

Claire Cameron is coming to Shelburne Public Library on June 22

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

When Claire Cameron was young, she was working in a summer camp in Algonquin Park. It was 1991 and at that moment, a Canadian couple were attacked and killed by a black bear. Statistically, bear attacks are extremely rare, with a few people per year being fatally attacked in the whole of Canada or the U.S.

Cameron was back working in the park and was haunted by the bear attack on the two people. No one was there but their bodies were found five days later. The bear was found still with the remains, clear evidence of the attack, and was shot.

At nine years old, Cameron's father died of skin cancer ? melanoma. His death was quite protracted and difficult for his young daughter to witness. Seeking healing from her grief, she turned to hiking in the wilderness, which brought her back to herself. Hiking and her connection to nature over the years, her time in Algonquin Park working as a hiking guide were critical to her.

Still, the story of the bear attack haunted Cameron, bears obsessed her even and she was determined to discover the truth of the bear attack story. She began back in the Algonquin Park working with a scientist to learn more about them.

Earlier this week, the Citizen had the chance to interview Claire Cameron about her remarkable new book, which is a mystery she decided to solve, a fiction of a bear's life and her own memoir, interwoven and powerful.

All the elements of ?How to Survive a Bear Attack: a Memoir? are pressed by her cancer diagnosis. Her father's death was suddenly her own future, with a current prognosis of three years to live. Of the danger behind a bear's attack, she notes that for her, that very unlikely event is not what will end her life ? her own genetics will do that. So, her vision of how to live is also her own.

She told the Citizen, ?I've been around black bears; they were all peaceful encounters. This is a book about how to co-exist with bears and they with us. I was trying to address my fear; at most, one person a year in North America is attacked by a bear. That's a very low number.?

She was 19 years old when the attack on the couple happened and she read about it in the paper, saying, ?My book is about how it happened. It links my cancer to the bear attack ? how disease can strike a life.?

During the research to discover what prompted the bear's attack, there been thoughts that there were groceries and there were, but the hamburger meat in a package near the fire was left untouched. The bear's autopsy confirmed the findings of the first responder camp staff once they had found the bear, killed and brought it back.

The second element of Cameron's book is a black bear's behaviour, its life as the fiction in her book. For that she wrote, working with a scientist to get a picture beside in science but in a fictional story.

Cameron attended Queens University to study history and went to California as an outdoor guide ? ?It was such a big part of my life,? she commented.

When, at 45, she was diagnosed with skin cancer, the same as her father and told to stay out of the sun, she gasped, ?What am I going to do? That was my whole life.

?It's still a work in progress,? she quipped.

?I worked in Algonquin Park. It was a paradise and it was so shocking, I think for me, learning how to live with a chronic condition which was not necessarily a death trap ? there is still time.?

She said, "I've started to hike in November ? the hiking trails are empty then and I enjoy the bad weather."

Philosophically, "If there is something you can't control... I concentrate rather what I can than can't."

What has guided Cameron through writing this book is how not to think about things that don't often happen, and how to get through hard things.

How to Survive a Bear Attack: A Memoir has "this true crime mystery ? there's a lot of that in the book." She has had a huge response getting to know black bears better, though this is about an individual. A lot of people are really interested in that.

There is more. While Cameron has been touring with this book, the environment has been an important part of it: she gets into the idea of Algonquin being founded in 1893. The people who lived there were told to get out. For her, it's a haven; it was the end to where they lived.

Even worse: the park is logged and was formed to a view of logging. Forty percent is logged but with roads and gravel extraction, sixty percent is industrial.

"What I thought of as pristine is not at all," she noted with sadness. "I learned you need to ask if the area ? is it conserved ? for whom and for what? I was naive. Writing this book expanded what I think wilderness is."

Living in Toronto now, Cameron goes down to the lake at the end of the day, commenting she had never thought of that but now to her, it is a wilderness.

As a writer, it is so important for her to have ambition. Having cancer gave her the impetus to be very focused on writing.

"I've just started planning my life in three year segments," she explained. "Planning my time is much simpler ? who you spent time with is much clearer."

She said, "It's easier to take the attitude."

Claire Cameron is coming to the Shelburne Public Library for an afternoon's delight and conversation on Sunday, June 22 at 1 p.m. with her new book, *How to Survive a Bear Attack: A Memoir*. There will be book sales and signings.

This is a free event. To register, visit eventbrite.ca/e/an-afternoon-with-claire-cameron-how-to-survive-a-bear-attack-a-memoir-tickets-1215613806619