdom of Kongo, a chameleon-like translator and a sadistic Nazi caught up in the violence of war and oppressive hierarchies. The fluid, rhythmic style reveals the absurdity of power, the complexity of identities and the brutality of systems. A dense, poignant and essential story that examines memory and humanity.

Un lourd prix à payer

Claire Ménard-Roussy

Éditions David

Un lourd prix à payer has a gripping plot that realistically and sensitively explores the journey of a Dutch immigrant family in Glengarry County, Eastern Ontario, after World War II. Through a narrative imbued with tension and fragility, the author paints a picture of integration marked by challenges, breakups and silences. The sober, nuanced writing accurately captures the emotions involved, revealing identity crises, family dramas and the complexity of being uprooted. This thriller-like novel invites us to reflect on the invisible impacts of exile and the heavy price everyone pays in trying to rebuild their lives elsewhere.

Nickel City Fifs : Une épopée queer sudburoise sur fond de trous

Alex Tétreault

Prise de parole

Nickel City Fifs plunges us into an underground gallery where tenderness rubs shoulders with trash, where each character swings between excess, heartbreak and subversion of codes. The dialogue, disarmingly funny, flows in raw, lively and resolutely uninhibited language, carried by an undeniable desire to speak out and denounce. In this play, nothing is sacred except Love in all its forms and Holy Poetry. And then there's Zigs — a legendary Sudbury venue that is somewhere between joyful crater and insular hideout—a glowing refuge for fiery souls and a vibrant backdrop for the queer struggles of yesterday and tomorrow. An irreverent and flamboyant play, where chaos becomes a cry of love and freedom.

Trillium Book Award for Children's Literature

OVERALL CITATION

One might mistakenly believe that children's literature is easier than works aimed at adults. On the contrary, young readers are more demanding, and the culture available to our children is of utmost importance in nurturing the adults they will become. The titles submitted for the 2025 Award for Children's Literature are imaginative and diverse, and their creators understand that this young readership is not faint of heart. These books offer us so many avenues and facets of integration, learning and wonder, on themes as varied as they are bold: immigration, feminism, autonomy, renewal, resilience, grief, jealousy, neurodiversity and more. Selecting finalists is an almost impossible task, as there are so many wonderful projects to reward and niches to nurture.

Rose du désert
Michèle Laframboise
Éditions David

The futuristic dystopia devised by Michèle Laframboise in *Rose du désert* is a post-Earth world where technological and cultural reference points are just memories and stories. The environmental and technological situation provides food for thought, and the characters are endearing, believable, complex and well developed. The kindness of the small community abandoned on an arid satellite—its resilience, openness and above all its capacity to forgive again and again—nurtures hope for the future of this pocket of humanity and perhaps for us all. Even when beset by unimaginable challenges, joy remains the essential element that defines us and allows us to move forward.

Le roi Poubelle
Eudes La Roche-Francoeur
Prise de parole

What if the world of garbage was actually a vibrant kingdom full of life? Roi Poubelle takes readers on an ocean voyage to an island of trash where everything is reinvented with humour and sensitivity. Through songs, rhythmic dialogue and humour, this play tackles serious issues such as overconsumption, grief and environmental anxiety. But at the heart of this adventure is friendship, a vital bond that drives the characters to overcome their loneliness, reach out to one another and even pave the way for hope. Combining lightness and depth, this first play published by the author allows young audiences to engage with these themes long after the curtain has fallen.

Trillium Book Award for Children's Literature

Le bonnet magique

Mireille Messier

Comme des géants

The straightforward, sophisticated writing in *Bonnet magique* leaves plenty of room for reading. The tale of Isaura and Arlo, two children who are caring for Capucin, their sick hedgehog friend, and set off into the forest in search of a cure, subtly deals with key themes such as kindness, caring, connection to living things and attention to the invisible. The story, both playful and mysterious, creates a strong connection with nature without ever becoming didactic or moralistic. The illustrations by Charlotte Parent are a wonderful accompaniment to the story and reinforce the sensitive atmosphere of the book.