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Behind the Book: Ray Rickman, An Interview with Hester Kaplan, and RI’s Native American Heritage

Ray Rickman

By Leah Catania

Though Rhode Island has long had a storied history filled with tolerance and acceptance, in the early 19th century, the state was not immune to the rising tensions that gripped the rest of the United States. Race and class often came to a head in the poorer districts of Providence. The low rent in areas like Hardscrabble and Snow Town brought different races together, along with crime and businesses that were looked down upon by much of society. In 1824, a white mob formed and razed twenty homes in Hardscrabble that belonged to blacks. The riot in Snow Town seven years later resulted in the death of four whites by the militia called in to control the mob. Both riots were incited over minor or individual acts, but they caused the population of Providence to demand a stronger police force from their government.

When it comes to Rhode Island African American history, there are few people as well versed on the subject as Ray Rickman. On November 5, at 4:30 p.m., he will be in the Mary Tefft White Center speaking as the last installment of the Talking in the Library Series. Interestingly, as a former State Representative, one of the bills he worked on established Rhode Island's Poet Laureate position, currently held by our first speaker, Dr. Rick Benjamin, our first speaker in the Fall 2013 series. In addition to his lawmaker duties, Rickman has served as secretary of the Rhode Island Historical Society, and he was also formerly the president of The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and is currently a Senior Advisor. On Tuesday, he will discuss the Providence race riots, how race and class were factors, and the demand for a larger police presence in the city.

An Interview with Hester Kaplan

By Leah Catania

Hester Kaplan's first collection of short stories, The Edge of Marriage (1999), won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. The Tell (2011), her most recent novel, examines the ways in which gambling can tear apart a marriage. In the fall 2013 issue, Roger Williams University's literary journal, Mount Hope published Kaplan's short novella “This is Your Last Swim.” That publication includes her appearing in the Mary Tefft White Center's Talking in the Library Series on October 22nd. She teaches in Lesley University's MFA in Creative Writing Program. Hester lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where we conducted the following interview by phone.

LC: Your novel The Tell incorporates so many different themes and idea. What was your first idea that served as inspiration for the rest of the novel?

HK: My first inspiration came from finding myself in a lot of casinos sort of by accident. I didn't go there to gamble. I don't gamble. I don't like gambling at all. But in various places in the country, I found myself in casinos for one reason or another. I was just drawn to the people who were there, trying to figure out what was going on in this place that made me feel really so awful, so depressed. Then from there, I really thought, who was the most unlikely woman I could put in the casino and have become a slot machine addict? And that turned into Mira. And then I built a world around her. You know, I was interested in casinos but I'm most interested in marriage, particularly in this book. This was just a bad bump in the road for [Mira and Owen]. To further see whether this was even a viable idea, I did a lot of research on gambling, particularly women on slot machines, and ended up talking to a number of women who are addicted to slot machines. I found some of the stories so unbelievably devastating and hard to fathom, these quick demises that really seemed almost sudden and inexplicable to these women. One day they were not addicted, the next day they were hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. It was really quite stunning. And living in Rhode
Rhode Island and its Native American Heritage: A Lesson for Today

By Leah Catania

As Rhode Island celebrates the 350th anniversary of its royal charter this year, founder Roger Williams’ progressive ideas continue to circulate. His passion for equality extended to all areas of his life, including, most notably, the Native Americans in the area that would become Rhode Island. Tribes such as the Narragansett and Wampanoag lived, farmed, travelled and hunted for several thousand years in the area before the Europeans stepped off their ships. In fact, it was the Wampanoag that first took in Roger Williams following his banishment from the Massachusetts Bay colonies. Williams’ ideals were so inclusive that he refused to simply settle wherever he pleased, as most colonists did, so he paid the Narragansett for the land he called Providence and continued his peaceful negotiations with the tribes in the area.

The legacy of the Native tribes is still very much a part of our state’s identity. As Roger Williams University honors the life of our namesake, we need not do anything more than look out of our campus windows to see Mount Hope rising gently on the horizon, one of the most important Native American sites in Rhode Island. In a nearby swamp, Wampanoag sachem Metacomet’s murder marked the turning point in King Philip’s War, the most destructive conflict in New England during the 1600s. As richly
documented by Nathaniel Philbrick in Mayflower (the University’s 2013 Common Reading selection), Roger Williams tried his hardest to prevent the war, but could not reconcile the two sides. Today, when understanding and tolerance are so important to our state, we can look at Mount Hope and recall what happened in the past when our founder’s ideals were ignored in favor of violence and bloodshed.

As part of the Talking in the Library Series, archaeologist and anthropologist and RWU adjunct professor, Alan will be speaking about his work at Rhode Island’s archaeological sites on Tuesday, October 8th, at 4:30 p.m. With twenty-five years of experience in cultural resource management, Leveillee’s focus is on sharing information gleaned from archaeological research with nonprofessional audiences. Currently, he works as a principal investigator for the Public Archaeology Laboratory, lectures for the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, and serves as an advisor at four local museums. In the Mary Tefft White Center, Leveillee will discuss archaeological finds from as far back as 11,000 years ago, what those artifacts can tell us about the populations that lived off the same soil we walk on every day, and how those ancient peoples are related to present-day Native American tribal groups.

Behind the Book takes an in depth look at the world of the book through articles and interviews about the creative process, issues in publishing, and the writing life.

From the Nightstand: Provost Andrew Workman

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Interview conducted by Zachary Mobrice.

Dr. Andrew Workman, is Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. He has been at RWU since 2012.

Recent Reads: Provost Workman’s current reading reflects his extensive research and study of history, and is grouped into schemas according to topics. The first grouping, he tells us, was sparked by the captivating story of Mayflower by Nathaniel Philbrick, RWU’s 2013 Common Reading selection. It led him to three other books discussing colonial/revolutionary America: The Name of War by Jill Lapore, The Marketplace of Revolution by T.H. Breen, and Minutemen and their World by Robert Gross. For the second grouping, Provost Workman turned to World War II and post-war Europe, having recently finished Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin by Tim Snyder, and Endgame, 1945 by David Stafford.

Memorable Reads: Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution by Eric Foner, who Dr. Workman believes to be “the best U.S. historian of our time.”

Essential Reads: “Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle are essential reads for those who wish to become both morally sound and knowledgeable in the way America works; these Greek philosophers were, after all, the revolutionary thinkers whose ideologies became the basis for our government.” The provost also recommends Letters from an American Farmer by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a series of fictional letters written by an American farmer in the years prior to the American Revolution. Published in 1782. “It is an early take on this multi-cultural, multi-ethical, multi-racial, new nation.”

What are people in the Roger Williams University community reading? The From the Nightstand team asks which books are on people’s nightstands—either being read, or waiting to be read.