

PQ win literary bonanza for biography of Levesque

OTTAWA (CP) — Peter Desbarats' book on Rene Levesque went on sale Oct. 23 and was selling sluggishly until Nov. 15, when Mr. Levesque was elected premier of Quebec.

"The next day we sold 75 copies of Rene at lunch hour," says the manager of a book store a block from Parliament.

The store has sold more than 1,000 copies since then. It is a little gold mine, as Canadian books go, and part of the reason is that author Desbarats was three years behind schedule. So he hit the Levesque victory.

Altogether 15,000 have been sold, nearly all since Nov. 15, a printing of 5,000 more is under way, a French translation for Quebec is in the works, and a New York publisher is interested.

"Ten thousand is a terrific seiler in Canada," says Lorraine Wilson of McClelland

and Stewart. "When it gets up to 15,000 ... that's great."

McClelland and Stewart actually ran out of copies a week before Christmas, with 1,000 back orders and book stores crying for more.

She says she has high hopes for U.S. sales as the Levesque image takes on continental proportions.

"They contacted us," she says of the New York publisher. "This fellow in New York said the U.S. had forgotten Canada until the Quebec election."

The book has been a sensation in Montreal where, the author says, worried political organizers tried to push copies into the background in one store as election day approached. One book store thought about hiring extra security guards.

The readers have included Rene Levesque himself, who checked the manuscript last summer for factual errors.

Mr. Desbarats says Mr. Levesque complimented him on his assessment of Quebec nationalism but grumbled about the description of his racy personal life.

Demand for the book from Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto has been so heavy that friends in Western Canada have told the author they can't get it.

Its freaky timeliness — even Desbarats didn't expect his subject to form a majority government — made it a compelling Christmas gift.

Author had to pay

Jeannette Munson, an Ottawa public servant, sent six copies of the \$10 book to friends and relatives in the Maritimes. She also received half a dozen.

Authors customarily get six free copies but Desbarats had to buy 10 — at half price — to satisfy the demand from relatives for autographed copies.

"All my friends and relatives wanted it and they assumed I got it for nothing," the author says. "I had trouble getting my order filled."

"Desbarats has to be the luckiest slow writer in Canada," said publisher Jack McClelland in a television interview this month.

The book was supposed to be published in 1973, when Levesque's Parti Quebecois won 30 per cent of the vote in the Quebec general election but only six seats.

Levesque himself wasn't elected that year.

If the party had made a poor showing Nov. 15, Rene likely would have been bumped as PQ leader and the Desbarats book relegated to the has-been shelves.

"It looked at least 50-50 that Levesque would be out after the election," says Mr. Desbarats, editorialist for the Global Television network in Ontario.

The 43-year-old Montreal-born journalist and author, who doesn't speak French well, is less perturbed about the future of Canada than many who bought his book.

"With a good progressive government, there's a chance for greater stability in Quebec in the long run," he says.

He received the standard 10 per cent — \$1 a copy sold — on the first 5,000 sales and a higher percentage as sales increased.