

From Muskoka Magazine

Story lines linked in two Kilbourne novels

First, we begin with some history about the novelist. Christina Kilbourne grew up in Muskoka and while currently living outside the area with her husband and two young children, still considers Muskoka her home.

Kilbourne graduated with an Honours BA in English Literature and Anthropology followed by a MA in Creative Writing and Literature.

Continuing to visit Muskoka and holiday here, she participates in such events as the Muskoka Novel Marathon. In fact she is a respected member of that group, having won several awards over the years. Kilbourne says “Muskoka is home for me”.

Kilbourne was a writer of articles and short stories. She then produced two novels – ***Day of the Dog-tooth Violets***, for which she received the New Muse award in 2001 for first time fiction, and ***The Roads of Go Home Lake***, an outgrowth of her participation and awards from the Muskoka Novel Marathon. It has just been published this August and is hailed as the long awaited sequel to ***Day of the Dog-tooth Violets***.

Kilbourne demonstrates a great understanding of and sensitivity to generational effects of family violence, adult illiteracy, racism and poverty in both novels.

The two novels are interconnected, about the same two families with parallel themes.

Day of the Dog-tooth Violets is the story of Nan and Gunner, children of Libby and Winnie (heroine of the second novel). They are classmates attending the small two room Go Home Lake Public School.

The story begins with Nan, who was adopted. As an adult returning from the west after her Mother dies, she discovers that her birth Mother was of Chippewa heritage.

As a child growing up in Port Hope, she has felt this unexplained affinity for fellow classmate Gunner, son of Chippewa mother and Norwegian father. Does this shared heritage explain that unspoken bond, interest and concern for one another? We find out in the sequel.

The plot moves from past to present with both Nan and Gunner as adults respectively reflecting back to their childhood, family life and school experiences. The contrast in their life situations is staggering with Nan experiencing the advantages of loving parents, comfortable life style and some status in the community.

Gunner, on the other hand, is the victim of family violence, poverty, and racism. While Nan excels at school, he can barely cope, fatigued and malnourished. We become sensitized to the effects of poverty on individuals as well as families and Native Americans in particular.

The Roads of Go Home Lake continues the story through the eyes of Winnie St. Pierre, mother of Gunner. It begins with Winnie and children's move to town after the death of unpredictable and abusive husband and father, Hamar, a Norwegian immigrant. Uneducated and unaccustomed to town life Winnie struggles as a single parent with six dependent children.

Winnie is well versed in hunting and trapping skills as she grew up in remote ghost town in back woods Muskoka, to which her aboriginal parents fled when she was six years old. But she lacks what is needed to cope in modern society, such as family and friends, education, confidence and social skills.

Isolated in town, her eldest son, Gunner, whom we met in the first novel, is her main support.

With the move in 1986, Winnie goes back in time, sharing her own life of nearly thirty years ago, in the 1960's.

Hers is the fight for survival and the search for family from whom she was banished at the age of sixteen when she was sexually assaulted. She is concerned too, with the child that her own Mother gave up years before her own birth.

Her struggle to cope with civilization and to find a job, leads her to Nan's Mother, local schoolteacher Libby McKenzie, who becomes her tutor.

There appears to be the same unspoken bond between Winnie and Libby as between their children, Gunner and Nan.

The mystery element in these novels exists as to the source of these felt connections between the two mothers and the two children of very different life situations and cultures.

But these novels are really about the domino effect of the family violence from generation to generation, as well as poverty, racism and illiteracy and finding one's own family of origin.

In *The Roads of Go Home Lake*, the inner strength, and personal growth of Winnie from abused daughter and wife to a self-sustaining confident person serves both as personal inspiration and reveals how the effects of generational violence, illiteracy and racism can be overcome.

We learn how these cycles are broken as Winnie takes responsibility for her search for identity and healing. It is about “closing the circle” by bringing fractured families together, as well as breaking the cycles of violence, poverty and illiteracy.

What is particularly special about this second novel is that some of the proceeds are to be donated to Canadian Aid Charity to support native victims of family violence and to promote literacy.

“*Day of the Dog-tooth Violets* is a sensitive, restrained yet subtly ambitious novel about the healing nature of memory and the persistence of blood and heritage,” states reviewer Alan Cumyn.

Nancy Bauer reports this about *Day of the Dog-tooth Violets*: “A strong novel, polished, well-paced, expertly structured. And even better, the characters are alive and their interactions nicely done, completely believable. Kilbourne also creates a strong sense of place.”

In my opinion the same comments can be made about *The Roads of Go Home Lake*, just out in print as this review is put to pen or should I say computer. Both books are engrossing, certainly easily read, the first with less than 200 pages, the second with just over 300.

Both novels share strong messages about overcoming the generational effects of the different kinds of abuse and healing.

Review by Diane O'Hara

Copyright © Muskoka Magazine