ARTS AND CULTURE OTTAWA ᐊᑐᖅ

Aglukark memoir highlights music and healing

Musician reflects on childhood, early songwriting days and 'survival tools' during national book tour

Nehaa Bimal

Sitting in Ottawa's Fairmont Chateau Laurier before a recent book-launch event for *Kihiani: A Memoir of Healing* at Library and Archives Canada, Susan Aglukark says the iconic hotel was where her recording career began in the 1990s.

"On the top floor of this building was a recording studio that CBC Northern Services used to have, where *Dreams for You* was recorded. So it all began here. It's very full circle for me," the Juno Award-winning singer-songwriter said Sept. 4 in an interview.

"Back when I first moved to Ottawa in 1988, walking into the Chateau Laurier felt surreal," Aglukark said, referring to the stately building in the shadow of Parliament Hill.

"Even today, stepping into this building brings up that little trigger — that feeling of not quite belonging. It stays with you."

Aglukark was on the second stop of her national book tour that began Sept. 2 in Toronto to promote the release of her memoir.

The Inuktitut word kihiani in the Arviat dialect means "because we must."

"In this context, it means, 'I do what I have to because I must,'" she said.

"I have a duty and a responsibility — not just to the previous generation but to the next generation — to do what I must, to stay here, responding, answering the call of my healing journey."

The 272-page book traces her life from her childhood in Rankin Inlet and Arviat, where her parents worked as preachers, through her rise as an award-winning musician and her long journey of healing from childhood sexual abuse.

One chapter, *The Hallelujah Kids*, recalls one of her earliest musical memories: singing *Happy, Happy, Happy* in church at age seven. But music was complicated.

"Though I loved music, it was a conflict from my parents' gospel music versus devil's music," she said. "I was taught not to be 'too much' or 'too proud.' Pride is something I'm still working on."

Her father loved music, and that relationship — as well as the ties to her siblings and her mother — runs through the book, along with photos from her childhood.

Several chapters detail Aglukark's early music career, recounting the creation of her albums *Dreams for You*, *Arctic Rose*, *This Child* and *Unsung Heroes*.

Chapters titled *Justice for Whom?* and *Testify* describe how, in her early 20s, she first testified against the man who had assaulted her and others more than a decade earlier in Rankin Inlet when she was eight years old.

She also describes naming her abuser in 2018 during a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls hearing in Rankin Inlet.

"We absolutely have to do more work in terms of providing the right supports for those recovering from child sex abuse," she said on her decision to share her experience.

"These are the words I used to describe what happened. And if these words help you, that's what they're there for," she said.

"Visual compartmentalizing" is a "survival tool" that works for her, she said, whenever she returns to Rankin Inlet, where her abuser still lives.



Susan Aglukark, a Juno Award-winning Inuk singer-songwriter, holds her new book, *Kihiani: A Memoir of Healing*, at an art gallery inside the Fairmont Chateau Laurier hotel in Ottawa Sept. 4 before attending a book launch at Library and Archives Canada. (Photo by Nehaa Bimal)

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>
> — Susan Aglukark

"There's literally a compartment in my head that says, 'You might bump into him.' And every visit, I do. And so, what I have to do is store up enough energy so that when that happens I know that he can't touch me or hurt me," she said.

"That compartment is critical to my health in that community. And I would encourage many to try that."

Working with co-writer Andrea Warner, Aglukark organized her story into 25 chapters. Her childhood "before" the assault had to come first, she said.

"What's important to me about the reader is that, as many of our own people read this story because I think they can relate to the 'before' story," she said, speaking of childhood memories of playing on the land. "And the 'before' is this beautiful time."

The memoir also explores ilirasungniq, a word she defines as a compounded emotional fear passed down through generations of Inuit.

It connects to the ongoing impact of colonization and settlement life, she said, that makes her work with the Arctic Rose Foundation, a charity she founded in 2012 to support arts-based after-school programs for Indigenous youth, important.

"For those of us who work in mental health and healing, it is not the community that is in crisis, it's the environment that we are stuck in that is," she said.

Journal entries and poetry from her youth that she saved, she said, became the earliest form of navigating that fear. Many excerpts from her childhood diaries are featured in the book.

Despite the pain, Aglukark said her memoir ultimately is about possibility.

"What's important about the story is not the assault itself, but that we can heal [from] that. And I feel like I'm whole again," she said. "But it's also so important for the reader to understand because so many of us are on this journey, that whole doesn't mean 100 per cent."

That balance, she said, allowed her to keep going in a career that has brought both extraordinary highs and burnouts resulting from the trauma of her childhood assault, depression and migraines.

"I've had an incredible life. And there have been lessons there to share, because somewhere in those lessons are tools to keep moving forward in our life's choices. Kihiani — because we must," she said.

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