Nobel-Prize winning author challenges Janesville students

BY ANNA MARIE LUX
December 7, 2013

JANESVILLE--In his native Turkey, writer Orhan Pamuk is the equivalent of a rock star.

People love his novels because of his rich storytelling and keen insight into contemporary issues.

The winner of a Nobel Prize in Literature is less known in the United States, unless you talk to students at the Academy for International Studies.

They are brimming with ideas about his work.
For more than two months, the Janesville teens have been engaged in his seventh novel, “Snow.”

Last week, they even met the passionate author and asked him thoughtful questions during a daylong conference in Madison.

Pamuk left a powerful impression.

“I was intrigued to meet a man who won a Nobel Prize and who potentially changed part of the world with his writing,” said Brice Christopher. “I can use him as a model for success. I want to reach out and make change, too, but don’t know how yet.”

Christopher and almost 20 academy students joined 300 high school students from around the state at the annual Great World Texts program.

The initiative of the UW-Madison Center for the Humanities provides support to high school teachers who want to challenge their students with literary books of the world.

Every year, the program plunges seniors into a different
In the past, some of the reads were classics, such as “Antigone.” Others tackled contemporary issues, such as Arundhati Roy's “The God of Small Things.”

In “Snow,” Pamuk examines the issue of religious freedom and the right to wear veils.

The book tells the story of Ka, a Turkish journalist who was in political exile in Frankfurt but who has returned to Istanbul. Ka tries to find out more about the suicides of a number of young girls forced by their schools to remove headscarves.

Students were asked to respond to the book with original projects.

Christopher developed a Turkish travel guide for readers of “Snow” and others who want to travel there.

Brad Allen wrote a journal from the perspective of Ka to better understand his viewpoint.

Felicia Lynch sewed a German coat, like the one described in the book and worn by the main character.

Kaylee Rossing wrote the poems named in “Snow” on a canvas in the shape of an evocative snowflake.

All are seniors at the academy and attend Craig High School. They urge more people to read Pamuk's book and describe him as a humble man who talked with them, not at them.

During a public address, Pamuk gave young people some pointed advice: “Don't listen to the critics. Listen to yourself.”

Rossing explained what his words mean to her.
“You don't have to look to others for acceptance,” she said. “The only person you need to impress is yourself. It's a good message today when everyone is trying to impress.”

Academy Dean of Students Jane Thompson said the Great World Texts program shows what can happen when you give students an in-depth book and a chance to think about it.

“They were able to delve into political and social issues in 'Snow' that pertain to their country today,” she said. “Everyone had time to grab onto something different in the book and be creative.”

The program allows students to shore up confidence in their own abilities and to focus on inquiry.

“We want to know why and how,” Thompson said. “Here at the academy, we are not just going through content. It's more about the deeper learning and developing our students' ability to think.”

Academy students have been taking part in the Great World Texts program for five years under the guidance of Katherine Conover, who retired last year but continues as a guest teacher. The academy is a charter school in the School District of Janesville, is open to juniors and seniors in the district and is located at UW-Rock County.

The state Department of Public Instruction has adopted the Great World Text teaching materials as a model for how teachers can be flexible in the classroom and meet the goals of Common Core State Standards that are now mandated in Wisconsin.

Heather DuBois Bourenane, program coordinator for Great World Texts, said the program was developed as a way to expose both the power and potential of critical
reading through challenging works of world literature.

“We want to demystify the experience of reading hard books,” Bourenane said, “and to give students the confidence they need to be ready to see themselves as serious scholars.”

Anna Marie Lux is a columnist for The Gazette. Her columns run Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Call her with ideas or comments at (608) 755-8264, or email amarielux@gazettextra.com.