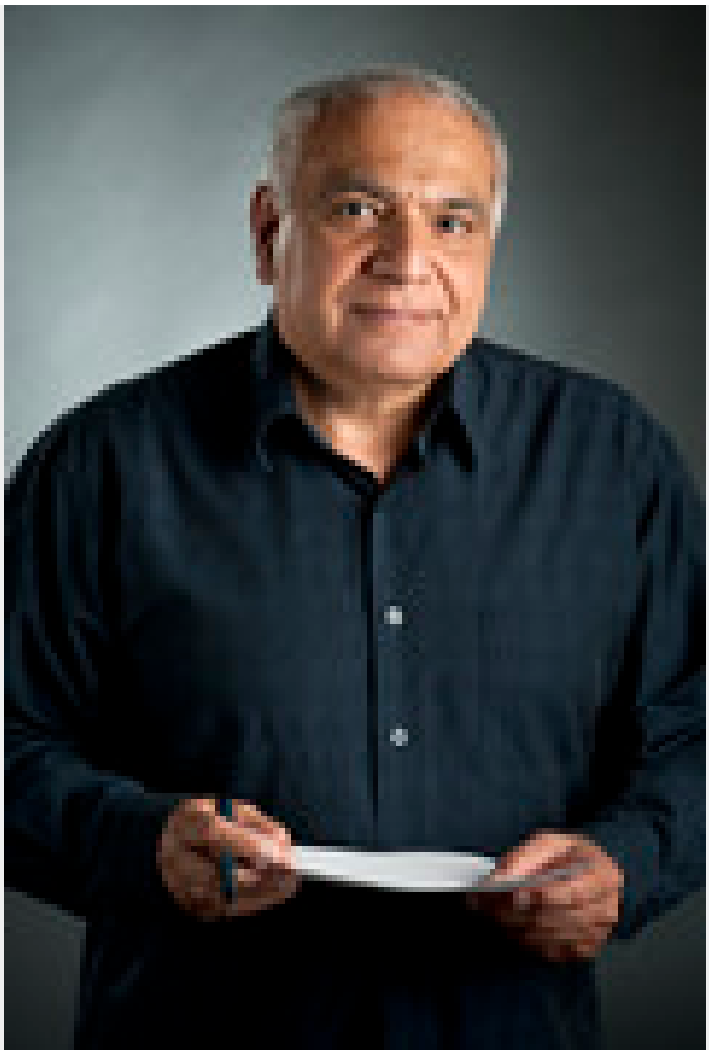
KEGHART WRITER WINS SAROYAN AWARD

Posted on July 23, 2013 by Keghart



Category: Opinions



Compiled by Keghart.com staff, Toronto, 23 July 2013

As a literary reviewer for a national newspaper, Keith Garebian is used to handing out praise. However, in the past two months the Armenian-Canadian writer has found himself on the receiving end: in mid-July he was awarded the prestigious William Saroyan Medal while in May he was the winner of a 2013 Mississauga Arts Award for his new book, "Moon on Wild Grasses".

The Saroyan Medal, awarded by Armenia's Ministry of Diaspora is for contributing to the dissemination of Armenian culture in the Diaspora, prominent achievements in the sphere, and contributions to the relations within Diaspora Armenian communities. There are approximately 10 million Armenians worldwide, and Garebian is one of a minority of Diaspora writers who write only in English. He attributes the award chiefly to his two books, "Pain: Journeys Around My Parents" (a memoir published in 2000 and long out of print), and "Children of Ararat" (a collection of poetry about his Armenian father and the Genocide of Armenians in 1915). The Writers' Union of Armenia is considering translating "Pain" in 2015 and is interested in translating "Children of Ararat".

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Garebian has signed numerous petitions advancing Armenian causes nationally and internationally, and written articles and reviews related to Armenian history and culture, though he neither speaks nor writes Armenian. Garebian was one of two writers to receive the Saroyan Medal, the other being Peter Surian of the U.S., who was honored for his novels. Both men were invited delegates to the 5th Conference of Diaspora Writers Who Compose in Other Languages held in Yerevan, Armenia's capital, July 12-15. The honor, which came on Garebian's 70th birthday, caught him by surprise. One moment he was sitting in a roomful of people, then someone said to him: "You'd better get up there … they're giving you a medal."

In his impromptu acceptance speech, Garebian noted that he was visiting a country that his Armenian-born father could not return to, and that he somehow felt was causing him to be re-born in a spiritual and cultural sense. “It’s such a thrill because the medal is given to so few people. I believe I’m only the second Canadian to receive one.” he told a Toronto-area newspaper.

Garebian's impressions of Armenia will be published in an upcoming issue of Keghart.

Even though Garebian’s life has been largely shaped by what his family went through during the Genocide of Armenians (“I have inherited the obsession of a survivor”), he was born in India and had never set foot in Armenia until this July. Besides not being able to speak Armenian, he explains his family’s old home is occupied by Turkey. One of his visits was to the Armenian Genocide Memorial. “Outside, I was fine, but once I went inside and looked around I lost it — and wept. Memories of all my family’s suffering came back … it was a tsunami,” said the writer.

The Toronto writer says the Writers' Union of Armenia has expressed an interest in translating his two Armenian-themed books to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Genocide in 2015.