Sweetness in the Belly brought to life at TIFF



By Brock Weir

Over the course of this year, Aurora readers have come to know Lilly and Aziz, the central lovers in Camilla Gibb's bestselling novel Sweetness in the Belly.

As the Aurora Public Library's selection for the 2019 One Book One Aurora Campaign, which aims to have the whole community reading from the same book and passing copies from one to another, this vivid depiction of an English-born orphan living andworking in Ethiopia during the final years of Haile Selassie's reign and falling in love with an idealistic young doctor has captivated many readers.

This Saturday, however, the story will reach a whole new audience when the film adaptation of the novel has its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).

Starring Dakota Fanning (Once Upon a Time?in America) and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II (Aquaman), the film was shot on location in Ethiopia. Ms. Gibb had a chance to see parts of the film being made at the very locations which helped inspire the story. Having recently seen a rough cut of the film, she was tremendously moved by how director Zeresenay Berhane Mehari interpreted her story, and she is eager to see the finished product along with the rest of the audience this weekend.

?It is tremendously exciting,? Ms. Gibb tells The Auroran. ?I hope the world is kind to my child! I am kind of amazed you can take such a big, sprawling book and make a movie out of it. Obviously you can't bring everything from the book into the movie, but I think they have really captured the essence, the spirit, the mood of it ? and the sadness of it, too.?

?It just feels so close to me in so many ways I can't

really be objective about it. I hope the world is kind and receives it in the spirit in which it has been created. It sounds hokey, but there has been a tremendous amount of love for this project, and it does feel like a labour of love on the part of everyone involved. It is not easy to go to Ethiopia and make a feature film, but they did it and it is amazing.?

It is also a labour of love that has been a long time in the making. Film producers first bought the rights to Ms. Gibb's book more than ten years ago. The interested parties, she said, shared they related very personally to the story and offered a ?very personal appeal? for the rights, sharing insights from their own lives and why the story resonated so much with them.

?That was one of those times when I realised that this is a much more universal story than, perhaps, I even knew at the time,? she says.

Until she read the final script, however, she wasn't sure what would ultimately be at the heart of the cinematic version of her story. In the end, however, the love story is its beating heart, along with the questions it raises about where we, as a people, belong in the world, ?especially in a world where there is so much dislocation and separation ? where do we truly belong and how can we build a sense of belonging for ourselves in a new place that we have just arrived, that we didn't necessarily arrive at by choice??

She saw this heart beating when she visited the set last fall. She was in ?awe? of the whole process, particularly by how Fanning and Abdul-Mateen captured the spirit of her characters, and how the behind-the-scenes crew worked tirelessly to capture the perfect looks to bring them to life. By her own admission, how a character looks in a story is often secondary in Ms. Gibb's creative process, but what they accomplished in the film perfectly hit the mark.

?I was really interested in knowing what the work meant to the actors and what the story meant to actors,? she says. ?I talked to Abdul-Mateen and I don't want to put words in his mouth, but it was the first time he had been to Africa. He's from New Orleans, he's a Muslim, his family converted, and it really meant something for him to come to Africa, come to a Muslim community in Africa and see a story that was originating from this place, that was going to be broadcast to the world and be a part of that. It really meant something to him and I was touched he had a personal investment in the story.

?They have done something beautiful.?

For more information on One Book One Aurora 2019, including where in the community to find your own copy of Sweetness in the Belly to borrow and pass on, visit onebookoneaurora.com or visit the Aurora Public Library.