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Stories of newcomer students inspire local teacher?s first novel



By Brock Weir

Maryam Jumaah felt older than her years when she first arrived in Canada.
She came to Canada from Iraq aged just 14. In those 14 years, she experienced racism, war, and events she still finds difficult to describe.
She lost her school, her church, and even her home to explosions, but still, she kept close to her heart the very idea ?that in every darkness there is light.?
She found her light in her family and in God, but here in Canada, she also found a new light in her teacher, Meghan Ferrari.
?When I came to Canada, I felt so old,? says Maryam. ?I went to elementary school and I saw all these kids playing in the snow, making snow angels, and I thought I didn't feel like I was 14, I felt as if I was 40 because of my experiences.?
Once she was in Ms. Ferrari's ESL class at St. Robert Catholic Elementary School, she says she felt the tide turn. They helped pull her out of her shell, express herself and share her story and her story, in turn, helped inspire Ms. Ferrari's first novel, The Garden, which went on sale last week.
The Garden is inspired by the stories of Ms. Ferrari's newcomer students.
It's described as ?a poignant, yet inspiring young adult novel that sheds light on the social impact of modern military conflict and the plight of innocent victims displayed by it. The Garden provides readers with empathy, respect, and a deeper understanding our new neighbours uprooted by war.?
?I feel Ms. Ferrari did a great thing by expressing my emotions with her beautiful words,? said Maryam at The Garden's official launch at the Aurora Public Library. ?It takes a big heart to actually understand someone who has limited English and put it in a book that is full of emotions, themes and explanations.?
The Garden first began taking root in the Aurora Public Library's Writers' Group, of which Ms. Ferrari is a member, and the peer feedback helped the finished product take shape.
?In the fall of 2015, I found myself deeply effected by the Civil War in Syria and refugee crisis it created,? Ms. Ferrari explained at the launch. ?I felt compelled to help and felt I could make a difference through my teaching and writing. As an educator, I witnessed the transformative power of literature. In the classroom, I have seen it act as a tool of social justice, raising awareness, deepening understanding and inciting students to action. Most importantly, I have seen its ability to create empathy, to build bridges between diverse people and places.
?The inspiration for The Garden came from my newcomer students at St. Robert CHS. In developing relationships with them, I learned of the hardships many of them faced in their native countries. I found myself in awe of the strength, determination and courage they had to overcome these obstacles. I was also amazed by their resiliency and how quickly they were able to become

leaders and role models in their new Canadian communities. My hope for The Garden is that it will impact young readers in the way that these students have so positively impacted me.?

One person who is sure that The Garden will have that positive impact on young readers is Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration at the Aurora Public Library, who just happens to be the facilitator of the Writer's Group.

Ms. Mandelcorn said it was an honour for the Group to share in its development and to see the finished product.

?From Chapter One onward we were totally riveted. To be part of something so special, something so important is a privilege not everyone gets to have. In many ways, we feel like midwives to The Garden. Meghan did all the hard labour, but she graciously allowed us to be part of the extraordinary experience of supporting the birth of this fabulous narrative.

?I want to introduce The Garden not from my perspective of the Writer's Group, but from my previous portfolio as the Young Adult Coordinator at APL, a position I held for 26 years. Every so often a book comes into your hands that you know must be given to as many young people as possible, that must be read and shared by parents, teachers and librarians, but must not only be read, but discussed, because the content is so important. The Garden is a novel about survival, about family, of friendship, under the most extraordinary and harsh circumstances. It is a novel about today's political reality of refugees in a turbulent environment set close to home in Canada making it so very relatable. Sadly, it is also a narrative of war, of loss, and that is universal and that is why The Garden is so important. Books change lives. Through narrative, they inspire and transform how we think about the world around us and how we can effect change. It has been an honour to read The Garden.?

Parsa Vahabishekarloo, a Grade 12 student at St. Robert feels the same way. A native of Iran, he says his time in the country ?made the best years of my life a life filled with joy and sadness, laughs and cries, comforts and discomforts, good days and bad days, like every other place around the world. The Garden really makes me emotionally attached to it because it really reflects a life of challenged family. It shows that family is everything; I have a brother and I would do anything to protect him and make sure he is safe and happy. The family is the only thing that will always support us through any challenges in our lives. They are always there when you need them and always listening to you and truly love you for the person you are.

?The Garden was like our ESL class. It was a place where we could rest our minds and souls after a long, challenging day dealing with tough English speaking. Ms. Ferrari is like the mother to us. She dug a small hole in her garden and carefully planted each exhausted and unique seed in the safest place in the world. She took a broken and tired seed and gave me the chance to grow up and be a strong, tall tree.?