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Letters from the Law Commission of Canada

by Shauna Van Praagh, LCC President

Letter # 7

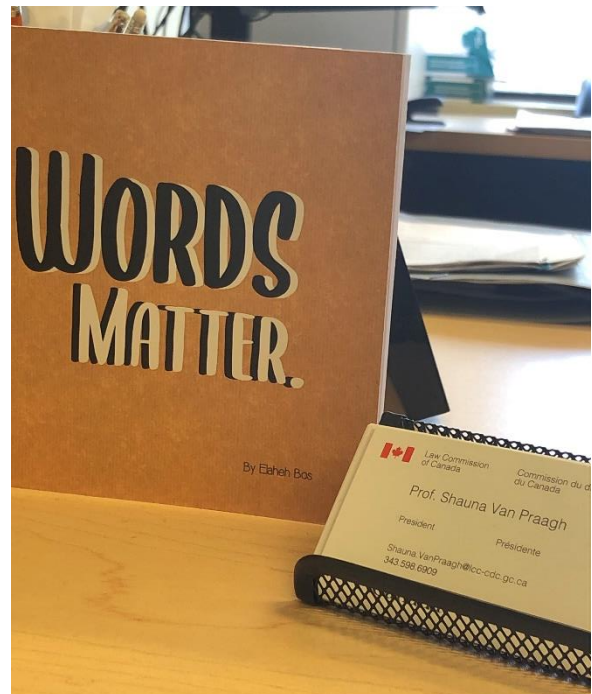
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Words Matter. That is the title of a tiny soft-cover book by Elaheh Bos, standing up and propped open on my desk at my Law Commission of Canada office.

Here are some of the sentences that a reader of *Words Matter* would find as they turn the pages:

- "You can't build a house with words, but words can make a home feel safe."
- "Words can inspire an idea, a person, a generation, a nation."
- "Words become stories, recounting the tales of the old, or the courage of the bold."
- "Words can bemuse, confuse, entrance, and amuse."
- "They hint, they spell, they say, or scream. They help us dream."

With the words she chooses to talk about words themselves, the author invites reflection, conversation, and questioning. Readers might implement the ideas they find on the pages. Or they might start to write their own sentences. They might take time to consider how they select their own words; they might slow down to assess the potential impact of what they say and how they say it.



Book cover of Words Matter by Elaheh Bos.

This isn't a letter grounded in travel to a different place or to meet with people outside the LCC. Instead, perhaps because I started writing it in January, a month that sometimes feels like it's at a standstill, this diary entry is situated firmly inside our Ottawa office. It is focused on how our small team has instituted a routine for sharing words and stories related to the promise and work of the Law Commission.

Once a week, a staff member shares a news item in which they see some connection to the vocation of the LCC. Every four weeks, someone shares their pick for book of the month. Beyond offering an opportunity to strengthen our team through the sharing of insights and commitment, the exercises underscore the connections among journalism, fiction-writing, and law reform.



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Reporting by journalists, whether from around the corner or around the world, can offer deep, critical understanding of contemporary issues. Offering the news depends on and invites serious engagement with individuals and communities. The stories shared each week come from a wide variety of news sources and locations; each one gets us thinking about the ways in which norms and expectations, whether formal or informal, intersect with people's lives and trajectories.

The understanding, knowledge, and grappling with complexity at the heart of journalism are also found, albeit in different ways, in works of fiction or creative non-fiction. Here too words serve to recount, inspire, and help us dream. We have had two book picks so far. In December, we were introduced to Jesse Thistle's *From the Ashes – My Story of Being Métis, Homeless and Finding my Way* (2019). The author traces a path of hope intertwined with stories and reflections of identity, belonging, and struggle, and offers a narrative inspiring for any project tied to law and justice. In January, the selected book was *From Far Away* (1995), written by Robert Munsch with Saoussan Askar who shares her account of moving to Canada at age 7 from what had been a "very nice" place to live until the moment "when a war started". The words and pictures provide a compelling portrait of what arrival feels like and of the crucial impact of kindness and understanding on the part of individuals in our lives.

In both books – one about "finding my way", the other about coming "from far away" – we see the importance of telling one's story, counting on supporters, and choosing direction. One situates Canada in the world; the other underscores the existence of worlds within Canada. Both nourish and rely on the reader's imagination, curiosity, and compassion. As the LCC team looks forward to the February book pick, we can already see how the preoccupations tied to change and evolution in law might intersect with those expressed by creative writers. Words in both contexts guide and shape the work of listening, learning, gathering, mapping, planning, and constructing.

Readers may not be surprised by the sketching of connections among the distinctive forms and methods of journalism, fiction, and law. They might find a little more challenging the specific links between children's literature on one hand, and the shape and promise of law reform on the other. Below I share some of my favourite excerpts from two authors of books for children who underline ways in which children's literature is composed of compelling stories, structures for understanding and questioning the world, and insights into human behaviour and interactions. These are all, of course, elements characteristic of law.

Philip Pullman (from "Magic Carpets - The Writer's Responsibilities" and "Children's Literature Without Borders" in *Daemon Voices – On Stories and Storytelling*):

- "I take it that art, literature, children's literature, do *not* exist in an ivory tower; I take it that we're inextricably part of the world, the whole world; and that we have several kinds of responsibility that follow from that..."
- "Knowing that our readership includes children – notice, I don't say *consists of children*, because every children's book is also read by adults – but knowing that there are children



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reading us, what should our attitude be? Where does our responsibility lie? ... My feeling is that whatever we depict in our stories, we should show that actions have consequences.

Isaac Bashevis Singer (from "Are Children the Ultimate Literary Critics" in *Stories for Children*):

- "Children are the best readers of genuine literature...No matter how young they are, children are deeply concerned with so-called eternal questions...Children think about and ponder such matters as justice, the purpose of life, the why of suffering...Many adults read and enjoy children's books...They, too, are serious children."

A couple of years ago, I discovered a reference to something American legal scholar Robert Cover used to say: "I went to law school to make the world a safer place for poetry." There is so much to contemplate in that statement – whether about the necessity of imagination and ideas, the importance of ensuring the safety of poets, or the intertwining of learning law and recognizing the power of words. All of that explains the presence of a child's book entitled *Words Matter* on the desk of the LCC president - just waiting to be picked up and read by visitors.