



Book Club Guide

Scarborough

By Catherine Hernandez

About the Author

Catherine Hernandez (she/her) is an award-winning author and screenwriter. She is a proud queer woman who is of Filipino, Spanish, Chinese and Indian descent and married into the Navajo Nation. Her first novel, *Scarborough*, won the Jim Wong-Chu Award for the unpublished manuscript; was shortlisted for the Toronto Book Awards, the Evergreen Forest of Reading Award, the Edmund White Award, and the Trillium Book Award; and a finalist for Canada Reads 2022. She has written the critically acclaimed plays *Singkil*, *The Femme Playlist* and *Eating with Lola* and the children's books *M Is for Mustache: A Pride ABC Book* and *I Promise*. She recently wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of *Scarborough*, produced by Compy Films and levelFILM. It was the 1st runner up for the coveted People's Choice Award at the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival, won the Shawn Mendes Foundation Changemaker Award, was nominated for 11 Canadian Screen Awards and won 8, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. The film won the Panavision Spirit Award for Independent Cinema at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival and was named #3 of the 20 Greatest Toronto Movies Ever Made by the *Globe and Mail*. She is the creator of Audible Original's audio sketch comedy series *Imminent Disaster*. Her second novel, *Crosshairs*, published simultaneously in Canada and the US and the UK, was shortlisted for the Toronto Book Award and made the CBC's Best Canadian Fiction, *NOW Magazine's* 10 Best Books, *Indigo Best Book*, *Audible Best Audiobooks* and *NBC 20 Best LGBTQ Books* list of 2020. Her third children's book, *Where Do Your Feelings Live?* which is a guide for kids living through these scary times, has been commissioned by HarperCollins Canada and will be published in winter 2022. Her third novel, *The Story of Us*, about the extraordinary friendship between a caregiver and her elderly client, will be published in winter 2023 by HarperCollins Canada. She is currently working on a few television projects and her fourth novel.

Retrieved from: <https://www.catherinehernandezcreates.com/about.html>

About the Book

Scarborough follows the lives of three children who inhabit Toronto's low-income east end. Bing, who lives under the shadow of his father's mental illness while his mother works tirelessly in a nearby nail salon. Sylvie, who, along with her family, rides the waves of the shelter system and the complications of special-needs education. And Laura, whose history of neglect with her mother is destined to repeat itself with her father.

A sense of community is built once a family reading program is established in the Kingston/Galloway area under the compassionate direction of childhood educator Ms. Hina. The program's goal is to increase literacy on a provincial level. But amidst acute poverty and rampant drug use, Ms. Hina soon realizes the neighborhood's people would be more interested in learning – if only they had full stomachs. Told over the course of an entire school year, Scarborough explores the positive impact of neighbourhood programming amongst Toronto's poor and its devastation when the very governments who established these programs come and go.

Content Warnings

Some of the characters in this novel use racial slurs. The content also contains some depictions of child abuse, sexual abuse, and bullying. If you or anyone you know needs support, please use the resources listed on the links and resources section of this guide.

Retrieved from: <https://www.catherinehernandezcreates.com/books.html>

Discussion Questions

1. The novel uses multiple narrative voices, letting us hear the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers. Why do you think the author chose this approach? How does it affect you as a reader?
2. Many of the characters retell or recount the stories of others. The children recognize resilience and love in adults, for instance. How are the characters interconnected by overlapping or parallel stories?
3. Which of the characters do you relate to the most? Why?
4. If you grew up in Scarborough, or know it well, what do you recognize? What stories ring true?
5. How does the novel demonstrate economic disparities? What does the email correspondence between Ms. Hina and her supervisor suggest about the differences between downtown Toronto and Scarborough?
6. How does it feel as a reader to have children as narrators? Do their limitations in language or maturity affect the story?
7. What are some of the structural challenges that the characters face in trying to get their basic needs met? For example, what obstacles does Sylvia's family run into as they try to get medical care for her brother? Why does Ms. Hine feel the need to offer food at a program based on literacy?
8. Is it possible to keep school and politics separate as Jane Fulton suggests to Ms. Hina? And, is it desirable to keep them separate? Why or why not?
9. The concept of heteronormativity refers to how our society assumes that heterosexuality is the norm. This is reflected in everything from our assumptions (e.g. that little boys will grow up and marry girls) to popular culture (e.g. the preponderance of heterosexual characters in TV and the movies). How does heteronormativity influence the lives of characters like Clive (Lorna's husband) and Bing? How does it influence their ability to live their "truth"?
10. Bing and his mother Edna remember the night of Bing's performance with small differences. How does memory shape the novel? Does it make characters biased or untrustworthy narrators?

11. Why do you think the author chose to divide the sections of the novel into seasons? How does this affect you as a reader?
12. Although there is tragedy toward the end of the novel, many of the children and adults gain community support and strength. What are the stories of resilience and of change in the novel?
13. What kinds of systemic changes would be needed to address the challenges faced by the characters in *Scarborough*? Are there efforts that you know about? Do you feel a desire to get involved in creating change?

Author Interview

Malia Baker: Hey Catherine, how are you doing?

Catherine Hernandez: Oh my god, it's happening. It's happening, Malia!

Baker: Dream for both of us! First of all, I wanted to give you the reason I chose this book. When I picked it up, from the dedication to the first chapter, you could tell that this was going to be raw and authentic and real. And that's something that you can't really spark in a book a lot of times. Yours did it for me right away. It's just too good of an opportunity to pass up, and I'm just so grateful now getting a chance to know you.

Hernandez: Oh my gosh. Well, I'm grateful for you for picking up my book, for believing it enough to defend it on national television and radio. This means so much to me, and this is seriously a dream come true to be shortlisted for this competition.

Baker: We've got this. Now the first question: Catherine, why did you write this book and what was the process like?

Hernandez: Well, there's two things. One of them is that I definitely wanted to capture the spirit of a community, this community that was really supporting me during a really challenging time. At that time, I was a single mother. I had a struggling home daycare situation, really living hand-to-mouth and and when I say paycheque to paycheque, it wasn't really that. It was like a handful of change to a handful of change, sometimes hoping that I would make enough money just for groceries and to make the rent.

And so, capturing the precarity of those times, I wanted to tell a story about a community that refuses to be undone, even though they're facing a system that's really designed to fail them. The process of writing it, funny enough, is that I would write it before the children would arrive at the home daycare. You definitely get that sense, when you read the book; it's like the desperation of those times.

Baker: I thought it was really interesting the way that it was represented. It almost felt like a documentary that was written down. Even the dialogue I was like, "Oh yeah, that's like things that people say, this isn't polished." You can read it for hours on end and say, "Oh, they went through like years and years, making sure this is perfect, perfect, perfect." And as much as it was perfect, perfect, perfect, it was in its original and authentic way.

A lot of the story is told from the perspective of little kids. Why did you make that decision?

Hernandez: Well, because we know that children in the first two years of their life will learn almost everything that they need to know to survive as a human being. So most of their cognitive skills are learned in those first two years of life, and the speed at which

they learn is something that I wanted for the book. So it's actually quite a short book. Arsenal [Pulp Press] did their best to sort of enlarge the font.

I've got to tell a funny story about writing *Scarborough*. I was a playwright, this is my first novel, and so I remember writing the first manuscript, and at 20,000 words, I was like, I just wrote 20,000 words! Finished! I didn't realize that you have to at least hit about like 80,000 words for a novel to have the right heft that publishers expect.

I remember writing it, and it just feels so new to me. I felt excited about people finally learning about my community. This book is really taking me on some major adventures — everything from it being adapted into a film at TIFF to now this, it just feels completely unreal.

Baker: What did you personally take away from the experience of writing this novel?

Hernandez: I always say this when it comes to my writing process because I really believe that the ancestors just speak through me and I'm just writing down what they want me to say. And then also that community matters, especially because we're right now in the middle of a pandemic. I think that what this pandemic really teaches us is what happens when community is not the priority. What happens when we don't care about other people? This is what happens.

The antidote to that, obviously, is to love one another, to really centre safety, to really ensure that everyone has equal access to resources. That's what I got out of it when I was writing it, for sure.

Baker: And I feel like that's something that people definitely take away after reading the book, at least what I took away while reading the book. I was wondering, since there's so many perspectives in that community and you wrote all of them so eloquently, what was that like? Especially since not all the perspectives, you can't live in each one, to have those different lives — what was the experience of writing that like?

Hernandez: Well, you know, I wanted to have Scarborough be its own character in the novel. My editor at Arsenal Pulp Press, was just like, "I want you to think of it as another character and maybe map it out." And I actually had a map that I would say, this scene happens here and this happens here, so I can have an idea of it, right?

And that helped me a great deal. But the thing is, it's not just about the map of it, but it's also how you traverse through Scarborough. I can't go to the grocery store or the Dollar Store or whatever without bumping into somebody and then us exchanging stories for the day. So it takes a long time to get anything done, that's for sure, in Scarborough.

I really wanted to capture that sort of start-stop, start-stop, listening to everybody's gossip. So when you look at the book, it is from these multiple perspectives and then when it came to really editing down, I really wanted to make sure that people who are from those different communities felt that they were well-represented.

I mentioned this a lot in all of my interviews — when you're depicting people that are outside of a community, just make sure that those people from those communities are reflecting back to you ways in which you can do better. And also, pay them for their time, either a capitalist exchange or, in my case at that time because I was really struggling, sometimes it was just a loaf of bread or my labour.

Right now, it's very in vogue to have what they call a 'sensitivity reader' and I have issues with that, partly because you're not having these people read it because people are sensitive. So I called it an accountability team. They're there to keep you accountable so that you could do better as a writer.

Baker: I really love the way that you rephrased that. I think that's very, very true.

Other than the fact that all the characters live in Scarborough, what do you think ties all these stories together?

Hernandez: I think what ties them all together is that everyone just really wants to thrive. They want to do good by people, even the people who are the least likeable characters in the novel, such as Cory. The truth is that even he wants to do well by his child. It's just that when people don't have the resources, when they don't have the skills to do what they need to do, they make bad choices. And, those bad choices can affect lives in horrifying ways.

A lot of times, journalists will really commend me for how three-dimensional Cory is, as this person who was part of the skinhead groups in the 1990s in Scarborough. I find this so funny — the expectation to really make sure that people who are white supremacists are given that chance to be three-dimensional, whereas, when you're racialized, you're hoping for even just one dimension. Even if there's a person that is showing up on the screen, you're happy, right?

I'm glad that Cory doesn't come off as two-dimensional, and I'm also glad that I was able to find the compassion for him, especially because in the 1990s, there were men just like him in skinhead groups who sincerely, I was terrified of them. So it was wonderful to sort of, in my mind, make peace with those people who really a lot of times they're attracted to hate groups because they are outcasts in society.

And so, as a writer, I really have to really meet this person in the middle.

Baker: I feel like a lot of the marginalized groups, when you see them on the telly or you see them in books, it's always a sob story behind them. And, like you said, we're just grateful for that one-sided perspective — like, oh my God, she even said she had curly hair. That's crazy.

I just feel like this book reins that in. It showed some of the amazing memories and it shows some of the heartbreaking ones and it was just full-rounded in that way where

you could feel that sense of relatability if you're in it, and if you're not, then you could still feel the spark that was there.

What's one of the most impactful things that you learned about yourself, especially putting yourself in all these other perspectives' shoes?

Hernandez: Well, you know, as someone who identifies as a queer femme woman and also the fact that obviously I present as a brown woman, I learned that you can re-parent yourself.

So Vivek Shreya, who is a beautiful author, a creator of beautiful things in this world, wrote a children's book called *The Boy & the Bindi*. I remember her saying at one of her events that she wrote a book in which she just really wanted this feminine South Asian boy to be feminine and still be loved by his mother for doing feminine things. And she said, "I just really wanted to tell a story in which he is loved because I can do that. I'm an author. I can do whatever I want."

And I thought, that's exactly it. Like when it comes to Bing, I can author into being a child who is feminine, fat, Filipino and gay, who is loved by his mother. I can do it because I'm the author. I can create it. And that means that also in this world, we can create that reality. Right? It's just as simple as making a decision.

And when it came to like authoring things into being, like authoring into being Ms. Hina as the facilitator of the literacy program, I wanted to author into being a social worker who was brave enough to stand up to her manager. And that was really powerful because I would do these readings at events, and these frontline workers would tell me, "Thank you so much for writing that because I don't have the bravery," and I say, "Yes, you do. All you have to do is do what I did, write it into being." If I can write it, they can do it.

Baker: It's so interesting and intriguing to see a book that's in our reality and it is our world and it is our Earth, and it just shows all the possibilities of what it could be.

And Bing, like you said, that character, oh my God. My heart poured. I love him, and everyone included. It's just so interesting to see the different perspectives.

The theme of [Canada Reads](#) this year is One Book to Connect Us. What do you think of that and how do you think it resonates to your story?

Hernandez: Oh, well, I feel glad that this is the theme for the moment that [Scarborough](#) is going to be entering into the ring because that's exactly what this book is about. It's about, what does sincere connection between each other look like?

It's a recurring theme between all of the characters where you have Sylvie, who is like a really parentified child having to learn to make a connection with her mother, even

though her mother has her hands full trying to navigate the special education system, right?

You have Bing trying to make a connection with his classmates, even though he is considered to be different and weird.

And, Ms. Hina obviously building bridges with a community that has very little trust in her.

What I'm hoping for is that the people who read *Scarborough* will think about, "Who's across the way from me and my house? Who's taking care of my children? Who are the leaders in my small community? And, how can I make sure that we're all moving toward the collective idea that all of us deserve to be safe?"

Baker: When I first heard the theme, I was like, "This is going to be perfect for this book." It was just the thing that truly wrapped it all together.

OK, last question, do you have any advice for me as I get ready for the competition?

Hernandez: Oh my goodness. Well, I feel like as long as you understand that this is a discussion about the importance of whatever the themes are in the book, and not necessarily winning — I think that that's the number one thing, right? Because this is a discussion about great books for people to discover. I think that's what's going to be incredible to witness.

But other than that, I mean, seriously, Malia, I think that you are such a dynamo. I just have absolute confidence in you, no matter what happens in the competition. I just feel like I've already won having you championing this book, because that feels like an award like in and of itself.

But I mean, just have fun and be present in the conversation. That's all. I mean, how do you feel?

Baker: I'm terrified. I got to be honest. I'm so scared, but I feel like it's a good thing to be scared, you know? It's something that's out of my comfort zone. Everyone involved in it so far has been so lovely and I'm excited. But wow, nervous.

Catherine: OK, there's just one thing I wanted to say too, is that I know that, myself included, we're all like, amazed by your age, but your age aside, the truth is is that you're there, your voice matters, you're a powerful person, and that you're someone that everyone should be really happy that you're even at the table.

Baker: Thank you. I appreciate it. I feel like just having all these amazing kind of mentor-like roles around me and having you and just even being able to speak to you, it's a blessing for sure.

Hernandez: Oh, awesome. Well, thank you so much for choosing my book.

Baker: Of course. I'm so happy I got the chance to read it.

Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/a-community-that-refuses-to-be-undone-catherine-hernandez-and-malia-baker-discuss-the-novel-scarborough-1.6370345>

Other Links and Resources:

The Urban Alliance on Race Relations works primarily and proactively with the community, public, and private sectors to provide educational programs and research to address racism in society. <https://www.urbanalliance.ca/>

The Canadian Safe School Network is a national registered charitable organization with a mandate to reduce youth violence and make schools and communities safer. <https://cssn.me/>

Scarborough movie trailer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mX1SKWuQg0>

ConnexOntario Helpline: 1-866-531-2600 <https://www.connexontario.ca/>

Assaulted Women's Helpline: 1-866-863-0511 <https://www.awhl.org/>

Justice for Children & Youth: <https://jfcy.org/en/>

Victim Justice Network: <https://www.victimjusticenetwork.ca/>

Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: