

OBOA 2020 novel 'Scarborough' is hoped to spur conversation on how empathy creates action

Aurorans will soon have the chance to get fully immersed in Scarborough, the acclaimed debut novel of Catherine Hernandez, which is the Aurora Public Library's selection for their 2020 One Book One Aurora campaign.

Over the next eleven months, local readers will be able to pick up the novel from free lending libraries that will be popping up around Town, as well as the Aurora Public Library (APL) itself, to enjoy, return or pass on to new readers, all the while participating in a year-long roster of programming spearheaded by APL and the many community groups under their umbrella.

"I first read Scarborough when it was nominated for the OLA Forest of Reading Evergreen Award in 2019," says Reccia Mandelcorn, APL's Manager of Community Collaboration, who made this year's One Book One Aurora selection. "I simply fell in love with the characters and was so moved by the struggles they faced through economic and social marginalization and with the dignity with which the author told their stories."

It was a voice that Ms. Hernandez initially struggled to find.

As The Auroran reported last week, Ms. Hernandez, who grew up in Scarborough, felt her writing was becoming stifled after moving to Downtown Toronto. Moving back home after experiencing an abusive relationship, she says she heard a voice inside her saying, "Stop thinking that Scarborough is a place you escape and be here. I made Scarborough my home instead of being ashamed of it and I decided to really and truly listen to the conversations that were very familiar to me."

In listening to those conversations and setting them down on paper, she found her words struck a chord with the world around her.

"These conversations were similar to those I had when I was younger and I was just falling in love with this area all over again," she explains. "When I moved back here and started a home daycare, I realized there were so many stories from people in the community, especially when I was bringing the kids back and forth to different play centres - stories of people who are surviving quite intense things while raising their children. I realized this community needed a voice and I had to own up to the fact that I was ashamed of this area just because of my internalized racism and classism; I was ashamed of it and I really needed to turn that around for myself, in my body, and give this community a voice - and also not to make them caricatures but make them human beings with fibre and soul."

"When I started to piece together all of these stories that were really inspired by the residue of all the people I had met, I was

able to sew it all together as an overall arc of three children in a neighbourhood over the course of a school year and a facilitator at a literacy centre who realizes that a community needs so much more support than what she is being employed to do.?

Once the stories were brought together in the form of a book, Ms. Hernandez says it was 'no surprise' that reaction in Scarborough was 'a little bit slow to take.' There was a sense within the communities she was trying to reflect that literature, in the end, wouldn't reflect the real community, that their stories would never be covered in any form of 'literature' but, through word of mouth, this conception was challenged.

Through social media, particularly Instagram and Facebook, Ms. Hernandez heard from more and more people from Scarborough who said 'they felt seen, heard and acknowledged' in her words and that the book was actually 'celebrating them.'

'These are responses I treasure way more than any book review in a major magazine or newspaper [because] people said 'I saw myself,' or, 'I am one of these people.' To me, that really meant I had done my job, that I was respecting the community. It really was a love letter to the people who are frontline workers to these communities. It doesn't have to be Scarborough; it can be any community that is an afterthought. Any place that is a racialized community, it ends up being an afterthought for policy-makers and it is such a shame. I wanted [of these communities] to be front and centre in the book because I don't have those powers. I am not a politician, however, I have absolute power when I am writing. I can make that a reality for them, a reality where they are front and centre.'

For the characters in Scarborough, the measurement of success depends on who is in the spotlight. For some, the measure of success is to live abuse-free, find housing that is not precarious, or even simply realizing some form of financial security. Ms. Hernandez says that through her words she hopes people understand that the definition of success changes all the time. For her, success was sometimes 'finding enough money to buy a dozen eggs' or being able to make rent, or afford a music lesson for her daughter.

'All of these things are successes. They might be small successes, but every day was a race to that success, to make sure that my daughter was safe,' she says. 'For this book, as difficult as their lives are, the truth is that I'm actually showing a community that is full of success, that every day they are experiencing joy and they are achieving extraordinary things.'

'Change is slow to come, but I know [through my work] and workshops I have done with frontline workers like nurses, lawyers, social workers, I have been able to inform them that their work is important and to never forget it. I never forget the vision that they have always had within themselves of creating stronger communities because I know that the system they work against often dims that light within them and those tiny changes are

important to me.?

This is also important for the Aurora Public Library.

Although the novel's focus is on one community that Catherine knows intimately, the challenges she describes of intersectionality, of poverty, and of being 'othered' are universal, even in more affluent towns like ours," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "Storytelling creates empathy and empathy can create action. I hope that through reading this book together, we can see the importance of funding the infrastructure that enables all our community members to enjoy the fundamental rights to food, shelter and education."

For more on One Book One Aurora 2020, visit www.onebookoneaurora.com.

By Brock Weir