

# Big Rothesay Read Gearing Up for Year 3

*By Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

In little more than a month the title of this year's tome, selected by organizers of The Big Rothesay Read, will be practically a household word. It will be revealed at a event planned to build excitement and interest in literacy and the joy of reading. Literally thousands are expected to line up for a copy of the book chosen with great care to appeal to readers at the High School level and beyond.

Three years ago the concept took shape, as two professionals in the reading business collaborated on a project with the help of a one-time government grant. They hoped it would galvanize young people into reading more and benefitting for a lifetime. After all, if you can't read, the world is a very challenging and confining place where most doors remain shut and opportunities are few. Mary Ann Gallagher owns and operates Benjamin's Books in Rothesay and JoEllen Jensen teaches language arts at Rothesay High School. Together, they conceived of a plan to develop shared reading experiences that would involve youth and adults, based on similar "community reads" in North America. (Insert quotes)

Next they engaged the support of Roger Brown, Principal of Rothesay High, since their goal was to involve every student at his school. They reasoned that if a book could be put in the hands of everyone in the school it would be more meaningful and increase the likelihood of it being read. That meant that financial barriers would have to be removed and the book provided at no cost. " This has a huge impact and brings the school and community together" says Brown, "it's a wonderful program". With school support in hand , the project was born. That was in 2009 and with similar success in 2010, the Committee of volunteers is on a roll.

Volunteers work with the school's teachers to help develop appropriate lesson plans for the students' ages and to coordinate panel discussions in the community. They are convinced that discussion about a book, once read, can stimulate valuable interpersonal conversations and connections that are sorely needed in this age of multi-media communications.

Liaison with the Kennebecasis Library, a key supporter, helps ensure they have adequate supplies of the chosen titles and help raise awareness about the entire program. Volunteers Christine Benjamin, Madaline Boutilier, Heather Connolly, Charles Jensen, Sarah Kimball, Penny Milligan Kathy Smith and Justin Stoodley are part of the team effort. Connolly states "to our knowledge, this is the only community-wide "Read" involving an entire high school". They value the support of the Community Foundation, Town of Rothesay and sponsors yet to be announced.

The first book selected was "A Long Way Gone" by Ishmael Beah. It tells the story of Beah's childhood experiences and exposure to violence and how it affected his perspective on hostility and peace, global responsibility and racial awareness. All 700 students and more than one thousand community members took part making it an outstanding success. A visit by the author and addresses to the student body and community were warmly received.

Last year, the Canadian author, Lawrence Hill's "The Book of Negroes" was selected. As winner of several national awards, it came highly recommended. Again, the author's personal presence had a positive impact on school and community. He stressed the importance of literacy, celebration of differences, tolerance and community building.

Anticipation is building for the unveiling on March 16 of the name of the title book for the 2011 Big Rothesay Read. Much careful consideration will have gone into its selection as the most thought-provoking, well-written book possible with mass appeal. Armed with the statistics on illiteracy in our community through their work producing five Vital Signs Reports on Greater Saint John's quality of life, the Greater Saint John Community Foundation is sponsoring the purchase of books for the 2011 Big Rothesay Read in an effort to encourage a life-long love of

reading. Experts agree that actually possessing a book can make a difference. We know that books are often shared, along with stimulating conversations about it, once read. An educated literate community makes for improved chances of success and quality of life. On April 27 the Big Rothesay Read is inviting the entire community to Meet the Author and participate in a panel discussion.



Photo: Olivia Bettle and Cody Kane, Grade 12 and 11 students at Rothesay High, join Principal Roger Brown, top right, (seated) Mary Ann Gallagher, left and JoEllen Jensen, right, "The Big Rothesay Read" volunteers as they discuss the unveiling of this year's book title for the community and high school literacy project.

Photo by Jane Barry



Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. [sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com](mailto:sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com)  
To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)