

Lunch 4 Literacy turns 30!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 1, 2021)

One of the most enjoyable and highly successful annual events in Oak Ridge celebrates its 30th anniversary with its Tuesday, March 23, 2021, virtual event at 11:30 am. It is the Lunch 4 Literacy event cosponsored by the Oak Ridge Altrusa Club and the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club.

Our speaker this year, Ruta Sepetys, is a Lithuanian-American writer of historical fiction, a #1 New York Times bestselling author, an international bestselling author, and winner of the Carnegie Medal. She will delight the audience with her stories and is renowned for giving voice to underrepresented history and those who experienced it. See her website: <https://rutasepetys.com/>

Ruta Sepetys is the author of *Out of the Easy*, *Salt to the Sea*, *Ashes in the Snow*, and *The Fountains of Silence*. Her books have won or been shortlisted for over 40 book prizes, are included on over 30 state reading lists, and are currently in development for film and television. For example, the movie *Ashes in the Snow*, is currently featured on Amazon Prime: See the trailer here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZNbA6L8hvc>

You will be amazed by Ruta's insights into lost history and her ability to bring to life little known but substantial historical details in her stories. She was awarded The Rockefeller Foundation's prestigious Bellagio Fellowship for her studies on human resilience. The New York Times Book Review declared, "Ruta Sepetys acts as champion of the interstitial people so often ignored—whole populations lost in the cracks of history."

Don't miss this unique opportunity to be a part of bringing a person of this caliber to Oak Ridge virtually. You will want to be "there" to see and hear her speak and to get the opportunity to ask her questions. And it is so easy to do so from the comfort of your home or office!

Kelly Callison, former Lunch 4 Literacy Co-chair wants you to know, "Even with COVID which prevents an in person luncheon our sponsors and ticket buyers continue to support this important community event. Funds go to support literacy projects throughout our area." Come join us virtually for another great event, our 30th year of successful support to agencies helping to serve the needs in our communities.

The secret to our success over the years has been the loyal supporters and regular attendees to our events. You must know those of you who have supported the annual initiative as sponsors are especially appreciated and should feel good about your contribution to improving literacy among our communities.

While adult literacy is important, I believe you will agree with me that reaching our children who have reading limitations are even more important. If they are not helped, their future will forever be restricted.

While I do not like to cite statistics, some might help you appreciate the enormity of our task!

Why do we do this year after year? Anderson County Schools, excluding Oak Ridge, has only a 29% proficiency in reading! <https://www.niche.com/k12/d/anderson-county-school-district-tn/> . The state average is 35%... Oak Ridge Schools has only 40%. <https://www.niche.com/k12/d/oak-ridge-school-district-tn/>

Twenty one percent of adults in the United States are functionally illiterate. That's 43 million people! <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=How-Serious-Is-Americas-Literacy-Problem#:~:text=That%20accounts%20for%2012%20percent,the%20illiterate%2Ffunctionally%20illiterate%20category.>

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, sixty six percent of all eighth-grade students are unable to read proficiently. This is a reduction of two percent from two years previously... <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement?grade=8>

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Union, Campbell, Anderson, Cocke, Grainger, Loudon, Fentress, Jefferson, Scott, Clairborne and Roane counties, as well as Oak Ridge and Sweetwater, saw their percentages of third graders proficient in reading drop in 2019. Clinton school district increased...they are doing something right!

<https://www.wbir.com/article/news/education/tennessee-reading-scores-make-slow-climb/51-2ee29332-9a73-46d2-8a35-7ee0c1301776>

Can you imagine what the statistics will show for 2020? I fear it is going to be SAD! Likely we will see slippage in our efforts to gain ground in literacy, not only in the third grade but overall. We need to do all we can to help those who have programs that reach the most illiterate in our communities and help them learn basic skills many of us take for granted.

Sherrie Fairchild-Keys, Co-Chair says, "Over 30 years, Lunch For Literacy has brought world class authors to Oak Ridge! This year is no different! While this event will take place virtually, our audience will be engaged with our author in new and innovative ways!

Regarding the literacy grants, Sherrie observed, "As an elementary principal, I have had the benefit of seeing the immediate and lasting benefits our literacy grants have on students. We appreciate the continued support of long-time sponsors and connection with new sponsors so that children in our area have every opportunity to improve their reading skills."

Amber Roberts, Co-Chair says, "One of my greatest joys is serving as an educator in a community where education is held in such high regard. Every year our community supports our teachers and families with the resources they need to help our children learn and grow. Our committee is hopeful that this year's 30th anniversary event will result in more funds than ever to support literacy grants to combat the learning loss caused by the pandemic."

Examples of agencies who have received grants in the past are: Robertsville Middle School, Roane Imagination Library, Grand Oaks Elementary School, The Emory Valley Center, Girls, Inc., The Boys and Girls Club of Clinch Valley, Glenwood Elementary School, Willow Brook Elementary School, Clinton High School, Norris/Lake City Middle Schools, Clinton Middle School, Norwood Middle School, Aid for Distressed Families of Appalachian Counties, Andersonville Elementary School, Briceville Elementary School, The Blossom Center, The ARC of Anderson County, and The Boys and Girls Club of North Anderson County.

Some of the organizations have expressed their appreciation for the grants and tell what they have been able to do with the funds YOU who support Lunch 4 Literacy provide:

The grant we received to purchase books for our classroom libraries put enriching, high-interest books right in the hands of our children. The students were surveyed about what books they would like to see in their classrooms, and we were able to fulfill their wishes! These books will bless the children of Andersonville Elementary for years to come.

— Hope Holdaway, Andersonville Elementary School

For many years, the Lunch 4 Literacy Program has been instrumental in helping ADFAC provide backpacks and basic supplies needed for eligible students in Anderson, Campbell and Morgan Counties. Going back to school can be a source of anxiety for many families as they struggle financially. When students receive supplies, they are more self-confident as they have the same supplies as their peers. We are so grateful the Altrusa/Rotary grant made it possible for us to supply 4,131 students with backpacks in 2020.

— Becky Hook, ADFAC

These literacy grants, for me, and I have received several over the years, have offered ways to enrich the reading lives of my 8th grade students at Clinton Middle. The money has allowed me to continuously add to my classroom library titles that connect them to the content of our class as

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well as offering them the ever-important factor of choice in titles that interest them most and keep them, simply, reading.

— Kevin Powers, Clinton Middle School

Our grant allowed us to purchase picture books exploring social and emotional issues such as coping with anxiety and stress--so apropos at this time. The students loved the read alouds and created amazing artwork in response to the texts' themes and illustrations.

— Mary Williams, Grand Oaks Elementary School

Emory Valley Early Learning Center was able to use grant funds to purchase a curriculum geared toward children 18 months to three years old. This is a research-based curriculum that can help the teachers ensure that they are providing what the children need. It includes classroom management and social-emotional components that create a learning environment where children feel safe and loved. Children learn to reduce stress, engage appropriately with their classmates, and practice social skills, such as using kind words and helpful hands.

— Terry Peek, Emory Valley Center

In keeping with tradition, again this year we have a marvelous speaker lined up. Ruta Sepetys, is an internationally acclaimed number one "New York Times" best-selling author of historical fiction whose books has been published in over 60 countries and 40 languages.

The purpose of the joint effort is to provide grants to help improve literacy in Oak Ridge and Anderson and Roane counties. Each year the grants are awarded to selected recipients. While I do not have all the annual award data, from what I do have, I estimate some \$250,000 has been awarded in the past 30 years.

To qualify for grants potential applicants should meet award criteria which may be found on the Altrusa International Oak Ridge website <http://oakridge.altrusa.org/> or Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club website <http://www.orbrc.org/>. Hard copies are also available at the Oak Ridge Public Library. Each year, applications must be submitted by Nov. 1.

This year's event will be held virtually on Tuesday, March 23, at 11:30 am, featuring speaker Ruta Sepetys and I believe it will be an outstanding event. I just watched the movie *Ashes in the Snow* on Amazon Prime!

Tickets, which are \$30 each, should be purchased via the links below:

<http://www.eventbrite.com/e/2021-lunch-for-literacy-tickets-137349121921?aff=ebdssbeac>

Or, you can find the ticket website by going to: Eventbrite.com <https://www.eventbrite.com/> and search for "2021 Lunch for Literacy." Once you purchase your ticket, you will be given follow up reminders. Sales end on March 23.

You might want to ask questions of this most reputable speaker. If so, please submit those questions in advance. They will be sent to Ms. Sepetys before her talk. Please send questions to: lochlainns@msn.com by March 22.

Tony Wright, previous Co-chair of Lunch 4 Literacy, said, "Many, many, people have had, and continue to have, a passion to promote Literacy Improvement Initiatives in our area. We are excited that the Lunch 4 Literacy has achieved 30 years of success – and know that it will continue to help our children achieve The Gift Of Literacy in the future!"

We all know the COVID pandemic has necessitated changes in our lives and Lunch 4 Literacy is no exception. Therefore, we are altering our usual format, but I hope you will mark their calendars and plan

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to participate in what promises to be a fantastic talk. Please send this information to your friends, so they know how to purchase a ticket this year.



Ruta Sepetys