It’s often said, as it very well should be, that Vancouver Island is a place of manifold treasures, myriad riches: our Island boasts exquisite landscapes, marvellous creatures, warm and welcoming communities…and an abundance of exceptionally talented writers.

Last month, the Victoria Book Prize Society held its annual award ceremony and gala to honour some of these skilled wordsmiths. Out of the eight authors nominated for a prize, three writers were nominated for their contributions to children’s literature through the creation of three splendid young adult titles.

Across Vancouver Island, and indeed across Canada, the name Kit Pearson is synonymous with wonderful historical fiction. A multiple award-winner best known for her thoughtful, engaging, and richly-researched Guests of War trilogy, Pearson was nominated for the first in her newest series. The Whole Truth (HarperCollins, 2012) tells the story of Polly and Maud, two sisters growing up in 1932, whose lives have just been turned upside down. “After it happened they were sent away.” This is all we are told before we meet the girls on the last leg of their arduous journey from Winnipeg to the West Coast, as they meet their new family. Sent to live with relations they’ve never met, Polly and Maud are faced with a life unlike any they’ve known. Gradually, though, they rise to the challenge, and begin to discover the magic of life on an island, but the girls are harbouring a dark secret—one that, if exposed, could destroy everything they’ve come to love. A captivating mystery for 10+.

The next nominee is another well-known Island writer. Pamela Porter’s imagination, compassion, and exquisite poetic style were put to great use in her free-verse novel The Crazy Man (Groundwood Books, 2005), which was awarded the Governor-General’s Award for Children’s Literature, and her nominated novel I’ll Be Watching (Groundwood Books, 2011) follows in the same tradition of evocative, captivating excellence. Set in small-town Saskatchewan at the start of World War II, I’ll Be Watching sees Porter once more taking on the challenge of storytelling through verse, and once again sees her outdoing all expectations to a breathtaking degree. The Depression has not been kind to Argue, Saskatchewan, and life has not been kind to the Loney family—most particularly, to the four Loney children. From the death of their mother, to their stepmother’s cruelty and abandonment, to the ensuing death of their father, the Loney children’s story would not be out of place in Dickensian London. Porter, however, manages to make this seemingly bleak tale at once haunting—literally, as at least two of the speakers within the novel are deceased—and hopeful. Her verse is simultaneously heartbreaking and inspiring. A book that has to be read to be understood.
I’ll Be Watching is a beautiful coming-of-age tale for 12+.

Finally, we come to debut author Caitlyn Vernon, and her personal, practical, and uplifting ecology book for kids (and smart adults), Nowhere Else On Earth: Standing for the Great Bear Rainforest (Orca Book Publishers, 2011). This outstanding title features a comprehensive profile of the Great Bear Rainforest, with hands-on activities, engaging anecdotes and adventures, and abundant photographs and information on not only the plants and animals that thrive in the rainforest, but the deadly threats and overwhelming challenges that they face in this age of pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change. It must be said, however, that Nowhere Else on Earth is not your conventional kids’ green science book: Vernon is smart, strong-willed, and a passionate optimist who firmly believes in the power of an individual, no matter their age, to make a profound, lasting, and above all positive change; reading Nowhere Else On Earth, it’s hard not to feel the same.

This intelligent, engaging science book for 10+ started life as an impassioned article in a local magazine, before it was spotted by a publishing house willing to take a chance in order to make a difference. Last month, Caitlyn Vernon was awarded the 2012 Victoria Bolen Book Prize for achievements in Children’s Literature. If you don’t think that one person’s actions are important, I really would suggest that you take a look at Caitlyn’s book, and think again.

We live in an age where we are constantly reminded that things are getting worse and there’s very little we can do about it—one person can’t change the world. And yet, here on a small island in the Pacific Northwest, three writers just proved that statement wrong. Whether you favour fiction, poetry, or factual prose, the truth in each is crystal clear: when you speak up for what you believe in, you always make a difference.

Maddy Smith is a children’s bookseller and an Islander born and bred; she reads, writes, and believes in the magic of a great book.