

Story of struggle and home selected for One Book One Aurora 2019



By Brock Weir

The world will soon know more about Lilly when actress Dakota Fanning brings her to life on the big screen in the upcoming adaptation of *Sweetness in the Belly*, but this year Aurorans will have the inside track as the award-winning novel takes centre stage in the community.

Sweetness in the Belly, the 2005 Giller Prize finalist novel by author Camilla Gibb is the 2019 selection for the Aurora Public Library's One Book One Aurora campaign, which aims to get all of Aurora reading from the same page.

Soon, lending libraries will be popping up in various locations around Town, laden down with paper back copies of the novel that are intended to be taken home, read, shared, and returned ? or passed along to another book lover. As the novels circulate around the community, a year-long series of programs will be built around the themes of the novel, which is set in Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia.

Sweetness in the Belly looks at both the intricate culture of this east African nation, coupled with the racially-charged world of Margaret Thatcher's London. It follows Lilly, born to British parents, who eventually finds herself living as a devout, white Muslim woman in Harar in the years leading up to the disposition of the Emperor.

Drawn to Aziz, a young, idealistic doctor, national upheavals tear the couple apart and send each into worlds quite unfamiliar to them.

?I am so excited about this,? says Ms. Gibb on her novel being selected for One Book One Aurora. ?The idea of using a book as a starting point for a community conversation is a tremendous way of bringing people together, encouraging not just a discussion of art and literature, but the issues it takes you to. But, what are those issues? I don't want to anticipate [what will come up in Aurora], but some of the more obvious ones are looking beyond stereotypes of Islam in a world that is full of kind of damning stereotypes complicating that portrait, and giving you an intimate look into a world that a lot of us haven't had the privilege of being immersed in before.?

Ms. Gibb sat down with *The Auroran* for this interview just two days after returning from Ethiopia watching director Zeresenay Mehari lead a cast that includes Fanning, and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II (*Aquaman's* Manta) as Aziz on location shooting.

Joining Ms. Gibb for the interview was Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the Aurora Public Library, who shared her enthusiasm for *Sweetness in the Belly*.

?I've read it three times,? says Ms. Mandelcorn. ?It was an escape into another world and I love books that teach me about different places and different cultures, whether it is religion, whether it is food, the history, or politics. There is fiction in this book, but it is quite true to the history of the time.?

Given Aurora's changing demographics, *Sweetness in the Belly* was a perfect choice around which to build a year-long conversation, she continues.

?I thought about the colours, the smells, the different things we could do and, of course, the whole process of immigration and the idea of what is home? We have so many immigrants coming from other countries coming to settle and find a new home I thought I

could pull those strings together of what happened when Lilly was looking for her own home: was it in her heart? Was her home in a place? It was perfect.?

An anthropologist by training, Ms. Gibb has had a long-time interest in religious and cultural practices around the world, particularly with the Middle East, and that extends to Islam. After a year abroad working in Cairo, she met a young Ethiopian woman, who had come to Canada as a refugee, while studying at the University of Toronto.

‘We became friends and she exposed me to that part of the world,’ Ms. Gibb says. ‘What did we know about Ethiopia at that point? Images of starving children were the limit of our exposure, and maybe some older people had images of Haile Selassie, but beyond that, there was very little. She took me into her own story, which was a story that really reflected a lot of recent history of the country. She had been born under the Emperor but had to escape during the (subsequent) Derg Regime. She came as a refugee and would say many years later that she was suffering from PTSD, but she wouldn’t say it at the time. She opened my eyes.?’

She opened her eyes not only to the culture of Ethiopia, but the sheer depth it offers as an area of academic study. In some ways, that was a problem. Focusing on the nation as a PhD student, she found writing her thesis was an academic exercise that ‘left aside all the visceral, sensory and personal experiences’ she felt after visiting the country.

‘To me, it didn’t in any way reflect people’s reality,’ Ms. Gibb explains. ‘It was kind of top down. It left me feeling quite bereft because it didn’t reflect my experience, nor did it reflect the experience of living in this time and place. It was written in academic language, so who cares? Maybe six other anthropologists who would have read it, but my family, friends and the family I lived with [in Ethiopia] couldn’t read it. Some of them spoke very good English, but this was written in an academic jargon and I felt I had kind of done a disservice.’

‘I tried to write it, but I wasn’t a writer yet. I had to write two other books that were much closer and more in my own backyard before I really had the muscles to take on something this big.?’

Next Week: How author Camilla Gibb found her voice and brought Lilly to life.

For more information on One Book One Aurora, visit onebookoneaurora.com.