

Jersey, sung and writ boldly

BY KELLY EBBELS
STAFF WRITER

What do “Thunder Road,” “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and “American Pastoral” have in common?

Scholars may ponder on, but the simple answer is that the Bruce Springsteen song, the William Carlos Williams poem, and the Philip Roth novel were all born of New Jersey.

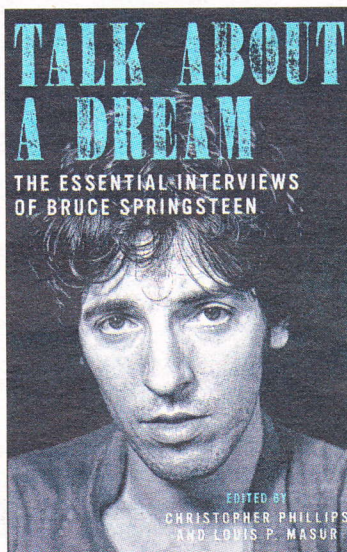
The final two lectures in a series called “Jersey: A Sense of Place,” offered at Montclair State University, will feature discussions on the three. Louis Masur, a professor of history and American studies at Rutgers University, will be discussing Springsteen in a lecture titled “Talk About a Dream: Bruce Springsteen’s American Vision – from New Jersey to the World” on Wednesday, Oct. 9, from 4 to 5 p.m. in Brantl Hall in Dickson Hall.

On Nov. 7, from 4 to 5 p.m. at the Cohen Lounge in Dickson Hall, will be a combined lecture on Williams and Roth, titled “The local is the only universal:” William Carlos Williams in New Jersey,” and “Philip Roth: Newark and Beyond.”

The scope of the lecture series – free and open to the public – has been broad, explained organizer Victoria Larson, director of the Institute for the Humanities at MSU: each lecture has focused on either Dramatizing, Living, Painting, Singing or Writing Jersey. With “Dramatizing Jersey,” the series bit the bullet and examined the TV series “Jersey Shore”; with “Living,” it looked at utopian communities in 19th- and 20th-century New Jersey; and with “Painting,” it looked at George Inness.

Larson, originally from England but a 25-year resident of New Jersey, was, once she acclimated to life here, struck with how stereotypes didn’t match up to the reality of the multifaceted qualities coming from the state.

“There’s so many layers to it, really,” Larson said of New Jersey. “There’s sort of multiple layers of



‘My work has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American dream.’

–Bruce Springsteen

meaning, in a way.”

Masur has just released, with co-editor Christopher Phillips, an eponymous book, a selection of interviews that Springsteen has conducted over the course of his career. One of Springsteen’s quotes came to Masur’s mind when speaking with The Montclair Times: “My work,” Springsteen said in a press conference in Paris last year, “has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American dream.”

Masur said he is interested in “the development of Springsteen’s ideas of commitment to community ... You can trace an entire arc in terms of his commitment both as an artist and as an activist through his 40 years of interviews.”

Also of interest to Masur is the “sense of place in Springsteen’s music – and these notions of both escaping and somehow finding a way back home again.”

The Williams portion of the

Nov. 9 discussion will be led by Neil Baldwin, director of the Creative Research Center for MSU and an author of a biography on Williams called “To All Gentleness.” As Baldwin explained, Williams was “completely dedicated to the life and the people and the stories of New Jersey,” noting his book of poems about Paterson, and other works that mention Clifton, even the “filthy” Passaic River.

Baldwin said his lecture would be “homage to a hometown hero.”

The Roth portion of the final lecture will be led by James Bloom, professor of English at Muhlenberg College. Bloom, an Essex County native, like Roth, is an editor at the Philip Roth Society’s publication.

Bloom explained that few other great writers had such a strong connection to place in their work as Roth did – and yet that Roth’s

work transcended it, never staying “provincial or parochial.”

Bloom recounted an amusing quote of Roth’s from his 1986 novel, “Counterlife,” that, even if a

New Jersey writer has written 30 books and won a Nobel Prize, the highest form of praise in the state will be having a rest stop named for you on the New Jersey Turnpike. “For a New Jersey novelist,” Roth writes, “that’s as much immortality as it’s realistic to hope for.”

Larson said the point of the lectures was a “questioning of preconceived notions, giving a second thought to a set of associations and stereotypes that you might take for granted.

“It’s a sort of series of investigations. It could be expanded infinitely if we had the time and the resources,” Larson said. “Each one really is just the tip of the iceberg.”

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