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The Bishop's Man by Linden MacIntyre

This existential thriller about sex scandals in the church is a worthy winner of Canada's Giller prize, says Rosalind Porter

Rosalind Porter
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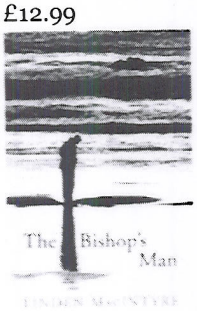
MacIntyre uses issues of faith and abuse to construct this existential page-turner. Photograph: Jason Horowitz/zefa/Corbis

Last summer, as Canadian publishers were preparing to submit their most worthy fiction to the Giller prize, Alice Munro withdrew her book, *Too Much Happiness*. Having won the $50,000 award twice, she wanted to open it up to younger writers.

The Bishop's Man
by Linden MacIntyre
416pp,
Jonathan Cape Ltd,
£12.99



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When one of the judges, Victoria Glendinning, complained about the "striking homogeneity" of the books, many of which were about "families down the generations and flashbacks to Granny's youth in the Ukraine or wherever", the prize seemed doomed. The winner would necessarily be an earnest "younger" writer obsessed by what it means to be Canadian.

The book that emerged from a surprisingly strong shortlist was *The Bishop's Man* by investigative journalist Linden MacIntyre. He is indeed younger than Munro (66 to her 78), but my guess is that even had she been on the shortlist, the prize would still have gone to him. For *The Bishop's Man* is an extraordinary novel, not least because it deals with rather hackneyed subjects (sex scandals involving the Catholic church, questions of faith and Glendinning's abhorred genealogies) without ever becoming a mere vehicle for the exploration of such issues. Above all, it's a great read – a page-turner which renders existential questions about personal responsibility into fodder fit for a thriller, and which takes language and form seriously.

At its centre is fiftysomething anti-hero Father Duncan MacAskill, nicknamed the "Exorcist" for the notoriety he has obtained cleaning up messy situations involving other priests to protect the church's various infallible positions. His emotional detachment make him excellent at the job, but when he stumbles upon a scene of sexual abuse, it becomes difficult to disengage. Sensing that he might be on the verge of siding with the civilians, his bishop sends him to South America, and years later, when the abuse scandals surface again, arranges for him to take over a small parish in Nova Scotia near to where he grew up.

Returning home is a rich theme for fiction and is always somehow more rich when it concerns places such as Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, where the intricacies of family trees really do matter. MacAskill not only becomes reacquainted with the countryside of his youth, but discovers that he is related to almost everyone there, which makes impartiality towards his parishioners virtually impossible. After the suicide of a young boy MacAskill suspects was abused by a priest years earlier, he becomes obsessed with his own chance connections to the tragedy – his role in exiling the priest, his familial ties to the victim and his affiliations with the church – and is led back into the dark corners of his earlier life and towards a totally unexpected resolution.

Some readers may find the hyper-episodic and temporally obscure structure frustrating and at times the novel comes dangerously close to wallowing in a rather prissy sentimentality, but its intellectual rigours and pacey plot keep it fully afloat. It's also impossible not to compare it to Giller judge Alistair MacLeod's magisterial earlier novel, *No Great Mischief* (the clans of Nova Scotia, the red-haired protagonists, the dialogue littered with Gaelic). Not that it really matters: for those of us who have spent the past decade eagerly awaiting another offering from MacLeod, here is something just as good.