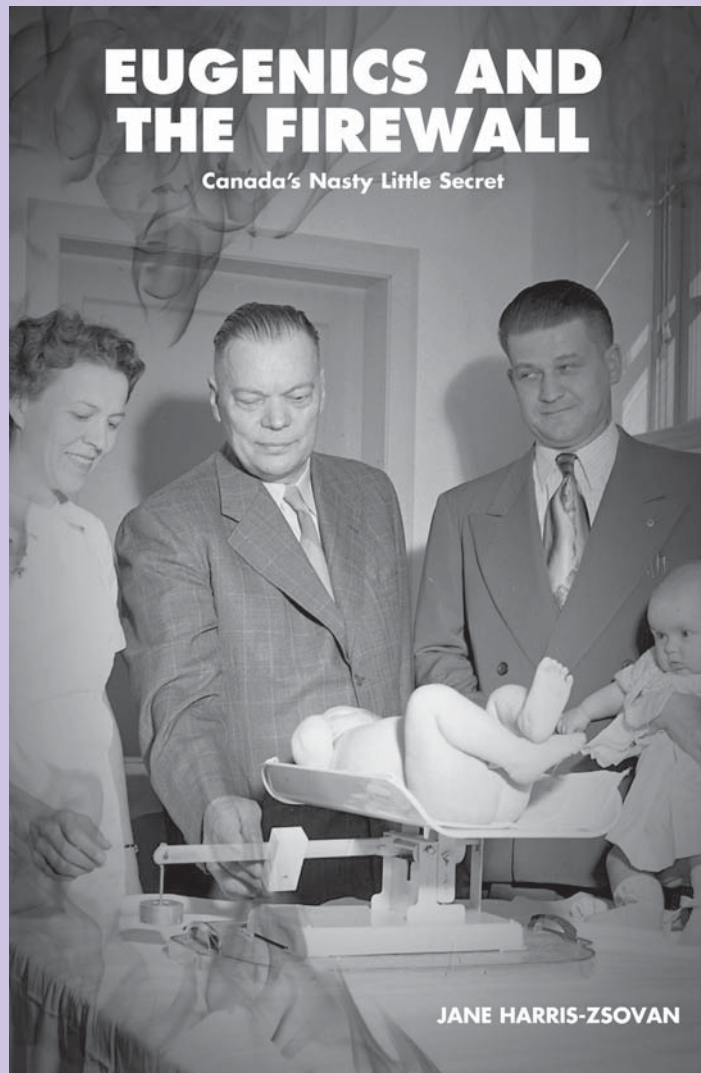


Shining a Light on Alberta's Past

Interview with Jane Harris-Zsovan

In 1928, the non-partisan United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) passed the first Sexual Sterilization Act. The UFA's successor, the Social Credit Party, led by radio evangelist William Aberhart, and later by his protégé Ernest Manning, removed the need to obtain consent to sterilize "mental defectives" or Huntington's Chorea patients with dementia. Between 1928 and 1972, nearly three thousand Alberta citizens were sterilized.

Whether it be theatre, music, visual or literary arts, it can be said that successful art often challenges traditions, makes us think outside the box, and can even make us feel uncomfortable. Local Author, Jane Harris-Zsovan recently released her latest book: *Eugenics and the Firewall: Canada's Nasty Little Secret*. The book unearths some dark secrets from Alberta's past. We sat down with Jane to talk about the book and what role the arts have in telling these stories.





AAC: How would you describe your book?

JHZ: The book can be considered a history of eugenics policies in Alberta. I wanted it to be accessible to a wide audience, not only academics. It focuses a lot on the cultural context of the time, as well as the people who created these policies. I try to take a cultural approach that will give readers a sense of what it would

have been like to live in Alberta during this time and the fear surrounding people who were considered “defectives”

The law started in 1928 and was voluntary; consent was needed in order for a person to be sterilized. These were usually people with ‘genetic defects’ or who had recently gotten out of a mental institution.

Within 10 years, there was concern that there weren’t enough people giving consent. The law was passed, and parents & teachers were required to report defective children, and often lost control of what happened to these kids. How much control the family had was often based on class. People with Huntington’s chorea or dementia, had little or no say for sterilization. Foster children, who were ward of the court and had no one to intervene, would also be sterilized by order of the minister. The eugenics board travelled over the province, seeking out ‘defective’ children in hospitals, health clinics and nursing missions.

(picture on cover of book) nursing mission in Lethbridge, sterilized one single mother.

AAC: How did you find these stories?

JHZ: They were all on the public record- the Canadian Hansard records, legislative bills, old newsletter clippings, and even letters to the editor. The book pulls out dusty papers and what may seem like a number of disjointed events and puts them all together. This creates a picture of what society looked like at that time; more than each of these papers would separately.

AAC: Why did you write this book?

JHZ: I wanted to understand why they (the government) did it- and why there were never any politicians in Alberta who renounced it- how no one at the time ever stood up and said it was wrong.

I also wanted to find out where the fear came from that helped these policies gain in popularity. They were very popular policies- middle class people were really afraid that their culture and their way of life were going to be swamped by insanity, vice and things like alcoholism and prostitution.

I ask a lot of questions in the book, such as to protect our rights, are we willing to take away the rights of others?

AAC: Even though Eugenics laws are no longer in place in Alberta, what can these stories tell us about today?

JHZ: In some ways, the times aren’t that different. When people are dirt poor & afraid, those in power (whether they are in government or not) can come in and take control very easily. In some ways Alberta still holds this fear- and it’s easy to see where this comes from.

AAC: What is the role of the literary arts in telling stories like this?

JHZ: I think good art makes you ask questions and is often about shining a light on who we are and why. Some people don’t like art or artists, because it makes them uncomfortable- and this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I wanted to ask the reader questions more than giving them answers- I wanted to get them talking, discussing and exploring. Writing can be a lot like a painting; my writing is very visual because our culture is very visual- I wanted to give a visual picture of what things were like at the time- which is why I included things like newspaper clippings.

AAC: Did you have any intentions for your book, and what it may make people think about?

JHZ: I wanted to be honest about eugenics and their history in Alberta. I didn’t want to blame anyone specifically, but to expose the culture at the time that allowed for this to happen. It wasn’t necessarily that all people agreed with it, but they didn’t care enough to say no and do something about it. Inch by inch, it became accepted. It would be great for people to think more critically about things we assume now are right and wrong- why not learn from the past?

To date, victims of the Sexual Sterilization Act have received little sympathy from the political heirs to the populist political movements that created and expanded the Sexual Sterilization Act. *AB*

Jane’s book, *Eugenics and the Firewall*, published by J. Gordon Shillingford Publishers is available from the Galt Museum gift shop and Chapters.

Visit her blog at visionofcanada.blogspot.com