

One Book One Aurora tackles LGBTQ themes with "Natural Order"



By Brock Weir

When Brian Francis goes to book clubs enjoying his second novel, *Natural Order*, he's often greeted with a familiar refrain: "How could she have done that? Why didn't she just accept her son for who he was?"

But for every time he's heard those same questions from people who can't put themselves into the mind of Joyce, an elderly woman coming to grips with painful decisions she made in her past, he hears something else: gay men saying, "That was my mom, that was my grandmother, or I knew who this woman is."

This dialogue is set to spread throughout Aurora this year as Mr. Francis' *Natural Order* forms the centrepiece of the 2017 One Book One Aurora campaign facilitated by the Aurora Public Library.

Come spring, paperbacks of the critically acclaimed book will be found across Aurora in small lending libraries free of charge for the community to read, return, and pass along, in the fourth annual initiative which aims to get all of Aurora reading from the same page.

"I read the book three times and loved it," says Reccia Mandelcorn of the Aurora Public Library (APL). When I think about a book for One Book One Aurora, I have to think about something that has themes we can build upon because you can find a really great book, people read it, and then they put it aside. But if you can come up with programs and themes to get the community involved you can make it into a conversation.

"This book seemed to hit the mark because it has very substantial themes that I could see our community being involved with: themes like aging, themes of health, nursing homes, relationships in families, small towns, and everything to do with LGBTQ, coming out, and coming to terms with relationships. I knew it was going to be a success."

For Mr. Francis, who is based in Toronto, the prospect of his latest novel, his second after the critically acclaimed *Fruit*, which was a finalist in the 2009 Canada Reads competition, being the centrepiece of ongoing community dialogue is an "exciting" and "rewarding" one.

"Really all I have ever tried to do when someone picks up a book is engage them emotionally," Mr. Francis tells *The Auroran*.

"There are a lot of books you read that you just don't connect with for whatever reason, and then there are books which, for some reason, just hit you at the right time or open your eyes up to things you hadn't considered before. For me, as an author, it is really rewarding when your book can spark a conversation and that your book can go in a bunch of different directions in terms of themes and topics.

"I am sort of there as the person who is putting the thing out there but I am nothing if the book isn't read and responded to by people. Having that response from the readers is really rewarding to me and ultimately it is about their experience."

In some ways, however, *Natural Order* is about Mr. Francis' own experiences.

The book follows Joyce at all stages of her life, from her youth growing up in a small-town Canadian community, raising a family, and whiling out the final stages of her life when she confronts secrets about her son John and lies about her childhood friend, and her very structured world begins to unravel.

The seeds for what ultimately became Natural Order were sown on many fronts.

A former volunteer at a seniors' residence, Mr. Francis found that one of the most valuable things he could offer the residents was a listening ear.

'In those kinds of places, your identity in your former life can be stripped away,' he says. 'You have a house, your community, you have children and all these things that surround you, and all of a sudden you find yourself in a room with a chair and a few artefacts from your former life. There were a lot of stories behind how they got to where they were and to have that 10 minute conversation with them once a week where they just talked about themselves was a chance for me to get to know them.'

That, however, was just one sphere of inspiration. The other came from much closer to home. At the same time he was learning about the seniors in question, he was delving deeper into his own mother's life. A recent widow, she was coming to terms with the reality of her new life. There was, he said, a sense of a generational shift, and he wanted to know more.

She ' and, by extension, Brian ' reconnected with a former teen flame who was, by this point, an out gay man living with his partner in Las Vegas. He was able to open Brian's eyes to a side of his mother he had not really considered before.

'We tend to think of our parents' lives starting when we were born, the most important thing that happened to you in your life was the birth of me and everything else before the birth of me was pretty trivial!' he jokes. 'He showed me what she was like as a 16 year old girl, showed me photos and told me stories about her. I saw her as independent of me and that was something I was trying to explore in the books.'

It is here the similarities end.

Unlike Joyce, the protagonist of Natural Order, Brian's mother was very accepting when he came out to her.

'For her, it was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy that this is why she watched Oprah shows throughout the years because she knew she was going to be dealing with this!' he says. 'Because she had this gay boyfriend in her past, she saw this as coming full circle. I haven't had any direct experience of people coming up to me and saying this has helped me with the experience of dealing with my child and coming out, but when I have gone to book clubs, there are a lot of people who say, 'I did not like that mother character at all. How could she have done that? Why didn't she just accept her son for who he was?'

'I think a lot of people forget what things were like in Joyce's generation. There was no PFLAG, there was no internet, this was a time where your child has a problem and your child has to get fixed. I think people forget that sometimes.

'The real issue is she wanted secrecy, which has shame connected with it. I think that is true of a lot of people of that generation.

You can say it is privacy, but a lot of it I think you could say was rooted in shame.'

For more information about One Book One Aurora ' and Natural Order ' visit www.onebookoneaurora.com. Next week, Mr.

Francis discusses success and the Library offers a growing slate of programming surrounding the themes of Natural Order.