ETSU hosts panel discussion for ‘Literature of Prescription’

JOHNSON CITY – East Tennessee State University’s James H. Quillen College of Medicine will hold a reception and panel discussion Thursday, April 19, for “The Literature of Prescription,” an exhibit that tells the story of a feminist author whose writing challenged a harrowing medical treatment for women in the late 20th century.

The discussion will feature three ETSU panelists who will present varying perspectives on the exhibit. A reception with light hors d’oeuvres begins at 4:30 p.m. on the first floor mezzanine of Quillen’s Stanton-Gerber Hall, the location of the exhibit. The talk will begin at 5 p.m. in the large auditorium. Admission is free and the public is invited.

“The Literature of Prescription” shines the light on the late Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a woman who – as prescribed by a physician treating her for nervous exhaustion – was confined to a room where she was allowed no activities, reading or writing and could not talk with others.

After her treatment, Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” an 1892 short story in which a woman – prescribed the “rest cure” by her physician – deteriorates into psychosis and begins to see distorted shapes that she takes as a woman trapped in the yellow wallpaper trying to get out. The story entered the canon of classic feminist literature and Perkins became a successful author.

The panelists for Thursday’s talk are Patricia Buck, Susan Elaine and Dr. Phyllis Thompson, all of whom have expertise in women’s issues of literature, medicine and mental health.

Buck, a lecturer in the ETSU Department of Literature and Language, will speak to the women’s health perspective of “Literature of Prescription.” Buck has taught a course at Quillen on the history of women’s health care as well as a graduate seminar in women’s literature and feminist literary theory.

Elaine, an outpatient psychotherapist in the ETSU Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, will focus on the experience of being a woman, with its roles and expectations, and on the resulting impact of the culture’s definition of mental illness on women. Elaine will show how women’s present-day emotional and psychological needs parallel the feminist struggles of Gilman.

Thompson, an associate professor of English at ETSU and director of Women’s Studies, will address the ways in which Gilman’s life experiences shaped her stories and how the author and her writings advocated for women and social change during a tumultuous time in history and continue to be relevant today.

Viewing hours for “The Literature of Prescription” are 8 a.m.–4 p.m., Monday through Friday. For more information or for assistance for those with disabilities, call (423) 439-8069.

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