

Quebec writer Louise Penny was awarded her fourth straight Agatha Award on Saturday night for her latest mystery novel, *Bury Your Dead*, the sixth book in her Inspector Gamache series. Penny, who lives south of Montreal, previously won prizes for *A Brutal Telling* in 2009; *The Cruellest Month* in 2008; and *Dead Cold* in 2007. Her novels have been translated into 16 languages and routinely make international bestseller lists.

The Agatha Awards, named in honour of Agatha Christie, are awarded to the top crime and mystery writers.

Ernesto Sabato dies at age 99

OBIT • Argentine writer Ernesto Sabato, whose novel *The Tunnel* is hailed as an existentialist classic and who presided over a probe into the crimes committed by the nation's military rulers, died on Saturday at home at age 99.

"Humanity cannot live without heroes, martyrs and saints," Sabato, an intellectual known as a tireless activist for justice and human rights, once said.

Toews inspired by involvement in film

Strands of autobiography in latest novel

ERIC VOLLMERS
CALGARY HERALD

Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas may have some strange methods when it comes to casting actors in his movies, but there's no denying his powers of persuasion.

SPOTLIGHT

Known for his existential and often sexually charged films, the acclaimed director also has a habit for using non-theatricals. So prior to the production of 2007's *Silent Light*, an award-winning drama about Mennonites in Mexico, he began a stubborn campaign to convince Canadian author Miriam Toews to accept a starring role.

She had never acted before. She has never acted since. She had no real interest in filmmaking.

To make matters even more strange, Reygadas seemed to be basing his entire casting strategy on an author photo he had seen of Toews and his discovery that she had a Mennonite background.

Nevertheless, he eventually made his case and Toews soon found herself in Mexico playing an expat Mennonite named Esther, a role that would land her a nomination for an Ariel Award, a Mexican Oscar of sorts.

"One of the ways that Carlos Reygadas convinced me to do the film was by saying 'Hey, this will give you something to write about,'" says Toews in an interview from her home in Toronto. "That sounded good to me, because I always need something to write about. During



Author Miriam Toews was recruited by filmmaker Carlos Reygadas to play an expat Mennonite in Mexico, which inspired her fifth novel, *Irma Voht*.

Postmedia News

the filming, I wasn't making notes or anything like that. Later on, I realized that it was something I wanted to explore in my work."

That exploration would eventually lead to her fifth novel, the funny and tragic *Irma Voht* (Knopf Canada, 255 Pages, \$29.95). The story revolves around a teenage girl living a stifled and sad existence in Mexico, where she lives with her family as

ismatic Mexican director to act as an on-set translator. This sparks another faceoff with her fire-and-brimstone father and leads her to flee with her two younger sisters to Mexico City.

Irma Voht contains thin strands of autobiography and covers what may seem like some familiar terrain for the author: Toews' *Can-Lit* breakthrough came with her third novel, 2004's *A Complicated Kindness*. It was nominated for a Giller, won the Governor General Award for English fiction and even picked up CBC's Canada Reads crown in 2006.

Like *Irma Voht*, it was about a teenager yearning for escape from a Mennonite community. But the autobiographical elements seemed even more direct. As a result, the success of *Kindness* put Toews' own past growing up in the Mennonite community of Steinbach, Man., in the spotlight.

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