

One Book/One New Paltz will examine The Plot Against America



Pictured are some of the members of the One Book/One New Paltz Committee clockwise from top: Mark Colvson, John Giralico, Shelley Sherman, Myra Sorin and Robin Jacobowitz. (Photo by Lauren Thomas)

One Book/One New Paltz is an annual shared reading experience meant to promote reading and build community between the college and the town, instigated in 2005 by Dr. Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. Based on similar “One Book, One City” initiatives established in many places across the country after a project called “If All Seattle Read the Same Book” was initiated in that city 20 years ago, residents are invited to read a particular book and discuss it with one another afterward at a number of free public programs offering the opportunity to converse about important issues in an unbiased environment.

The book selected by the One Book/One New Paltz Committee for this year’s community read is Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, an alternate history of our country that imagines the 1940 election of Charles Lindbergh as president. Defeating incumbent FDR in a landslide, the aviation hero’s isolationist policies lead to an acceptance of anti-Semitism in America and widespread persecution of its Jewish citizens as the new president allies with Nazi Germany in World War II.

The novel is also a counterfactual work of personal history, written as if it were an autobiographical tale remembered by the adult Philip Roth about the child Philip Roth and his family, who are given their real-life names and live in the Newark neighborhood in which the author was actually raised.

The Plot Against America (2004) was awarded the 2005 James Fenimore Cooper Prize for best historical fiction and the 2004 Sidewise Award for alternate history, and is currently being adapted for a six-part television miniseries. Critic Greil Marcus, who called the story “a fabulous yarn” when reviewing it for *The New York Times* in 2004, more recently wrote of the book, “It may be plumbed in years to come as a cautionary tale about the fragility of the democratic spirit in America or as a metaphorical rendering of the United States and its president today.”

One Book/One New Paltz will launch this year’s book discussions and programs on Wednesday, April 11 with a Holocaust remembrance presentation at SUNY New Paltz. The remainder will occur between Sunday, April 22 and Sunday, April 29, concluding with a book discussion at Elting Memorial Library. Each of the 12 programs to be offered is free of charge to attend and open to everyone.

Until now, the annual community read has taken place in November, shortly before Thanksgiving. But with that being such a busy time for people, the One Book/One New Paltz Committee decided to hold the 2018 event this spring as a change of pace to see how it goes.

The book selected each year is chosen by the committee, still under the auspices of founder Gerald Benjamin. Committee members this year include The Benjamin Center’s Robin Jacobowitz; Elting Memorial Library’s director, John Giralico and longtime trustee, Linda Welles; New Paltz High School librarian Joanna Arkans; Historic Huguenot Street archivist and historian, Carrie Allmendinger; SUNY New Paltz graduate program director Wendy Bower; Sojourner Truth Library dean, Mark Colvson; and New Paltz community members, Myra Sorin, Bruce Weisner and Shelley Sherman.

The book selected has to be easily obtainable and affordable, lend itself to discussion

and interesting programming, and appeal to a diverse audience, says committee member Shelley Sherman. The book should also be approximately 300-350 pages long. "Another strong selling point would be if the author is willing to participate in a program," she notes. Over the years, there have been four authors who appeared at a book discussion or related event in New Paltz, and in 2015, when Piper Kerman's *Orange is the New Black* was the reading selection, an actor from the television show based on the novel participated.

And while one might assume that committee members simply choose a favorite book, the selection process is actually based on what the public asks for. It begins with comment sheets made available at each of the book discussions or programs, explains Sherman, asking the public to suggest candidates for the following year's project. (In some years, a ballot box was installed in local bookstores and libraries asking for possible book choices.) Those responses are tabulated and combined with lists from recent years of books that made it to the final elimination rounds along with a few that were found on notable recommended book lists like Oprah's.

Once a working list of contenders is established, the committee meets and whittles the list down to 35-50 possibilities and then, after much discussion, to a list of 10-20. Committee members make themselves familiar with those books and then hold further discussions, pro and con, to narrow the list down to 4-5 books, after which a vote is held.

Previous titles chosen include *Home* by Toni Morrison, *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon and *Rip Van Winkle* by Washington Irving.

Sherman says that people will sometimes say that participating in One Book/One New Paltz encouraged them to read a book they might not have chosen on their own, and one that they found they liked more than they thought they would. "Also, people really just like to talk about books, and hear what other people think about a book," she notes.

Membership on the committee changes from year to year, although a number of its members have been with the project since the beginning, or close to it. "It's an interesting, smart group of people who like to read," says Sherman. "And it's a nice activity to be a part of." The project's mission to bring the college community and town residents together brings the opportunity to meet in a different way and have something to talk about that wouldn't come about otherwise, she adds.

But like every volunteer endeavor, willing participants are needed to organize the program each year if it is to continue to survive. Interested people can contact committee members to find out how to get involved. More information about One Book/One New Paltz is available at <https://onebookonenewpaltz.com/>.

Wednesday, April 11 at 7:30 p.m. in Lecture Center room 104 at SUNY New Paltz. Holocaust remembrance presentation with Michele Phillips, program director of the Memphis division of Facing History and Ourselves. She will speak on the topic,

“When Hate is in the Headlines,” presented by the Resnick Institute.

- Sunday, April 22 at 11 a.m. at the Jewish Community Center, 30 North Chestnut Street Rabbi Bill Strongin, spiritual leader of the Jewish Congregation of New Paltz, will lead a book discussion. Participants are invited to bring a vegetarian dish to share.
- Sunday, April 22 at 7 p.m. at the New Paltz United Methodist Church, 1 Grove Street Pastor Bette Sohm will lead a community book discussion. Refreshments will be served.
- Monday, April 23 at 4 p.m. in Wooster Hall 360 at SUNY New Paltz. Political scientist and Jewish New Yorker Gerald Benjamin will lead “Stranger Things Are Happening... Now,” a book discussion of *The Plot Against America*.
- Tuesday, April 24 at 1:30 p.m. at SUNY New Paltz, JFT 1010. Gerald Sorin, SUNY Distinguished Professor, author and critic, will lead a book discussion.
- Tuesday, April 24 at 4:30 p.m. in Science Hall 181 at SUNY New Paltz. Glenn Geher, professor of psychology at the college, will lead a presentation and discussion of “Why We Need to Hate” on the psychology of prejudice and hate.
- Wednesday, April 25 at 11 a.m. at SUNY New Paltz, JFT 1010. Emily Barton Hopkins, writer in residence at the college and author of *Book of Esther*, a counterfactual history of WW II, will conduct a seminar on *The Plot Against America* as speculative history. Why choose to envision an alternate past? What does this envisioning entail? What does Roth gain, and lose, in terms of plot or historical resonance, in choosing alternate storytelling?
- Wednesday, April 25 at 4:30 p.m. in the Sojourner Truth Library foyer on the SUNY New Paltz campus. The library’s dean, Mark Colvson, will host “Open Dialogue: Special Edition of Conversation One,” part of the Conversation One series. Speaking from their own experiences, participants will discuss the challenges of strong divisions within families, how we handle them and how they have affected us.
- Thursday, April 26 at 3 p.m. at Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main St. Kristopher Jansma, assistant professor of English at SUNY New Paltz, and David Burr Gerard, author of the novel *The Epiphany Machine*, will discuss *The Plot Against America*. In interviews with Philip Roth, he described writing his alternative version of history by simply “remembering” how it all happened; as if it really had. This presentation will offer a discussion about how great fiction shows us all what could have happened, but didn’t.
- Thursday, April 26 at 7 p.m. at Woodland Pond, 100 Woodland Pond Circle. The improvisational Community Playback Theatre will offer the audience an opportunity to tell stories from their own lives about personal experiences related to the themes of *The Plot Against America* and watch as Playback actors enact them.
- Friday, April 27 at 7 p.m. at Inquiring Minds bookstore, 6 Church St. Tom Olsen, SUNY New Paltz professor of English, will lead a community book discussion.

- Sunday, April 29 at 1 p.m. at Elting Library. The program series will conclude with a book discussion hosted by One Book, One New Paltz committee members, who will lead a wrap-up session to discuss *The Plot Against America* and the One Book, One New Paltz program.

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