

Author hopes One Book One Aurora will change perspectives



By Brock Weir

Camilla Gibb's upbringing, by her own admission, wasn't exactly 'jolly.'

A native of England, she grew up in a family headed by a father she describes as 'rule-bound, rigid, and ex-military' and 'as a consequence of it not being a particularly jolly [atmosphere]' her parents divorced when she was 10. While a divorce is always a challenging time for children, for Ms. Gibb it ultimately helped open up a brand new world to her.

At the age of 10, her mother fell in love with an Armenian actor who grew up in Beirut. Although he was not Muslim, he was an Arabic speaker and his addition into the family brought a new sense of 'fun' into her world.

'Everything changed,' says Ms. Gibb. 'The smells changed, the food changed, the dynamic and energy changed and I thought wherever he comes from must be a happy place. That influence certainly stayed with me, thinking there is something there that spoke to me.'

That influence outlasted her mother's relationship with the man, but it informed the direction of her life.

Wanting to know more about this culture and its influence on the world, Ms. Gibb dedicated her life to pursuing a career as an anthropologist. For her, anthropology was 'a portal, an escape, and a means' to get to a place for which she always had romantic ideas.

Her novel, *The Sweetness in the Belly*, the Aurora Public Library's 2019 One Book One Aurora selection, is very much informed by this journey.

The Sweetness in the Belly is described as 'a richly imagined narrative of one woman's search for love and belonging cast against a nuanced portrait of political upheaval' in Ethiopia. It follows Lilly, a young, white Muslim nurse searching for her missing love, Aziz. This yearning takes her 'and the reader' to Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, which is on the cusp of revolution.

Writing has always been a passion for Ms. Gibb, but there was a time when something like a novel was, for her, considered an almost 'illicit' writing form.

'I really took my academic self seriously,' she explains. 'I was a pretty seriously driven young academic, but in that world I don't think things like sensory experience and feelings were really valued. I didn't read any fiction for the entirety of my education, 10 years, where I had grown up with fiction. It was everything. Secretly, I started writing short stories 'secretly, because it almost felt illicit at this point.'

Taking a gap year after getting her PhD, Ms. Gibb says she began writing a short story 'that just wouldn't stop.' Previous attempts were 'terrible' but this one, she says, had some momentum and she was 'scared' to abandon it.

'This looks suspiciously like something that is not a short story,' Ms. Gibb recalls thinking.

She was supposed to take up a job in Lethbridge, AB, at the time, but deferred it for a year to pursue her instincts, although she says she didn't tell anybody as it seemed like a 'betrayal' of her academic life.

Two novels into her writing career, there were still signs of her academic life in the first couple of drafts of *The Sweetness in the Belly*. Her first two novels were written from the perspective of children, and the same can be said of the first iteration of *Belly*, but

her editor at Doubleday asked a very pointed question: Who is Lilly as an adult?

'I realised I had just written the backstory,' says Ms. Gibb. 'One of the things I think she was encouraging me to do was not hide behind the voice of a child; there is a complicated political framework and a child doesn't have to know what is going on, a child doesn't have to have an opinion, a child could be a pawn. She was forcing me to grow up in a way to take on the complexity of this place. I had to let Lilly grow up and I had to rewrite the book from the perspective of her as a young adult who is aware of what is going on.'

'I think I was intimidated to take on the politics and the complex social and political landscape, and it took a lot of years, really.' The book, she says, wasn't so 'agenda driven' until 9/11, but it was already underway. She was driven by a desire to tell an 'intimate story about this person in this place.'

'It was a literary endeavour, not a political endeavour, but when 9/11 occurred, I realised the context in which it would be received and the landscape had completely shifted,' she says. 'I had more of a responsibility, perhaps, or this book had more of a responsibility than just a piece of literary creation. I probably didn't respond to the extent to which that was true until I started having conversations with people around the book when it was out in the world and I saw how it could be used as a counter-balance between some of the more disturbing stereotypes of Islam as a religion of terror.'

This idea of challenging stereotypes is just one characteristic that made *The Sweetness in the Belly*, in the eyes of the Aurora Public Library, the perfect selection for One Book One Aurora 2019. Its themes have lent themselves to a wide-array of programming that will take place throughout the year based around the book, ranging from culinary endeavours to an evening of Arabic poets coming in to share their art in their own language and music.

'This is a dynamic world,' says Ms.

Gibb. 'The issues of immigration and migration are as old as we are. There are alarming circumstances that are moving people, but it always happens. We live in a complex, multicultural world. Why wouldn't we want to have informed friendships and find a common understanding, sharing each other's experiences in that way? I want people [through One Book One Aurora] to have an experience, which is what I look for in a book. I want an experience. I want to be immersed in something that is both outside my own experience, but also kind of reflects our common humanity. I hope it alters one's way of looking at the world, which is a little bit ambitious.'

To find out how you can start that journey through One Book One Aurora and Ms. Gibb's novel, visit onebookoneaurora.com.