

Writers in the Library

By Matthew Murray.

"Writers in the Library" was the second of two panels organized by the BCLA Readers Advisory Interest Group at the 2013 BC Library Conference. It featured local writers discussing how libraries influence the written word and what they think libraries could and should be doing. The writers read library-themed passages from their own work and discussed their own personal experiences with libraries.

The writers present were Jen Sookfong Lee (the author of *The Better Mother*, a finalist for the 2012 City of Vancouver Book Award), Steven Galloway (a Creative Writing professor at UBC and the author of *The Cellist of Sarajevo*), and Billie Livingston (the author of *One Good Hustle*, which was nominated for both the Giller Prize and the CLA's Young Adult book of the year in 2012).

Lee talked about how she likes to write in her local library as staying at home makes her feel "like a mole." Lee considers the library to be the first place she goes when she wants to find something out, and for her most recent book used the library extensively to track the evolution of the gay community's response to AIDS through bound copies of 1980s gay newspapers.

Galloway spoke of libraries being better for writers than for "normal people." He loves finding repositories of weird and arcane stuff while researching at libraries, and said "you can't Google something you don't know you want to know."

Livingston said that libraries were a great resource for people doing research, especially to help find books that would otherwise be unavailable. She gave the example of her trying to track down a copy of a book about carnival strippers that cost several hundred dollars to buy. Thankfully she was able to borrow it through interlibrary loan!

After discussing what they liked about libraries, the writers went on to say what they hated! Complaints included overdue fines, how loud libraries have become, parents with unruly children, computer time limits, and bed bugs!

The writers were also disappointed that Vancouver no longer had a "one book, one community" program. The writers said that projects like that were not about the specific book (though they preferred it to have some connection to the city), but about people talking about books.



Galloway, Lee, and Livingston (L-R). Photo by Matthew Murray.

While the writers enjoyed the idea of doing readings in libraries, they found that readings are frequently hosted in sterile, visually unappealing rooms often hidden away in the basement or back of the library, where nobody was going to find them by happenstance. To make library readings better, the authors suggested that they should feel more like an event with multiple authors, snacks, and wine (if possible). Lee also promised to come and rap at any library that invited her.

In regards to the future of libraries, the writers hoped that they won't abandon books and the written word, saying that while it is important for libraries to offer many different services, a library and a community centre are not the same thing.

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