

Real-life opal theft inspires plot twist in first novel by museum administrator-turned-mystery authoress

Dennis Hanagan

A first-time author from King West has based her debut novel on a true heist that took place at the Royal Ontario Museum and caused repercussions around the world.

Now her book is causing repercussions for her—good ones, in the form of pleased reader reviews on the internet.

Luba Lesychyn settled down to write *Theft By Chocolate* after a 20-year stint at the ROM where she served in the education and consulting departments and then in the Project Office.

She was in the Project Office when the Crystal was built. "I was the lucky person responding to people who either loved or hated that design," she laughs after a book-signing session in February at



King West author Luba Lesychyn signs her book at John & Richmond's Chapters.

the Richmond and John Chapters store.

Theft by Chocolate—described as a light, humorous mystery—tells the story of quirky heroine and chocolate-addict Kalena Boyko who heads to Canada's largest museum as an administrator and turns into a sleuth to track down the culprit who stole

the world's oldest piece of chocolate from a Mayan exhibit.

Lesychyn based the plot on a real life heist of an opal jewel at the ROM in the 1980s. The thief was never found, but the jewel turned up many years later in a Hong Kong black market.

"In the first draft of the

book I didn't have that particular story line in there. It was during a third draft that I was reminded of this opal heist and it tweaked my imagination."

"It (the theft) made an impact around the globe in terms of the way the heist was perpetrated. People found out how it had been done and security technologies around the world were at risk because of it," says Lesychyn.

She received her first writing review at age 8 when her teacher read aloud one of her stories to his class.

"People laughed and I thought 'that's interesting.' But I didn't become a serial writer. I let it go for a pretty long time and came back to it much later in life," says Lesychyn.

It was her passion for films that drew Lesychyn back to writing. "I'm a big

film lover and I had started writing about my Toronto (International) Film Fest experience every year because I had a friend who was living overseas who used to go to the festival with me. I was basically blogging...before that term even existed."

Over time more people were attracted to her film reviews. "The next thing I knew I had an international audience reading my yearly journal about the film fest," she says.

After that came a creative writing course at Humber College and subsequently her book. "With creative writing you can escape into a different world. I felt I was using a different part of my brain."

"There's something very satisfying about that, just making up your own little world and characters. It can be cathartic, too, because

you can draw a lot of yourself into your story."

There was an aspect of writing she hadn't anticipated—public speaking. "I'm shy. Most writers are. We're observers and so... you're not thinking that someday I'm going to have to do readings of my book in front of people."

Maybe it was her dad who gave her the gumption she needed. "My father was an amazing orator. He was very involved in the Ukrainian community. I think maybe I inherited some of that," says Lesychyn.

She has one and maybe two sequels in mind. "I've decided I've got the discipline it takes to finish a book. I've got the drive and desire."

For more information about Luba visit www.chocolativre.com.

Airport debate to continue March 25: curfew violations reported

Dennis Hanagan

The city's Executive Committee will deal with the controversial Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport (BBTCA) at a special meeting March 25.

It'll look at a request for an amendment to the Tripartite Agreement (TA) that oversees the airport. Porter Airlines wants jets and longer runways for the airport, and needs a TA amendment to do that. All three TA members—the city, the Toronto Port Authority, and the federal government—would have to agree to it.

It was standing-room-only in city council chambers Jan. 27 when opponents and supporters got together to hear an update on Porter's plans. Speakers for and against received applause from the crowd, although it was more robust for opponents.

City staff want more details. "Outstanding questions" remain, they say—Transport Canada has not provided confirmation of the feasibility and impacts of a runway extension, jet CS-100-builder Bombardier has not provided enough information about whether the jets will meet noise guidelines, and the TA, which expires in 2033, does not provide for its own renewal or extension.

Councillor Pam McConnell, whose Ward 28 includes Toronto Island, opened the meeting saying she's "not very neutral" on Porter's plans. However, many councillors "are not close" to the issue and must understand the importance of what they vote on, she said.

She set out the consequences succinctly: they have the opportunity to "get it right or get it wrong."

Less than two hours after the meeting began 85 people had registered to speak. Opponents questioned Porter's expansion plans and its effects on wildlife, air quality, the lake's water quality, boating and how fuel would be stored at the airport.

They said jet noise would interrupt Island events, and increased passenger use would create parking problems for Bathurst Quay residents.

One man said he found it easy to get to Pearson airport and questioned the stance that expanding BBTCA would be a convenience for Downtown travellers. "I don't get this convenience argument," he said.

TPA President Geoffrey Wilson told the meeting a poll revealed 90% of Torontonians said the island airport is a valuable asset for the city. He said 80% of the airport's flights take place over water.

Trying to assuage opponents concerns, he said "we don't aspire to be a mini Pearson on the lake." He said TPA's criteria for the airport is that aircraft meet noise restrictions, there be no negative impact on the environment, and the surrounding area be made no less livable.

BBTCA has an 11 p.m. to 6:45 a.m. noise curfew. Wilson fielded a complaint from the audience about a past-midnight flight. During the ice storm he said there were six curfew violations and the landings were not for safety reasons. The TPA fined Porter for all six, he said.

A city staff report to the Executive Committee says BBTCA has experienced significant growth following Porter's 2006 launch with annual passenger volumes rising to 2.3 million in 2012 from 26,000 in 2006. It's the ninth busiest airport in Canada.

The report notes "advances in jet technology have significantly improved the noise and emissions performance of such aircraft."

It goes on to say the TPA should have a master plan drawn up for BBTCA in consultation with the city, Transport Canada, stakeholders, and the public.

Toronto's Board of Health has recommended against Porter's plans.

Storage needed

A non-profit group that donates fresh fruit to neighbourhood food banks needs help from homeowners in Trinity-Bellwoods, Dundas-Spadina, and Dundas-Carlaw.

Not-Far-From-The-Tree needs homeowners, faith groups, or businesses that have space where NFFTT can store its bikes and small trailers so volunteers can venture into local neighbourhoods this summer to pick fruit in homeowners' backyards and haul it to food banks.

All homeowners give their consent. The fruit—cherries, apples, and grapes—are divided among the homeowner, a local food bank and volunteer pickers.

NFFTT needs space for a bike and small trailer. To help, call (647) 774-7425 or email storage@notfarfromthetree.org.

College St. study to commence

Dennis Hanagan

City planning staff will study College Street between Bathurst and McCaul to determine suitable future development there, and they want members of the public to form an Advisory Committee to help.

Advisory council members would include local residents, business owners, landowners and representatives from local organizations and the development industry.

Trinity-Spadina councillor Adam Vaughan told a Feb. 11 meeting at Lillian H. Smith library "we want very precise, made-to-order college Street solutions."

The study would examine building height and massing, public areas, streetscape and landscape improvements. Residential sidestreets won't be included. A final report will go to Toronto and East York Community Council next January.

The 484 Spadina site, where a controversial 22-storey tower is proposed to replace the Waverley Hotel and the Silver

Dollar, will be in the study.

There'll be no development freeze in the study area while it's underway. However, development applications will be evaluated with the study in mind, said city senior planner Marian Prejel.

Reminded that many historical buildings are in the area, Prejel said they could be listed for possible heritage designation.

A woman questioned having corporate representatives on the Advisory Council where they could push for large-scale developments.

Vaughan said "we need to get in front of the (development) industry and become more proactive and not simply respond to a dream a property owner has."

He referred to "cowboy planning" and how developers head to the Ontario Municipal Board when they don't get their way from the city.

The first meeting for the Advisory Council, which will look at "issues and opportunities" in the study area, is targeted for March 18.

Rooming house turn Waverley project from student housing to rental

Dennis Hanagan

The architect of a proposed 22-storey residential building that would replace the 114-year-old Waverley Hotel and its sicklekick the Silver Dollar faced an antagonistic standing-room only audience at the Lillian H. Smith Library Feb. 11.

"Do you care what any of us think," a woman asked David Butterworth of Kirkor Architects and Planners. The proposal by the Wynn Group of Companies "is out of proportion to the neighbourhood, out of character," she said.

City planning staff told Toronto and East York Community Council in January the proposal is "not supportable," adding it doesn't promote "a harmonious fit" with the neighbourhood.

The Wynn Group has taken its proposal to the Ontario Municipal Board with a pre-hearing set for March 25. A full hearing could take place in late summer or early fall.

The developer wants the OMB to rule on its application to have zoning for the site amended. If the board rules in Wynn's favour it could order the city to issue a building permit.

Butterworth told the gathering that with the lot size at one-third of an acre it's a "very tight site" to build on. But he felt the proposal is in keeping with the size of other buildings in the area. It

would have 220 units with 70 underground parking spaces.

A proposal for a University of Toronto student residence at 245 College seems to have triggered more applications for tall buildings around College and Spadina, among them Wynn's.

Trinity-Spadina Councillor Adam Vaughan understood the original Wynn plan intended to have privately-owned and operated student housing. But action by the city seems to have forestalled that.

Vaughan explained in an interview: "The 245 College (site) is the first one, and then we get four or five right afterward, all looking to replicate the model."

"In fact, we (the city) changed the zoning bylaw around rooming houses, and they (Wynn) may have

changed this proposal as a result of the steps we took to protect neighbourhoods from these massive rooming houses which (the Wynn proposal) originally came in as," said Vaughan. "It's still a substantial building in a very bad spot."

In addition to its height residents worried about the shadow it would cast on nearby Lord Lansdowne Public School. Butterworth said the shadow "moves very fast across the site." A student at the school said car traffic in an adjacent laneway would cause pollution in the schoolyard.

A questioner felt the laneway was too narrow to accommodate 2-way traffic. However, city senior planner Marian Prejel explained the city requires new developments, adjacent to laneways, to be set back far enough to create six-metre wide laneways.

Vaughan told the meeting the proposal causes "significant concerns" for the city. He said for one thing the developer is using "compressed floors" so that units would have only 8-foot high ceilings as opposed to the standard 10 feet.

A representative with an architectural conservancy group suggested incorporating the broad forefront of the 4-storey Waverley into the plan.

The Wynn Group is adamant about saving the Silver Dollar sign, said Butterworth.

The city's Heritage Preservation Services is scheduled to study whether the Silver Dollar and the Waverley are historically worth saving.

A merchant from Kensington Market, just blocks from the development, expressed concern that the 12,000 square-foot second floor retail space might someday become a grocery store.

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