

Storytelling: First Nations, medical thrillers, LGBTQ, and more

By Jon Scop.

Developing a Collaborative First Nations Storyteller-in-Residence Program (F3)

Two Vancouver Public Library librarians and a dynamic young Aboriginal storyteller presented a lively and informative session about VPL's innovative three-year program bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities through the power of storytelling.

Amanda Nahanne, now a Cultural Ambassador of the Squamish Nation, was VPL's first storyteller in residence, and recounted a time when the entire Lower Mainland was flooded and only Nch'ay (Mt. Garibaldi) stood above the sea.

Librarians Anne Olsen and Stephanie Kripps explained some of the many adjustments necessary in the transition from a writer in residence program to that of a storyteller. A traditional mentorship component was adjusted to reflect protocols for passing stories from one person to another, and stories invoked interesting questions of plagiarism and copyright. The panelists led us through the highlights of the community-led process that developed the program, and emphasized the importance of developing trusting relationships, remembering to always ask, and to be open to learning.

License to Heal, with Daniel Kalla (F13)

Participants at this informal and intimate author talk were treated to glimpses of the diverse worlds evoked in Daniel Kalla's novels.

Kalla, currently the department head of the Emergency Room at Vancouver's St. Paul Hospital, is a third generation physician. His grandfather was a Czech doctor who escaped Prague just before the Nazis invaded, and his father spent his teen years evading Nazis in Budapest. 2005's *Pandemic*, a thriller inspired by the SARS epidemic, was widely acclaimed, and more "medical thrillers" followed.

Kalla describes *Rage Therapy* as his "anti-psychiatry" novel, and told us about the time he read from the book at a conference of psychiatrists, one of whom stood up and enumerated the many, highly negative

things Kalla had to say about modern psychiatry. When the author admitted that he was indeed quite critical of the profession, the psychiatrist informed him that he had "pretty well hit the nail on the head."

Kalla's discussed and read from his latest novel, *The Far Side of the Sky*, which recounts a Jewish doctor's 1938 journey from Vienna to Shanghai, which became a thriving, international city during World War II due to its acceptance of thousands of Jews and other refugees. From an early interaction with Adolf Eichmann, to ethical dilemmas involving the medical treatment of wartime enemies, the work has been described as a page-turner as well as a love story. A sequel will be forthcoming in 2013.

Not Seeing Yourself: Exclusion of LGBTQ Protagonists in Young Adult Publishing (F18)

The story of a dispute that made the online rounds last year was the inspiration for a fascinating session presented by three BCLA groups: the Young Adults and Children's Services Section (YAACS), the Intellectual Freedom Committee and the new LGBTQ Interest Group responded to an incident in which two young adult authors claimed that a publisher insisted that one of their protagonists be changed from gay to straight. Although the facts in the dispute are unclear, they provided a springboard to a discussion of censorship, acceptance and the evolution of gay themes and characters in young adult publishing.

Rob Bittner wrote his MA thesis in Children's Literature on queer sexuality and religion in YA literature, and has been researching and publishing on the topic since 2008. He spoke of the evolution of gay characters who have evolved from having to die or suffer horribly for their sexuality, to a (generally) more enlightened present when queer themes can be celebrated. Bestselling author Susan Juby spoke about the writing of *Another Kind of Cowboy*, and reminded us of the differences between the relative acceptance of queer teens in urban areas of the Lower Mainland, and the difficulties teens still experience in more rural areas. Publisher Sarah Harvey of Orca Books, as well as author Tom Ryan, whose debut novel *Way to Go* has just been published by Orca, discussed pre-publication issues in

teen novels in general, as publishers decide on a target audience that may determine the level of overt sexuality in the work. Ryan's novel is semi-autobiographical, and he explained that the relative absence of actual sex reflects the reality of an isolated gay teen growing up in rural Nova Scotia.

Audience questions led to a freewheeling discussion of how librarians select YA materials in conservative areas of the province. While there is no clear consensus as to amount of industry pressure or self-censorship suppressing queer characters and themes in teen fiction, there was clear agreement that things are generally improving.

Ain't on the Globe & Mail Bestsellers List (F24)

BCLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee resumed a tradition which for some has become the high point of any BC Library Conference. With a tone quite different from other offerings, the session featured a group of about fifteen library workers and content creators as they presented 90-second reviews of the kind of materials you won't often find highlighted in the mainstream media. Books, zines, websites, films and even games were all fair game, as long as they weren't usually found in our library systems. As the publishing and distribution industries become more centralized, this session is presented to celebrate lesser-known and more diverse items that deserve to get attention.

This was definitely a session in which it was impossible to nod off. The 90-second rule was strictly enforced as a ticking time bomb on a large screen counted down the seconds. Those reviewers attempting to get a few extra words in were met with a cacophony of sounds as audience members rattled assorted percussion toys.

An annotated list of this year's titles may be found at <http://www.bcla.bc.ca/ifc/images/AintGM2012.pdf>. Everyone will have their individual favourites to take away, but a few which stood out for this writer were:

- Dropping Out (for Students), by Cavegirl. A zine for high-school age kids with instructions and advice for surviving without going to school or working.
- On the Line, by Frank Wolf. This DVD chronicles the author's travels as he and a friend cycled, hiked, rafted and kayaked the 1170 km. proposed route of the Embridge Northern Gateway Pipeline, in order to document what could easily be lost if the project is approved.
- V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, edited by Asfour John. Stories and poems emerging out of the Thursdays Writers' Collective, which meets at the Carnegie Centre.
- Paying for It, by Chester Brown. After the author ended a relationship with Sook-Yin Lee, he began visiting prostitutes, and this graphic novel documents his conversations with them.
- 10,000 Dresses, by Marcus Ewart. This children's picture book celebrates Bailey's realization of his true gender as a girl, despite the world telling him he's a boy.
- Working in the Shadows: A Year of Doing the Jobs (Most) Americans Won't Do, by Gabriel Thompson. The author works at cutting lettuce, processing chickens and other dangerous occupations that some would have us believe are "stolen" from American citizens by undocumented immigrants.

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