

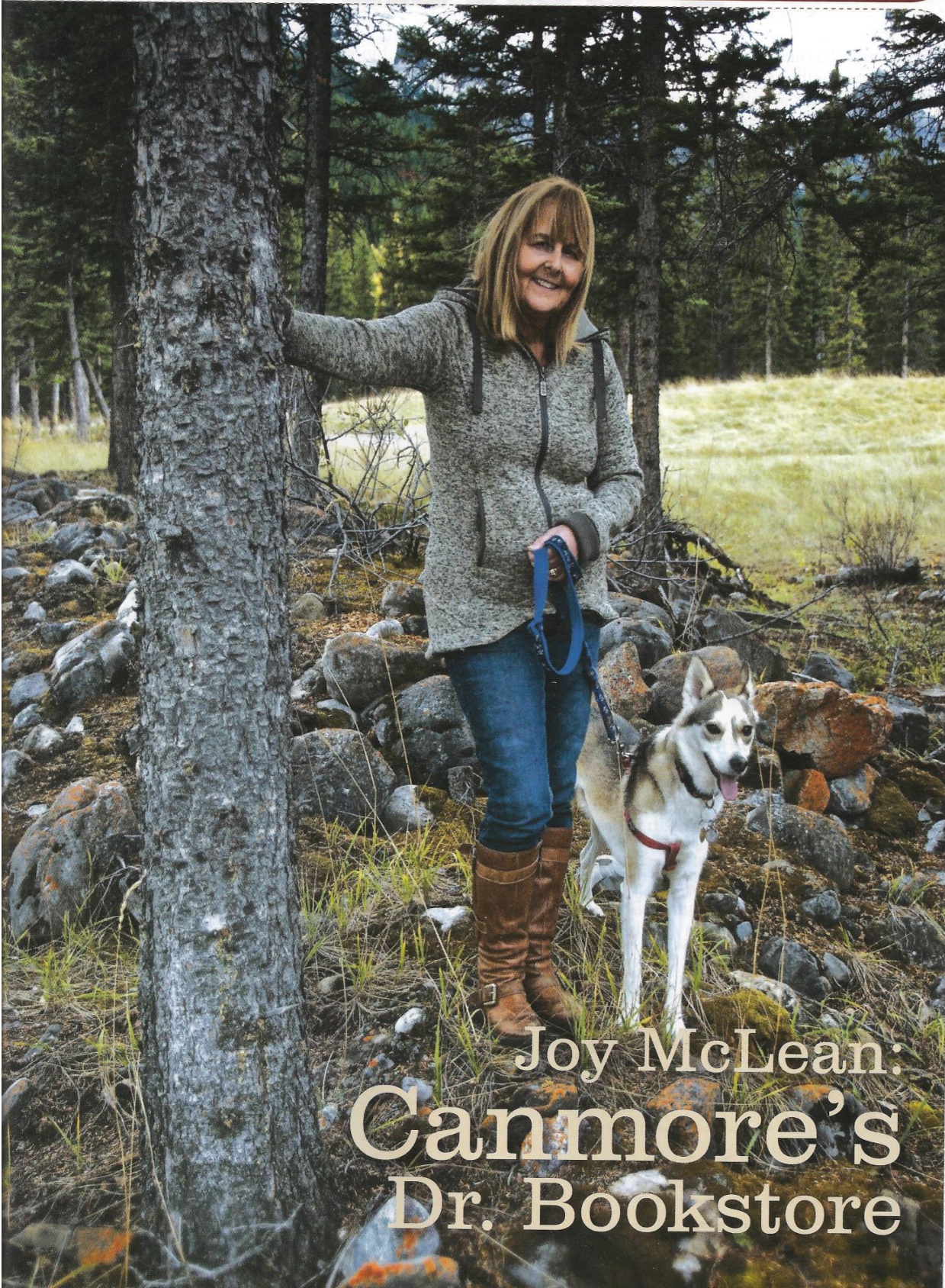
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Joy McLean:
**Canmore's
Dr. Bookstore**

"The Writers' Guild of Alberta is a community of writers that exists to inspire, connect, support, encourage and promote writers and writing; to safeguard the freedom to write and to read; and to advocate for the well-being of writers."

The Business

BY TRACEY L. ANDERSON }

Joy McLean: Canmore's "Dr. Bookstore"



When she talks about her life as an independent bookseller, Joy McLean, owner of Canmore's Café Books, lives up to her first name. Her passion for books and for helping people connect with them shows in her animated gestures, lively laughter and twinkly eyes. She loves what she does and wouldn't trade it for anything. In fact, she traded some of her original career to become a bookseller.

Dr. Bookstore

In 2004, Joy, a family doctor from Newport, South Wales, visited Canmore on a vacation with her husband, Charlie, and their children, Tom and Jennifer. The family loved

the area so much that they wanted to make it home. Soon Joy was making inquiries to see if and how she could work as a doctor in Canada. It didn't take long before she had several job offers and chose a position in a clinic in Banff. The family immigrated in 2005, and Joy's parents joined them five years later.

About a year after arriving, Joy and Charlie contemplated buying a Canmore business to run together. Charlie, a tennis coach, wanted to establish something for when he was ready to leave the court. Joy's mother had owned a small business in the UK when Joy was eight or nine, so Joy always wanted a small business too. One memorable day, Charlie asked

Joy if they could buy any store in town which she would like. Looking back she says, “I don’t think I’d ever really envisaged having a bookstore, but somehow that’s what came out of my mouth.” When Charlie responded, “It’s for sale,” Joy was stunned. “We were given 48 hours’ notice [...] and did we want it[...] Yes!” In retrospect, she says, “Now looking at it, I don’t think I could’ve run anything other than a bookstore.”

Although it was a decision made under time pressure, Joy says, “I don’t think I’ve ever regretted it for a minute. I love it. It’s a total and utter, complete passion.” It’s also a natural choice because Joy describes herself as “one of those little girls that used to sit in her window sill with a book in behind the curtains and have little dens that I’d make to read [in].”

These days, Charlie’s coaching career keeps him busy, so Joy runs the business mostly on her own. She splits her time between the store and her work as a doctor, which she still does two days a week as a member of a family practice with several other doctors. Wearing these two hats makes for some interesting looks from store customers who only know her as a doctor and then see her behind the counter in the store. She even has one little boy as a patient who calls her “Dr. Bookstore.”

Lessons and Surprises

Starting a new business in a new field isn’t easy and can come with many lessons and surprises. The hardest lesson Joy has learned about being a small, independent bookseller is that “we are negated as not being important within the industry or we haven’t been seen to be[...] It’s very frustrating when you’re doing what you consider the best job you can [and] selling an awful lot of books.” In the face of those frustrations and other challenges, Joy maintains her positive attitude. “You can’t be afraid. You have to just do it[...] you have to almost be fearless.” She also notes that “more and more people appreciate having a small bookstore.”

As for surprises, Joy says she didn’t expect “people’s expectations of price, and the anger and the nastiness they present” sometimes to the staff at the store over this issue. But she says, “I don’t think there’s any other negative.” In fact, she adds, “I don’t think I’d realized I’d have so much fun doing it.” The most fun for her is engaging with customers. “It’s just sharing the stories... and people enjoying the books.”

Expansion

Perhaps the fun she’s having is why Joy expanded the bookstore into a space across the corridor where she began selling used books and running a small tea shop in May 2014. The shop was previously a secondhand store that flooded last year and didn’t reopen. Joy finds the other side of the business—which they’ve called Chapter Two—exciting in a different way. “You don’t even know what’s going to come in through the door. It’s like ‘Wow! Look at that. I never knew that book existed’.”

For the new space, Joy chose to decorate with salvage furnishings. “I wanted the books to look as nice here as they do over there. I didn’t want people to come in and see a dusty secondhand bookstore.” She gathered many old pieces for the space from a store in Calgary called Uniquities. All the pieces are full of character, but Joy’s favourites are a Café Paris window and a large old chapel door. She says the window, with its gold leaf trim, is “pretty in a strange sort of way.” As for the chapel door, she loves that it’s very old and probably has many stories to tell. It’s displayed on a wall with steps leading to it and a sign that reads “To Narnia.” Joy added the sign soon after a customer came into the store one day, saw the Victorian lamppost that hides electrical wires, and said, “Oh! That’s like the lamppost in Narnia.”

Joy’s Bookshelf

As a doctor who’s a bookseller, Joy believes that reading is good for health. “It’s relaxing. It’s focused. It takes you away from your own world [...] to somewhere else [...] When you read a book, your pulse slows down and you relax.” Because Joy deals with sickness all day, she prefers books a little on the lighter side. She says she can’t read books that are too frivolous, but she enjoys stories with romance or magic in them, such as *A Discovery of Witches* by Deborah Harkness and *Me Before You* by JoJo Moyes. She also likes the mystery/thriller books of Canmore author Stephen Legault.

Although most of these books are adult reading, Joy says if she had to choose one book on her shelf that means the most to her, she’d choose *Winnie-the-Pooh* because “he’s just so wise, isn’t he?” Although it’s considered a children’s book, “if you actually read into it, it’s got such a lot of wisdom in it [...] The message in it is so good.”

Cont'd

Joy has plenty of stories to share about her life as a book seller: the good, the bad and the unbelievable.

The Good

"A young guy, probably about 27, came in and he wanted a particular book. It was Christmas and we'd sold out [...] He said, 'I've seen it in Safeway,' so I said, 'I couldn't match it at that price anyway.' He said, 'Yeah, but I don't want to buy it from them; I want to buy it from you, so I want to order it.'"

"I had a guy come in the other day and I said, 'You're ever so good [...] Every single book you want, you order from us.' He said, 'Where would I go shopping at Christmas? I've gotta' keep you here because I need you. I can't lose you in the interim. So I have to make sure that I support you during the year.'"

The Bad

"I don't want somebody coming in here 'Oh it's just a bookstore.' In fact, that is the worst thing I've ever heard. People walking past my door, looking towards it and saying [that]. It's not just a bookstore." With one woman who said it as she was walking past, "I said, 'You'd be surprised what treasures you'll find in there.'"

The Unbelievable

One time, a customer "used 25 minutes of [a clerk's] time—actually interrupted her with another customer—and had a pile of books [...] and ordered them all on her iPhone in the store" from another retailer.

Beyond the Store

With two careers on the go, Joy doesn't always have much down time. When she does, she likes to do crafts and make cards. Her daughter Jennifer takes photographs, and Joy creates cards from them to sell in the store. Joy enjoys working on the cards so much that she calls it her "zen time." When she's at the family's timeshare in St. Lucia, Joy likes to finally find time to sit and read [...] and poke around the bookstores there.

Since Joy loves to read books and share them with others, writing books seems like a next step. She did, in fact, write a book once—a mystery thriller she worked on for nine months—about a doctor who was abducted and taken across the Berlin Wall into East Berlin. Of the book's fate, she laments, "I gave it to one of my friends who was a journalist and said, 'Would you look at it?' and she *lost* it." Since this happened before the days of computers and backup, the manuscript—typed by hand with a quote at the start of every chapter—was gone forever. Although she would have liked for her kids to read it and to read it again herself one day, Joy takes a philosophical view of the loss. "It was fun writing it [and] I never had to have it rejected."

The Future

Joy's been in medicine for thirty-five years and plans to continue doctoring until her daughter Jennifer gets through college. After that, "I'll say goodbye to medicine and spend all my time in my bookstore." Until then, she'll happily continue to be Canmore's Dr. Bookstore because "I've loved every minute of it from the minute I walked through the door."

Tracey L. Anderson is a freelance writer from Edmonton who writes magazine articles, newspaper articles and poetry. When she's not working with words as a writer or in her editing day job, she enjoys movies, fine dining and time with her husband and her dog. Tracey loves to travel the world in books and on airplanes.