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Export date: Fri Mar 29 10:53:39 2024 / +0000 GMT

Gibb brings down curtain on One Book One Aurora 2019 with author talk



It has been a whirlwind year for Toronto-based author Camilla Gibb.

In addition to her novel, Sweetness in the Belly, receiving the big screen treatment with a film adaptation that made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) this past September, her story of Lilly, a young English orphan sent to live in Harare, Ethiopia, has been a focal point for many local booklovers as the 2019 selection of the Aurora Public Library's One Book One Aurora campaign.

Throughout the year, the Aurora Public Library (APL) has spearheaded a full year of programming exploring various themes contained within the book, from evocative talks, to film screenings, to photography and writing contests.

One Book One Aurora 2019, however, culminated last month in a special author talk given by Ms. Gibb herself in APL's central Living Room space.

?I want to thank [Reccia Mandelcorn, APL's Manager of Community Collaboration] very much for really thoughtful, creative programming you have developed around this book,? Ms. Gibb told Ms. Mandelcorn and the packed audience. ?I think programs like this are kind of remarkable in the sense that they use a book as a starting off point to talk about issues and ideas, and I think that is how a book wants to carry on living in the world as a form of conversation and [in a world of] big box stores, something we pass from hand to hand, or participate and share in the context of a book club.?

In sharing her story, Ms. Gibb spoke about the origins of Sweetness in the Belly itself.

The roots of the story began to form when Ms. Gibb was

studying for her PhD in social anthropology.

She developed an interest in the Muslim world from a relatively young age, swept up, courtesy of her mother's partner who grew up in Lebanon, by a world that seemed a little bit mysterious and just out of her grasp.

?I was curious enough that once I got to university I started studying not only anthropology but also middle eastern studies,? she explained. ?I knew that I wanted to learn the language, so in my third year of undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I went to Cairo and spent a year living in this heaving, seething metropolis of 18 centuries of history and it was a vastly overwhelming place where I couldn't have felt smaller.?

She lived in a university residence at this time primary of Arab women and this environment further stoked her interest ? and her travels, which eventually took her to Ethiopia.

The book was a success and its most recent chapter ? the film ? took her back to Ethiopia and back to the life-long friends she made during her time there, many of whom served to inspire her book.

?This book has had an interesting life,? she said. ?Ten years ago, it was optioned for a film and it took ten years for a very passionate Canadian producer to pull it all together. I wasn't asked to write a script. I would much rather have it done by someone who was a professional screen writer. I came in at quite a late stage, read the script and I saw this happening, which was quite surreal. This thing had to be [filmed] here in the places that I have been. It was in that context that I got to have these really wonderful reunions with friends and family and people.?

But the resulting product, the film, also courted controversy with an early synopsis of the film released just prior to TIFF, describing Lilly as a ?white Ethiopian? woman portrayed by Dakota Fanning sparking, despite its inaccuracy, a lengthy social media discussion on cultural appropriation.

?I think our conversations around appropriations have become so much more sophisticated and complicated,? Ms. Gibb told the APL audience. ?What happened in advance of the screening at TIFF was some controversy because a press release came out saying ?Dakota Fanning plays white Ethiopian.' They had been really careful around the wording, but this was a disaster, a three-day twitter storm where a lot of work had to be done. She is not a white Ethiopian. The director is Ethiopian, but the director is not a Muslim.?

For more on One Book One Aurora, including some of the work resulting from this year's reading campaign, visit onebookoneaurora.com.

By Brock Weir