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By Drake Lowthers - November 14, 2023



CLEVELAND: Christena Gillis says love, acceptance and inclusion are three things that connects all of us together as human beings and when you read her new book Man Included some of those things come to mid.

Adam Rodgers, the president of the Rotary Club of Port Hawkesbury welcomed a roomful of guests to the Friends United International Convention Centre for what he hopes will be the first session in a series of engaging speakers.

Gillis highlighted it was great to see so many people, including other Rotarians out to her book reading.

"This started way back, I wrote most of it, and put it away, I didn't think it was good enough, took it out and fiddled around with it," she said. "I fiddled around with it so much; I could have played a dance in West Mabou."

Suggesting she was encouraged by friends and family to get it published, she fluctuated between the feelings of the book being good to thinking it was a piece of crap.

"I think people go through that when they're a creative type," Gillis said. "I don't use contractions, so the language seems a little still at first, and my publisher insisted on that, because it dates back to 1918, people didn't tend to use contractions that we tend to use now."

Speaking on the book itself, she explained, Clementine Ellis has always hated the fact that she is named after a long list of dead aunts, despite her father's reminders that her name means 'one who is merciful' and that her challenge in life will be to live up to her namesake.

The Ellis family has recently rented an old house in the community of Normaway, Cape Breton. Clementine is not pleased to discover that an odd man, Harry, comes with the house.

Adjusting to sharing a house with Harry is yet another challenge in Clementine's life, but as time passes, a strong bond is established between the two of them. Clementine's growing compassion for Harry is reinforced when she discovers the dark family secrets that have hung over Harry's head since he was a baby, secrets laden with stories of murder and revenge.

"This is a work of fiction, if you're from this area, first thing you're going to do is say 'Who's that? Oh I know that one,'" Gillis said, explaining it's pretty easy to get caught up into that sort of thing. "However it is a work of fiction. I'm a soup maker - I chop stuff up and throw stuff in a pot and stir it up, and that's what I did with this."

An interactive conversation followed, and the first question in a lot of attendees mind's was if the places mentioned in the book were real, something the author doubled down on the fact that they were fictionalized places.

"Because I looked on Google Earth to try and find them," which resulted in a roar of laughter across the room. "And one of the places, there's an island in the Bras d'Or."

Gillis mentioned one character in the book was named because there was a jar of mixed nuts sitting on the counter, highlighting another reason not to investigate the nitty gritty details of the book, to try and localize them.

Speaking of the fact when she reads, she doesn't like a lot of detail, is one of the reasons her book is told through dialogue instead of description.

When asked about her history of writing, the author mentioned other than a few short stories and a couple children's books, this was her first serious attempt at writing a novel.

"[It's about] having the courage to do different things in life," Gillis said.

Drake Lowthers

Drake Lowthers is the editor of The Strait Area Reporter, where he leads coverage of the people, stories, and events that shape northeastern Nova Scotia and western Cape Breton Island. Originally from the Annapolis Valley, and calling Antigonish home for the past decade, he has a passion for community journalism, and has told hundreds of stories that highlight local voices - from grassroots initiatives to provincial issues that affect everyday life - in a creative, yet thought-provoking way. His dedication to excellence in journalism has earned multiple recognitions on the national stage, confirming his belief in the vital role of local news in informing, connecting, and strengthening communities. When he isn't in the newsroom, Drake is deeply engaged in the Antigonish community, where he continues to advocate for collaboration and building a stronger future.

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