Jeanne Marie Laskas, author of Hidden America, Otterbein University’s 2015 “common book,” speaks on campus on Friday.

By Mary Mogan Edwards

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For authors, having their books chosen as required reading for an entire freshman class at a college or university means exposure to hundreds of young, inquisitive minds and the chance to talk about the work with readers face to face.

For Jeanne Marie Laskas, having her book Hidden America serve as Otterbein University’s “common book” this year brought an unusual bonus: seeing her stories come to life onstage.

Otterbein is known for its theater program, so along with the writing assignment, panel discussion and other activities that typically focus on a common book, theater students chose some vignettes, wrote scripts and acted them out.

That sort of intimate feedback makes common-book programs rewarding for authors, and the collaboration that goes into the related student projects is one of the main reasons universities create them.

“It’s a way for our students to all be on the same page,” said Leah Schuh, assistant director of Otterbein’s Center for Student Involvement. “They’ve all done this one thing together.”
Otterbein student Amanda Ifantides hopes to teach high-school English and loves the idea of a book giving every new student a common starting point. “It also helps jump-start the school year, so there is something meaningful to discuss right from the first day of the semester,” she said.

In Hidden America, Laskas tells the stories of people whose work is essential to the American economy but goes unnoticed by most people. Sections on coal miners, air-traffic controllers, migrant laborers, the Cincinnati Ben-Gals cheerleaders and others prompted plenty of questions when she addressed a convocation of first-year students, Laskas said. Discussion of the chapter on a gun shop in Arizona was especially heated.

“The students challenge me on my positions, because I really tried not to take any in the book,” Laskas said. “I love it, because I get to hear what some really engaged young readers think.”

Education traditionalists have criticized common-book programs because they tend to involve recently written books with left-leaning themes — sustainability and multiculturalism are common — but timeless literary merit isn’t the point.

Asked about the criticism in 2010, Mabel Freeman, who founded and at the time headed Ohio State University’s First Year Experience program, told InsideHigherEd.com that students’ regular course work exposes them to the classics. With the common book, by contrast, “What we are trying to do is, create a sense of community.”

Ohio State’s Buckeye Book Community program gives every student the same book at orientation sessions with instructions to read it before coming to campus. Once classes start, the book is discussed in freshman survey courses, and residence halls organize activities around it. The author is invited to campus.

“We want to get them thinking about ways they can connect with each other,” said Bernie Savarese, who currently heads OSU’s First Year Experience program, which includes the Buckeye Book Community. “It’s a way to make this big place small.”

Ohio State’s choice this year, The Good Food Revolution by Will Allen, tells the story of Allen’s work developing a 2-acre “urban farm” next to a Milwaukee public-housing project.

At Ohio Wesleyan University, the OWU Connection program gives first-year students a list of books to be taught in different freshman-seminar classes, along with information about the professors who will be teaching each section of the class. That way, said Zackariah Long, an associate English professor who runs the program, students can choose according to their interests.

Still, Long said, every professor teaching every book in the program has the same objectives: having students think about the meaning of a liberal-arts education, getting out into the community through service projects, and building bonds with professors and other students.

“We’re trying to get them to appreciate that all the dimensions of their college experience can be related to each other.”

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