Neville Park Press
presents

"Reading is the Greatest Escape"

The first time I knelt down to pet Scout and then walk into The Great Escape Book Store at Kingston & Victoria Park, I knew that I'd found my Beach bibliophile home. Like 99% of my tribe, fantasy occasionally covets owning such a place: small rooms opening off each other, stacked with millennia of used books, stuffed with knowledge, handled by previous lovers. However, only 1% ~ among them Katya Nosko ~ make the life choices that lead to materialising the committed ownership such a place requires.



Scout welcoming me at the door

Katya left her university studies in Babylonian archaeology to be a stay-at-home mom, juggling a variety of part-time jobs while her husband did the main income. "The best thing that happened to me was that I had kids. I love it. I have a predisposition to cultivating early learning, doing things with my hands, being creative, being on the go. I'm fairly analog." In the process, she passed on what her parents had offered her: full bookshelves. "Love of learning and appreciating the artistry of book making, especially for children, means I've loved bookstores my whole life."

Abelard, Atticus, 10 editions, and David Mason (among many others in downtown Toronto) fed her love with enticing dusty smells, old illustrations, and lithographs. Her first wages, as a preteen helping to make theatre costumes at Malabar, where her father worked, went at once to her beloved horror paperbacks. Making friends with the same hankering for old books at Huron Street School, her group would frequent libraries and bookstores, pile high on books, then hang out and read to each other. "One thing I did with my own kids was hit libraries by subway. We piled high too. Also, The Great Escape was only a block away and became such a place. I'd plunk the kids on the

floor, look around, and yak with owners Bruce and Marg. Their invitation eventually came to help out a little bit." A couple of hours here and there, on shelving or behind the counter, gradually increased over ten years, another niche alongside her neighbourhood gardening business which was "very bespoke. I walked to clients with wagon and tools. I thrived. Gardening is one of the most wonderful things to do for yourself, for the neighbourhood, for the planet."

Bruce and Marg retired in 2011 and offered it to Katya, who by now knew she was good at the business and so bought it as is. "They had an efficiently run little ship. Years of watching had shown me how people purchase. The bookstore lives in this ecosystem; it survives only if it feeds and takes in from the neighbourhood. I have a different aesthetic sensibility then they did, I am a different generation, I have different interests. Yet I was respectful of their roots, as they'd bought this business themselves and nurtured it."

Caleb, who staffs Great Escape most weekdays, checked back into the history of the space and learned that its fate as a used bookstore began long ago. Originally Budget Book Store, it was bought by Ed, who renamed it after himself. Bruce and Marg bought it from Ed in 1996, their choice of retirement after their teaching years were done. Bruce's love of the space and what it means is clear in his sketch of Steve McQueen, sitting idle and reading a book on the motorcycle he roared along German roads on in *The Great Escape*. For Bruce, reading books was his great escape, a bookstore was everybody's great escape, hence the name he and Marg bestowed.



Ed's portrait of Steve McQueen on his Great Escape motorcycle holding a book, on the wall panel separating two small book-stuffed rooms in the store.

In 2013, as the sale was finalised and Katya was wondering what to do to market her arrival, she found out that who should be living three blocks over but Wally Floody, the real Great Escape tunnel engineer? Ted Barris had just published the real story in his book *The Great Escape*. It was a match: Katya had her first of what has since been an annual film-book club event. The Fox on Queen showed the movie, Barris explained the history, two camp survivors told their stories, and

the Floody family highlighted Wally's contribution. Katya glows as she recalls: "It was just a fabulous coming together ~" for the neighbourhood, and for her store.

Used bookstores embody nostalgia They bring people into a remembered place. One wants to experience being there, paying for something after searching through stacks with touch and smell. Bruce and Marg had customers who came weekly to buy paperbacks and bring them back, like a lending library. But habits change, new technologies have brought cheaper versions, online reading, so there are fewer used sellers or purchasers. But people who frequent used bookstores are curious and prefer taking time to wander and wait, not search quick finds online.



Katya in her happy place amid wall-to-wall books

Appreciating individual tastes, Katya does not select rigidly. She has a very strong kids' section built on her reading joy as a child, then as mother sharing with her offspring. Mysteriously, nasty who-done-its always move the fastest, while humour moves slowest ~ except for David Sedaris, of course. But vintage is her eccentric favourite.

Unsure what 'vintage' meant in her world, I asked her to explain. "Sure! There are two classifications in bookstore vintage: authors who are hard to find, and aesthetic beauty of cover design or book layout or content. When that comes in, it's gold. Our customers want to discover treasures here of history, literature, artifacts, to recapture lost knowledge. I did a window on vintage sewing patterns, weaving and quilting, patterning and sewing clothes: they all sold. A window on how to camp, live in the woods, make preserves: people walk by and go: 'Boom! I want that!'" Books come in every day "in swaths of sameness", but she doesn't take what's not needed. "We look for what somebody's going to need. Luckily, my brain allows for lots of information to go in, with ample storage for connections to be made, so when I'm going through a box, I know 'Somebody's going to like this!' We try to have a place where anybody walking in can feel connected."

Success has come to Katya when she is doing and enjoying a variety of different activities. Her life adages are few but punchy. “Open up your thinking. Learn different things. Build different skills. Find what you're good at. But remember, we also have to fight for our communities, to gift each other as much solidarity and help as we can. And that takes a lot of energy. Oh, yes.”

This year Katya’s Book & Film conversation presents *Women Talking* by Miriam Toews, and in 2027 we will be gifted with Tolkien. You can find out more at her webpage: Book & Film Club — The Great Escape Book Store 957 Kingston Road www.greatescapebookstore.com

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