

Fall under the spell of "Under the Visible Life"



By Brock Weir

Music is the one thing that unites the very different lives of Masha, an immigrant to Montreal, and Katherine, a woman haunted by the stigma of growing up as a mixed-race girl in a less-than-hospitable environment.

It is their story, as depicted in 'Under the Visible Life', a new book by Canadian author Kim Echlin, that Aurora Public Library hopes will unite Aurora in a year-long discussion of very important topics the 2016 selection for One Book One Aurora.

Later this spring, you will see copies of 'Under the Visible Life' pop up in small, portable lending libraries all around Town. The novel will be there for you to pick up, read, either to return to the lending library or pass along to another reader, in an effort to get all of Aurora reading from the same page and engaged in wide-ranging dialogue.

The novel follows Katherine whose only escape from hostile eyes is music. Masha, on the other hand, is orphaned and sent to live in Pakistan where she struggles to break free, eventually finding her way to Montreal in the 1970s. Music eventually brings the women together in the city and their lives are changed forever.

'This is the story of two women told in alternate chapters,' says Reccia Mandelcorn of the Aurora Public Library. 'Their lives parallel each other and are held together by the threads of music and jazz. Katherine was born in 1940s Hamilton to a woman who was in a relationship with a Chinese man at the time when interracial marriages were not allowed. She was put in a reform school and her daughter was taken away.'

'Masha was originally from Afghanistan and her mother married an American. Her parents were killed in an honour killing. She ends up finding her way to Montreal and they both become jazz musicians at a time when Jazz was not a place women found themselves. You have these two parallel stories of women who have faced poverty, parenting issues, racial issues, prejudice, but they are joined by this thread of jazz that intertwines through the whole story.'

Naturally, these themes lend themselves to a variety of programming options and the Aurora Public Library is pulling out all the stops, generating a series of events designed to stimulate ideas around immigration, racism, and jazz. All three themes, says Ms. Mandelcorn, are going to play a 'huge part' in the year ahead.

'We looked at the whole aspect of immigration and the changes that are happening here in Aurora with the whole refugee crisis and one of the things we're doing is having a panel discussion on the changing face of Canada,' says Ms. Mandelcorn. 'It will discuss how the country is changing, how we welcome people, as well as the challenges.'

Writing workshops and culinary events will also be held over the summer and fall, with a photography exhibition featuring portraits of jazz musicians by Newmarket photographer Greg King, jazz concerts at the Library as well as at the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Library's partner in the Aurora Cultural Roundtable, photo contests open to all Aurorans on moments inspired by music, and a writing contest where participants will be required to set pen to paper on anything that comes to mind while listening to a selection by John Coltrane.

One Book One Aurora will culminate on Saturday, October 22, with a Meet the Author event with Ms. Echlin, who will read selections from her book accompanied by a live jazz musician.

Kim is one of Canada's most accessible authors, which is lovely when you consider she has won all these awards, teaches at the University of Toronto, Ryerson, York and Guelph, was a producer for the CBC and an editor for the Ottawa Citizen, says Ms. Mandelcorn. All I had to do was send her an email, she called back, and said she would be honoured [to have her book featured in One Book One Aurora]. She is really excited about doing it.

Another thing that is nice about Under the Visible Life is it is really an accessible read. If we're looking at something we hope the whole community is going to be reading, particularly in the spring and summertime, you couldn't find a better vacation read than this.

Adds the Aurora Public Library's Cindy Shaver: I also read it and was mesmerized by the way she wrote it. You wanted to be there in that time. You could feel the passion. If you read it, you will become absorbed in Katherine and Masha's lives. It just took over!

Paperback copies will be available in the lending libraries once they are released this spring, but if you would like to get a head start on the novel during March Break, the Library has several hardback copies now available. The Library has been distributing a number of copies to circulate through local book clubs and, so far, the response has been great, says Ms. Mandelcorn.

If people in the community have new ideas on how they would like to join in, we would love to add more events [to the One Book One Aurora calendar]. The whole idea is that it's not just the Library doing this. We're inviting the whole community to participate and come on board in different ways. We want to keep that community energy going!

For more, visit www.onebookoneaurora.com.