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## Summer Reading Program to Highlight Diversity at IWU

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## Summer Reading Program to Highlight Diversity at IWU

June 14, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – “Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.”

In this passage from the final installment of her 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri suggests knowing where you've been is just as important as knowing where you're going. With the selection of *Maladies* as the centerpiece of this year's summer reading program, IWU students and staff hope to instill in the campus community a similar dedication to embracing your roots.

“The reading program book selection speaks to our values as a university,” said Roshanda Ross, director of multicultural student affairs. “Here at Illinois Wesleyan, we're committed to striving for diversity.”

Based on the idea that reading and critical reflection are central to the mission of a liberal arts college, IWU's annual summer reading program provides an opportunity for new students to participate in a shared intellectual conversation with the campus community by expressing ideas about a common text. With past titles including Colin Beavan's *No Impact Man*, Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, the reading program helps ease the transition from high school to college by preparing new students for the discussion-oriented courses characteristic of IWU.

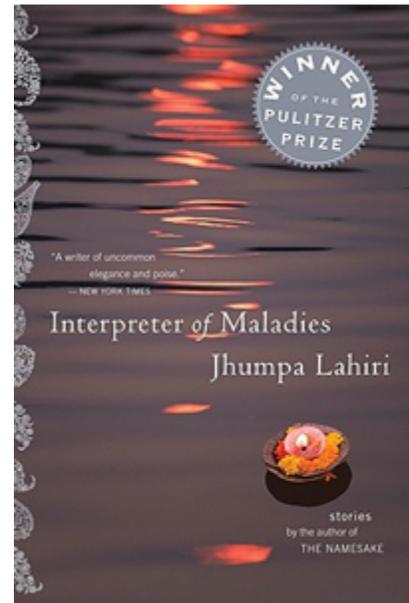
The Speakers Committee and First-Year Advisory Board's joint selection of *Maladies* this year will expose the class of 2015 to an international bestseller which not only was translated into 29 languages but also, in addition to the Pulitzer, won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New Yorker Debut of the Year Award, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Addison Metcalf Award and a nomination for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize.

In *Maladies*, Lahiri writes about dilemmas in the lives of Indian-American immigrants, addressing culture clashes and the generation gap while raising the question of how someone discovers and celebrates his or her own ethnicity—timely themes reflecting the mission of many at IWU.

“Many of us here, myself included, feel it is critical to create opportunities for students to encounter diversity so they are prepared to build knowledge and relationships in their future,” said Meghan Burke, assistant professor of sociology and co-director of a pre-orientation program for first-year students called Engaging Diversity. “We believe very strongly in the University's strategic goal to ‘create a welcoming, inclusive, multicultural campus where all community members appreciate and respect the diversity of the nation and the world.’ It will only enhance our success in the future, both as individuals and as a community.”

Ross agreed, stressing the importance of encouraging diversity during college because it is, in various ways, “a time to explore,” she said. “The world is getting smaller. Everyone needs to know how to interact with, communicate with and respect those who are different from themselves.”

To encourage this message of cultural acceptance, IWU's Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and International Office both work to foster understanding of different cultures and promote global diversity opportunities on and off campus. One initiative, the African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American and Native-American (ALANA) Orientation, to be held this year from August 13 to



August 15 before fall classes begin, provides first-year ALANA students with a head start on meeting IWU faculty and staff, exploring the Bloomington-Normal community and networking with ALANA alumni.



*Each year during Turning Titan: New Student Orientation activities, incoming students gather with orientation leaders, faculty members and staff volunteers to discuss the summer reading text.*

“The ALANA Orientation helps cushion the culture shock for those who need it,” said Ross. “In addition to standard activities like small group meetings with professors and sessions about campus resources, it really stresses the importance of how to be successful in society without losing your cultural heritage and values.”

Resources like the GUIDE mentoring program, which acquaints first-year ALANA students with ALANA professionals in the area, expand upon the new student orientation experience. And the International Office offers special services for international scholars both before they arrive and once they are settled on campus, where student enrollment represents 23 different countries.

But multicultural and international programs at IWU are not geared solely toward ALANA and international students. “We now have programs like Engaging Diversity, which promotes group discussion about race and intercultural communication among students of all races,” said Ross. “It’s broadening the conversation, because it’s important for our entire community to be involved.”

This sentiment is also reflected by the International Office, which in addition to providing international student support offers study abroad programs to hundreds of locations in more than 70 countries and nearly every academic discipline. Such programs are available for all IWU students interested in learning more about life in other nations and cultures.

Ross also said getting involved in student organizations like the Black Student Union, Spanish and Latino Student Association and the International Society provides a great platform for embracing diversity at IWU. “Learning about diversity in a classroom where you’re getting a grade might be too formal a setting to allow for genuine curiosity and interactions,” she said, adding that the groups host various events inviting students and faculty of all backgrounds to gain a deeper appreciation for different cultures. “Becoming a member of a multicultural student organization gives you a safe, fun environment in which to figure out how to learn about others and make IWU an inclusive community.”

These on-campus initiatives have made Burke believe that for the incoming first-years, current students and faculty members who read *Maladies*, Lahiri’s analysis of cultural interaction and discovery will be more than just a dive into great literature—it will be a relevant life experience. “I think the bottom line is that we need more education and more opportunity to cross lines of difference,” she said. “Students who have made that effort have only felt rewarded in doing so. I hope the selection of *Interpreter of Maladies* continues to build interest in engaging diversity on our campus and creates opportunities for some interesting and perhaps difficult conversations.”

The reading program will culminate during Turning Titan: New Student Orientation in small group discussions to be held the evening of August 17. Participating faculty and staff members will attend a pre-discussion planning session on August 15 before incoming first-year students arrive to campus. In coordination with the reading program, this year’s President’s Convocation, to be held on August 31, will welcome as guest speaker acclaimed scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Lawrence S. Rockefeller University Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University Center for Human Values.

For additional information about the reading program, multicultural and international offices and new student orientations, visit the websites at [www.iwu.edu/advising/reading/](http://www.iwu.edu/advising/reading/), [www.iwu.edu/multicultural/](http://www.iwu.edu/multicultural/), [www.iwu.edu/intloffice/](http://www.iwu.edu/intloffice/) and [www.iwu.edu/orientation/titan/](http://www.iwu.edu/orientation/titan/).

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