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Annabel Lyon: CanLit's newest golden girl



With two young kids and three big nominations, the author tells Marsha Lederman, life is busy – and great

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Marsha Lederman

Vancouver — From Saturday's Globe and Mail
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Think writing a historical novel based on Aristotle's relationship with Alexander the Great sounds intimidating? Try doing it through two pregnancies and while raising two very young children – the sleepless nights, the baby brain.

But, boy, have things ever worked out for Annabel Lyon. She has become Canada's newest literary star, with her debut novel for adults, The Golden Mean, short-listed for three major awards: the Giller Prize, the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and this past Wednesday, the Governor-General's Literary Award for Fiction.

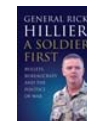
"You try and strike a balance, but I don't even know what that would look like."

The three nominations have thrust the thoughtful, introverted New Westminister, B.C., writer into a spotlight she may be a little uncomfortable with, but is struggling to appreciate nonetheless. She never expected mass-media interest in her book, written from the ancient philosopher's point of view and set 2,300 years in the past.

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"It's all good news, but it's overwhelming," she said over tea on Thursday. She's particularly giddy about being nominated alongside her long-time literary idol, Alice Munro, on the G-G and Writers' Trust lists. "If I get to meet her, I'm just going to stand there, not knowing what to say."

Lyon, 38, was born in Brampton, Ont., but moved to Coquitlam, B.C., when she was 1. Her father, journalist Jim Lyon, taught her at a very young age – she thinks she was about 6 – to write short, concise sentences *à la* Ernest Hemingway.

"I have a very distinct memory – and I can't have been very old – of standing at his knee and him taking *The Old Man and the Sea* off the shelf and opening it up and saying, 'Okay, look at this sentence. Look at how he does this.' ... If you love hockey, you take your kid to the hockey game; if you love Hemingway, you show your kid Hemingway."

It rubbed off. Lyon has published a book of short stories (*Oxygen*), novellas (*The Best Thing for You*) and a juvenile novel (*All-Season Edie*).

She started writing *The Golden Mean* after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, inspired her to reread Aristotle (her undergraduate degree was in philosophy) for comfort, and answers about the meaning of life. Then came the idea for a novel. For seven years, she researched ancient Greece and her central characters, while writing the story she imagined about Aristotle and his student Alexander.

On the way, she had two children – now 4 and 2 – and continued to press on with her heady project through the chaos that inevitably erupts in the household of a very young family. Make that household a one-bedroom suburban condo, and finding the head space – well, even the space – for quiet contemplation becomes fairly challenging.

Lyon, who had been used to working alone for long stretches, now found herself writing in very small snippets, setting tiny goals for herself: 200 words during naptime; a sentence or two on really difficult days. The writing was never a chore; she looked forward to those brief moments spent in another world.



Lyle Stafford for the
Globe and Mail

Annabel Lyon's novel *The Golden Mean* has been nominated for three awards: the Giller, the Governor-General's and the Writers Trust.



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"It was something that I turned to, to keep me sane a little bit, to be an adult again," she says. "That was my thing. I didn't go to the spa or go to the movies or hang out with friends. I would work on my book. That was my way of getting back to my old self. Being able to think with a grown-up brain. And then it was back to the diapers and the apple juice."

Some days her partner took over at home and sent Lyon to the library for a full day of work. That had to stop, though, during her second pregnancy, once she could no longer make it home up the hill from the SkyTrain station. (She wound up delivering a 10-pound boy.)

Her own children became the models for Aristotle's daughter and son. The age gap worked, and she loved using her children's looks and personalities in her book.

The Golden Mean is a blend of historical fact and Lyon's imagination. The events the story is set around are factual. But much around those facts is imagined.

Lyon turned to historical texts for clues. Her Aristotle is bipolar, something Lyon extrapolated from two of his works. In *Problems*, he mentions a link between melancholy and the creative temperament. "It's a very short little passage, but it sounds like he knew what he was talking about," says Lyon. The manic part of the equation came from how prolific he was. And in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains his idea about the golden mean: To live a good life, you have to find a balance between two extremes. "I thought, 'That sounds like somebody who struggles with it, who desperately wishes he could do that.'"

For her research, Lyon contemplated a trip to Greece, where she could feel the air and see the ruins of the world she was writing about. But how to do that with a young family? Take the babies? Leave them behind? She was nursing. It would be complicated – and expensive. In the end, the only travelling she did was to the library.

Lyon isn't done with ancient Greece. After finishing a sequel to *All-Season Edie*, she wants to write about Aristotle's daughter, Pythias. But there will be no capitalizing on *The Golden Mean's* success by hurrying out a sequel. "I'm not in a rush to start it. I haven't put a word down."

Right now, Lyon is concentrating on teaching (she teaches an online creative-writing course at the University of British Columbia) and reading. She's making her way through the other books on the three short lists to which she's been named, and will attend the Giller Awards next month with her parents.

Between juggling her work, her family, "and all the craziness that's happening right now," Lyon has not herself found the golden mean. "You try and strike a balance, but I don't even know what that would look like," she says with a laugh. "No, life is crazy for me, as it is crazy for pretty much every working mother that I know."

The children do keep her grounded. "They're about the only people in my life at the moment who don't want to talk about this. They're just: Come and do puzzles, come and do Lego, I'm poop, come change my diaper.' When I was writing this, that was my break from them. And now my break from all this is to go and do stuff with them. Because this just means nothing to them."

Still, it seems all the excitement has somehow permeated her daughter's brain. In the car in the middle of Wednesday's craziness, the four-year-old suddenly piped up from the back seat: "Alice Munro!" Who, Lyon asked, is Alice Munro? The answer couldn't have been more thrilling: "Somebody Mummy works with."

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