

Port to host first annual literary fest

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NEWBURYPORT — Authors, poets, publishers, agents and illustrators will converge on Newburyport in late April for the city's first literary festival, which organizers expect to draw more than 2,000 people.

The two-day event will feature presentations by upward of 50 writers, many of whom have ties to the area. And the gamut of topics to be addressed will include something for nearly everyone, with sessions on the next Harry Potter book, historical fiction, a teenage poetry slam, illustrating children's books and remembering Andre Dubus, the late Haverhill author to whom the festival is dedicated.

"We have a wealth of writers and a love of books in the community, and we're going to celebrate that," said Vicki Hendrickson, who has been the lead organizer for the festival.

Hendrickson, who oversees the city's Adult and Community Education program, proposed a literary festival after attending a National Endowment for the Arts conference where she learned that the number of people — especially educated people — who read literary fiction was declining significantly. She saw the opportunity to encourage reading as one that was harmonious with her work in adult education.

Hendrickson and a group of dedicated volunteers have spent more than a year organizing the event. But donations from the Institution for Savings and the Newburyport Five Cents Savings Bank ultimately made it possible. The Planning Committee has also partnered with the public library, Nock Middle

School and many of the cultural museums in the area for various events.

"The library celebrates reading everyday," said Dorothy LaFrance, head librarian. "To have it celebrated in a more formal way in the community is very exciting. While the big studies say reading is declining, it's not in Newburyport. This is a great city."

Among the authors who will be featured at the event are novelist Richard Russo, crime fiction writers Tess Gerristen and Keith Ablow, Andrew Dubus III, poet X.J. Kennedy and young adult author Lois Lowry.

Although this will be the city's first literary festival, organizers said they are already optimistic about holding the event annually. Dubus, who attends many such festivals throughout the country, said the event has the potential to explode, drawing as many people to the city as the annual Yankee Homecoming Festival.

"It's a smart move for any city that can hold it," Dubus said. "And this is the perfect setting. They can really take off."

All events of the literary festival will be free, except for a Friday night gala. For more information, visit www.newburyportliteraryfestival.org.