

Connelly set to close One Book One Aurora 2015 with author talk



By Brock Weir

Reccia Mandelcorn had goosebumps on her arms as she and Cindy Shaver finished hanging up vivid photos of life in Burma in the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbott Gallery last week.

It is not as though they hadn't seen the photos before – after all, Ms. Mandelcorn says they had a bit of a ‘tug of war’ choosing the top 20 shots after a visit to the photographer's studio a few months ago, but seeing them all together reinforced a view Ms. Mandelcorn has had for quite some time.

‘Karen Connelly is a poet and it doesn't matter if she is behind the camera, if she is writing a memoir, or if she is writing fiction,’ she says. ‘Her soul is a poet's soul and everything she writes, whether it is English or Burmese, comes across as poetic.’

The Aurora Public Library hopes this is a view now shared by the community as it indulged in Ms. Connelly's memoir, ‘Burmese Lessons,’

The book forms the centrepiece of the Library's second annual One Book One Aurora campaign, which seeks to get everyone in Aurora literally on the same page, reading the same book distributed through free lending libraries that have popped up around Town.

Since the program's launch this spring, Burmese Lessons has formed the basis of several community events, ranging from film screenings to discussion groups, to letter-writing campaigns and this most recent photo exhibition. It culminates next Saturday; October 24 in the Library itself where Ms. Connelly will give a rare author talk about her work.

‘I am hoping [Karen] imparts her poetic soul, her sense of adventure, her open-mindedness, her take on feminism, on being an artist, on other people and being open-minded, having a political discourse, on having a responsibility for other people,’ says Ms. Mandelcorn. ‘I just want people to take away who she is. I think she is a young woman who has given her soul to life. She is just full of energy and compassion.’

Burmese Lessons follows Ms. Connelly's journey through Burma (Myanmar) and the challenges she encountered along the way, including a torrid affair with a young freedom fighter.

Its vivid depiction of a complex political and cultural landscape has already facilitated fruitful discussion in Aurora through several avenues.

?'[Book clubs] came back to us and said it stimulated the most conversation they ever had about a book ? some good and some not so good ? but the whole thing about sharing ideas is you have to have passion about it,' says Ms. Mandelcorn. 'Last week, we had a discussion at our Tuesday Philosophy Club and they used this book as the starting point for their discussion. They traced philosophers who all had different views of what the social contract was, taking that into account what the government and the people's responsibilities are in terms of having a democratic or autocratic government and freedom.

'They extrapolated that into Burmese Lessons and talked about what it is like to have a country under dictatorship. That discussion then morphed into Bill C-51 and it became hot and political, talking about civil disobedience and when it is justified to have civil disobedience in the state.

'It was a really interesting exchange of ideas that this book created in many different ways. It has morphed through in ways I hadn't necessarily counted on, but it has stimulated a really, really good discussion. That is what reading should do. That is what ideas should do, and that is what libraries should do. I am really psyched!'

One Book One Aurora's Meet Karen Connelly will take place Saturday, October 24, from 2 ? 4 p.m. at the Aurora Public Library. For more information, visit www.aurorapl.com