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LOCAL LITERARY HIGHLIGHTS

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2021 A Novel Idea events to begin this week

BY DAVID JASPER

The Bulletin

Deschutes Public Library's monthlong literary celebration, A Novel Idea ... Read Together, is set to begin this week. By featuring two books that capture the immigrant experience in modern America, the 2021 installment of the annual community read could be the most pertinent in its 18-year history.

"The Other Americans," by Laila Lalami, and "Front Desk," a youth selection written by Kelly Yang, are the two books everyone will be reading, discussing and learning more about alongside their neighbors. The all-free, all-online programs inspired by the selected novels is just getting started, with virtual appearances by Lalami and Yang planned for early May.

The Youth Edition of A Novel Idea marks just the second time in the event's history that a children's book is being included in the programming. The first was in 2009, when Deschutes partnered with the Oregon State Library in celebration of the state's sesquicentennial and went with the three titles that the state-wide committee chose — among them two books, "Apples to Oregon" and "Bat 6," geared toward youth readers.

A youth selection was made this year to include more people in A Novel Idea, according to Chantal Strobel, communications and development manager for Deschutes Public Library.

"We have wanted to expand our reach to all ages for several years and believed that adding a youth edition would be an exciting way to include younger readers and their families. We received a generous grant from the Roundhouse Foundation that made this possible," Strobel said via email. "We intend

to continue to include a youth selection moving forward. This year's book, 'Front Desk,' was selected by a team of our youth services librarians. We are eager to welcome 'Front Desk' author Kelly Yang in early May to speak to Deschutes County on Saturday, May 1."

'Front Desk'

"Front Desk" author Yang's first book is aimed at kids in grades 3 through 6 and tells the story of 10-year-old Mia Tang, who lives in a motel with her immigrant parents. It's Mia's job to work the front desk when her parents are cleaning the rooms.

Mia, who longs to be a writer even though English is not her first language, also harbors a pretty big secret — her parents hide immigrants in the motel, something its heartless owner, Mr. Yao, would not like very much if he got wind of it. But, naturally, Mia has a plan to make it all work.

According to Youth Services Supervisor Chandra vanEijnsbergen, who served on the committee that chose the book, it can and will appeal to older readers as well.

As Mia wants to be a writer, library offerings related to the book include the "Snail Mail: Grab & Go Kit," vanEijnsbergen said. Available starting Saturday at Deschutes library branches, it's being offered for all ages and has everything you need to revive the nearly lost art of snail mail.

"It's encouraging people to write physical letters, which people really don't do as much anymore," she said. "There's a bunch of stuff in there to write postcards, and so we're just encouraging people to pick somebody

that they care about or appreciate and write them an actual personal postcard. It will

include stamps to send them, so really, especially during this time, to reconnect with friends and family.

Whether you've already read the book or plan to, "Let's Talk about It," at 1 p.m. Wednesday, will offer a variety of discussion questions and resources relating to "Front Desk."

Mia's favorite game in the book is Monopoly, and another kit put together for the Youth Edition of A Novel Idea is called Front Deskopoly, which is like the game, but with a Front Desk theme. It will be available starting April 10.

'The Other Americans'

In "The Other Americans," author Lalami tells the story of Nora Guerraoui, a Bay Area jazz composer who returns to the Mojave Desert hometown where she was raised by her Moroccan immigrant parents, who own a restaurant. The visit is precipitated by the death of her father, Driss, the victim of a hit and run.

But it's not just Nora who narrates this tale. The story is also told through the eyes of her mother, Maryam; Mexican immigrant Efraim, who witnessed the accident but is afraid to come forward; Jeremy, Nora's former classmate who is now a cop, and so forth.

The book's timely themes, along with the way Lalami weaves food, the desert and music are woven into the novel, make for some rich programming possibilities.

"We have 12 original programs crafted after 'The Other Americans,' basically everything from cooking to jazz to presentations on immigration, PTSD, the opioid epidemic and lots more," said Deschutes Public Library Adult Programs Specialist Paige Ferro.

Among the first programs related to Lalami's tome is the Joshua Tree National Park Ranger Talk at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday.

"We will have an actual park ranger in Joshua Tree National Park, in the Mojave Desert, and he or she will be there to show us some actual flora and maybe even fauna from the park," Ferro said. While some of the offerings are prerecorded, this is a live presentation, though the recording of it will be available to view by April 8.

"This year, for A Novel Idea, all of our adult programs are going to be recorded so that everyone can access them if they can't make them on the exact time and date that it's airing, they can still get to them at our Deschutes Library Youtube page."

Other upcoming programs include an online book discussion with Lalami at noon April 9. Questions for Lalami can be sent in advance to Ferro at paigeb@dpls.lib.or.us. Foodies may want to check out "Merging Flavors," a cooking workshop at 3 p.m. April 17.

In the book, composer Nora has synesthesia, a rare neurological condition in which sensory pathways become intertwined, leading her to hear colors. It so happens that Bend is home to professional composer and synesthete Chris Thomas, who will discuss what that's like in "Hearing in Color" at 7 p.m. April 22.

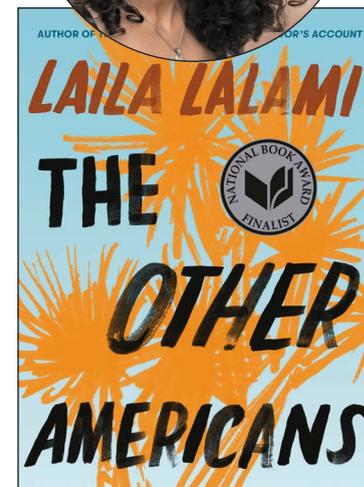
The library is also partnering for two virtual exhibits of artwork and quilts inspired by "The Other Americans." A link for the quilt show will be shared at 6 p.m. Tuesday, and will become active 24 hours later. A link to the presentation "Art Inspired by Art" will go live at 6 p.m. April 26.

For more information and access to all of these programs, head to deschuteslibrary.org/calendar/novellidea.

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Submitted photos
Kelly Yang, author of "Front Desk," will speak May 1 via Zoom as part of A Novel Idea, the annual community reading event from Deschutes Public Library.



Submitted photos
Laila Lalami's "The Other Americans" is the adult selection for the 2021 A Novel Idea, Deschutes Public Library's annual community read. Lalami will give a live presentation as part of the community read's festivities at 4 p.m. May 2 on YouTube.