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Acclaimed novel ?Scarborough? selected for One Book One Aurora 2020

It is said that the best authors write what they know, letting their personal experiences inform what they put down on the page. That's exactly what author Catherine Hernandez did in her acclaimed debut novel, Scarborough. But what she put down on the page also helped challenge her previously-held misconceptions about the Toronto neighbourhood she returned to, providing a voice to individuals who had, unbeknownst to her, felt voiceless along the way.

Ms. Hernandez exploration of the diverse Toronto borough is the 2020 selection for the Aurora Public Library's One Book One Aurora program.

One Book One Aurora is the Aurora Public Library's (APL) annual campaign to get all of Aurora reading from the same page. In the months ahead, small lending libraries will be popping up around the community laden with copies of Ms. Hernandez' novel to pick up free-of-charge to read, return and/or pass along to other readers.

A year-long series of programming based on the themes of the novel will also be rolled out, themes of which can be both challenging and uplifting.

?Scarborough is about community, so I am always happy when a community bands together to go and look at a piece of literature, or any kind of piece of art, and then share their thoughts with one another,? says Ms. Hernandez. ?Any possibility for community members to convene and share space intellectually and physically is, for me, just a wonderful opportunity.?

A finalist for the Trillium Book Award and the City of Toronto Book Award, Scarborough is billed as the story of an inner-city community ?suffering under the weight of poverty, drugs, crime and urban blight. Scarborough, the novel, employs a multitude of voices to tell the story of a tight-knit neighbourhood under fire: among them, Victor, a black artist harassed by police; Winsum, a West Indian restaurant owner struggling to keep it together; and Hina, a Muslim school worker who witnesses first-hand the impact of poverty on education. And then there are the three kids who work to rise above a system that consistently fails them: Bing, a gay Filipino boy who lives under the shadow of his father's mental illness; Sylvie, Bing's best friend, a Native girl whose family struggles to find a permanent home to live in; and Laura, whose history of neglect by her mother is destined to repeat itself with her father.?

Speaking to The Auroran of the themes she hopes the community is able to explore through the reading of her work, Ms. Hernandez says the ?number one thing to consider as community members is whose needs are the priority??

?Why are those people made priority more often than not??
she asks. ?Let's look at privilege and what does that mean for access to basic needs? Those kinds of questions can be very difficult for people to deal with, to question, ?Why do I have more access than others?' and then to consider, ?Why are those systems in place that make those different levels of access present?' That's the number one thing I want people to take away when it comes to my book because one character who is the facilitator at the literacy centre, she is dealing with a system that is really working against her and she is a frontline worker who understands the needs of a community and everything she does that is right, that is just, is actually against policy and against the rules. I think we just need to consider why those rules are in place. Who is it serving? If we ask ourselves those questions, I think we will build strong communities.?

Ms. Hernandez asked herself those very questions when she found herself living in Scarborough. Having grown up in the community since she was 10-years-old, she says she always felt it was a place full of stories, but didn't think ?those stories had any real value.? Earlier writing, she said, made ?caricatures? of people living in the community and ?some of the writing I have done in the past I am not entirely proud of because my politics were definitely different back then.?

?I was always extremely ashamed of my neighbourhood just because it was low income and I always thought Downtown Toronto was the place to be, especially as an artist,? she says. ?I always felt like I was on my way out of Scarborough and when living downtown my writing sort of had a surface quality to it, a really superficial quality. I had these clever moments, but I never felt like it could get any deeper when it came to character development. What I didn't know at the time, because of where I was right near Queen's Quay, my writing was sort of stifled by the superficial nature of the people who are downtown. In Scarborough, there is really nothing to hide between us.

?A lot of time when we're sharing space, I find the conversations are very in-depth and there's no pretense, nothing to hide behind. The quality of conversation between you is so much more genuine and I didn't know any of this until my daughter and I actually had to flee an abusive relationship. We had to come to Scarborough and live with my parents and sister for about six months. We were in precarious housing until I got a basement apartment where I started a home daycare.

?I remember being in a room with all of our belongings and one of those grocery carts and thinking to myself, I am back at square one? I have to rebuild all over again, not knowing this was to be the emphasis of writing this book because when I returned to Scarborough there was this voice inside of me saying, ?Be still. Stop thinking that Scarborough is a place you escape and be here.' I did exactly that. 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.?

Next Week: Ms. Hernandez re-discovers her voice, and finds the voice of a community.

By Brock Weir