

A New Deal for Quilts Award Presentation
Janneken Smucker

Thank you to all of you for being here today.

I am Kevin Baker, director of the New York City Chapter of the Living New Deal, and I am here today to present our 2023 New Deal Book Award to one of our two co-winners this year.

This was an especially strong year for entries. The book we are to hear about today is *A New Deal for Quilts*, by Janneken Smucker, published by the International Quilt Museum, and the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

First, to state the obvious, this is a truly gorgeous book, with many color and black-and-white reproductions of sublimely beautiful quilts, and Americans from all backgrounds at work on them. As Scott Borchert wrote in his review for the award committee, this is an “illuminating, surprising, and beautifully designed book.”

It is as well, though, an intellectually important work, showing us as it does how the New Deal took patchwork quilting from what was largely a media and corporate creation—the Colonialist Revival myth that the earliest European colonists in America thriftily made leftover material into quilts for their families—into a reality, where they did just that in the Great Depression.

Prof. Smucker makes clear there simply wasn't enough readily available fabric in colonial America for quilts to be anything but a luxury item. The fad for quilts in the 1920s was mostly something promoted in women's magazines, with an invented history to inveigle women into quilting as a sort of salute to their American ancestors.

With the New Deal, however, you had a government that actually paid women to make quilts, paid women to teach others how to make quilts, and paid people to photograph and write about quilts.

As Prof. Smucker writes, "...the government drew on both the symbolic heft and practical potential of quilts and quilting in its relief and rebuilding projects. Governmental programs used quilts to symbolically communicate the values and behaviors individuals should embrace amid the Depression. New Dealers perceived the practical potential of crafts to provide women with skills to support their families; the government hired home economists to train women to make quilts in WPA Sewing Rooms, WPA Handicraft Projects, and in Farm Security Administration Migratory Labor Camps and Planned Communities. The federal government's use of quilts and quilting aimed to show how women could contribute to their families' betterment, generated empathy for poor and migrant families, and empowered Americans to create and use thrifty domestic objects closely associated with ideals of home and comfort."

I think this—and all of *A New Deal for Quilts*—makes two very important points about the New Deal in general. One is that, while we often think of the New Deal as something that proceeded from the top down—brilliant people in Washington coming up with great policies—and they were plenty brilliant!—so much of it also came from the grassroots, from regular Americans who significantly shaped, and influenced, and animated the programs they needed.

And the other is how much the New Deal was about making America live up to its promise. If the idea of colonial women industriously quilting away was largely a media concoction, the New Deal made it a reality in the modern day, a communal undertaking open to anyone, of any color or creed, and one celebrated in all. It opened a way for us to live up to the best of our ideals—and to create something of real beauty in the bargain.

In the end, as Prof. Smucker writes, “Whether in our collective romanticized memory, covering our bodies as we sleep, or hanging on museum gallery walls, quilts are potent objects, and the U.S. government harnessed that power to relieve the impact of the Great Depression.”

In a year when we face existential threats every bit as real as those we faced as a people during and after the Depression, we should take heart from the quilters' ingenuity and courage, and think what we can do to stand fast.

Thank you.