

?Finding Edward? picked by Library for One Book One Aurora 2023



If you don't yet know the name of Cyril Rowntree, you're likely to hear his name on the lips of many Aurora residents this year as One Book One Aurora (OBOA) gets underway.

Finding Edward, the acclaimed and award-winning novel by Sheila Murray, has been tapped by the Aurora Public Library (APL) for OBOA 2023, a library-led initiative that aims to get all of Aurora reading from the same page.

Throughout this year, free copies of the book will be distributed throughout the community for local readers to experience the remarkable story of Cyril, a Jamaican man who migrates to Toronto in 1912, and ?begins to navigate his way through the implications of being racialized in a challenging new land.?

As more people take in the story, which sees Cyril drawn to a mysterious suitcase of photos and letters from the 1920s and undertaking a very different journey as a result, community partners are curating programs over the next 10 months centred around the themes contained within its pages ? and this is a prospect that is nothing short of exciting for author Murray.

?I am thrilled,? Murray told The Auroran. ?It's lovely to think so many people in Aurora will be sharing the book, their experiences with the book. Obviously, it's a different experience for every reader and that's very exciting.?

The daughter of a Black Jamaican father and a White English mother, Murray was born and raised in England before moving to Canada with her family when she was 17. With a background in journalism, she's always had a keen interest in Black History in Canada, ?which I knew was rich,? and this was one of the starting points to penning Finding Edward.

?I think I have never understood to what extent across this country Blacks have been present and for how long,? she says. ?My curiosity about that was what inspired the notion of having this person, born in the 20s, who could show us in many ways how everything changes but nothing changes. Has it always been the experience of Black people and people identified as Black being a challenge in this country??

?My parents retired [in Jamaica] and I spent a fair bit of time there knowing some incredible young people who have made the journey to Canada and to other places full of determination and determined to succeed once they arrive. Then there are an enormous number of hoops they have to jump through. Their resilience and tenacity always impressed me so much and that's what partly led me to think about looking at this through the eyes of a younger person. I didn't want to tell a historical story where people might be able to say, ?All of that happened in the past and that has very little to do with what we experience now.' I very much wanted to

show what happened in the past is, in part, what we continue to experience.?

Since its publication last year, readers have been enthralled by the experience of Finding Edward, and it has racked up numerous accolades along the way, including being shortlisted for the 2022 Governor General's Awards. While she says that kind of recognition has been 'fabulous,' what's particularly rewarding is the feedback from readers.

'What's really moving is the comments I hear from people who are reading the book. I didn't know who my readers would be when the book was published. It was an open discovery and it turns out that there are all sorts of people and all sorts of ages, Black and White, and various others in between. I think probably the most moving comments have been things like, 'That was my experience.' They can look at Cyril's experience and say that's exactly how they felt and that is very gratifying. I heard from people who are now in their 70s for whom the Edward story had real resonance. Even though they are straight White men, they really responded to Edward's experience.

'I don't think there is any discomfort in the discovery.?

As people make their way through Finding Edward and making their own discoveries along the way, Murray says she hopes the reader leaves with a better understanding of the experience of a person newly arrived to this country 'somebody who doesn't necessarily look like them, although there are all sorts of nuances there' and continue the dialogue.

'One of the things I would like people to talk about is what difference does it make when you feel you belong, or how do you feel you belong in your community? What makes that sense of belonging for you? Consider others who are finding that place is a lot harder. I think one of the things that certainly has been written in reviews is Cyril's experience of loneliness is very strong and I think perhaps that many, many of us feel loneliness and also these days with all that happens in the world and the way our culture is changing? I hope there's a really universal connection there that people could talk about. Just the overall piece which is look at all of the Black history across this country and how long it has been here?

'All of us have learned a great deal of the experience with Indigenous people is how little was broadly known. There are things that happened which should have been part of the Canadian narrative from the beginning of those relationships but have been sort of wiped out of history. There's another question: Why do we wipe some of these histories away, and is it important to know? How do we know ourselves as Canadians through the experience of other people in this country and ultimately for a new world country that is built on immigration? Those are questions I think everybody can enjoy answering from their own perspectives.?

For more on this year's One Book One Aurora selection, visit onebookoneaurora.com.

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter