

The Next Chapter

Meet Jo Steffens,
WordFest's new director

Jo Steffens attributes her love of all things literary to her parents' choice to raise her *sans* TV.

The new director of Calgary's WordFest, takes over from Anne Green, who was with the literary festival since its inception. Steffens grew up shuttling back and forth between Calgary and San Francisco and says that, during those years, she found solace in books. She has fond memories of her mother at her bedside reading to her from Pippi Longstocking or the Heidi chronicles, and holds a special place in her heart for one of the first novels she read on her own: C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. "I just absolutely fell in love with it," she says.

Her love of books led to a love of writing and, by her early 20s, Steffens was getting published in a variety of newspapers and magazines. She would end up working as a senior editor for one of the early social media websites during San Francisco's dot-com boom, eventually transferring to New York. There, she moved through a variety of positions in the literary world, including editor, author, publisher, manager, producer, bookseller and, up until her decision to take on the WordFest directorship, curator of exhibits and programs at the Municipal Art Society of New York.

Steffens says her decision to leave this role and the publishing epicentre of North America to work with Calgary's 16-year-old literary festival was driven by both a readiness for a new career challenge and a desire to be closer to her extended family here.

Hired in large part for her experience and savvy with technology, Steffens says she's excited to bridge the gap between technology and literature at WordFest, and her plans include creating a stronger online presence to encourage audience participation and interaction, including outdoor digital billboards programmed with the work of a festival author.

Steffens' desire to give WordFest a technological boost will benefit from the festival's new partnership with Hôtel Le Germain and the



cutting-edge conference facilities the downtown boutique property brings to the table. "I'm excited by how different platforms and applications encourage people to read and to write," she says.

Although Steffens believes technology is the key to keeping literature relevant especially to the younger generation, she says her own lifelong devotion to the written word will always be grounded in books in their traditional, paper-printed form.

"I care very much about stories, writers and artists — and I care about this city," she says.

—Cara Casey

WordFest 2011 takes place Oct. 11 to 16. For information on festival events check out wordfest.com, or follow the festival on Twitter @wordfesttweets

Jo Steffens' Top Reads of 2011

WordFest's director tells us which of the year's books — so far — have made the biggest impressions on her.

**THE SISTERS BROTHERS, PATRICK DEWITT
(HOUSE OF ANANSI, 2011)**

"The author has a completely original perspective and he puts a new twist on the Old West that is both violent and funny."

**THE RETURN, DANY LAFERRIÈRE
(DOUGLAS & MCINTYRE, 2011)**

"This is a beautiful novel, written in verse, and it won many awards in the original French edition."

**DOGS AT THE PERIMETER, MADELEINE THIEN
(MCLELLAND & STEWART, 2011)**

"She's a really talented writer who has flown under the radar, and I believe this could be her breakout book."

**WHEN GOD WAS A RABBIT, SARAH WINMAN
(HEADLINE REVIEW, 2011)**

"This is a delightfully imaginative book with an eccentric cast of characters, siblings as best friends — and a talking rabbit."