

WRITE

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Take It Outside

Authors in the park

BY ELEANOR P. SAM

THE CONVENTIONAL PLACES for a book launch or author reading include libraries, book stores, or book clubs. But Shakespeare's plays are hosted in Toronto's High Park, so why not offer authors a similar platform?

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is, after all, not only home to many creative writers and storytellers but to some of the finest parks in the province. Hence, the Authors in the Park initiative was born. When I shared the idea with other writers, the response was tepid at best, but I saw its potential. Connecting with book clubs via Instagram and posters in neighbourhood storefront windows increased interest.

So, enveloped by nature, on Saturday, June 1, six Ontario-based authors read from their work in Home Smith Park, which is historically significant as a traditional Indigenous trade route. Attendees gathered by banks of the Humber River, as did groups of mallards, led by green-headed, yellow-billed males. The air was replete with melodic birdsong as yellow-brown Baltimore orioles and northern red cardinals observed the activities from nearby maple trees.

At the outset, the intent was to have six authors walking along designated paths, reading, pausing, and addressing audience questions. Writers were unsure, however, of their ability to attract followers and decided that a collective gathering and reading was a safer bet. Accordingly, the approach morphed, and all readings were held in one location with questions taken after each one. We had a range of writers working in genres including women's and contemporary fiction, suspense, memoir, and poetry. For the most part, the authors did not know each other, yet the flow of their narratives was complementary. Attendees sat along park benches or in folding chairs, immersed in the readings and enjoying humour, excitement, wonder, pain, mystery, and reflection.

P.H. Oliver read from her debut novel, *The Gynesaur*, a humorous tale about four women from different walks of life and their bond of friendship that defied extinction.

Next, I introduced listeners to my novel *Manor on the Viridian Sea*, about a Canadian millennial's fantasy of life on a Caribbean island that turns into a series of trap doors.

Jass Aujla's piece from her riveting page-turner about identical twin sisters, *Anjali and Riah in Next of Twin*, kept the audience on the edge of their seats.



Kris Purdy's excerpt from her novel, *Paradise Pending*, gave a glance into partners Dani and Jo's mind-bending medical drama that unfolded on a vacation in Spain.

Laura Pratt shared a cringe worthy passage of a blow-out scene that became a public spectacle from her memoir *Heartbroken*.

Lastly, Maureen Hynes took the audience on a series of journeys through her poetry collection *Take the Compass*.

The event's verdant surroundings came with challenges. The rush of the Humber cascading in the background competed with the readings, making it difficult to grasp the nuances in some pieces. Park rules prohibited the use of microphones, although one author persisted and brought a portable public address system, like those used by tour guides. This proved helpful and should be considered when readings in open spaces are undertaken.

The event culminated with authors selling and signing their books. A giveaway table filled with gently used works by other writers was provided. Excess copies of these books were donated to local initiatives, such as little free libraries. Participating authors left the park as colleagues and agreed to create a virtual writer's group and ongoing events.

The stories told, whether in narrative or poetic forms, were many and as diverse as the authors themselves. There was not a "danger of telling a single story," as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns.

Parks with their fresh air, natural beauty, and walking paths are healthy calming places. Our city has a treasure trove of them. It is our hope that other authors will embrace this approach and read from their stories in unconventional spaces like parks while partaking of nature's abundant offerings.

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Eleanor P. Sam is a Toronto-based novelist, born on a sugar plantation in Guyana, South America, with West and Central African ancestry. Her two novels are *The Wisdom of Rain* (2nd edition, Isalea Publishing, 2022) and *Manor on the Viridian Sea* (Isalea Publishing, 2023). Keenly interested in her cultural and historical heritage, her stories reflect and express this legacy. Eleanor received her bachelor's degree from York University and her master's degree from University of Toronto.