

A Greek tragedy with contemporary themes is this year's 'must read'

By Franklin Crawford

Sophocles' tragic play *Antigone* may not be on *The New York Times*' suggested summer reading list, but it is required reading for more than 3,500 incoming Cornell freshmen as part of the university's First Year Reading Project for fall 2003.

"I am delighted by the selection of Sophocles' *Antigone* as Cornell's freshman text for next fall," said President Hunter Rawlings, who, following his retirement from the presidency later this year, will return to teach in Cornell's classics department. "Our freshman book project has already attained the status of a Cornell tradition after only two years, and the *Antigone* is certain to add intellectual excitement to this program, which has proven to be popular with both students and faculty members."

Antigone was selected from a number of possible works because "it is a timeless text that raises timely issues," said Vice Provost Isaac Kramnick, "and it also serves as a tribute and an honor to Hunter Rawlings' eight years as Cornell's president."

The 2003 First Year Reading Project will be part of the freshman orientation program, modeled on last year's success with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the inaugural reading project in 2001 of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Incoming students will be sent copies of the book this summer and will engage in faculty-led discussions during their first week at Cornell and in many freshman writing seminars.

Members of the Cornell community also are invited to read the play. Kramnick said the town-gown connection established through the *Frankenstein* reading project last year will continue. The Tompkins County Public Library and Ithaca's high schools will join in with book groups and readings of *Antigone*, and other town-gown events may follow.

Together with their entering classmates, professors and continuing students, new Cornell students will discuss, criticize and evaluate the play at required campus events during the university's orientation week, including a large-group symposium and small-group discussions. A faculty member will lead each small-group discussion with the assistance of an upper-level student. When classes begin, many new students also will have opportunities to write about some aspect of the play in their first-year writing seminars.

In September, Cornell's Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts will open its season with an innovative production of *Antigone*, under the direction of David Feldshuh, professor and artistic director of theatre, film and dance at Cornell. The play will include an original music score by Andrew Waggoner (Cornell DMA '86). Norman Johnson, professor of theater at Ithaca College, will design masks for all cast members.

"This is the kind of play that is most exciting to undertake: a brilliant work that presents challenging theatrical questions and, because of the passage of time, a formidable theatrical risk," said Feldshuh. "The goal is to use the power of ritual, of mask, of text, of original music, singing, movement and spectacle to spark the religious intensity that must have accompanied the production 2,500 years ago. What a great opportunity this is for us. What a privilege to be part of an adventuresome experiment in teaching and learning as a community."

Antigone is one of three plays written by Sophocles about the ill-fated family of Oedipus. The three plays

are not written in sequence and even contradict each other, said Jeff Rusten, Cornell professor of classics.

"Actually, there is no 'cycle' of Oedipus plays really, in the sense of a continuous group (like the trilogies of Aeschylus that were meant to be performed together)," said Rusten. "These are three plays that happen to be about three episodes in the history of the same family, but they were written many years apart."

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus. She disobeys the orders of Creon, her uncle and the king of Thebes, who forbids the burial of her brother Polyneices, considered a traitor to the city. After Antigone buries Polyneices, Creon condemns her to death and decrees that she be buried alive in a cave. Though warned by the prophet Tiresias, Creon sticks to his decree. Creon eventually yields and decides to free Antigone, but he arrives at the cave too late -- Antigone has hanged herself and is already dead. Creon's son, Haemon, who had been engaged to marry Antigone, is enraged at his father and kills himself. Creon's wife also commits suicide.

But *Antigone* is more than just a tragedy about a dysfunctional family.

"The *Antigone* urges us to confront the tensions inherent in our competing obligations to family and community, to religion and the state, and to individual freedom versus national security," said Rawlings. "As a professor of classics soon to re-enter the classroom full time, I applaud this realization of ancient Greek tragedy on Cornell's campus because it has much to teach all of us about ourselves and the choices we still confront in the 21st century."

Kramnick told the *Cornell Daily Sun* that he is well aware the United States may be at war with Iraq before incoming freshmen arrive.

"Along with other issues that will be debated are the justice and morality of the U.S. at war," he said. "Both Antigone and Creon are given powerful voices to make arguments for both sides. It is a powerful and resonant text. There are just so many different issues to be discussed and themes to be explored. Among them is the existence of higher standards of justice and morality against the particular edicts of a particular system, as described by Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctrine of civil disobedience."

Cornell's First Year Book Project is overseen by Provost Biddy Martin and Vice Provost Kramnick and sponsored by the Provost's Office with the assistance of the office of Vice President for Student and Academic Services Susan Murphy.

February 27, 2003

[| Cornell Chronicle Front Page](#) | [| Table of Contents](#) | [| Cornell News Service Home Page](#) |