

Porter: Bringing the city together with a good read

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By
Catherine
Porter
Columnist

Here's why you should read Judy Fong Bates' *Midnight at the Dragon Café*: You'll sample the terror of landing in Canada to marry a stranger, you'll grasp what it's like to be erased from people's sightlines, you'll glow from sentences so perfect, they splash through your mind like fragrant bathwater.

Plus, it will give you an excuse to speak to strangers on the streetcar.



Porter hands over to Karen Mondok a copy of *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, on the Queen streetcar as part of the Toronto Public Library's one book program.

RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

I handed out more than 50 copies of the book on the Queen streetcar Monday as part of the Toronto Public Library's One Book campaign.

One wispy-haired woman said she would read it in hospital, while awaiting her death. "I have two blood clots in my brain," she told me. "I'm living on borrowed time."

The tiny Chinese lady perched beside her said the book echoed like her own life: Hers was also the only Chinese family in an otherwise white town. Her parents ran the local Chinese restaurant and yes, they lived upstairs. She too was the only English speaker in the family. I didn't ask if her brother and mother were lovers . . . She'll get to that part.

Even the dude whose earphones were threaded through metal holes in his earlobes eagerly accepted a copy.

This city devours books. I counted six open tomes on a quiet subway ride across town Monday — *The Biography of Che Guevara*, Lisa Jackson's mystery *Malice*, *Honey Flava* — a steamy read, a Google search later revealed — by Zane. I crouched to decipher a few titles and rudely interrupted for others. One startled reader shouted "It's really good," over her shoulder while beating an escape through the doors. Maybe she feared I'd sit on her lap.

What if I'd tugged the same book from my overstuffed bag and said: "Don't you think the Chinese tradition of adopting a Canadian name is strange? Imagine being named Annie after a Western movie character by some random man."

I wouldn't be a stalker, then. I'd be a kindred spirit.

The One Book campaign aims to turn the entire city into a book club. There are 1,500 copies of *Midnight at the Dragon Café* now floating around — 500 handed out on the TTC Monday. Another 1,100 were pumped into the library system. That gives you ample time to digest the book before April, when dozens of events celebrating it are planned around the city. You could take in a Cantonese opera, attend a University of Toronto lecture on the theme of "dueling identities," hear Fong Bates read at a Chinese restaurant on Dundas St. W. (The month is also packed with unrelated literary events, from book swaps to author readings.)

The coolest events will be the unplanned ones, between strangers on sidewalks and subway platforms. Books are private affairs with public intentions. They are meant to be debated. They foster compassion, dressing us briefly in the skins of other people. My mother, who grew up in revolutionary Hungary, always says: "The first people fascists imprison are writers."

This book offers plenty to discuss. It is the Chinese-Canadian version of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* — a coming of age story of a young, lonely girl growing up in small-town Canada. There is sacrifice, family secrets, the pull between opposing cultures. In a city where half the population was born elsewhere, many will relate.

I plan to give my copy to Maria, a Filipina nanny friend of mine. What is it like for her to tend to two Canadian children while her own three babies grow up without her a world away? Can she relate to the Chinese concept of "*hek fuh*" — swallowing bitterness — that Fong Bates describes?

I collect the characters of books I adore. They stay with me like friends. I made a new one in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. Mrs. Heighington is the mother of Annie's best friend. She is haggard and poor, giving birth too often and married to the wrong man who hollers at her from the television room. But, there is an irresistible romance about her. She spends her days listening to opera and reading Emily Dickinson while the dishes pile up. She sends her children out to collect cigarette butts which she later dissects, digging out the unsinged tobacco for her home-rolled smokes. She goes on strike from housework every spring to read Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Her life's motto is: "Life has a habit of getting in the way and you just have to do the best you can."

I often wish I was such a character, letting my hair go ratty and my roof sag. I resent Martha Stewart for convincing me my home's appearance reflects my spirit. Don't you?

Let me know on the subway if you see me.

Catherine Porter's column usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca

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