**2022 Anthology Launch: Both OIW and Ottawa Rising**

*A release into a book launch.*

—by Lisa Zanyk

Normally there would be nothing unusual about a writers’ organization staging a book launch; it would be obvious.

But these have been unusual times, and the prevailing atmosphere at the Ottawa Independent Writers’ launch of its 2022 anthology project on October 17 was one of glee. We were collectively proud of ourselves for being, in person, a collective.

The 2022 OIW Anthology, “Ottawa Rising,” is a lovely collection of stories and poems on this theme, of the consistently high quality of past anthologies, leftover copies of which were up for grabs at the event. OIW released one anthology “during Covid,” as people insist on saying (implying that Covid is a thing of the past, which is most certainly not true, despite our newfound freedom to ignore it and “resume” life as we knew it.) But that collection, released onto impersonal curb-side pickup spots, did not enjoy a peopled celebration and so, obviously, was not, you know, fun.

This one was.

The launch, held in a charming reading room at Villa Marconi, an Italian history centre and retirement residence, was organized by OIW’s core group of dedicated workers and attended by about sixty members and friends.

Participants were greeted at the door, given two free drink tickets and their requisite copies of the anthology – and no masks, or vaccination boosters, thank goodness. Drinks were both alcoholic and non: simple wine or beer or sparkly things, and, most notably, Bob Barclay’s signature cider labelled ***Launch Cider***.

Giddily meeting people who’d only been encountered on Zoom over the last couple of years, we all succumbed to the same ice-breaking jokes: “You look taller in person!”/ “That’s because I am standing up!” and “Maybe you would recognize me better if I put a square frame around my face.” As I have a

bad habit of repeating and laughing at my own jokes, I quickly learned to refrain.

Having recently attended an in-person conference in Toronto, I was somewhat prepared for, but certainly not over, the awkwardness of accomplishing social requirements and skills, such as checking in, lining up, getting registered, making introductions, juggling one’s “stuff,” and whether or not to wear a mask. The mask thing is a whole other issue.

The hosting of the event was anything but awkward. Tamara Miller (president) and Lena Samson (anthology editor lead) deftly led us through the afternoon, which consisted of welcome notes, OIW information, and discussions about whether the “hybrid” (partly in-person, partly online) model will

continue to be the ideal for OIW, whose membership increased significantly during Covid lockdowns – partly because online meetings were easier, and partly because of financial breaks offered by OIW.

Emceed by Bob Barclay, there ensued a series of readings by contributors to the Anthology. Common themes emerged: family history, immigration, deep personal connections, and why stories matter.

These included Lucia Cavalcanti, with a heartwarming story about being transported to the ultimate in “the present” while watching a fake drive-in movie with her grandson during a Covid lockdown; Anna Romano Milne’s story about her mother, crossing the Atlantic to be married in Canada, choosing, when forced, to carry a giant wheel of Italian cheese rather than her coveted and expensive wedding dress; Su Mardelli’s hilarious account of her and her sister’s foiling of the spelling game; and John Gelder’s story about aging. I am sorry that I can’t recount them all; you will have to read the book.

I would not begin to choose a favourite. It turns out that OIW members are not just good writers, but superbly entertaining readers as well. Perhaps some frustrated actors among us.

The OIW board welcome contributions of writing and editing. And in the meantime, there’s already been another workshop/meeting.

It is hoped that if we all behave –wearing masks, getting vaccines, staying away from giant events – we will be able to have other opportunities to connect in person as well as online. The best thing we can do is keep close to our dining room chairs and our fingers on our keyboards, keep out notebooks current, and write.