Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures wins prestigious award

In November, CFPC member Dr. Vincent Lam received the coveted $40,000 Scotiabank Giller Prize for literature for his debut story collection, Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures (published by Doubleday). This collection of linked short stories connects the lives of a group of young doctors as they move through medical school into the real world of emergency medicine. Shaftesbury Films recently acquired the rights to Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures and intends to develop the stories into a drama series for The Movie Network.

The son of Chinese immigrants from Vietnam, Dr. Lam graduated with his medical degree and did his residency training in family medicine at the University of Toronto. He now practises emergency medicine at Toronto East General Hospital. He also does international air evacuation work and expedition medicine on arctic and antarctic cruise ships.

Dr. Lam says he is thrilled to have won the Giller Prize. He is also still somewhat in shock. “A lot of my heroes have been honoured with this award in the past,” he says. “I’m sort of a quiet person by inclination, so it’s very ironic in a way that I would have ended up as an emergency physician, which isn’t that quiet a profession, and that I would end up a recognized writer. I always took writing very seriously, but I also took it for granted that 99% of Canadian writers spend their entire careers unrecognized.”

At age 32, Dr. Lam is a prolific as well as a successful writer. He worked 20 hours a week writing Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures while also doing 4 or 5 emergency shifts weekly. He has also co-authored a practical, evidence-based, nonfiction book with Dr. Colin Lee, entitled The Flu Pandemic and You: A Canadian Guide. He is working on his debut novel, which Doubleday will publish, most likely in 2008. It is about a Chinese compulsive gambler who works as an English school headmaster during the Vietnam War.

Dr. Lam loves pursuing 2 careers at once. He believes there’s a strong link between storytelling and diagnostic skills. Writing and medicine are also alike in that both require “a little grain of talent and an immense amount of hard work,” he says. “I’m a person who becomes very fidgety if I’m not getting something done.… Emergency doctors and family doctors—we get a lot done because of the pace of what we do.”

Dr. Lam acknowledges sleep deprivation as a familiar friend (or foe). “I was undergoing massive sleep deprivation writing Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures—I still am,” he says. “It was possible, though, because emergency medicine is shift work. One of the many reasons I’ve chosen this particular path is because it suits writing.… I truly believe that family physicians are the cornerstone of good health care.”

Dr. Lam and his wife, CFPC member Dr. Margarita Lam-Antoniades, live in Toronto with their son, who is almost 2 years old.

—Barbara Kermode-Scott