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Museum of Dufferin to host Canadian author Antonio Michael Downing

By Joshua Drakes, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

An upcoming literary event at the Museum of Dufferin will bring one of Canada's emerging voices in fiction to the region for an afternoon focused on storytelling, identity and community.

Scheduled for April 25 from 2 to 4 p.m., the event will feature author Antonio Michael Downing in a moderated conversation, followed by a book signing. Hosted at the Museum of Dufferin, the program is part of a broader effort to connect readers with writers in an intimate, community-driven setting.

Moderated by Shelburne Public Library CEO Shannon McGrady, the afternoon is designed to offer attendees not only insight into Downing's work but also an opportunity to engage directly with the ideas behind it. Tickets are available in advance, with organizers emphasizing accessibility and community participation as key elements of the experience.

Downing's appearance is part of ongoing initiatives in Dufferin County to bring literary voices into smaller communities, creating spaces where readers can engage with authors beyond the page.

Originally from Trinidad, Downing said that his early life and interest in reading and writing were deeply influenced by his grandmother, who introduced him to reading and storytelling at a young age.

?My grandmother was [the person] who really got me started,? he said. ?She raised me and gave me a lot of gifts, but the two that had the biggest impact were singing, which she did a lot of, and reading. She was older, and her eyes were bad, so she taught me how to read at a really young age, so that I could be her eyes, and that kind of stayed with me ever since.?

?It was just the magic of picking up this object made a paper, and reading these markings just scrawled onto it, and somehow that transports you to another place and another time. I was just hooked as a kid.?

After her passing, he relocated to northern Ontario, an experience that profoundly shaped his perspective and creative direction. That transition, marked by a sudden shift in culture, climate and identity, continues to inform much of his work.

"Everything had changed, the weather, the people, the way we spoke,? Downing said. ?When someone says, ?Who are you?' Usually, we just start talking about where we're from, who raised us, what kind of food we like, and such. What if every single thing that was part of that was gone, but you still existed??

?That's how it felt. That mystery of where exactly is the self, where does the self live, how do we feel, what makes us feel like we belong somewhere? That sense of identity, belonging, becoming, those things are the things I write about almost always, because it was such a big moment for me in my life,? he added.

His novel, Black Cherokee, explores themes of identity, belonging and self-discovery through the story of a young girl navigating complex cultural roots. Spanning her formative years, the narrative examines the pressures of being asked to define oneself within rigid boundaries, while also questioning broader societal ideas about inclusion and exclusion.

?The story is about a young girl, and just like the title sounds, she's both black and Cherokee,? Downing said. ?She gets rejected by both sides, by both communities, and she has both communities asking her to choose one or the other. We meet her when she's seven, and we leave her when she's 18, and it's really about the choices she makes along the way of trying to figure out who she is and who she should be.?

?Really, it's asking about a lot of the politics of our day. When you really get to the heart of it, it's about who's included and who's

excluded. Just like she is being excluded from these communities she belongs to, we're often asking that about immigrants, are they really Canadian. We're almost constantly asking ourselves this in our politics, and this story is really a microcosm of this greater debate,? he added.

For Downing, storytelling serves as a fundamental way of understanding both personal and collective experience. His work reflects an ongoing exploration of how individuals come to define themselves, particularly when faced with displacement or competing identities.

Drawing on his own experiences, he approaches writing as a means of making sense of life's uncertainties, using fiction to examine questions that are often difficult to address directly.

His rich storytelling will be on full display at the Museum of Dufferin on April 25, allowing guests to engage directly with Downing in a moderated setting, rounded off by a book signing.

To buy tickets, go to https://canhist.ca/small-town-big-ideas. Tickets can also be purchased at Booklore in Orangeville.