



*Let's Get
Waterloo Region
On The Same Page
in 2007 !*

Press Package & Information
April 26, 2007

***One Book, One Community* 2007 Reading Selection Announced**

Waterloo Region invited to get on the same page with Elizabeth Ruth's "Smoke"

Organizers of the **One Book, One Community** program today invited all of Waterloo Region to "get on the same page" by reading Elizabeth Ruth's "**Smoke**". Ruth's novel was unveiled today as the 2007 **One Book, One Community** reading selection.

Libraries and bookstores in Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and the townships have stocked up on extra copies of the novel to respond to the anticipated demand from readers eager to participate in this community-wide reading program.

According to Angela Caretta, Chair of the steering committee of **One Book, One Community**, the success of the program lies in the selection of a Canadian novel by a living author who is available for the "Meet the Author" events in all area municipalities in September. "Both loyal readers and new readers enjoy the opportunity to hear and see talented writers who create masterful works that are successful in Canada and around the world," says Caretta.

One Book, One Community was created to promote reading by adults, and to build new connections in the community through the shared experience of reading. "Once people have read the same book," says Caretta, "they talk to friends and neighbours about how the story resonates in each of their lives. The special twist this year is a surprise ending, so we'll be asking everyone not to spoil the ending for their friends."

In 2002, when **One Book, One Community** was launched, organizers expected that 1% of the Region's population would read Alistair McLeod's "No Great Mischief". Instead of the expected 4000 readers, more than 6800 readers were counted and an additional 3000 people attended author events. By tracking sales, library circulations, web hits and event attendance, the committee has recorded that 79,900 people in Waterloo Region have participated in the program. Interest in the reading program has continued over the past 5 years with selections still generating lots of interest in libraries, bookstores, workplaces and book club gatherings.

Organized by library staff, booksellers, city staff and volunteers, the program requires a year round commitment. After the book title is announced, individuals, book clubs, organizations, employers — everyone — is invited to take up the challenge of the **One Book, One Community** initiative and organize their own way of "getting on the same page."

The working group organizes the author events in Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and the townships from September 25 to 28, 2007. Watch **The Record** for notices of community events as they develop, or check out the **One Book, One Community** website at www.therecord.com/onebook. And don't forget the OBOC Blog — check it out at <http://obocwaterlooregion.blogspot.com>

Readers and event participants will be counted again this year, so be sure to participate, and let the community know how you got involved. Email the website, visit your local library, fill out a ballot on the bookmark, or speak to one of the working group volunteers.

For more information about Elizabeth Ruth's "**Smoke**" visit www.penguin.ca

For more information about **One Book, One Community**, contact your local library or contact the Steering Committee Chair, Angela Caretta acaretta@cambridgelibraries.ca
Daytime Telephone — (519) 653-3632 x 101

“Smoke”

In the 1950s, in the Ontario tobacco-growing community of Smoke, a young boy on the verge of manhood is scarred forever. A night out with his buddies, too much booze and a lit cigarette, and Buster McFiddie's life will never be the same. Through the process of healing, one man's voice speaks to him, softly, to ease his pain, spinning yarns of The Purple Gang, the notorious Detroit mob. It is the voice of John Gray, the town doctor, and soon it's clear that telling these tales means as much to Doc as hearing them means to Buster.

In an era of conformity, a disfigured boy tries to move his life forward, and an old man grapples desperately with his past: the convergence of two lives on the cusp will change each of them, and the small-town world that binds them, in ways they could not have imagined.

Elizabeth Ruth's second novel is a tour de force: a potent, richly inventive story of identity and transformation, of reconciliation between the way you are seen, and the truth of who you really are.



Elizabeth Ruth

Elizabeth Ruth was born in Windsor, Ontario. She is an only child and was raised by a single mother. Elizabeth moved homes 40-odd times as a child and teen, living in Canada, Colombia, and the US. As a young woman she took herself to France. Elizabeth attended eight schools before arriving at university - in one year, changing schools three times - and as a result she isn't shy about meeting new people! Elizabeth has worked for pay since the age of fourteen. Some of her jobs have included: selling doughnuts, books, acting as a bilingual tour guide in an antique toy train museum, cleaning offices, dishwashing, and working the midnight shift at a Chrysler mini-van plant. For eleven years Elizabeth also worked in women's shelters and community based mental health centers, focusing on people who often get lost in mainstream mental health services – youth, those labeled schizophrenic, and the homeless.

Elizabeth has always been interested in how society defines "normal" and why. Themes of identity, sanity/madness, and "the outcast" frequently appear in her fiction. Elizabeth wasn't always sure she'd go to university, having been threatened with expulsion from both primary and secondary schools for truancy (boredom) and challenging authority, but she loved formal learning too much to be put off. After completing a graduate degree, and as she was about to continue on to a Phd., Elizabeth decided to concentrate on her fiction instead



“Tobacco Tale is Addictive”

At first glance, *Smoke* seems like just the kind of CanLit novel that up-market downtown writers would like to sneer at. Set in a village called Smoke, in southern Ontario's tobacco country, *Smoke* tells the tale of a sensitive farm boy on the verge of becoming a man in 1958, and what he learns by listening to the stories told by the town's elderly doctor.

But this isn't *Jake and the Kid* revisited: Elizabeth Ruth is closer to Pedro Almodóvar, Todd Haynes and other leading members of the New Queer Cinema than to W. O. Mitchell. Like Haynes in *Far From Heaven*, Ruth recreates the 1950s with affection, understanding and uncanny accuracy. It's a virtuoso performance that neither preaches nor mocks the past, but subverts it by challenging us to rethink what is normal and what is not.

Fifteen-year-old Brian (Buster) McFiddie, the younger son of one of the Tilsonburg area's leading tobacco growers, falls asleep with a cigarette in his hand and wakes up with his bedding on fire. As burns are cleaned and fresh dressings applied to Buster's face, Doc Gray tries to distract him by recounting true crime stories of the Purple Gang, the Prohibition-era mobsters who ruled the liquor smuggling that ran from Windsor to Detroit. When the bandages come off and Buster has to face the world outside his bedroom, a gangster's fedora and a couple of other gifts teach him how to move forward, as the talkative doctor continues to come to terms with the past.

There's not a lot more that a reviewer can say about the plot of *Smoke* without giving too much away too soon. What a reader really needs to know to get hooked is that Elizabeth Ruth is an innovative storyteller, full of quirky surprises, who has the courage to confront basic preconceptions about self-identity.

In 2001, Ruth raised the bar for any writer in this country interested in sexual and social metamorphoses with a debut novel, *Ten Good Seconds of Silence*, in much the way Barbara Gowdy did with *Falling Angels* in 1989. *Ten Good Seconds of Silence* exhibited great daring in its insights into single parenthood among women marginalized by psychic states that are all too easily dismissed as psychotic. She was rewarded by being named a finalist for the Writers' Trust of Canada Fiction Prize, the City of Toronto Book Award and the Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award.

Ruth didn't take home any prizes, but her first novel has been adopted by several university courses and its German translation is creating a buzz similar to the one that made Gowdy more widely read and discussed in Europe than in Canada in the early stages of her career. Because both authors are equally direct and disturbing when it comes to human bodies and the transfigurations in flesh that love impels, they also willy-nilly have much to say about the spiritual crises of our time and the ways tolerance gets tested in everyday life. They speak directly to the urbane and cosmopolitan even when their settings are as provincial as *The White Bone's* herd of elephants or *Smoke's* tobacco-harvesting crew.

The depth and fluidity of Ruth's first novel was marred for me by outbursts of metaphor and imagery that undercut rather than heightened its texture and intensity. Although there are two metaphors in the opening four sentences of *Smoke* so distracting that they ought to have been blocked by her editors, Ruth is much more her own stylist and less of a Timothy Findley wannabe this time around. Because she's so full of vitality, so drawn to so many things simultaneously, so

alive, reading her is always likely to be more of a D. H. Lawrence roller-coaster than a Virginia Woolf Ferris wheel. Whenever the ills of this book's characters intersect with the culling and curing of tobacco leaf, Ruth is utterly compelling.

The child of a single mother who moved around a lot, Ruth has lived in more places here and abroad than most writers of even her much-travelled generation, and has supported herself by working at a lot of different things, including the midnight shift at a Chrysler minivan plant. Before coming to writing full-time via the Humber School for Writers, she spent more than a decade as a counsellor in women's shelters and mental health centres. She sees the world through a variety of lenses, including the one that comes from promoting and compiling the works of the writers she's anthologized in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*.

The result is not only extraordinary empathy with a full range of characters, but also a keen sense of the everyday things ordinary people do with considerable grace under the pressure of earning a living, in inhospitable circumstances, to make homes for themselves and their families.

Smoke is a subtle, nuanced, unconventional probing of the anxieties of outsiders in a decade notable for conformity. Since I am someone who lived through that time among not-dissimilar people, it strikes me as a notable achievement for any writer -- and utterly remarkable for someone who is a self-confessed "city girl" born at the end of the sixties. More important, *Smoke* is not an aesthete's exercise in historical pastiche: It addresses the gap between how we see the maimed and deformed and how they see us in an unforgettable way.

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Reviewed by T. F. Rigelhof