

# Everything You Wanted to Know About Rhode Island, But Were Afraid to Ask

By Alyssa Smith

**As the title** suggests, *Rhode Island 101* provides readers with the “salty essence of the Ocean State” in 248 pages. Written by Cranstonite (and former ESM contributor) Tim Lehnert, this new book is a compilation of everything and anything a person could possibly want to know about the smallest state in the nation. It presents Rhode Island in all its undersized quirkiness, including a bevy of contributions and quotes from locals and out-of-state observers.

Lehnert points out that the book's breadth is surprisingly extensive, noting that it “ranges from pop stuff like the origin of Newport's own 60s pop band The Cowsills, to information of a more serious manner, like Scituate being on the short list of sites for the UN Headquarters.” He also elicited help from local favorites like Mark Patinkin, Charlie Hall and Arlene Violet to add an authentically Ocean State touch. While the author maintains that the book “doesn't pretend to be comprehensive,” it's really a tell-all, covering both the best and the worst of times the state has seen since its discovery by Giovanni da Verrazzano in 1524.

The publishers of the 101 series specifically state in the liner notes that it is not akin to *Fodor's* or *Lonely Planet* guides, but rather aimed at a visitor looking to get the skinny on the non-traditional scene and who wants to use the book as a reference point. The food section is quite helpful for those looking to find staple Rhody cuisine, like New York system wieners and Chef Richard Gutman's “Quintessential RI Diners.”

Though the book is impartial, a majority of the passages pay homage to the true native, and readers will most likely chuckle as they graze through sections

like “Rhody Symbols” and “Rhode Island Lingo.” Lehnert even takes on the daunting task of explaining and mastering the very intricate accent of the Rhode Islander, giving readers the phonetics as provided by local speech pathologists. Originally hailing from Montreal, Lehnert was among the many outsiders initially taken aback by Rhode Island “tawk,” quipping, “I can just explain it as a combination between the Boston and New York accent. When I first heard it, I didn't think people were serious.”

Since Rhode Island is so synonymous with political figures, usually of a more corrupt nature, the book is laden with information about the life and times of Providence's Prince, former mayor Buddy Cianci. *Projo* columnist Mark Patinkin weighs in on the state's colorful political arena, and other political darlings like Lincoln Chafee and Bruce Sundlun appear as well.

Hand-in-hand with the political low-down is the frequent mentioning of “The Family,” i.e., the infamous mafia organization. *Rhode Island 101* delves into the New England mob, once run out of a vending machine company on Federal Hill, with a profile of Cosa Nostra boss Raymond Patriarca. The book details Patriarca's activity, from his rise on Atwells Avenue in the 1920s and 30s, to his convictions and subsequent death in 1984.

Though the state has earned notoriety for harboring crooked individuals, Lehnert explores the more positive side of fame in the culture section. The Emmy-nominated *Family Guy*, Fox's cult favorite, adult-oriented cartoon, centers on Peter Griffin, a stereotypical Rhode Islander who lives with his family in

the fictional town of Quahog. Though the show's creator, RISD graduate Seth MacFarlane, takes his fair share of liberties with his depiction, a fair amount of authentic Ocean State humor is found in the show. MacFarlane's portrayal is not always flattering, but Rhode Island capitalizes on the celebrity, appropriating things like Peter's favorite bar, the Drunken Clam, which is now a real place in Narragansett.

Lehnert also catalogs the literary, musical and athletic figures that lived in or had strong ties to Rhode Island, adding proof to his assertion that the state “boasts one of the highest populations of artists per capita in the country.” Considerable mention is given to H.P. Lovecraft, the science fiction and horror writer who was born in Providence and wrote some of his most prolific work while residing in a spacious brown Victorian on the East Side's Barnes Street until 1933.

The most difficult task for Lehnert was deciding what information just had to be included, and what needed to be passed over to make the book work. And while some might think there's a dearth of history behind this humbly sized state, as Lehnert proves, there's a lot to offer.

The author hopes that *Rhode Island 101* will be a conversation/argument starter, if nothing else. The book is a light read, and Lehnert believes the series is enjoyable and can be a nice accompaniment to your beach day, or a motivator for those who want to learn a little more about our fascinating little state.

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