

Reading Across Rhode Island: A conversation with Kate Lentz of the Rhode Island Center for the Book



Photo credit: Rhode Island Center for the Book

Around the world, shared-reading programs bring communities together to experience a single work of literature. Canada's public broadcaster sponsors a nationwide *Canada Reads* campaign. In Dublin, Ireland, *One City, One Book* welcomes readers into a narrative tied to the city. As Ocean State residents begin a new year by collectively opening *Rising: Dispatches from a New American Shore* by Elizabeth Rush, *Motif's* Sean Carlson interviewed Kate Lentz, executive director of the Rhode Island Center for the Book, about the nonprofit organization and its 2020 *Reading Across Rhode Island* selection.

Sean Carlson (*Motif*): Now in its 18th year, how did this Rhode Island-wide reading initiative begin?

Kate Lentz: We created Reading Across Rhode Island in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, when fear, loathing and misunderstanding were palpable in our communities. Librarians, readers and educators committed to civic engagement as a way to create greater understanding across differences came together to select an inspiring book and to engage in a statewide dialogue. Through the power of stories, we designed the program with the intention of sparking discussion, creating spaces for sharing multiple perspectives and promoting new understandings of ourselves, our neighbors and the critical challenges that we face as a community. It was a positive step forward in the aftermath of such a tragedy, and it continues to be a powerful model to promote the common good.

SC: What's your process for managing partnerships and raising awareness about the 2020 program?

KL: Rhode Island Center for the Book distributes thousands of books to libraries, schools and senior centers across the state. Our January kick-off event at the Save the Bay Center in Providence aimed to showcase resources and available programs for teachers, librarians and book-discussion leaders, to help infuse their conversations with scholarship and context. These enrichment materials include a resource guide, developed by our committee, and a curriculum guide, created by RI high school teachers. A collective of artists and educators called Living Literature will bring the subject matter to life through performance, amplifying the themes of *Rising* by organizing a theater adaptation and facilitating talk-

back discussions for intergenerational audiences. These efforts are designed to promote discussion at libraries, bookstores, community centers, senior centers and businesses across the state and to inspire our community partners to develop their own programs and enrichments related to the book's themes.

SC: Although a local connection isn't required, have you taken proximity into consideration?

KL: Our 2017 selection, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, reinforced for us the importance of proximity in achieving social change. Stevenson showed how we cannot isolate ourselves, that to create change in the world we each need to get closer to other people on the margins of society. We've tried to stay proximate since then, viewing each of our selections as a catalyst to talk about racism, environmental justice, democracy, immigration, identity and more. There's something so powerful about how books propel critically important conversations and raise consciousness. Literature can take us places it's often difficult to go.

SC: What kind of meaningful and measurable impact have you seen following previous picks?

KL: I believe the 2017 program featuring *Just Mercy* helped move the needle on the Justice Reinvestment Initiative in Rhode Island [**ed. note:** criminal-justice reform legislation signed into law by Gov. Raimondo in October 2017]. The following year, I received one of my favorite emails from a Providence teacher, describing her students' enthusiasm for our pick, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas: "I cannot believe how interested and involved the students are. They're begging to take the books home and some are actually hiding them and sneaking them out of the school!" Last year, the Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Management started agency book groups and brought Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha to speak to an inspired crowd about her memoir *What the Eyes Don't See* detailing the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. It was meaningful that the event was sponsored by the two administrative branches of our state government most closely aligned with the themes the book explores. And the Childhood Lead Action Project in Providence further connected with our local communities, helping to educate audiences about childhood lead poisoning and environmental injustice here in Rhode Island.

SC: Elizabeth Rush's *Rising* examines the significance of rising sea levels with scientific research woven into deeply personal stories. What do you hope to see with this year's selection?

KL: We're really lucky to have a local author who has gifted us such lyrical prose, while including our state's landscape in the narrative. *Rising* is a fascinating book, and it can move the needle on Rhode Islanders' awareness of the climate crisis. Rather than be overwhelmed by the ominous prospects we face, we'll be partnering with groups and focusing on presentations from folks pursuing positive action to give people a sense of the movement afoot that's working to address this issue.

SC: And what kind of response have you heard thus far?

KL: Before we even kicked off the 2020 program, we already had requests for books from more than 40 schools, libraries and senior centers. I don't think we'll be able to meet the demand. There is so much happening across our state, and it has been overwhelming in the best way possible to connect with all of the people and organizations who want to be involved.

As part of the 2020 Reading Across Rhode Island program, Elizabeth Rush will participate in events on Thu, Mar 12 at 6pm at Barrington Public Library and on Thu, Apr 2 at 1:30pm at the University of Rhode Island (South Kingstown) and at 6:30pm at Salve Regina University (Newport). Living Literature

performances of Rising will take place across the state, and other events are planned. For more information, go to ribook.org/rari