

# salonbooks

## Blood will tell

**Bestselling and award-winning author Lawrence Hill delivers this year's CBC Massey Lectures with an expansive meditation on the ways society has been shaped by its relationship to blood. Review by Thomas Hodd**

For more than 50 years, the CBC Massey Lectures have provided Canadians with inspiring ideas on an array of topics, crafted by some of the country's top public intellectuals. Fiction writers have also graced the airwaves and book covers of this prestigious platform, chief among them Douglas Coupland, Thomas King and Margaret Atwood. Following the tradition of the

latter category, the 2013 Massey lecturer is Ontario-based Lawrence Hill, author of seven books, but perhaps best known for his recent award-winning, international bestseller *The Book of Negroes*.

Given the title of Hill's Lectures, *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, one might think that this book is merely a timely marketing decision on the part of the publisher to cash

in on the Halloween crowd. But Hill's lectures are anything but tales of sensational gore: taking as his topic the subject of blood, he begins with a personal anecdote of the first time he cut himself as a child, before moving into a much larger and more expansive meditation on the ways human society has been shaped by its obsession (or aversion) to blood.

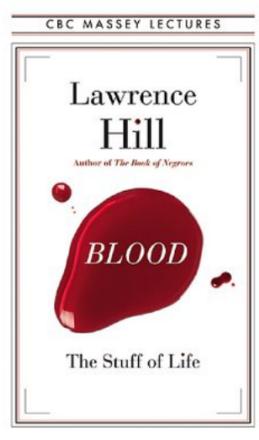
Divided into five themed chapters, Hill continually weaves in and out of history, ducks into mythology and art, and flits from religion to science to pop-culture, all in an effort to examine the universe of ways in which humans have used and abused this basic element of life.

Hill is at his best when he recognizes connections, as when he talks about the recent teenage craze for *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* and the books' underlying commentaries on blood and identity. Also compelling are his short historical discussions about bloodletting and his examination of the social effects of the guillotine. There are a myriad of provocative, entertaining and disturbing nuggets to be found in this book; moreover, when put together, they

demonstrate the breadth of Hill's research and his gift for weaving details into an accessible and digestible argument.

If there are any hiccups in this book, it is in those moments when Hill should have shown us an idea rather than told us about it. Hill's moral conscience, for instance, sometimes gets in the way of his ideas. When he offers incidental opinions, for example on hockey violence or the Ben Johnson scandal, these off-hand comments distract from the argument rather than enhance it. Then there is Hill's lengthy discussion of how the concept of blood-lines has been used throughout history as an excuse for discrimination, violence and genocide. His treatment of the issue, though undeniably important, becomes repetitive at times. And it is in such instances that one recognizes the difference between the career essayist who crafts and hones an argument and the full-time writer of fiction who builds character, plot and narrative.

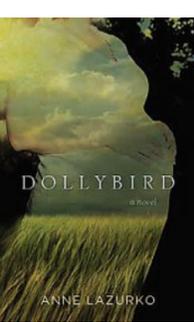
These minor criticisms aside, *Blood: The Stuff of Life* is a fascinating journey in print, and will no doubt be an immense pleasure



**Blood: The Stuff of Life** by Lawrence Hill, Anansi, 272 pages

to listen to when he tours the country to speak about this topic. **S**

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**Dollybird** by Anne Lazaruko, Coteau, 256 pages

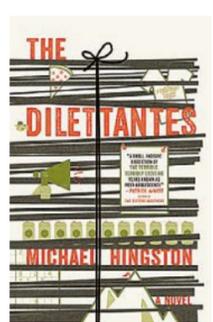
In the summer of 1906, the province of Saskatchewan was less than a year old, largely unpopulated and hungry for settlers. Thousands of individuals and families travelled there from eastern Canada seeking a new life. In Anne Lazaruko's debut novel, *Dollybird*, both Dillan Flaherty and Moira Burns arrive in Moose Jaw on the run from their past: he a grieving, bewildered young widower; she a self-described "almost doctor," unmarried and pregnant. But while Dillan sees only hardship and damnation ahead, Moira is confident and unrepentant. Both are in for a surprise. *Dollybird* explores human relationships: parents and children, men and women, siblings and female friends, and how these connections are further complicated in the face of an indifferent, unpredictable natural environment. After her family heirlooms are destroyed by a tornado, Moira tells herself, "only the strong and the

ugly survive in this place."

Lazaruko's straightforward prose transports the reader to early 20th-century Canada. A Halifax slum, seedy brothel and claustrophobic sod hut are brought to life by well-researched details into medical practices, domestic life and homesteading. Hers is an unidealized portrayal of life at that time, as known to the working poor, the disenfranchised and the sickly. Her characters are well-developed, flawed and frightened.

*Dollybird*, like all good novels, and life itself leaves much to ponder and question. It does reassure us, however, that placing ourselves in a new location does not necessarily mean that we have left old attitudes and beliefs behind. **S**

Laurie Glenn Norris for the *Telegraph-Journal*



**The Dilettantes** by Michael Hingston, Freehand, 272 pages

The student newspaper at Simon Fraser University has been dealt a blow: Metro, the free daily newspaper blanketing the lower mainland, has finally made its way to campus. As Alex, Tracy and the other editors at The Peak scramble to rally the newspaper troops, a mid-level celebrity arrives on campus and puts in a bid for student society president.

The first novel from Edmonton Journal books columnist Michael Hingston, *The Dilettantes* is whip-smart, pointed and current. The text is inter-cut with the paraphernalia of the university landscape – course syllabi, Peak memoranda, an Internet Movie Database profile. The Peak's editorial meetings devolve into pages of straight dialogue, references flying fast and mixed with the uncanny accuracy of cats playing Ping-Pong.

*The Dilettantes* depicts with precision the irony offered up as gospel by Hingston's 20-something population. His Alex is hyper-self-aware, critical to a fault and invested only in detachment. As The Peak is subsumed by the monolithic Metro, the editors are challenged to care in an age where caring is the kiss of death.

Unfortunately for Hingston, *The Dilettantes* can't escape its own satire. In a novel where everything is questioned for value – including authorship – the book becomes bogged down in tongue-in-cheekisms. The advice Alex receives from industry veteran Mack Holloway is too little too late: "You know, the last thing the world needs is more writing ... So if you're not in it to really connect with someone, then do us all a favour and pack it in." **S**

Emily Davidson for the *Telegraph-Journal*

## New Brunswick's reading

### Hardcover, fiction

1. **How the gods pour tea** by Lynn Davies (Goose Lane)
2. **How the Light Gets In** by Louise Penny (St. Martin's)
3. **The Rosie Project** by Graeme Simsion (HarperCollins)
4. **MaddAdam** by Margaret Atwood (McClelland & Stewart)
5. **The Orenda** by Joseph Boyden (Penguin)

### Paperback, fiction

1. **Me Before You** by Jojo Moyes (Penguin)
2. **The Forgotten** by David Baldacci (Hachette)
3. **The Brutal Telling** by Louise Penny (Little Brown)
4. **419** by Will Ferguson (Penguin)
5. **The Cruellest Month** by Louise Penny (Hachette)

### Hardcover, non-fiction

1. **Back to Basics** by Michael Smith (Penguin)
2. **David and Goliath** by Malcolm Gladwell (Little Brown)
3. **I am Malala** by Malala Yousafzai (Hachette)
4. **Drink** by Ann D. Johnston (HarperCollins)
5. **Salinger** by David Shields (Simon & Schuster)

### Paperback, non-fiction

1. **Underground New Brunswick** by Paul Erickson (Nimbus)
2. **Blood** by Lawrence Hill (Anansi)
3. **Unwritten Diary of Israel Unger** by Carolyn Gammon (Sir Wilfrid Laurier University)
4. **Failures and Fiascos** by Dan Soucoup (Nimbus)
5. **Blood** by Lawrence Hill (Anansi)

Bestselling books this week at Westminster Books, 445 King St., Fredericton, 454-1442, westminsterbooks.com.

★★★★★  
"If I could give this play six stars, I would."  
— SHANNON BOKLASCHUK, THE STAR PHOENIX, SASKATOON

★★★★★  
"It's hard to say which is better – her script about a reluctant veteran's return to Juno Beach or her twin performances as a 10-year-old girl and 80-year-old man."  
— JOHN THRELFALL, MONDAY MAGAZINE, VICTORIA

★★★★★  
"Mark it down. Get your tickets right away."  
— COLIN MACLEAN, EDMONTON SUN

★★★★★  
"Jake's Gift is the most theatrically pure show I have ever seen. So well fleshed out are her characters, so instantaneous are her transitions that it feels like an ensemble show."  
— KATIE NICHOLSON, CBC WINNIPEG

# jake's gift

This show is part of the To Warm the Heart Series

The moving story of a WW2 veteran's reluctant return to Juno Beach  
written & performed by Julia Mackey | directed by Dirk van Stralen

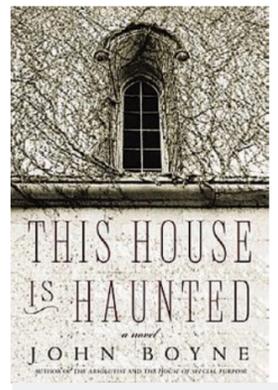
**Imperial Theatre**  
Tuesday, November 5 at 7:30 p.m.

Many of those who saw this show at the Imperial in 2009 have asked us to bring it back, so we were thrilled to hear that it is touring again. **Jake's Gift** is the story of 80-year-old Jake, a Canadian World War II veteran, who reluctantly returns to Normandy, France for the 60th Anniversary of D-Day. While revisiting the beach he landed on decades ago, Jake meets Isabelle, a precocious 10-year-old from the village. Their surprising relationship brings both the healing they so deeply need.

**TICKETS:** [www.imperialtheatre.nb.ca](http://www.imperialtheatre.nb.ca) Box Office 674-4100 or 1-800-323-7469

## A Poe man's Dickens

**MICHAEL HIGGINS**  
MYSTERIES & MYSTICS



**This House is Haunted** by John Boyne, Doubleday, 297 pages

The year is 1867, the city is London and the protagonist declares, "I blame Charles Dickens for the death of my father." This is the opening and it sets the stage.

Eliza Caine is an unprepossessing woman (as she regularly reminds us), recently orphaned and desperate for a job (as her loving father chose not to disclose the disturbing truth that he rented their house from a bit of a miscreant).

She is desirous of escaping the suffocating gloom of London, and venturesome in ways not common among Victorian women of a certain class.

Responding to an ad for a governess in southeast England, Caine begins on a journey that will take her to the liminal point, bring her into contact with a distraught spirit, imperil her life – several times – and test the limits of her love and reason.

As it happens, Caine is the sixth governess at Gaudlin Hall with responsibility for two children – the precocious Isabella and endearing Eustace – and she discovers in medias res that four of the previous governesses – Tomlin, Goding, Williams and Harkness – perished in grisly circumstances and the fifth, Bennet, lured Caine by means of a clever stratagem to replace her as governess. Bennet then fled for her life. Not an auspicious start as a private

teacher. And it gets worse:

"I was by now quite frightened of the presence. It had blown me off my dandy-horse, thrown me from the windows of my bedroom, turned the ice-cold water to a scald.

I also believed that it had been responsible for my almost falling under the passing train on the day I arrived in Norfolk. It knew who I was."

There is, however, more than one "presence," and there is a mighty confrontation at the end.

And then ...

As ghost stories go, Dublin novelist John Boyne opts for the normative Victorian setting, has fun with numerous Dickensian allusions, emulates the prose of an era with consistency and relishes the occasional anachronism.

But the frisson is tame, the twists predictable, character credibility weakened by caricature, and the plot thin.

But the end, ah, the end, is perfect. More Poe than Dickens. **S**

**Michael W. Higgins** is a senior fellow with Massey College, University of Toronto, and vice-president for mission and Catholic identity at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn. He is a former president of St. Thomas University.

