

# NEWS FEATURE

Wilfrid Laurier  
University



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*Note: The book title is  
pronounced Tass-ee-nan*

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## **Story of Innu struggle to reclaim homeland wins national book award**

*Waterloo, Ont. (Aug. 28)* — A journalist from St. John's, Nfld., has won the national Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction with a book that tells the inspiring story of the Innu fight to safeguard their traditional way of life in Labrador and Quebec as military test flights roar overhead.

Marie Wadden won the second annual contest with *Nitassinan: The Innu Struggle to Reclaim Their Homeland*, published in December 1991 by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. of Vancouver. The \$3,000 award is given for a writer's first or second book that is one distinguished by first-hand research, well-crafted interpretative writing, the writer's personal experience and discovery, and a Canadian location and significance.

Administered by Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, the award was endowed by Edna Staebler to give acknowledgement and encouragement to promising new writers. An award-winning journalist, Staebler is author of *Cape Breton Harbour, Places I've Been and People I've Known*, and the *Schmecks* cookbook series.

"This award recognizes the inspiration, determination, patience and self-sacrifice that a creative writer brings to a first book," Staebler says.

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"I am delighted because the award will bring more attention to the Innu," Wadden says. "I appreciate the vote of confidence in my writing too. I love writing and wish it was easier to make a living at it."

It was during a vacation in Labrador in 1979 that the St. John's native first learned of the Innu and their way of life — not as yet spoken of in the media or schools. Wadden says she gained a deeper sensitivity to the people's struggle from having two Innu boys board at her home in 1981-82 while they attended high school in St. John's. One, Peter Penashue, is now president of the Innu Nation.

Already forced onto reserves in the 1950s by the invasion of large-scale industrial developments, the Innu faced further assaults on their way of life when, in the 1980s, jet bombers began making low-level training flights over their hunting grounds. With the Canadian government planning to establish a massive NATO training centre in their midst, the Innu launched a protest that attracted worldwide support.

After spending time in the bush with the Innu in the preparation of a documentary film, Wadden says, she felt like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*. "I was privileged to see a very different way of life and world view."

Frustrated, though, by trying to tell the Innu's story in the fragments permitted by television, Wadden left her job with the CBC in Montreal in 1988 to devote herself to the project. "People I'd gotten to know well were being arrested. I felt an urgency to write it then."

Her love of writing sprouted in the nurture of a Grade 5 teacher who had her pupils construct stories around new words to learn how to spell them. At home, Wadden taught herself to touch-type on the family's portable machine and dreamed of writing for a living. She pursued her interest in writing through the graduate journalism program at the University of Western Ontario, from which she graduated in 1977.

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It was in writing *Nitassinan* that, for the first time, she began to feel like a genuine writer but says completing the project would have been more difficult without the ongoing support and counsel of Boyce Richardson, an Ottawa-based journalist and longtime writer on native issues.

In 1991, a chapter from *Nitassinan* about the Churchill Falls hydro-electric project won first prize in the non-fiction category of the Newfoundland Arts and Letters Competition. In May, two chapters of the book were reprinted in the *Montreal Gazette*. Wadden, now network producer of news and current affairs for CBC Radio in St. John's, has also won awards for her work in film and television.

There were a total of 41 entries for this year's Edna Staebler Award. Also short-listed were: *Fields of Vision: A Journey to Canada's Family Farms*, by Phil Jenkins with photographs by Ken Ginn, published by McClelland and Stewart; *Rock-a-bye Baby: A Death Behind Bars*, by Anne Kershaw and Mary Lasovich, published by McClelland and Stewart; *Invisible Power: The Women Who Run Canada*, by Sherrill MacLaren, published by Seal Books; and *Street Kids: The Tragedy of Canada's Runaways*, by Marlene Webber, published by University of Toronto Press.

The jury, which considered the selections of a preliminary committee, included publisher Jack McClelland of Jack McClelland and Associates Inc., Literary Consultants, of Toronto; Harold Horwood, a Nova Scotia-based writer who has served on three juries for Canada Council grants and once on the Governor General's award committee for non-fiction; and Sandra Woolfrey, director of Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Last year's award was won by Susan Mayse for *Ginger: The Life and Death of Albert Goodwin*, published by Harbour Publishing.

The next call for contest entries will be made early in 1993.

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***Note: Photographs of the author and copies of the book may be obtained by contacting Sheldon England of Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. at (604) 254-7191.***