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THE COMMUNITY WEEKLY

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WordFest volunteer reader Andrew MacPherson and Anne Logan, co-ordinator for the volunteer reader program, with some of this year's books. Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald

Readers get to shape WordFest selections

KATHLEEN RENNE
FOR NEIGHBOURS

When October rolls around, lovers of all things literary have something to get excited about: WordFest. With more than 70 authors present and 60 events spread between Calgary and Banff, it's nothing short of a bookish extravaganza.

Like many big events, WordFest employs a small army of volunteers. Unlike many big events, it uses volunteer input to influence festival programming, courtesy of its Volunteer Reading Program.

WordFest artistic associate Anne Logan, who also heads the program, says volunteers are necessary to help WordFest staff get through all the books publishers and publicists send them for possible inclusion at WordFest.

"We probably have more than 200 books," Logan says. "It's impossible for us to read them all, so it's nec-

essary to have other people help us read the books and tell us what they think about them."

In other words, the public is involved in helping choose the writers.

Volunteer readers drop by the WordFest office (which Logan likens to a library containing as-yet-unpublished books), and either select a book off the shelf that interests them or ask her for a recommendation. The volunteer then has two weeks to read and return the book, accompanied by a short review.

"If a volunteer raves about a book, then festival staff (members) are more likely to consider it for

WordFest," says Logan.

Logan says U.K. author Sarah Winman will be part of this year's WordFest, largely because of the Volunteer Reading Program.

"We hadn't even really paid attention to her book (When God Was a Rabbit) until a volunteer read it and brought it to my attention," she says. "I took a look at it and I really loved it... I read it, but wouldn't have if a volunteer hadn't read it first."

Volunteer reader Kathy Lewis says mysteries are her favourite reads, but she says reviewing books for WordFest has expanded her literary horizons into humour and poetry.

"I tend to gravitate toward a mystery, but if there's not a mystery there, I'll get something else," she says.

In fact, Lewis has already bought her ticket to see local humorist and travel writer Will Ferguson at this year's WordFest, after the Volunteer Reading Program

introduced her to his work a few years ago.

"He wrote about his travels in Japan. It was quite fun to read. I read it as a manuscript, and that was quite neat," she says. "You feel you are at the early stages of something."

Lewis estimates she previewed between 10 and 12 books for this year's WordFest, no onerous task for her.

"I read like a person might eat candy," she says laughing, adding that reading on the bus and before bed is just a part of her daily ritual.

Fellow volunteer Andrew MacPherson, an engineer, also describes himself as an "avid reader."

"I like to read new literary novels, and that's exactly what WordFest is looking to have read," he says. "I always read lots, but this gives me the chance to read novels a couple of months ahead of everyone else."

SEE WORDFEST, PAGE N6



Take part in this year's WordFest, through Oct. 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and wordfest.com.

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WORDFEST

MacPherson, who read a half-a-dozen books for WordFest this year, says one of his favourites of the past few months has been Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers: A Novel*. DeWitt has been shortlisted for a Man Booker Prize, an honour that has interfered with the possibility of him attending WordFest.

Both Lewis and MacPherson are aware of the subjective nature of reviewing, a key part of their job as volunteer readers.

"What I like, someone else might not like, and vice versa," says Lewis, saying she bases her reviews on factors like how easy it is for a reader to follow the story and how the author structures it.

MacPherson says he will read a book about almost anything, as long as it's well written.

"It's important how the story is told and how the writer writes it," he says, adding he relies upon the reviewing guidelines WordFest provides, focusing his comments on what he thinks the author is trying to achieve and how the novel affects him.

MacPherson says he's noticed an evolution of the Volunteer Reading Program over the five years in which he's been involved.

"At first, I'd just pick myself what books I wanted to read," he says. "Now, staff will give you a book they'd like you to review. You're given the feeling you are making a real contribution to the artists they're picking."

Logan says she doesn't put books on the shelf for volunteers to select if WordFest staff have already decided to program that particular author. And she'll usually gather at least two volunteer reviews for each

book she wants read.

"It's a really great way for us to gauge the public's reaction to a certain book," says Logan, who has read 65 books so far for this year's WordFest.

The Volunteer Reading Program starts in February and runs until about June. Logan estimates there are 40 to 50 people in the program, ranging in age from university students to retirees.

"It's actually great because it represents the cross-section of WordFest audiences. A retired teacher and a university student can read the same book," she says.

And there's no minimum (or maximum) on how many books a volunteer is required to read. Logan says some volunteers read one book per session, while others read 15.

And as for requirements to participate in the Volunteer Reading Program? Logan says there aren't any.

"We aren't picky," she says, adding the only attributes a volunteer must have is the desire (and ability) to read a book within two weeks and provide a review.

Obviously, one of the advantages of the Volunteer Reading Program, over other volunteer opportunities at WordFest, is the flexibility inherent in the task.

"We have a lot of readers who want to be involved with the festival but aren't around. This program gives people an option to be involved somehow, even if they aren't around for the actual event," says Logan.

The one problem for volunteer readers like Lewis?

Exposure to all the different books and authors provokes a desire to collect a lot of books, which can be a costly habit.

She keeps her library card current.