



Liem Yip, with project partner Gabriel Morin, is one of the authors of the English grand prize winner in B'nai Brith Canada's Diverse Minds Creative Writing Competition. The winning entries are published in hardcover book form and distributed to elementary school readers. *DAVE SIDAWAY*

STUDENT AUTHORS FIGHT OTHERING WITH PASSION, CREATIVITY AND WIT

B'nai Brith-sponsored writing competition promotes diversity, leads to publication



IAN MCGILLIS

Can a lesson in diversity and inclusiveness be learned from a flock of narrow-minded chickens? The winner of an inspired literary contest for Montreal high-school students says yes, it can.

The Diverse Minds Creative Writing Competition, launched by B'nai Brith Canada in 2019 and open to all Montreal students in grades 9 through 11, solicits illustrated stories on the aforementioned themes of diversity and inclusiveness; the winners are then published in hardcover book form and distributed to elementary school readers. In the words of B'nai Brith's mission statement, the competition offers students the chance "to become active human rights role models for their younger peers."

The society's pitch found fertile ground at Royal West Academy in Montreal West, where teacher Gloria Kopyoulian seized on the concept, convinced four groups of two in her English class to enter, and provided structural guidance, technical assistance and general encouragement through the process.

Remarkably for a contest with such a broad catchment area, all four pairs in Kopyoulian's class were ranked in the overall top 10 by the nine-person judging committee. Among those pairs were English-language grand prize winners Liem Yip and Gabriel

AT A GLANCE

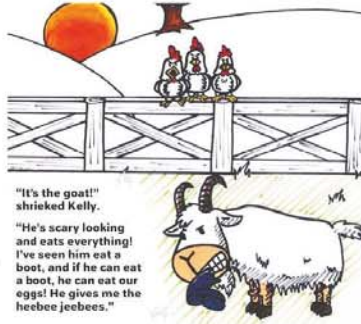
■ Information regarding next year's Diverse Minds Creative Writing Competition will be announced by B'nai Brith Canada in early November. ■ For details, visit bnaibrith.ca/diverseminds.

Morin, who share the \$2,000 prize for The Eggknapper, their story of how farmyard chickens apply discriminatory stereotypes against their fellow farm animals when a series of egg thefts occurs, and how they finally get their comeuppance and learn their lesson.

The French language winners, also awarded \$1,000 each, were Omar Ghazaly and Wesley Yan of Collège Saint-Louis in Lachine, for *Le Voyage de Ferret*.

"It had to be about diversity," Yip, a 15-year-old N.D.G. resident, said at Royal West last week. "So I wanted to have a whimsical, child-appropriate story that still has a message." (Co-author Morin was unavailable on the day of our interview for the good reason that he was writing an exam, but in the competition's Montreal presentation ceremony said that he was inspired by observing, as a frequent babysitter, how effective stories can be as a tool for teaching kids.)

"I chose chickens (as protagonists) because they're just funny, and of all animals they're some of the most talkative, always in little groups clicking and clucking. So I figured a group of rather racist chickens would be a good subject." Having struck on an effectively counterintuitive set of villains,



In Liem Yip and Gabriel Morin's *The Eggknapper*, a group of chickens applies discriminatory stereotypes against fellow farm animals when a series of egg thefts occurs. *LIEM YIP AND GABRIEL MORIN*

Yip and Morin set about the nuts and bolts of writing and illustrating.

"It took about a month," Yip said. "Most of the sessions were in class (hours). The teacher was kind enough to let us set up a table in the hall and get down to work. There was a lot of bouncing around of ideas, a lot of typing and erasing. Once we had a solid page-by-page layout for the book, we started illustrating. We tried to make those simple, because we had to colour them and we didn't have a lot of time. But I think it turned out pretty good."

He's right; it did. What's more, *The Eggknapper* isn't just a good book for a pair of 15-year-olds to have created — it's a good children's book, period. Yip and Morin avoid the common pitfall of talking down to their young readership; their prose is plain-spoken but rich, and

peppered with some sophisticated vocabulary — "maliciously," "theorized." They also achieve something that has eluded many a more experienced author: they've managed to both instruct and amuse without shortchanging either option. This is a book that is funny without trivializing the decidedly unfunny forces it seeks to fight against.

Yip, who said he "has never been the most organized person" (somehow that's hard to believe), professes to have learned some valuable lessons from the experience of creating the book.

"Now I know I've really got to start right at the beginning," he said. "I kind of slacked a bit, and that's why we ended up cramming a lot."

As for how the aspiring professional writer felt the day his first allotted shipment of the book came back from the printer: "It blew my mind."

REVIEW

Gilded ... and toxic

Strong performances help, but mystery series remains disappointingly superficial

The Undoing Debuts Sunday, Crave

CAROLINE FRANKS

Nicole Kidman is unparalleled in the art of playing a woman who's equal parts flinty determination and distraught pain. When her face falls in shock, her character is likely to fight the instinct to fall apart, instead stealing herself for whatever's yet to come.

It's a balancing act that found a

particularly remarkable showing in David E. Kelley's *Big Little Lies*, with Kidman as a woman on the edge of shattering within her abusive marriage.

In *The Undoing*, Kidman is again a wife overwhelmed by her husband's potential for perfidy, a role she once again owns with an irresistible force. But not even Kidman's performance, nor sharp turns from the likes of Hugh Grant and Donald Sutherland, can quite centre its

diffuse interests. The new HBO limited series is, to no one's surprise, ably acted and handsomely made. Director Susanne Bier shoots the chilly New York winter in which the show's catastrophic events unfold with an eye for the unsettling.

When Kidman's character Grace gets overwhelmed, we see flashes of the horrors running through her head — and it's just about impossible to tell if we're looking at the past or some imagined version thereof.

In these unsettling moments, when Grace acts as an unreliable narrator in the increasingly bizarre story of her own life, *The Undoing* is extremely effective as a psychological thriller. Where it gets lost, then, is in chasing the scattered interests of its ever-twisting plot.

Grace's world turns upside-down the day after a young mother is gruesomely murdered

the night after her glitzy private school benefit. The media, salivating over the details of a crime implicating the city's most elite social strata, can't get enough coverage of the aftermath and ensuing court case.

When turning to the prime suspect (Grant), they make sure to highlight that he's not just a charming children's oncologist, but a white and obscenely wealthy man.

And when push comes to shove, the skeptical reports continue, who's the jury going to believe: dead Elena and her taciturn husband, or upstanding citizens Jonathan and his status-quest therapist wife (Kidman)?

These are useful, interesting questions, so it's frustrating to realize that *The Undoing* raises these issues almost as a courtesy before almost entirely glossing over them. *Variety.com*

THE SCOOP

Elton John inspires Barbie

Elton John now has a Barbie doll inspired by his likeness. The singer-songwriter partnered with Mattel to create a blond Barbie with accessories including a purple bowler hat, pink sunglasses and a bomber jacket with "Elton" written on the front. The new figure, part of Mattel's Gold Label of Barbies collection, was created to mark the 45th anniversary of John's 1975 concerts at Los Angeles' Dodger Stadium. A photo from the two shows, featuring the star dressed in a customized Dodgers uniform, appears on the front of the packaging.

Charley Pride to receive award

Singer-songwriter Charley Pride will receive the 2020 Willie Nelson Lifetime Achievement Award at the Country Music Association Awards next month. The 86-year-old will be recognized for his work as a musician and humanitarian. Pride found fame in the 1960s and 1970s with hits like *Kiss an Angel Good Mornin'* and *Is Anybody Goin' to San Antonio*. He was named CMA Entertainer of the Year in 1971, the only Black star to claim the trophy. The awards are set for Nov. 11.

Howard suing 20th Century Fox

Actor Terrence Howard has accused 20th Century Fox of using his likeness from *Hustle & Flow* to promote its hit show *Empire*. The star says execs failed to offer a satisfactory answer when asked how they came up with the *Empire* logo that features his face in profile — since he never sat down for a photo shoot. He believes the screen capture came from a music studio scene in the film *Hustle & Flow*, saying it was reversed and subjected to CGI effects. Howard says Paramount would've paid him if 20th Century Fox got a proper licence to use the image. He's suing for damages and wants an accounting of *Empire* merchandise with the logo.

Reagan set shut down

Production on Dennis Quaid's Ronald Reagan biopic has been halted in Oklahoma after a coronavirus scare on set. Multiple members of the film's crew have tested positive for COVID-19, and Quaid and Penelope Ann Miller, who portray Ronald and Nancy Reagan in the film, have been told to stay away from the shoot.

Vanessa Williams had COVID-19

Vanessa Williams has revealed she contracted COVID-19 after returning to the U.S. from London. The 57-year-old actress had been in the English capital working on the West End play *City of Angels*, which was put on hold due to the pandemic. "I was sick with COVID — I got the London version," Williams said Thursday on *Extra*. "I was sick in March when I came back from London. We kind of as a cast got ill... So I went through the couple of weeks being sick."