

Invisible Family: How Stories and Libraries are Uniquely Capable of Supporting Community Members with an Intangible Second Culture.

Abstract of panel:

Did you know that according to the 2024 Census, about 3.1 percent of American citizens identify as having parents of two or more races and between 2.2 and 4.8 percent of Vermont's population of citizens fall into that category as well? Some of those 2.2-4.8 percent of Vermonters may belong to families that have blended their two cultures, giving all family members a solid grounding in their mixed heritage. It is just as likely, however that for many, their second culture is intangible. What is meant by "intangible" is people of bi-cultural heritage where the hallmarks of that mixed heritage are not necessarily an active part of their lives, and/or are not necessarily visible to themselves or to others by markers such as language or appearance. This is where books and libraries come in. This panel will be a lively discussion with a moderator and three Vermont authors who will discuss their own experience with intangible second cultural heritage, and how stories, librarians and library resources are uniquely capable of helping community members explore and connect with their roots.

The Vermont authors

William Alexander is a National Book Award winning author, and writes for all ages. His novels include: *The Legend of Memo Castillo*, *Goblin Secrets*, *Ambassador*, *A Properly Unhaunted Place* and the forthcoming *Sunward*. For more information, please visit www.willalex.net

Mima Tipper is an author with an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from VCFA. She writes for young teen lit and young adult audiences, and *Kat's Greek Summer* is her young teen lit debut. For more formation, including information about school and library visits, please visit www.mimatipper.com

Ann Dávila Cardinal is an author with an MFA in Writing from VCFA. She writes for all age groups, including young adult horror novels *Five Midnights*, *Category Five*, *Breakup from Hell*, and the upcoming *You've Awoken Her*, as well as a middle grade biography of Bad Bunny. Her adult novels are *The Storyteller's Death* and *We Need No Wings*. For more information, please visit www.anndavilacardinal.com

The moderator

Diane Grenkow is the library director at the Jeudevine Memorial Library in Hardwick. She holds dual citizenship, US and Canadian, courtesy of birthright citizenship. For more information, please visit www.jeudevinememoriallibrary.com

Summary of the panel:

Introductions:

Diane Grenkow, the moderator, starts: introduces herself and speaks of realizing recently that with HR569, the birthright citizenship bill, that as her parents weren't born in the states—her dad is Canadian and her mom a German immigrant—if she was born now in the USA, she would not be a US citizen.

Mima Tipper introduces herself and *Kat's Greek Summer*. Talks of being half-Greek and how one of the threads in the book is main character Kat Baker's experience with her intangible Greek culture.

Ann Dávila Cardinal introduces herself. She's half-Puerto Rican, and in most of her books writes about characters with feet in two worlds. Ann says she wishes she'd seen books like those she writes growing up.

William Alexander introduces himself. He speaks of being invisibly half-Cuban. That he is best known for fantasy and for writing characters that belong to more than one world. The story conflict is in the overlap.

Diane asks how books explore the themes of second culture.

Ann talks of her YA novel *Five Midnights*. The novel is written from two perspectives: a half-Puerto Rican teen girl and a young Puerto Rican addict. Ann talks of being careful of using voices that are not her "own voice." Her intention was to present a character with a similar background to hers, and share the feeling of not feeling at home in either culture. Teens feel like they don't belong in many cases; the two culture-thing adds to that confusion.

William talks of how important books about diaspora are and how important books about belonging to more than one world are. When he was small and his elders never talked about Cuba, but that's what they were always talking about. Characters who didn't belong in either place. The logic of diaspora. The place you are from is a place you've never seen and can't go back. He only made sense of diaspora through fantasy and science fiction, and was hungry for those stories as a kid. Those books absolutely informed the books that he writes now.

Mima talks of how she planned to write a fun, beachy read set in Greece, but found that when she put a character into her memories of her own summers in Greece, that the character began to ask questions about her experience and her two cultures. "Why don't I speak Greek? And why did this or that happen, or not?" Mima remembers her own feelings of confusion and disconnectedness as a child, but didn't have the language back then to ask the questions. Now as a author, she hopes that kids will read *Kat's Greek Summer* and, if they have this two culture background, that there may be language to start conversations about their own experiences.

Diane asks each of us to talk about how community can be built by talking about second cultures.

William speaks of how an overlap of culture is a metaphor for community and kind of a map for how community is made. How a person views that overlap between worlds is the basis for a lot of questions with two cultures: when one language is spoken at home and another at school. Where questions, particularly for a young person, come up: “Am I legit? Do I belong?” Figuring out a place of belonging is a useful conversation to have.

Mima speaks of how libraries bring people together in a space where they may access culture through fiction, food, mythology. This is how she tries to access her second culture. History. Travel. Book groups and clubs. These avenues offer opportunities. Language groups brought together in a library’s public space. Libraries hold space for citizens to gather and explore, and possibly nurture that side of their family even if they cannot travel to the home country.

Ann speaks of how stories can bring that culture to people. How in VT, families have to pursue their second culture actively because of the lack of diversity. She understands what it is like not to fit in. Through school visits has encountered kids who look popular, etc., but who share that they also feel like they don’t fit in. Stories give them a chance to see outside of their culture perhaps, while still relating to that feeling of not belonging.

William speaks of how a library is a place where history is acknowledged to be happening. You don’t just store the past. It is still part of the community

Diane asks authors to speak to their experience of going to libraries, or of reading growing up.

Mima says, “I am a reader and that’s why I’m a writer. I always loved books from my youngest memories. I had a wonderful library in my elementary and middle school. I loved lining up to pick out books.”

Ann speaks of being 5 years old and visiting her library on 125th ST (in NYC) and taking out *The Snowy Day*. How seeing brown people on the cover was a game changer for her. How the *Oxford English Dictionary* blew her mind, and how she saw librarians as the keepers of the secrets of the universe. How libraries were a refuge. A place to read books. How books helped when life was difficult and how she loved horror, saying she could look at her own life and think, “At least there are no zombies.”

William speaks of always being in the library. There was AC. A librarian handed him Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and that changed and shaped him more than any other book.

From Audience Q&A

How many books did you write in the library?

Ann says none, really, but then says that she did write at the college library when she worked at VCFA.

William says that he spent a chunk of time writing in the library before picking up his own kids, He stood at the end of the aisle using the deep windowsills. Talks about how he loves that games are in the library. How games are the smallest unit of making story because each move is a choice. He is happy libraries have board games.

Mima speaks of the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington, VT. How she'd tuck herself in and work in the kids' section while waiting for her daughter to finish at a nearby school. How she loved listening to the families while working on her writing.

Where do you get your cultural access?

Mima drew on memories of spending summers in Greece, and conversations with her mother. A lot of memories and a lot of time digging deeply into them. Gained cultural access through food. Through childhood experiences at a Greek Church. Always served access in tidbits. Mostly the summers in Greece fueled her cultural access.

Ann spent a lot of her childhood going to Puerto Rico to spend summer with family. Draws on those summers a lot. Spent her childhood in NYC and there was a lot of Puerto Rican influence. Sensory experiences were very strong in these community pockets. Ann tells of creating Puerto Rican experiences in VT through gatherings. Also, she goes back to Puerto Rico every year.

William was born in Miami. In little Havana. Very Cuban. Can't live there if you don't speak Spanish. Bits of upbringing that are very Cuban. Where do you get your sense of culture? Family? Politics? How to define that culture or heritage. What pieces are relevant. Very important to a feeling of legitimacy. "Do I count?" Figuring that out is a huge part of belonging to more than one world.

Mima: What does it mean to be part of a culture if you don't feel like you are part of that culture? Definitely explores that question in her *Kat's Greek Summer*. Food, travel, books, internet. These are all access points. Language could be a huge obstacle to access if a person doesn't speak the second tongue.

Ideas for how libraries are uniquely positioned to support:

Pointing patrons to Books (fiction and non-fiction)

Offering Talks and presentations from visiting authors

Offering Classes about crafts and foods from different cultures

Offering or hosting Language classes/groups

Hosting cultural groups, providing groups with free community rooms

Helping with internet research/providing internet.