



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
Office of Marketing and Communications
Press Release
September 1, 2020

Contact: Angela Daidone
201-684-7477
news@ramapo.edu

Opening Convocation Examines Acclaimed Author Mohsin Hamid’s Fictional Novel “Exit West”

MAHWAH, N.J. – Forced migration, ensuing struggles and a young couple’s pursuit of happiness are the main themes of *Exit West*, a novel by British Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, which was chosen as the summer reading selection for Ramapo College’s first-year students.

This year, the College’s Opening Convocation was presented virtually by Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies Rebecca Root. In his introductory remarks, President Peter P. Mercer welcomed the Class of 2024, saying that, despite the tumult of the past months, the year ahead “should be marked by growth, challenge and reward,” for both the students and the College at large.

“We are directly experiencing an unprecedented time in our history,” he said, citing the events surrounding the current health crisis, our country’s upcoming elections, racial discord and discrimination, and other injustices. “There are many parallels to be drawn from *Exit West* to our current circumstances,” President Mercer said, noting that the main characters “confront unrest, discrimination and the need to adjust to new realities and new environment.”

Professor Root, who also serves as Director of the College Honors Program, illuminated those parallels and discussed many of the critical themes in Hamid’s novel. “I love this book because I teach about human rights, especially questions about forced migration, and the struggle for refugees and asylees to attain their full human rights,” she said.

Exit West chronicles the travels and struggles of Saeed and Nadia, a young couple who live in an unnamed city undergoing civil war and finally have to flee, using a system of magical doors, which lead to different locations around the globe. Although the story is fictional, it is loosely based on events that occurred during the Syrian Civil War, Professor Root noted, which led almost 6.6 million people to flee their country. In discussing the increasing incidence of mass

migration globally and its impact on humanity, she examines a quote by the author Hamid, “We need to figure out how to build a vision for that coming reality that isn’t a disaster, that is humane and even inspiring.”

When asked about the very different format for this year’s convocation, Professor Root said, “It is strange not to be physically present together for convocation, but I think the theme of *Exit West* resonates even more in our virtual environment, where we are all thinking about the factors that limit our mobility and pursuit of happiness and the possibilities that will come when those factors are no longer so powerful. At the same time, the book offers these compelling examples of people who, yes, are refugees, but also aren't defined by that. Similarly, I think we all need reminders that we aren't defined by the circumstances that shape our lives in this moment; we define who we are and what we do with our energy and abilities.”

She said that although she did not speak with the author, she found through reading published interviews his open and unapologetic pro-migrant politics “inspiring, which encouraged me to be frank in stating my opinions during the convocation talk. Not everyone will agree with Hamid's point of view, or mine, of course. But college is an ideal space in which to engage in conversations around difficult or challenging subjects, so why not kick that off your very first day of college?”

Professor Root said she feels the book’s topic is providing an important message for students. “It speaks to the struggle all of us face to find our place in the world and make real connections with others, and to make new homes in the places we end up in,” she said.

Exit West was the 2017 New York Times Best Book of the Year and received the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction in 2017. Hamid’s other works, *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, also have received global acclaim.

###

Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state’s premier public liberal arts college and is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding. The College is ranked #1 among New Jersey public institutions by College Choice, and is recognized as a top college by *U.S. News & World Report*, *Kiplinger’s*, Princeton Review and *Money* magazine, among others. Ramapo College is also distinguished as a Career Development College of Distinction by CollegesofDistinction.com, boasts the best campus housing in New Jersey on Niche.com, and is designated a “Military Friendly College” in Victoria Media’s *Guide to Military Friendly Schools*.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor’s degrees in the arts, business, data science, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to master’s degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Data Science, Educational Technology, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education.

