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Report calls for action as Canadian books disappear from bookstore and library shelves

Canadian books are slowly disappearing from bookstore and library shelves in Canada, and Canadians are reading them less, according to a new report by a volunteer industry task force.

“The book industry needs to take urgent action at the federal, provincial and territorial levels to reverse this situation and increase awareness and reading of Canadian authors,” says task force member and publisher Philip Cercone of McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Canadian writers and publishers continue to account for large numbers of new books, and surveys of book readers show high interest in reading Canadian works. But their share of book sales has declined from 25% to 12% over the past 10 years.

The task force was set up by concerned book industry players to investigate why a fewer Canadian-authored books are now being stocked, sold, and read, and what can be done to reverse this trend.

Among the key findings:

- Canadian-authored books get lost among the enormous number of new titles available every year in Canada. The book industry now relies on digital systems that do not distinguish between Canadian and foreign books
- Independent bookstores do the best job of bringing Canadian books to the fore and stemming the decline, but many Canadian neighbourhoods, towns, and even sizeable cities, lack local bookstore
- Public libraries are doing a superb job of encouraging book reading but are hampered by their software and their budgeting practices from helping their library users discover and borrow Canadian-authored books.
- Publishers haven’t developed industry practices that give Canadian books a strong identify in the crowded marketplace, with the result that a large percentage of book readers are unaware whether or not books at their disposal are Canadian.

The task force involved 29 knowledgeable and respected industry insiders, who are known for thinking outside the box and who volunteered their free time to research and analyze the matter and to come up with proposals for action. “We are offering 68 recommendations which we think will reverse the situation, and lead to greater awareness

and reading of Canadian authors,” says publisher Jeff Miller of Irwin Law. Among the recommendations:

- Industry action to support startups of new independent English-language bookstores across the country, with a target of 50 in the next 5 years.
- Expansion of the federal government’s Canada Book Fund to support bookstore programming of events with Canadian authors, and to double public library spending on Canadian-authored books.
- Provincial government action to implement accredited bookstore policies, adapted from a highly successful Quebec model, which gives Canadian-authored and published books in Quebec great visibility, and puts an independent bookstore in virtually every town and city in Quebec.
- New provincial support to expand the very popular “tree award” programs, which put new books by Canadian writers into the hands of tens of thousands of school-age kids every year.

The task force report was prepared by Cercone, Miller, and James Lorimer, president of James Lorimer & Co and publisher of Formac Publishing. They distilled the discussions of the task force, together with industry research spanning the last 40 years, into the 182-page report.

“We hope the report will spark discussion and action in the industry, and by governments.. We’ve identified a trend that hasn’t been noticed by most industry insiders and government policy-makers. Because Canadian authors and books have such high visibility, everyone has assumed until now that they have a strong position in the market,” says Lorimer

The report can be downloaded now at www.morecanadareport.ca.

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