

Niverville author wins prestigious prize

by SVJETLANA MLINAREVIC

As Manitobans celebrate Pride this month, one author that should be on everybody's lips is K.R. Byggdin whose book *Wonder World* is quickly becoming known in literary circles.

Raised in Niverville but residing in Halifax, Byggdin's book has won the prestigious Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award which comes with a \$30,000 prize.

"That was very unexpected. I was up against two really stellar writers – Bobby French and Lisa Moore – these are people with large national platforms and profiles who are publishing really large presses like Harper Collins... Here I was feeling a little, I guess, like an underdog with this story set mostly in Manitoba, published by a small indie publisher – Great plains Publications – out of Winnipeg. It was quite a surprise and a shock. It was a really lovely experience. I felt at the gala that the audience was very receptive to what I had to say in my acceptance speech. People were really there to celebrate and were excited by the types of stories I was putting out into the world, which is just a really, really lovely feeling," said Byggdin.

Wonder World centers around 27-year-old Isaac Funk, a Mennonite-born, queer man who left his hometown of Newfield, Manitoba, for Halifax, Nova Scotia, to explore his authentic identity. After receiving an inheritance from his late grandfather, Isaac must come back to face the friends and family he left a decade earlier and decide if he wants to make Newfield his home.

Through clever prose, factual and fictional comparisons to towns in the Southeast, and a bit of good-natured poking at Mennonite traditions, the writing both draws those familiar with the area into the novel and illuminates the history of the region to those who may be unfamiliar with rural ways of life.

"...What's really special to me is that he finds a place of community and belonging in this fictional town of Newfield Manitoba as an openly pansexual, openly queer person. He does that without having to compromise his identity and who he is, but finds a way to find belonging in his small town as well as having folks embrace him just as he is, which I think is really lovely," said Byggdin.

"It's been really amazing to



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Niverville author K.R. Byggdin won the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award which comes with a \$30,000 prize for their book *Wonder World*.

see the positive response just keep building and building especially since at this point it was published in April 2022."

Byggdin said he will use the money to pay for a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the University of Guelph in the fall.

Byggdin grew up in Niverville and drew inspiration from that experience in setting and character development. They brought in a lot of Mennonite culture which was gleaned from having Mennonite friends, going to a Mennonite church, and eating the food.

"It's not autobiographical by any means. It's definitely a novel not a memoir, but I drew inspiration from my surroundings as I was growing up."

Byggdin said they loved storytelling since they were a young child and their experience writing began through fan fiction from movies, tv shows, and books that they loved as a child.

"I've always loved storytelling and performing and writ-

ing, those sorts of things, but it was more around the last two years 2017/2018 that I got more serious about thinking what would it mean to write stories about things that matter to me about today adding my won unique fresh take on things rather than simply expanding someone else's world.

They said they were inspired by Miriam Toews and reading her work about Steinbach and seeing characters and situations, streets, and landmarks and recognizing them.

"...Oh wow! Stories can come from any place! It can come from places I know. The situations, the people, the landscapes I grew up with are just as special as say Toronto, or London, or medieval England. That there is something special and unique in the place where I grew up in Southeastern Manitoba that was worth exploring through writing."

Growing up as a child sometimes the only visible queer trans folks Byggdin was

exposed to would be writers and the stories they developed such as Ivan Coyote and their account of growing up in a small town in the Yukon. Byggdin said they would like to bring more queer and trans characters into Canadian literature to make people feel represented. They said in Hollywood the story of a struggling queer kid who comes out is shown as an awful experience and that while it's important to talk about that experience it can create an impression that having that identity is negative.

"I really wanted with *Won-*

der World to write a story about a character who does go through difficult times, but ultimately finds joy and belonging and acceptance and happiness and community right where he is in Southeastern Manitoba. And is able to really celebrate his queerness as a strength and not just a difficulty in his life."

Whether queer and trans people are accepted in southeastern Manitoba, Byggdin said it's a complex issue but the appearance of Pride parades in the Southeast shows that there is support for the LGBTQ2S people.

"I think it's a complex issue, but I also think there are many, many people who do support and love their friends, their family members. In writing *Wonder World*, it's kind of that hopeful story of saying this is what our Southeastern Manitoba could look like and I hope will grow into and blossom into as people are able to find acceptance and stay where they are.

"Because I think it's a common misconception that's very easy to say of a place like Steinbach or Niverville, 'Being queer and trans that's not something we do here,' or 'I've never met anyone like that that's an idea you must have gotten from someone else,' or 'That's the thing people do in Winnipeg not here,' and that's simply not true. Queer and trans folks have been part of these communities – rural, Mennonite, religious, any way you slice it – for the whole history of Southeastern Manitoba. So, it's important to recognize that in the stories we tell not to reinforce those false narratives that queer and trans people don't belong or don't have a place in Southeastern Manitoba."

In terms of representation of queer and trans people in literature, Byggdin said they're optimistic about how queer and trans literature in Canada continues to evolve and they said they're glad to be a small part of that with *Wonder World*.

Currently, the author is working on their next novel, but won't share any details about it other than to say it will take place in Manitoba.

"I feel if I talk about it a lot, I'll end up feeling like the work is already done when it isn't very much. I definitely have more stories that I want to tell featuring more queer and trans characters and I'm really excited to do that through the schooling I'm going to be taking and through the works I continue to publish as well."

-With files from Nicole Buffie

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RCMP HANDOUT

If you've seen this stolen e-bike, the RCMP would like to hear from you.

Electric bike stolen

by GREG VANDERMEULEN

Police are on the look out for an e-bike stolen during the middle of the day from an address on the 300 block of Second Street in Steinbach.

RCMP say the EDGO electric bike was taken between 12:15 p.m. and 1:30 p.m.

on June 4.

The bike has a silver frame with black fenders, and is 60 cc with black saddle bags.

Anyone with information is asked to contact the Steinbach RCMP at 204-326-4452 or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 or www.manitobacrimestoppers.com.