

One Book One Aurora 2022 closes with grand finale author talk

In her debut novel, *Swimming Back to Trout River*, author Linda Rui Feng paints a vivid and intimate portrait of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in prose that provided a feast for the senses and inspired creativity.

The book, which was selected by the Aurora Public Library as the basis of their One Book One Aurora campaign, which aims to start a community conversation around a single novel, inspired myriad activities for the whole family, from spectacular dances illustrating Chinese heritage, to photo contests asking readers to capture the magic of music, and writing workshops to get the creative juices flowing.

All of these came together at the end of October as the Library hosted Linda Rui Feng in a virtual conversation as the grand finale of One Book One Aurora 2022.

In 1981, five-year-old Junie, born without legs, is sent to live with her grandparents in a small village called Trout River, the Library describes the book. Her father, Momo, has left China for America to seek a better future, with her mother, Cassia, due to follow. The novel traces the adults' attempts to seek reconciliation within themselves and with each other. Feng moves fluidly back and forth through time, vividly portraying the experience of living in China during Mao's rule as well as the pressures of being a new immigrant.

The interweaving of character and setting, past and present are told from multiple points of view with just the right amount of historical reference so that the reader gets a glimpse into the social environment during and after China's Cultural Revolution.

Hosted by Reccia Mandelcorn, the Library's Manager of Community Collaboration, the author talk was a chance to hear from the writer herself and for readers to pose questions of their own.

One such reader asked the author to elaborate on her approach to creating such a vivid world on paper.

You have a symphony of sense in your writing, the reader said. We can hear, see, smell, feel, and touch the elements in your narrative and it really brings it to life. Was this a deliberate writing process, or is this how you experience the world?

Linda Rui Feng responded that everyone sees the world in different ways including herself.

But most of it is because it comes with envy of other people with different jobs, she joked. As a writer, I mostly sit in front of the computer or with a piece of paper, something, and I mostly live in my head. I spend a lot of time in my head. I am tremendously envious of people who create out in the world, engaged with the senses. I am envious of dancers who speak so powerfully through their gestures and their bodies, or chefs who tell us where they come from and the stories of their childhood with their meals and the flavours they create.

I spend a lot of time wishing that I had those jobs and that kind of envy seeps into my writing because I do care about how our senses take us back to the past and how we understand our world through hearing with music but also smell. One not terribly significant scene involves a dead whale and the putrid smell that comes with that. When I wrote it, I hadn't thought too much about scent and smell but since that draft of the novel came out on the page, I have started to think more about the history of smell and scent and the importance of all of that in our lives.

Describing herself as a slow writer, Rui Feng shared she is hard at work on her next book. To some degree it focuses again on the immigrant experience but through the eyes of younger characters: millennials, in a story partially set in San Francisco.

I continue to find fascination in music and other arts; it seeps in and drives what I do next, she said. It is still very much in the early stages. The things I say are amorphous as they are on the page, but I am interested in intergenerational relationship between

three millennials and a woman who was their caretaker and kind of a younger generation trying to understand an older woman with a very different life history. I am still thinking about understanding immigration, understanding when someone's life changes in the middle, in a very drastic way. I am interested in looking at younger people's perspectives on it. I am still thinking about the how, who and why of this picture.

?I wanted to convey [in *Swimming Back to Trout River*] ?a universal connection with readers, whether they speak Chinese or not. The ideal scenario is when someone is from a very different linguistic, or cultural background and find echoes of their childhood, their life, their parents, their friends, their children in this book. That is always my dream. If they have similar experiences as the characters in the novel, I hope they will use it to reflect on their experiences, whether they are happy or painful, and find some solace.?

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