

# Summer Reading 2009

## Valuing our Past and Building Our Future R. Barbara Gitenstein, President

I am pleased to welcome you to The College of New Jersey community. Your participation in our Summer Reading program is a first step in your career at the College and should help prepare you for our challenging and engaging academic environment.

The College is a values-based institution that seeks to provide a context in which you will learn and grow. As an institution, we value our past and encourage you to do the same; we also honor our responsibilities to the state and nation and we insist that you do so as well. These responsibilities cannot be met by only looking backward; we must also look around and look ahead. I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities that will present themselves throughout your time on the campus. In the short time you will spend with us you will further develop your passions and will have the chance to develop new ones. Now is the time to discover the impact you can make on the world. Like the institution that you have joined, your experience at The College of New Jersey is contextual. You will learn from others and they from you; you will learn from their pasts and they from yours.

As a consequence of this contextual learning, you will come to understand your past better. This greater understanding will result in great changes for you and for the larger community in which you live,

changes that will position us to thrive in the twenty-first century. As a community dedicated to free inquiry and open exchange, we seek to help nourish the development of our students to become leaders in our complex and diverse world by providing a supportive environment in which to challenge each other and ourselves intellectually.

Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* has been selected as this year's summer reading. The summer reading activity is a part of the College's programs scheduled every year to engage our community in discussion around a selected theme. The theme for this year is "The Family." As part of Welcome Week, you and your peers will have an opportunity to examine Balakian's book in a discussion led by a faculty/staff facilitator on August 24, 2009.

---

*You will learn from others and they from you; you will learn from their pasts and they from yours.*

---

Again, welcome to the community of The College of New Jersey. I hope you will take full advantage of what the College has to offer you, and what you have to offer our community.

# Essay Assignment

The subtitle of Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* (2009) tells us a great deal: *An American Son Uncovers His Armenian Past*. Balakian uses memoir to explore his growing up in suburban New Jersey and gradual discovery that his family had been the victims of the Turkish government's efforts to exterminate the Armenian people in 1915. (Elie Wiesel has described this event as "the first genocide of the twentieth century.") Balakian is an award-winning writer who has written and translated several histories of the Armenian Genocide (including the New York Times bestseller *The Burning Tigris*, 2004). He is also the author of five books of poetry, including *June-Tree: New and Selected Poems* (2004). *Black Dog of Fate* reflects on the ways in which individuals and families bear witness to historical events.

This academic year the College is sponsoring a series of programs based on the theme "**The Family.**" The theme will be inaugurated at the Summer Reading discussions on August 24 and celebrated at the campus-wide Community Learning Day on October 7, a day featuring Peter Balakian as keynote speaker.

With the theme of "The Family" in mind, please consider the following questions as you read *Black Dog of Fate*. Be prepared to share your responses with your fellow students and your faculty/staff facilitator in your Summer Reading discussion group on August 24. **Write an essay in response to one of the discussion questions. Your essay, which should be 2-4 typed pages long, will be collected by your Summer Reading discussion facilitator.**

**I.** Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* is a memoir about the relationship between the individual and history. As he grows up, the author discovers that his family is both a web of personal bonds and a reservoir of history. From this perspective, one can see the book as a testament against all those who are unwilling to remember the atrocities of 1915. Using specific references to the book, discuss the themes of secrecy, denial, and truth-telling in *Black Dog of Fate*. How do these themes occur not simply on

a geopolitical level but also within the author's family?

**II.** In the tenth anniversary edition of *Black Dog of Fate*, Peter Balakian returns to Aleppo, the Syrian town in which his grandmother and aunts lived as refugees. How does this ending shape the meaning of Balakian's story? Using specific references to the book, discuss the symbolism of Balakian's trip to Aleppo and Der Zor. Why does he carry bones from Der Zor when he returns to the United States?

**III.** Many of Balakian's memories center on his grandmother's cooking as if food itself contained a history of Armenia. As the memoir progresses, these reflections extend to many different families and ethnicities. Using specific references to the book, discuss how food is represented in *Black Dog of Fate*. What do attitudes towards food reveal about personal and cultural values? Feel free to draw on your own family experience in answering these questions.

**IV.** Although much of *Black Dog of Fate* is about the Armenian genocide, the book also reflects on suburban New Jersey with its immaculate lawns, fascination with sports, and dependence on the automobile. Balakian shows us how the growth of suburbs in the decades after World War II helped shape American families. Using specific references to the book, compare and contrast the time and location of your upbringing with Balakian's. In what ways is your family a product of the environment in which you (and your parents) were raised? In what ways, do you see your family accepting (or pushing back against) its immediate cultural landscape?

**Please note: We will be reading the Tenth Anniversary edition of *Black Dog of Fate* (re-published in 2009). This edition includes two new chapters that provide a significantly different ending to Balakian's story. Please be sure to read this new edition of the book.**