

Rutgers professor revisiting the legacy of Anne Frank

Written by Bill Nutt For the Home News Tribune
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“THE ANNE FRANK PHENOMENON”

WHAT: Lecture by Professor Jeffrey Shandler of Rutgers University on the impact of Anne Frank and her “Diary of a Young Girl” on popular culture. Talk, followed by a question-and-answer session, is sponsored by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University.

WHEN: 4:30 p.m., Monday

WHERE: Rutgers University, Douglass Campus Center, 100 George St., New Brunswick

ADMISSION: Free. Advance registration recommended.

MORE INFORMATION: Call 732-932-2033 or e-mail csjlrvp@rci.rutgers.edu or visit BildnerCenter.rutgers.edu

Who was Anne Frank?

Plenty of people think they know the answer to that question.

Most probably think of her as the Jewish girl who spent two years hiding from the Nazis with her family in an attic in Amsterdam, only to be captured and taken to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she died at age 15.

Some see her as a representative of the six million victims of the Holocaust. Some think of her as the promising writer of a diary that is still read and studied by adults and schoolchildren alike.

Still others reflect on the optimist who wrote these poignant words: “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart.”

All these views are correct to an extent. But even taken together, they form an incomplete picture of Anne Frank. There is more to her life — and the impact of her life — than most people realize.

That’s the contention of Jeffrey Shandler, professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers University. Shandler will discuss his ideas in “The Anne Frank Phenomenon,” a free lecture he will deliver at Rutgers on Monday.

Shandler’s talk, which will be followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience, is being sponsored by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University.

“I’ll be talking about the wide range and the dynamics of the Anne Frank phenomenon,” Shandler said. “We want to try to understand the diary on its own terms, as well as on its place in culture.”

A play and more

That impact includes such well-known examples as the official dramatization of “The Diary of Anne Frank,” written by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam.

But Shandler cites other examples, such as the fact that some 60 different pieces of music — from pop songs to oratorios — make reference to Anne Frank. There is even an asteroid named after her,

Shandler’s lecture at Rutgers draws in part on his book “Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory.” “We got thoughtful examinations of material not well-known in this country,” he said. “We were able to cast the net pretty wide.”

The discussion reflects the mission of the Bildner Center, according to Professor Yael Zerubavel, director of the center.

That mission includes bringing “the best of scholarship in Jewish studies to a diverse audience, including Rutgers’ students and faculty, public school teachers engaged in Holocaust education, and the general public,” Zerubavel said.

“Professor Shandler’s talk addresses the amazing impact of Anne Frank’s diary on American culture as an iconic text of the Holocaust that has shaped Holocaust memory for many Americans and has become a source of inspiration to other works,” Zerubavel said.

Any discussion of Anne Frank must begin with her own writing, according to Shandler. “The Anne Frank of the writing is a very feisty teenager,” he said. One chapter of his book is devoted to Anne’s sense of humor.

But even the diary offers an incomplete picture, Shandler said. “A diary is very person and intimate. But Anne wrote it with the idea that, after the war, it would be published. We know that she even rewrote some of it herself. She edited herself.”

Some of that editing involves Anne’s thoughts about her sexuality and the changes going on in her body. “The attitude toward adolescents writing about sex in the 1940s was very different than what it is accepted today,” he said.

By looking at the unedited text, a more complete picture of Anne emerges. “It’s a way of critiquing the overly beatified remembrance of Anne Frank,” Shandler said.

Interpreting her story

Shandler will also approach the way Anne Frank’s story has been viewed from 1947 (when it was originally published by her father, Otto Frank) to the present. That includes references to documentaries and YouTube clips, as well as numerous publications.

“Besides the story of Anne, this is the story of how people have engaged with the diary,” Shandler said. “It tells a lot about Holocaust memory.”

He also points to a body of work that speculates about Anne’s life if she had survived. That runs the gamut from the literary (Philip Roth’s 1979 novel “The Ghost Writer”) to the lurid (episodes of the TV series “American Horror Story: Asylum”).

“What’s behind this desire to wonder if Anne Frank is still alive? She’s someone you know so well and who you feel for,” Shandler said. “Some people like to imagine the life she never had the chance to live.”

Shandler hopes that his audience at Rutgers, as well as readers of his book, will come to appreciate the importance of Anne Frank’s story and the role her diary plays. “That is what will endure,” he said. “This is a prominent work, a central work of adolescent literature, and a central work of Holocaust memory.”

For that reason, Shandler stressed that his lecture is intended not simply for university scholars and educators, but for the public as a whole. “If this is a book that has meant something to them in their lives,” he added, “this is a talk that will speak to them.”