

Novel rooted in Victoria setting

Marjorie Celona's *Y*, the story of a newborn girl abandoned at the YMCA, has earned a Giller Prize nomination



BY AMY SMART, TIMES COLONIST SEPTEMBER 9, 2012

Within the first three pages of Marjorie Celona's debut novel *Y*, named to the Scotiabank Giller Prize longlist this week, the downtown Victoria setting begins to take shape.

A Langford man drives into town along the TransCanada Highway as it narrows into Douglas Street, passing Thompson's Foam Shop, White Spot, Red Hot Video, the Traveller's Inn, the bright red brick of City Hall and the McDonald's on the corner that fills with teenaged beggars.

If he had more time, he'd drive right to the tip of the Island and watch the sun come up over Dallas Road. Instead, he turns toward Christ Church Cathedral and waits to be the first person through the doors at the YMCA, where he watches a mother abandon her newborn child.

Setting was important for the Victoria-born-andbred author, whose debut novel follows the abandoned child through an adolescence of foster care.

"I think, in some ways, this novel for me is a way of memorializing Victoria, from when I lived there, when I was a girl," Celona, 31, said from her current home in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"At some point, I decided to cover it with as many specific details as possible that I could remember through the late '80s and through the '90s in Victoria."

Celona grew up in Fernwood and graduated from Victoria High School before studying creative writing at the University of Victoria.

She has since moved around the United States for various fellowships and residencies, including completing her master of fine arts degree at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She wrote Y while thinking of home, from a cabin in upstate New York, during a one-year fellowship at Colgate University.

"I was sort of in the forest - it had a very similar climate, that kind of dark earthiness that a forest has," she said. "To be there in a place that is so far away from Vancouver Island, but to be reminded of my home, made it easy to write about Vancouver Island."

The first seed of Y was planted much earlier, however, when Celona was preparing for an internship with UVic's literary magazine, The Malahat Review. Nervous about the gig, she pored over back issues, looking for editorial biases and anything else that might ease her transition into the role. But she got distracted by the layout and font - specifically the beautiful drop caps (large, stylized letters at the beginning of a story), and even more specifically, the frequency of the letter "Y" in that form. Before conceiving of the novel's main character, Shannon, or her mother, Yula, she began writing Y.

"The initial inspiration was a fascination with the letter Y itself. The sound of it, the shape of it, symbols of it that I kept noticing," she said. "And from there, a first line popped into my head: My life begins at the Y."

She wrote a short story based on the theme for a UVic fiction workshop in 2004. And although polished drafts were published and anthologized, she felt the story was unfinished.

"It had unanswered questions," she said. While Shannon was a fully developed character, her mother remained a mystery. "I wrote the novel, essentially, to finally find Shannon's mother."

Celona didn't grow up in foster care, but said she can relate to Shannon's character in other ways.

"Shannon and I share a recklessness of spirit," she said. "We're both Island children and we both felt and feel confined by being on an Island. But more than just a geographical recklessness, I think we both have restless souls. I move around a lot; I move almost every year. I'm not sure what that's about, but to me, that's the part of Shannon I can relate to the most - that sort of eye-on-the-door quality."

Celona did research for Y in two stages. First, she read newspaper articles and books about children who had been abandoned. After writing her first draft of the novel, she spoke with people who had dealt with the foster-care system, interviewing social workers, foster parents and foster children through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

It was partially to ensure her facts were straight and scenarios she'd created were realistic. She also wanted to make sure she was hitting the right emotional notes, she said, "to get a sense of what it would feel like to yearn for your birth parents."

While facts shifted in the story, the emotional tenor of the novel didn't.

"You can research about anything, but you can't research somebody's reaction to something, or how anybody feels," she said.

"You've either got it inside you to write, or you don't."

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