

Linda Hutsell Manning gives reading at Madawaska Community Centre



By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Author Linda Hutsell-Manning returned to the Madawaska Community Centre on Sept. 4 at 6:30 p.m. to read from her novella *Heads I Win, Tails You Lose*, and her short story *The Killing Room*. She was there last year and did a successful reading from her book *Fearless and Determined: Two Years Teaching at a One Room School*. Bancroft This Week did a lead up article for this reading called *'Linda Hutsell Manning returns for book reading at SA Library'* for their Aug. 30 edition. While there were few people in attendance due to the lovely weather outside, Hutsell Manning gave a wonderful reading of her works. While not many people came by the evening of Sept. 4 due to the sunny and balmy weather, Hutsell Manning still gave an impassioned and heart felt reading of her work to those in attendance. First, she read from her short story *The Killing Room*, which she said she was surprised it was published on its own due to it being a short story, and thought it would be part of an anthology. She prefaced the reading by saying that she was an only child born in Winnipeg and that her dad was charming, handsome but also a gambler and an alcoholic. She said they left Winnipeg when she was nine years old under strange circumstances, and they moved around and she attended five schools in a year and a half. The last place they lived was a farm north of Baltimore, Ontario as her dad decided they were going to raise chickens to cash in on the fried chicken craze of the 1950s. Hutsell Manning said they got beautiful baby chicks but nobody said they were going to be killed when they matured. She said there was a shed on the property and her mom pulled her aside and told her they were going to start killing chickens. Her dad ran the plucking machine, while her mom scalded them. "So, there was only one job left, killing the chickens. Six chickens hanging in a row with pails underneath them with a tool to kill them," she says. Hutsell Manning said she was indignant about it as her mom was very kind to animals but she realizes now she had no choice as her father had decided to do this and was convinced that they'd get rich doing it, as he always did with whatever plans he'd come up with. "I wrote this story in the third person, the girl's name is Kate, but it's basically autobiographical," she says. Hutsell Manning said she helped kill the chickens at her parents' farm until she was 14 years old and got a paying job that summer, as her other friends did. She says the book will be published on Jan. 25, 2025 and proceeded to read a portion of the story for the attendees. "It's a tough story and I certainly didn't tell anybody at school that's what I was doing. I just said I had to work on the farm. And I know lots of farm kids have to kill things, I'm aware of that. Farm kids know a lot about life and death that ordinary kids don't," she says. Hutsell-Manning then talked about her novella *Heads I Win, Tails you Lose*, and said that a long time ago, she remembered visiting a friend who was in a relationship with an artist. She was working full-time and he slept all day and worked all night in the garage. "And he smoked incessantly. I don't know whether he drank, he was kind of charming. And I remember one time we visited and went for a walk and he ran out of breath after five minutes and had to sit down. And we kept walking and she said he'd probably end up in a wheelchair and she'd have to push him around in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. I was in a wonderful marriage to a wonderful man and it just seemed stupid to me. She was a high school teacher, a very talented woman. And then I got the idea for this story, except I had no idea how it was going to pan out. It came out very differently, nothing like that couple. So, in this story I made it into a surreal situation and I always say *Alice in Wonderland* is surreal. Little girls don't fall into rabbit holes, but that's an

accepted story, what happens in Alice in Wonderland. What happens to the husband in this story is impossible, as it's surreal," she says. Hutsell Manning then read an excerpt from the novella to the audience. After that, she talked about a story she'd started over 30 years ago, for her daughter when she was at university, and her boyfriend had let her cat out and the cat was killed. "It was a terribly upsetting thing, so I decided I would write a story and bring the cat back to life for my daughter. So originally it was called The Christmas Stocking Cat, but I had an agent at the time who was a cat person and didn't like it so it was shelved. I went back to work on it at the end of COVID-19 and renamed it Finding Moufette, (French for skunk, as her daughter's cat had a white stripe like a skunk) and it has anime illustrations," she says. After showing the attendees the book Finding Moufette, Hutsell Manning shared that she'd also written a poem about freedom as part of an assignment for a poetry group she belongs to, and she said she'd written in in pantoum form and was actively looking to have it published soon. "I started writing lines about freedom and didn't like the way they were turning out. So, I decided to rhyme it which makes it harder as rhyme is out of style but I think it turned out well. It really turned out being about what freedom isn't not what freedom is," she says. Hutsell Manning then read the poem, entitled "Freedom," for the attendees. After that, Hutsell Manning told the audience that she was working on a memoir about her childhood and a short story collection, publishing dates to be announced. She then answered questions about her work, her writing process and the publishing world in general. Hutsell Manning told Bancroft This Week that despite the low attendee turnout on the evening of Sept. 4, she thought the reading had gone well. "I've done readings for smaller audiences and bigger audiences. I know it's the luck of the draw. It's a nice night and people are probably out barbecuing and enjoying it," she says. "I'm not Margaret Atwood."