BIG READ TACKLES DIFFICULT TOPIC

This year's choice is wrenching Holocaust story 'The Shawl'

By Jordan Wilkinson
For the Poughkeepsie Journal

There was a time when flipping through the pages of a book after a long day was something people eagerly looked forward to. It's no secret the practice of reading books has declined, but an annual event by the Poughkeepsie Public Library District aims to get Hudson Valley residents' noses into the pages and their thumbs off the cellphone screens.

"The Big Read:" begins its monthlong stint in the Hudson Valley on Sunday. Every year, self-proclaimed history buff and Poughkeepsie Public Library director Tim Lawrence and his co-workers choose a book from a list provided by the National Endowment for the Arts to create events, programs and discussion groups around the themes and plots of the book.

Instead of choosing one of the old English class standards such as "The Catcher in the Rye" or "Lord of the Flies," Lawrence chose "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick.

Watch out, Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

The nation's top-selling candy bar is about to find itself in an unlikely new competitor in the peanut butter cup category: Butterfinger. Nestle has plans for a 2014 rollout of its most radical-ever twist to the 90-year-old candy bar, perhaps best-known for the way it sticks, crunches and ooze between teeth. So convinced are Nestle U.S.A. executives that the Butterfinger Peanut Butter Cup will be a smash, that Nestle has even purchased its first-ever Super Bowl commercial to tout it.

"The peanut butter cup is America’s favorite candy," said Jeremy Vandervoet, brand manager for Butterfinger. "This is the first time the peanut butter cup will change."

But executives at Hershey, maker of No. 1 Reese's, say they're not worried. "Reese's is one of America's most beloved brands," said Anna Lingert, senior manager of brand PR and consumer engagement at Hershey. She says its sales topped $1.5 billion last year, making it the top-selling confection brand. No other domestic candy brand topped $1 billion in sales last year, Nielsen reports.

Wal-Mart and Trader Joe's have tried to get into the peanut butter cup action with their own private brands. But for Hershey, the new, competitive pressure from Nestle has got to feel something like a chocolate bar left out too long in the sun: hot.

"Butterfinger will have something that Reese's doesn't," said Gary Stibel, CEO at New England Consulting Group. "There is definitely room for two in this market segment."

For Butterfinger, it's also a stark admission: Most consumers can only handle small amounts of its sweetness and crunch.

"People prefer Butterfinger in small doses," concedes Vandervoet, the brand manager. "That, he says, is why many prefer to sprinkle it on their ice cream or frozen yogurt — but not gobble down entire bars."

So, he said, Nestle executives asked themselves: "How do we go beyond the bar to give people smaller doses of Butterfinger?"

Answer: By crumbling up some, but not too much — of the Butterfinger crunch inside a peanut butter bar. It's worked on the new product for more than two years.
Read

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The seven-page short story describes the harrowing experience of life in a concentration camp and was chosen to tie in with the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht.

The tragedy, also referred to as the "Night of Broken Glass," was a two-day series of anti-Jewish attacks carried out by the Nazi regime on Nov. 9 and 10 in 1938 in Germany, Austria, and areas of Czechoslovakia.

"We thought it gave us an opportunity to create an interesting set of programs," Lawrence said.

And program they did. Jewell Ratliff, public information officer for the Poughkeepsie Public Library, holds monthly meetings with representatives from Hudson Valley schools, libraries and program partners to create a series of community events that not only last an entire month, but impact Hudson Valley residents of every age.

It all begins with an opening ceremony at Spackenkill High School with a presentation of a Recorded interview with "Shawl" author Oszik. Students of Spackenkill will also display art and perform music.

Michelle Devlin, a senior at Spackenkill High School, won an art contest that put her interpretation painting onto the event’s brochures and promotional material.

"I came in second last year," Devlin said. "I knew I had to try again this year, so it’s really exciting."

Joshua Kotzin from Marist College will also give a presentation. Doubling as coordinator of Jewish Studies and an English professor, Kotzin offers a unique knowledge on the literary significance of "The Shawl" in the greater context of the Holocaust.

"People are still kind of profoundly disturbed and troubled by the facts of what happened during the Holocaust," he said. "What’s amazing about this program is that The Shawl challenges us to be connected to people in our community."

"The Shawl" is a program that runs in conjunction with its Big Read parent to help introduce subject matter to young students.

According to Ratliff, students participating in "The Little Read" are a program that runs in conjunction with its Big Read parent to help introduce subject matter to young students.

The Dutchess Board of Cooperative Educational Services Adult Learning Institute runs classes at the Dutchess County Jail where they hold discussions and writing workshops based on the Big Read book.

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Read book.

Green Haven holds a book club and writer's group that inmates write reaction and narrative responses.

Given "The Shawl's" heavy subject matter, introducing it to children can be a challenge. "The Little Read" is a program that runs in conjunction with its Big Read parent to help introduce subject matter to young students.

"We’re talking about literature, but we’re also using visual arts and music to help because I think when you deal with subjects this heavy it’s really helpful to tap into the arts to help us process," Ratliff said.

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IF YOU GO

What: The Big Read featuring "The Shawl" by Cynthia Oszik

Where: Opening ceremony begins at Spackenkill High School; events at various locations throughout the month.

Cost: Free

Information: A calendar of events is available at poughkeepsiejournal.com/big-read/

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