

ARTS: Writing couple opens Main Street shop

Everyday objects find life with lauded poet

BY CHRIS SHANAHAN

Objects as diverse as insects and a family scrapbook provide creative inspiration for Stouffville poet Souvankham Thammavongsa.

The 32-year-old writer employs minimal lyrics with a visual sense in her body of work, which includes an acclaimed debut book *Small Arguments*.

"I'm really interested in objects. I like to look at things and describe what it is, even if people already know what the object is," Ms Thammavongsa said. "I think for me it gives me a sense of discipline in that all the material for that poem comes from just that object."

Published by Pedlar Press, *Small Arguments* won the 2004 ReLit Award. The collection of 31 poems about everything from a grasshopper and a snail to strawberries was described by a reviewer at the time as "quiet, beautiful jeweler's-eye lyrics".

A native of Thailand who grew up in Toronto, Ms Thammavongsa based her second book, Found, on a scrapbook kept by her father while he lived in a Lao refugee camp in 1978.

According to another review of the book, by Canadian poet/novelist Anne Michaels, "This is the voice of a pilgrim, the one who bends to see, leans to hear ... Thammavongsa has distilled her meaning from her details so masterfully and with such confident wisdom that she seems to be reading nature. Through her eyes, we can believe we see the true meaning in things."

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MORE SOUVANKHAM?

For more information and updates on the Stouffville poet, go to www.souvankham-thammavongsa.com

in 1978.

In 2009, it was made into a short film by Paramita Nath and screened as an official selection at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival.

The film is an impressionistic journey told through old photos, text, animation and home movies.

From *Found's* official website, "Thammavongsa's parents lived in a Lao refugee camp, where she was born. During this time, her father kept a scrapbook filled with doodles, postage stamps, maps and measurements. The pages of the original scrapbook are our only windows into this extraordinary past..."

Now working on her third book, the poet continues to hone her skills on a series of verses dealing only with different elements of light.

One of her new poems is based on her experiences taking swimming lessons at the Lebovic Leisure Centre.

The limits imposed by a sole subject matter provide motivation and unique challenges for the writer.

"Working with one object pushes you to understand the mechanics of that object and also your own mechanics...and what you can do with that object with that set of limited tools," noted Ms Thammavongsa, also a successful visual artist who uses a paperclip to paint miniature watercolours.

SWIM LESSON POETRY

Her artistic vision is also evident in a downtown venture launched recently with husband Andrew DuBois. Together, they opened Concrete Books and Records, a cozy store at Main and Church streets featuring gently-used and vintage literature, sports and children's books, vinyl LPs and CDs.

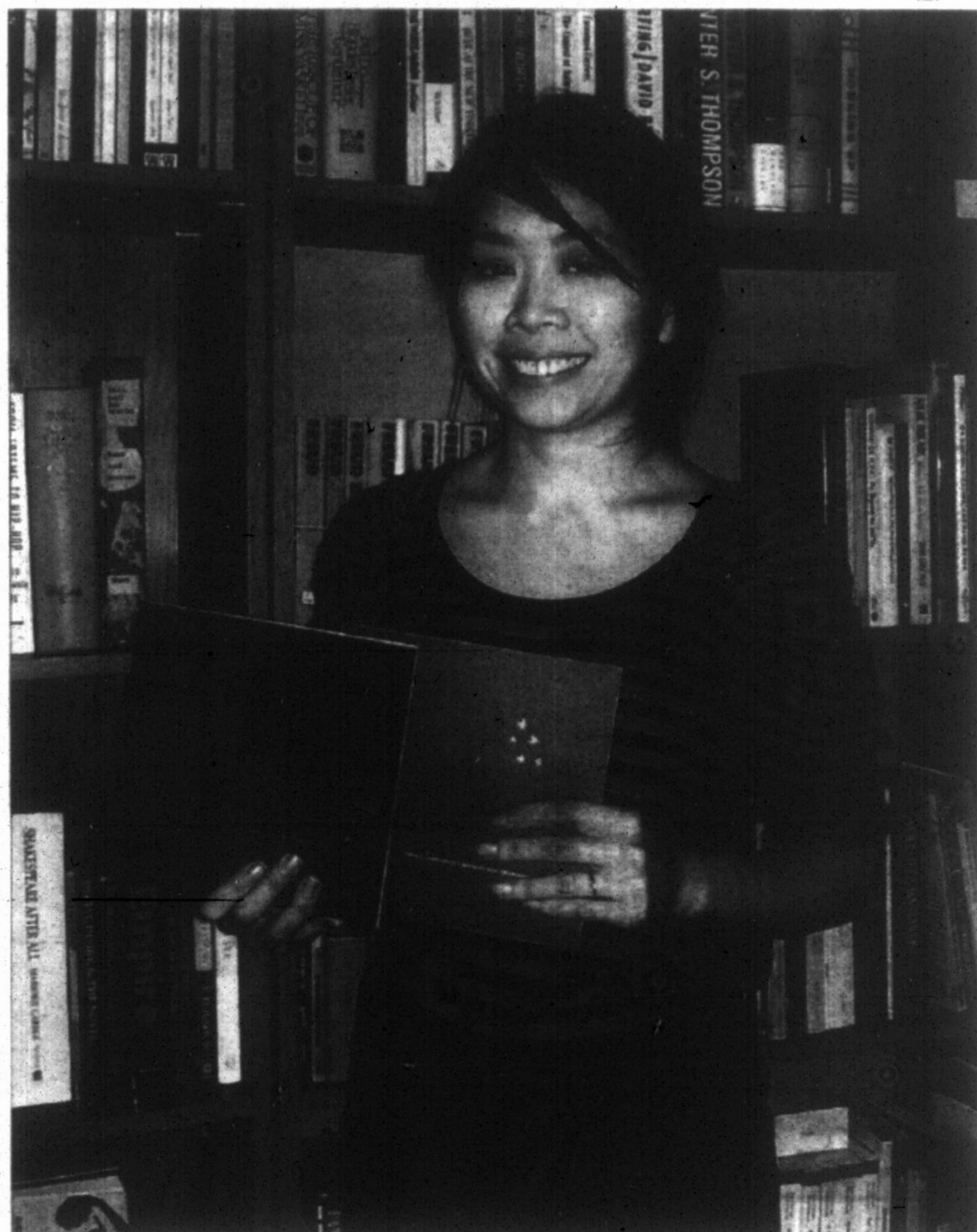


PHOTO: CHRIS SHANAHAN

Stouffville poet Souvankham Thammavongsa inside Concrete Books and Records, the Main Street store she opened with her husband. The name has family ties, too.

Mr. DuBois and his wife moved to Stouffville last year and soon found themselves looking for the type of place they could visit and browse for books and music in a comfortable, relaxed environment.

So they decided to open Concrete, named in part because Mr. DuBois' father is in the concrete business.

"Also it's the idea that books are concrete objects, not just things that float around on the Internet," Ms Thammavongsa said. "I didn't have books growing up as a kid, so I think for me it fulfills something."

The couple hopes to turn their new store into a local destination for the arts, attracting poets, fiction writers and musicians among others. An initial monthly poetry reading last

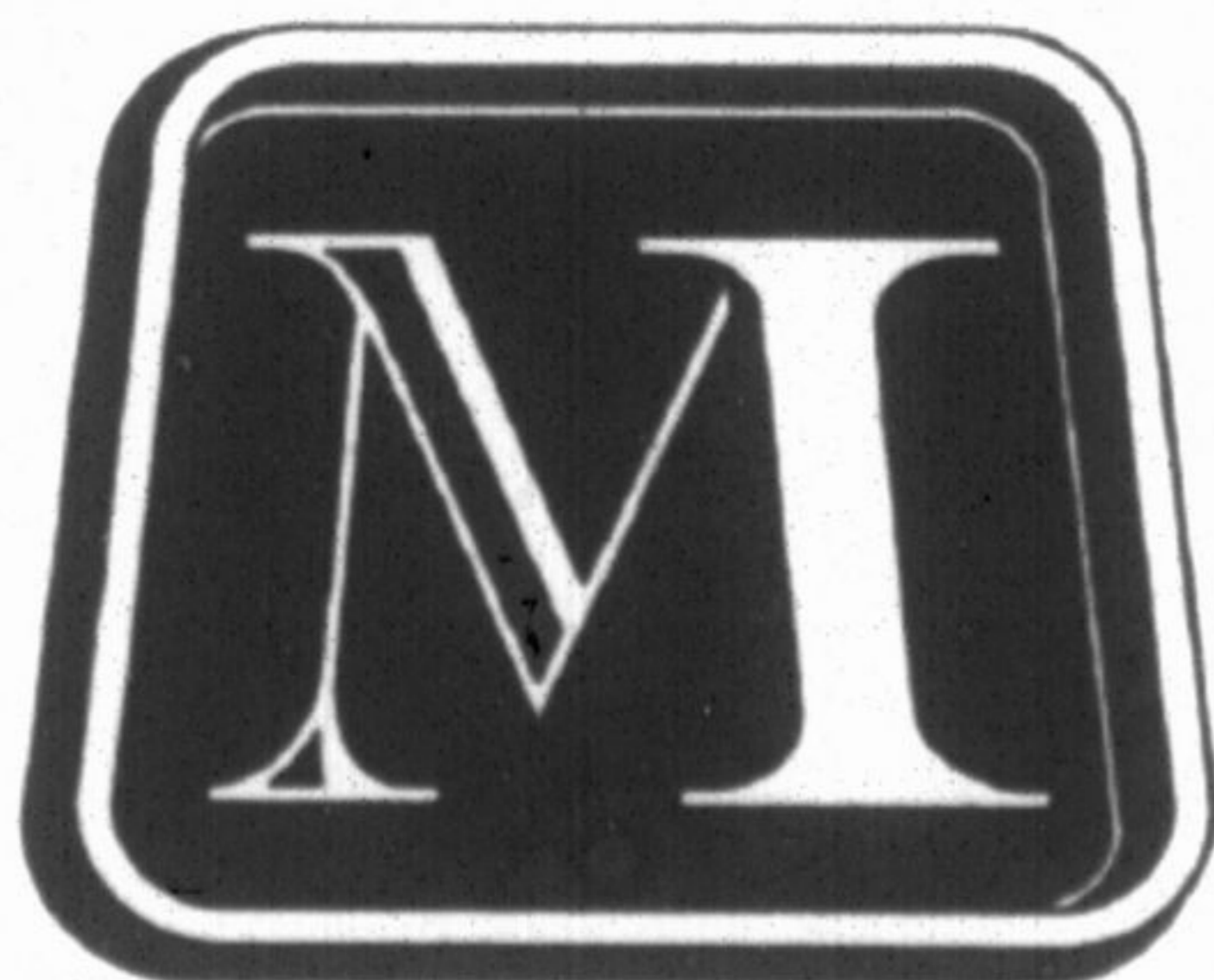
month attracted a full house.

And Mr. DuBois — a University of Toronto at Scarborough English professor and co-editor of *The Anthology of Rap* — is also hosting regular writing workshops for young people aged 12 to 18.

WORKSHOPS FOR YOUNG WRITERS

His 900-page rap book, compiled with Adam Bradley of the University of Colorado, received critical acclaim from North American publications including *The New Yorker*, *Huffington Post* and the *New York Times Book Review*.

For more information, visit www.souvankham-thammavongsa.com and www.foundthefilm.com.



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