



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

NEARTS

A GREAT NATION DESERVES GREAT ART



THE BIG READ

RESTORING READING
TO THE HEART
OF AMERICAN LIFE

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The Big Read

Restoring Reading To the Heart of American Life

The Big Read ranks as the most ambitious national literary initiative since the Federal Writers Project shut its doors in 1939. Developed in response to the NEA's *Reading at Risk* study, which documented the alarming national decline in literary reading among all age groups, the Big Read serves as the literature component of American Masterpieces.

The idea is to help restore reading to the heart of American life through what are sometimes called one-city, one-book programs. Communities apply to the NEA for Big Read grants, and the strongest applicants receive a matching grant based on the size of the community. They also receive reader's and teacher's guides and educational CDs of a caliber that most might never manage on their own.

By the end of 2007, nearly 200 cities and towns will have hosted Big Reads. Before 2008 is out, 400 more will

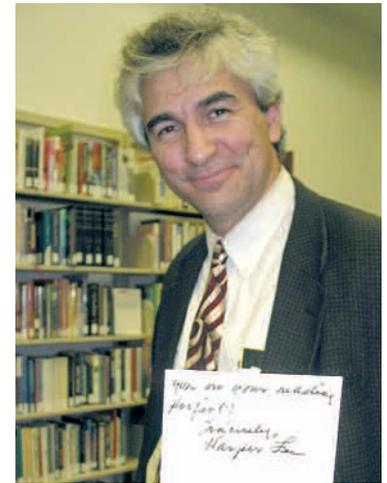
be able to make the same claim. The program also will go international, incorporating reciprocal Big Reads between the Russian cities of Saratov and Ivanova and American communities reading Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Personally, I'll never forget my first Big Read experience, touching down in Topeka, Kansas, to check in on its

encounter with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A visibly moved librarian pulled me aside, marveling at not just the biggest, but the most ethnically diverse turnout the library had ever seen. In a city notorious for the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, this clued me in to the Big Read's secret shadow goal: to get the country reading again, sure, but also to bring communities together by giving Americans something more interesting to talk about together than the weather.

One final note: Here at the NEA, we take it as absolute gospel that the most successful projects are those that are done in partnership. I know without a doubt that without our partners, we simply couldn't make the Big Read happen. So many thanks to the Institute of Museum and Library Services—our lead federal partner, Arts Midwest, The Boeing Company, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Community Foundations of America.

David Kipen
NEA Director of Literature



NEA Literature Director David Kipen holds up the second page of a letter written by Harper Lee to the citizens of Starkville, Mississippi, who were reading her book as part of the Big Read. Photo by Nancy Jacobs.



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A great nation
deserves great art.

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ON THE COVER:

Mrs. Laura Bush delivers remarks at an April 16 Big Read event in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Photo by Carl David LaBianca.

A Great Nation Deserves a Great Read

The NEA Launches a New Literary Initiative—The Big Read

According to the NEA's 2004 report *Reading at Risk*, even Oprah's legions of loyal readers have not been enough to stem the steady decline in reading in the United States. Based on the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, *Reading at Risk* states that while 56.9 percent of Americans read any literature in 1982, 20 years later only 46.7 percent of Americans were still reading literature. Furthermore, when asked if they read any books at all, only 56.6 percent of Americans said yes. This decline matters, according to the NEA's newly released *The Arts and Civic Engagement* study. Americans who are engaged in the arts, including literary reading, are also actively engaged in their communities—including volunteer efforts—at a rate that is at least twice that of nonreaders.

There is no instant cure for aliteracy—knowing how to read, but choosing not to—but the NEA has developed the Big Read to help reverse this trend by making reading irresistible. Launched as a pilot program of 10 communities in 2006, the Big Read is modeled after the highly successful cityread programs popularized by cities such as Seattle and Chicago. While many communities nationwide have followed in these cities' pioneering footsteps,

a high percentage of these programs eventually fizzled due to the enormous demands the programs place on community resources, including fundraising, the design of attractive events, development of educational materials, and publicity campaigns. Still, these communitywide reads proved the best model for stimulating literary reading in tandem with community interaction, so the NEA stepped in to develop a model program that would alleviate some of the burden for local communities.

The Big Read launched nationally this spring with 72 communities hosting a Big Read—from the nation's capital to tiny, rural Enterprise, Oregon, to Miami, Florida's metropolis. Bridgeport, Connecticut, which applied for a project grant with neighboring cities Norwalk, Shelton, and Stamford, was one of four Big Read programs in Connecticut. "The Big Read has been a phenomenal success throughout our four communities," stated Bridgeport Mayor John M. Fabrizi. "Not only has this initiative brought the joy of reading to the forefront, it has forged unique partnerships between community organizations that would never have occurred otherwise. We are already making plans for next year's Big Read celebration!"

Mrs. Laura Bush, honorary chair of the Big Read, echoed Mayor Fabrizi's sentiments during her visit to Bridgeport for a Big Read event celebrating *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In her opening remarks Mrs. Bush said, "Bridgeport is restoring [its] tight-knit sense of community through the Big Read. At the library, in schools, in government offices, at work, in civic groups, and in book clubs, citizens from every walk of life have come together by reading the same good book. And they're having fun together by bringing this good book to life."

The following pages profile several communities that have hosted Big Reads from January to June 2007. Although these communities all read and discussed different novels, designed different calendars of events, and offered different strategies for getting back to reading, each proved that the Big Read is truly a Big Idea.



NEA Chairman Dana Gioia moderates a panel (left to right: Central High School English teacher Carolyn Axt; Dr. Anne-Imelda Radice, Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services; Harper Lee biographer Charles J. Shields; and Mrs. Laura Bush) discussing Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* during an event at the Barnum Museum on April 16, 2007 celebrating the Big Read. Photo by Carl David LaBianca.

Homecoming

Salinas Reads *The Grapes of Wrath*

Dedicated to continued exploration of John Steinbeck's work, the National Steinbeck Center (NSC)—located in the author's birthplace, Salinas, California—hosted a Big Read of *The Grapes of Wrath* for Monterey County. Abby Pfeiffer, Manager of Grants and Sponsorship, and Lori Woods, Curator of Education and Public Programs, spoke to the NEA about NSC's experience with the initiative. (Read the full interview on the NEA Web site: www.arts.gov/features/index.htm.)



SpectorDance Studio presented the dance piece *Common Ground*, which explores issues in California agriculture from the 1930s to the present, as part of Monterey County Reads *The Grapes of Wrath*, sponsored by the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California. Photo by William Roden.

NEA: Why did NSC want to participate in the Big Read?

ABBY PFEIFFER: We, as an institution, had not ever taken on a one book, one community initiative, and so this gave us a chance to use the backing, not only financial, but name and logo backing, of the National Endowment for the Arts to launch this program and let it be our pilot.

NEA: In light of last year's controversy surrounding the possible closure of the Salinas library, how important was the Big Read to the community?

LORI WOODS: I thought that the combination of all the activities that we did, and their reach, and the enormous amount of press we got really brought reading to the forefront in this county for five weeks. Everybody knew that the whole community was reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, and I think that's particularly important in a

community where our libraries were threatened to be shut down. I read [Chairman Gioia's introduction to *Reading at Risk*] numerous times during introductions to our events, to remind people how important print culture is, what it makes possible in the human mind, and the kinds of skills that might be lost if we give up.

NEA: Is there anything that has particularly surprised you about hosting a Big Read?

PFEIFFER: I don't know if it was a surprise as much as a revelation. . . . What happened around *The Grapes of Wrath* and the Big Read was that

people came together in small groups at libraries and at the events here at the Steinbeck Center. And what was apparent to me was that people need and want a reason to communicate with each other. That's what reading is all about, that you can read and then talk with each other. I know that that was one of the goals of the Big Read, and it was exciting to see that happen. And it truly did happen, [but not] because of anything that we tried to make happen. We just put the book in people's hands and they read it, and they wanted to talk about it, and they came together as a group. And then the Big Read took off on its own.

First in Fiction

Craven County Celebrates *The Great Gatsby*

North Carolina license plates read “First in Flight” but with five Big Read programs in the state—perhaps they should read “First in Fiction.” In eastern North Carolina, Craven-Pamlico-Carteret Regional Library—a nine-library consortium serving three counties—celebrated F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Librarian Joanne Straight, Craven County’s Big Read coordinator, said that the nine libraries participated in the project in order to bring programming to the region that each library wouldn’t have been able to facilitate individually. “We had been talking for awhile about the possibility of trying to do a regional community-read, but it had not actually gotten any farther than the discussion stages. So this was a good impetus for us to do that and know that we’d be able to do more than we would have been able to do on our own,” she explained.

Including 76 diverse events and involving 29 book clubs, the regional read was programmed to appeal to multiple segments of community residents, including nonreaders. Featured events included a keynote by humorist and national Fitzgerald expert Dr. Elliot Engel and a kickoff performance by the North Carolina Jazz Repertory Orchestra, the state’s premier jazz ensemble. High school students participated in an “It’s the 1920s Old Sport” program in which they responded to the book by creating visual art and musical and theater performances. Straight said, “We found that people who wouldn’t have picked up this book on their own read it because of being involved and participating in the activities, like some of the kids who performed in the high school jazz band.”

Troops and families stationed at nearby Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point also participated in the area’s Big Read. (Communities are encouraged to part-



Young readers from the Western Carteret Public Library assisted the youth services librarian in creating a replica 1922 Silver Ghost Rolls Royce while the community read *The Great Gatsby* as part of the Big Read. Photo by Pat Deshinsky.

ner with local military installations for the Big Read, an activity that’s supported by The Boeing Company.) According to Straight, the base was eager to be involved. “[The base librarian] did a variety of things such as screening silent movies and holding book discussions. She had a tea party for the children with some of the stories from the 1920s and really [presented] a wide variety of programming, reaching out to the military base and dependents.” The military community also was invited to join in Big Read events hosted by the county.

Straight said that the libraries now plan to collaborate on future events, including another community read. “We have made people more aware of the library, the kinds of services that we offer, and hopefully, more willing to seek us out and take advantage of us. . . . One reading group has told me that they’ve already penciled us in for next year; whatever we do, they’ll take part in it.”

To Read a Mockingbird

Native-American Tribe Hosts Big Read in Michigan

A federally recognized tribal entity, the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians (LTBB) has more than 4,000 members, many of whom live in Charlevoix and Emmet Counties in the northwestern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. According to LTBB Education Director Melissa Claramunt, the Tribe wanted to host a Big Read of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a vehicle for expanding its existing literacy efforts and building partnerships with local non-tribal organizations. "The Big Read project actually encompasses a large part of the greater Northern Michigan community, including seven public libraries, the schools within the Charlevoix-Emmett Intermediate School District, local bookstores, area churches, and many social service organizations and agencies. The primary motivation in pursuing this grant was the opportunity to develop collaborative partnerships between the Tribe and local community organizations."

In light of the novel's themes, the LTBB and Greater Community Big Read featured a roster of community-building and intergenerational events, including read-alouds, storytelling, and a tour of the tribal government's headquarters. "It is important that the greater community increase their understanding of the resources and educational opportunities that are available from the Tribal community," explained Claramunt.

Partners such as the Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra were eager to get involved in the Tribe's Big Read. The orchestra commissioned a song cycle for mezzo soprano and chamber orchestra by composer James Grant based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, entitled *Scout*. The piece was narrated at its premiere in mid-June by Mary Badham, who portrayed Scout in the 1962 film adaptation of the novel.

Like many Big Read communities, LTBB used a portion of grant funds to purchase multiple copies of the



This photo was one of a series that were part of a Caught Reading promotional ad for the Big Read of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians of Michigan. Photo by Annette VanDeCar.

novel. "[We have] given away more than 1,500 paperbacks of *To Kill a Mockingbird* so far," reported Claramunt. "Because our community is rural and socio-economically diverse, the committee felt that it was essential to put the novel in the hands of our community members, therefore eliminating any obstacles that they might have in obtaining the book." Free copies of the novel were available at local schools, churches, libraries, and arts and culture centers. Claramunt added, "This element of the project helped to extend the reach of our efforts even further, as extended family members, visitors to the area, and many others heard about the Big Read project and asked to get involved."

Claramunt stated that, overall, the community embraced the project wholeheartedly. "The Big Read has been quite successful. . . . The public libraries have done an amazing job reaching the residents, drawing in participants, and sharing the project's purpose. We have also been very fortunate to receive extensive media and photo coverage from the local newspapers. . . . What has been the most surprising is how many people knew about the program and knew about reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

“Sweepin’ Down the Plain”

Oklahoma Reads *The Grapes of Wrath* as Part of Centennial Celebration

In 2007 Oklahoma celebrates its centennial of statehood with a broad range of activities including an Oklahoma-themed music festival, the commissioning of sculptures and paintings honoring outstanding Oklahoma natives, and the inclusion of an Oklahoma float in the annual Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. For two Oklahoma cities—Norman and Stillwater—their Big Read celebration of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* are also official Centennial Projects. As Lynda Reynolds and Karen Neurohr, co-coordinators of Stillwater’s Big Read explained, “. . . the focus throughout the state is Oklahoma’s rich history. We saw the Big Read as a wonderful opportunity to examine the image of Oklahoma while reading a literary masterpiece.”

Anne Masters, Associate Director for System Services of the Pioneer Library System in Norman, added: “We also felt a certain sense of urgency because the Dust Bowl generation is aging, and many of their memories are being lost. The Big Read discussions allowed a forum in which personal and family histories concerning the Depression Era in Oklahoma could be shared.”

Each community involved readers and nonreaders alike with an extensive schedule of book discussions, memoir workshops, a discussion of Oklahoma music and its significance in the novel, and training sessions for reading ambassadors and book discussion leaders. According to the Stillwater coordinators, “All together there were several thousand people who participated by attending a program or book discussion or who learned about the Big Read from a speaking engagement to their group.”

Masters said that Norman experienced the same kind of enthusiasm. “At the kick-off event, participants signed in from 20 different zip codes; Norman has only five zip codes within its city limits. Our two

high school presentations alone brought more than 1,000 young people to the Big Read.”

Each community plans to host future community-wide reads, and in Stillwater, organizers will present their Big Read experience to the state’s librarians and educators at several conferences this fall. According to Reynolds and Neurohr, “The experience of participating in the Big Read and bringing it to our community as one of only two communities in the state to receive the grant continues to be very rewarding. It took many people to make it all work, and it was definitely worth the effort.”

Collectively, the Oklahoma Big Reads involved 65 arts and culture, church, civic, hospitality, media, school, and science organizations. “Perhaps the aspect that will have the most long-term effects will be the partnerships formed through this process. Norman is no stranger to the one town, one book idea, but the Big Read took the concept to a new level of quality, excitement, and participation,” said Masters.

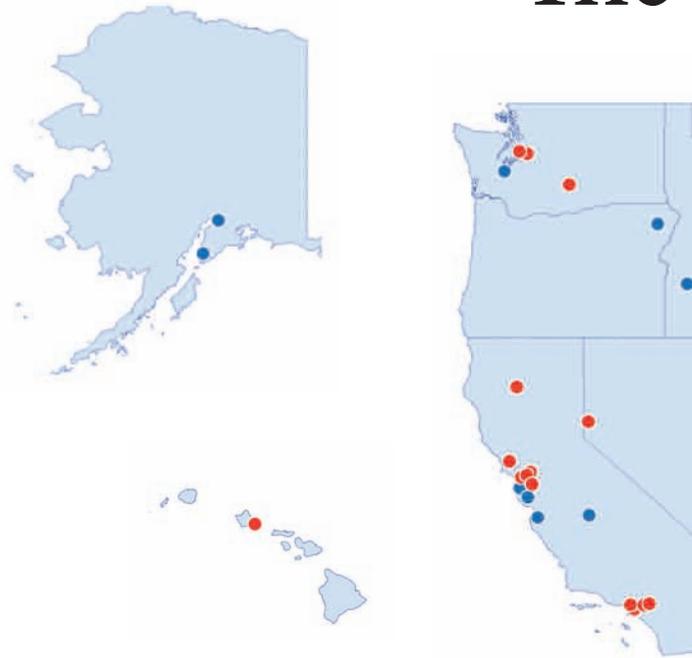


(left to right) Alex Hartley as Tom Joad, Kelley Chancellor as Pa Joad, and Randy Hemphill as Jim Casey perform in *Trucking with the Joads* for 600 juniors and community guests at Norman High School as part of Norman, Oklahoma’s Big Read. Photo by Gary Kramer.

New Cities Join The Big Read

Second Group of 2007 Communities Awarded

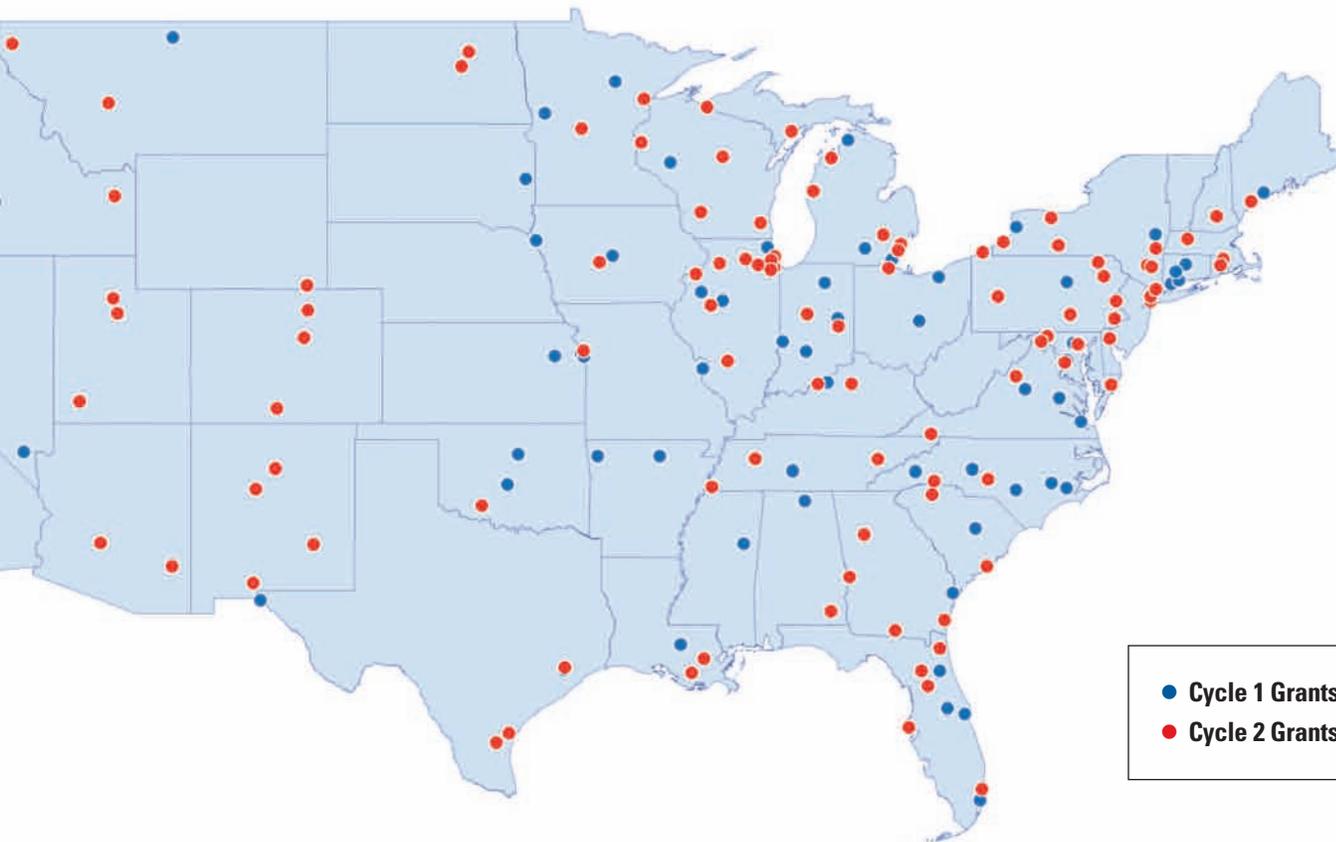
In 2006, the NEA launched the pilot phase of the Big Read with only ten communities. By the end of 2007, nearly 200 communities will have participated in the national program. From January–June, 72 communities hosted Big Read celebrations from Enterprise, Oregon, to El Paso, Texas, to the nation's capital. Joining that group are 117 communities (listed below) that will host Big Reads from September–December 2007. For more information on these new communities, the books they're celebrating, and their calendar of events, please visit www.neabigread.org.



The

Ozark-Dale County Public Library Ozark, AL	Jacksonville Public Library Jacksonville, FL	Rend Lake College Ina, IL	Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians Suttons Bay, MI
Safford City-Graham County Library Safford, AZ	Marion County Public Library System Ocala, FL	Spoon River College Canton, IL	Cromaine District Library Hartland, MI
West Valley Arts Council Avondale, AZ	Pinellas Public Library Cooperative, Inc. Clearwater, FL	Frankfort Community Public Library Frankfort, IN	Detroit Public Library Detroit, MI
Shasta Public Libraries Redding, CA	Florida Center for the Book / Broward Public Library Foundation Fort Lauderdale, FL	New Castle-Henry County Public Library New Castle, IN	Wayne-Metropolitan Community Action Agency Wyandotte, MI
Rural California Broadcasting Corporation / KRCB Rohnert Park, CA	Golden Isles Arts and Humanities Association Brunswick, GA	Harrison County Public Library Corydon, IN	Carlton County Historical Society Cloquet, MN
Los Medanos College Pittsburg, CA	Valdosta State University, Odum Library Valdosta, GA	Hometown Perry, Iowa Perry, IA	Park University Parkville, MO
Berkeley Public Library Berkeley, CA	Muscogee County Friends of Libraries Columbus, GA	Kentucky State University Frankfort, KY	Lewis & Clark Library Helena, MT
Contra Costa County Library Pleasant Hill, CA	Hawai'i Capital Cultural District Honolulu, HI	Houma Regional Arts Council Houma, LA	Lincoln County Public Libraries Libby, MT
Pleasanton Public Library Pleasanton, CA	Madison Library District Rexburg, ID	Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance Portland, ME	Friends of Washoe County Library Reno, NV
Rancho Cucamonga Public Library Services Rancho Cucamonga, CA	Beverly Arts Center Chicago, IL	Worcester County Library Snow Hill, MD	Center for the Book at the New Hampshire State Library Concord, NH
Will & Company Los Angeles, CA	Center for Asian Arts and Media at Columbia College Chicago Chicago, IL	Towson University Towson, MD	Northeast Cultural Coop Amherst, NH
County of Los Angeles Public Library Downey, CA	Oak Park Public Library Oak Park, IL	Harbel Community Foundation Baltimore, MD	United Way of Salem County Salem, NJ
Cal Poly Pomona Foundation Pomona, CA	Orland Park Public Library Orland Park, IL	Community Foundation of Washington County MD, Inc. Hagerstown, MD	Caldwell Public Library Caldwell, NJ
Adams State College Alamosa, CO	Aurora Public Library Aurora, IL	Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association Deerfield, MA	Bernalillo County Albuquerque, NM
Weld Library District Greeley, CO	DeKalb Public Library DeKalb, IL	Attleboro Public Library Attleboro, MA	High Plains Writing Project Roswell, NM
Arapahoe Library Friends Foundation, Inc. Englewood, CO	Quad City Arts Rock Island, IL	Escanaba Public Library Escanaba, MI	The Regents of New Mexico State University Las Cruces, NM
Alachua County Library District Gainesville, FL	Sterling Public Library Sterling, IL	Ironwood Carnegie Library Ironwood, MI	
		West Shore Community College Scottville, MI	

Big Read, 2007 Grants



● Cycle 1 Grants
● Cycle 2 Grants

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum
Santa Fe, NM

Brooklyn Public Library
Brooklyn, NY

Columbia University in the City of
New York
New York, NY

Westchester Arts Council
White Plains, NY

Hudson Area Association Library
Hudson, NY

Poughkeepsie Public Library District
Poughkeepsie, NY

Research Foundation of SUNY on behalf
of SUNY New Paltz
New Paltz, NY

Research Foundation for and on behalf
of SUNY Fredonia
Fredonia, NY

Writers & Books
Rochester, NY

Dormann Library
Bath, NY

Montgomery Community College
Troy, NC

Rutherford County Arts Council
Forest City, NC

Shakespeare Club-Lake Region Library
Devils Lake, ND

Dakota Prairie Regional Center
for the Arts
New Rockford, ND

Toledo-Lucas County Public Library
Toledo, OH

Lawton Public Library
Lawton, OK

The Arts Council of Erie
Erie, PA

Susquehanna County Literacy Program
Montrose, PA

Scranton Public Library
Scranton, PA

Kittanning Public Library
Kittanning, PA

Montgomery County Community College
Foundation
Blue Bell, PA

Easton Area Public Library
Easton, PA

Jump Street
Harrisburg, PA

Museo de Arte de Ponce
Ponce, PR

RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Warwick, RI

Charleston County Public Library
Charleston, SC

Spartanburg County Public Libraries
Spartanburg, SC

YWCA Knoxville
Knoxville, TN

The Dixie Carter Performing Arts Center
Huntingdon, TN

Rhodes College
Memphis, TN

Houston Library Board
Houston, TX

Friends of Corpus Christi Public Libraries
Corpus Christi, TX

Texas A & M University Kingsville
Kingsville, TX

Utah Arts Council
Salt Lake City, UT

Cedar City Public Library
Cedar City, UT

Orem Public Library
Orem, UT

Vermont Arts Council
Montpelier, VT

Rockingham Library Assoc.
(dba Massanutten Regional Library)
Harrisonburg, VA

Arlington Cultural Affairs Division
Arlington, VA

Barter Foundation, Inc. (dba Barter
Theatre)
Abingdon, VA

Yakima Valley Libraries
Yakima, WA

Pat Graney Performance
Seattle, WA

King County Library System Foundation
Issaquah, WA

Martinsburg-Berkeley County Public
Libraries
Martinsburg, WV

University of Wisconsin-Richland Library
Richland Center, WI

Waukesha Public Library
Waukesha, WI

Marathon County Public Library
Wausau, WI

St. Croix Falls Public Library / Festival
Theatre
St. Croix Falls, WI

The Wyoming Center for the Book, Inc.
Cheyenne, WY

Reading Big in the Last Frontier

Alaska Takes On Two Big Reads Throughout the State

Serving nearly half of Alaska’s population, Anchorage Municipal Libraries (AML) this spring celebrated Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. AML Director Karen Keller said the novel was appealing because it examines contemporary issues, such as censorship, and because, as science fiction, it’s a draw for those wary of “literary fiction.” Keller added that the novel also resonates with the strong oral history traditions of the state’s Alaska Native and Asian immigrant populations.

Having previously hosted successful community reads, AML used the Big Read grant to broaden its reach. “Even though we’re the largest city in the state, and [if we had] just done it here, we could’ve said, ‘Well, we covered half the state just by staying within the city,’ we didn’t stop there. We went to the state capital [Juneau], we went to the northernmost city in the United States [Barrow], and we went nearly everywhere in between.”

Keller credits the program’s success to its many local partners, such as the transportation system, which contributed \$5,000 in free bus ads due to the high quality of the NEA-produced publicity materials. “It wasn’t just about the Anchorage Municipal Libraries trying to pull this off. We had great support,” said Keller.



Residents of Seward, Alaska, play Mah Jong at the Seward Public Library’s Joy Luck Club Party as part of the Big Read on the Kenai Peninsula. Photo courtesy of Alaska Newspapers.



Anchorage Municipal Libraries kicked off its Big Read project with a media conference and the unveiling of Big Read bus signs. Photo by Toni Massari McPherson.

Unlike Bradbury’s firefighters, the Anchorage Fire Department supported the program by providing technical assistance for a teleconference with Ray Bradbury—a program highlight that attracted 160 participants. The teleconference itself was a partnership between AML and the Montalvo Arts Center, which arranged the teleconference with Bradbury as part of Montalvo’s Big Read of *Fahrenheit 451* in Saratoga, California.

South of Anchorage, communities on the Kenai Peninsula celebrated a Big Read of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* led by the Kachemak Bay Campus-Kenai Peninsula College in Homer. Campus Director Carol Swarz said that the novel resonated as an opportunity to discuss “the role of immigration in Homer and this part of Alaska—immigration from other parts of Alaska and from the lower 48, in addition to cultural immigration.”

Non-traditional students—including ESL students in the adult basic education program and high schoolers who are either homeschooled or attend the alternative high school for at-risk students—were specifically targeted by Homer’s Big Read to get the students excited about reading. Organizers also collaborated with the Kachemak Bay Writer’s Conference to bring Amy Tan to Alaska for a public reading during the Big Read.

Life Is Larger Than We Think

NEA Chairman Dana Gioia Interviews Amy Tan

*In 1989 a young business writer named Amy Tan published her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, to international acclaim. Although the author thought this largely autobiographical work might be received as “weird stories about a weird family,” the richly textured book quickly became a bestseller. In the succeeding years it has never lacked for readers. She has since written five other highly acclaimed novels including her most recent work, *Saving Fish From Drowning* (2005).*

*As one of the initial selections in the Big Read, *The Joy Luck Club*—a novel composed of interlocking short stories that portray the assimilation of Chinese families into America and the tragedies they left behind in the troubled landscape of World War II and Communist China—is being read and discussed across the country.*

*A classic of Asian-American literature, *The Joy Luck Club* reminds us of our nation’s rich ethnic diversity. As an arresting contemporary novel, it also reminds us that we often define ourselves as individuals and communities through story.*

On August 7, 2006, I had the pleasure of interviewing Amy Tan at her home in Marin County, California, about her childhood, writing career, and the role of stories in Chinese and American culture.

— Dana Gioia

DANA GIOIA: You were born in Oakland in a family where both parents had come from China. Were you raised bilingually?

AMY TAN: Until the age of five, my parents spoke to me in Chinese or a combination of Chinese and English, but they didn’t force me to speak Mandarin. In retrospect, this was sad, because they believed that my chance of doing well in America hinged on my fluency in English. Later, as an adult, I wanted to learn Chinese. Now I make an effort when I am with my sisters, who don’t speak English well. It’s such a wonderful part of me that is coming back, to try and speak that language.



Author Amy Tan. Photo by Robert Foothrap.

GIOIA: What books do you remember reading early in your childhood?

TAN: I read every fairy tale I could lay my hands on at the public library. It was a wonderful world to escape to. I say “escape” deliberately, because I look back and I feel that my childhood was filled with a lot of tensions in the house, and I was able to go to another place. These stories were also filled with their own kinds of dangers and tensions, but they weren’t mine. And they were usually solved in the end. This was something satisfying. You could go through these things and then suddenly, you would have some kind of ending. Even if it was magical, you had a resolution. I think that every lonely kid loves to escape through stories. And what kids never thought

that they were lonely at some point in their life?

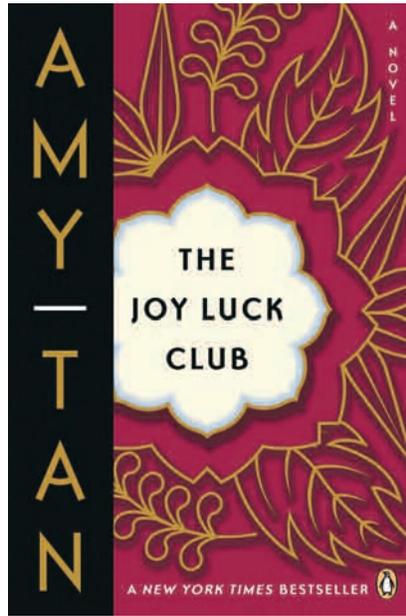
GIOIA: Would you explain the special symbolism of your title, *The Joy Luck Club*?

TAN: I don't think joy and luck are specific to Chinese culture. Everybody wants joy and luck, and we all have our different notions about where that luck comes from. Look at the lottery. You have millions of people who believe in luck. Luck is in every part of China. Many Chinese stores and restaurants have the word "luck" in their names. The idea is that, just by using the word "luck" in names of things, you can attract more of it. I think that's true in my life, as well. You attract luck because you go after it. I also think our beliefs in luck are related to hope. Some people who are without almost any hope in a situation still cling to luck.

GIOIA: Your mother—to put it mildly—did not approve of your ambition to be a writer. Would you talk about this?

TAN: My mother and father were immigrants and they were practical people. They wanted us to do well in the new country. They didn't want us to be starving artists. Going into the arts was considered a luxury—that was something you did if you were born to wealth. When my mother found out that I had switched from pre-med to English literature, she imagined that I would lead this life of poverty, that this was a dream that couldn't possibly lead to anything. I didn't know what it would lead to. It just occurred to me I could finally make a choice when I was in college. I didn't have to follow what my parents had set out for me from the age of six—to become a doctor.

GIOIA: *The Joy Luck Club* is a book of enormous literary historical importance in American literature, because it brought the complex history of immigration between China and the United States into the mainstream of American literature. Writing this book, did you have any sense that you were opening up a whole new territory?



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TAN: No, I had no idea this was going to be anything but weird stories about a weird family that was unique to us. To think that they would apply to other people who would find similarities to their own families or conflicts was beyond my imagination, and I have a very good imagination.

I wanted to write this book for very personal reasons. One of them, of course, was to learn the craft of writing. I always loved to write stories, and I loved to read more than anything, before I was writing. The other reason was to understand myself, to figure out who I was. A lot of writers use writing as a way of finding their own personal meaning. They want to represent what

they feel about the world. I wrote out of total chaos and personal history, which did not seem like something that would ever be used by other people as a way of understanding their lives.

GIOIA: Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

TAN: I have many reasons why I think reading is really important. It provided for me a refuge, especially during difficult times. It provided me with the notion that I could find an ending that was different from what was happening to me at the time. And when I look at reading now, I think it's also that with imagination; that is the closest thing that we have to compassion and empathy. When you read about the lives of other people, people of different circumstances or similar circumstances, you are part of their lives for that moment. You inhabit their lives and you feel what they're feeling and that is compassion. If we see that reading does allow us that, we see how absolutely essential reading is. That compassion is not anything we are going to learn through psychology, or sociology or cultural courses. And it's so vital, especially today when we have so much misunderstanding across cultures and even within our own communities.

A full-length version of this interview first appeared in the May/June 2007 issue of *The American Interest*.

Building a Community of Readers

An Interview with Librarian and Author Nancy Pearl

In 1998, NEA Big Read Readers Circle member Nancy Pearl—then a librarian at Seattle Public Library—spearheaded the city’s first communitywide reading program, one of the first in the country. Nearly a decade later, that program is still going strong, and is one of the models the NEA used to create the Big Read. In this interview, Pearl shares the genesis of Seattle’s program and affirms why it’s so important for Americans to read. (Read the full interview on the NEA Web site: www.arts.gov/features/index.htm.)

NEA: How did you develop “If All Seattle Read the Same Book?”

NANCY PEARL: It really arose because we got a grant from the [Wallace Foundation] to develop audiences for literary programs. I think that one of the roles of libraries is to broaden and deepen a person’s experience with the work of literature, which is what I think that a program like “If All Seattle Read the Same Book” does. My main criterion always for picking a book when I was there was, Does it make for a good discussion?

NEA: Why was it important that the program focus on everyone reading the same book?

PEARL: It was important to me that we all read the same book because I think that we live in a world that is so fractious and divided that it’s very easy to spend a day or more never talking to anybody, perhaps, outside your family about anything besides “Pass the milk.” I wanted to bring people together. The beauty of the library is that once you walk in the door, everybody is equal; the riches of the library are available to everybody. I wanted to build a community of readers, in that sense.

NEA: What’s the harm if people stop reading?

PEARL: I think reading a book is one of the few ways that we can enter the world of another person. All those statistics in *Reading At Risk*, which showed that readers were more generous in their charity giving and did more



NEA Big Read Readers Circle member Nancy Pearl. Photo by Marco Prozzo.

for the community, I think that’s directly due to the fact that when you read a book, you are literally leaving your own life and entering a different world. I always like to say in my talks that, in this world, we’re given one life to live. But through books and reading, we can have any number of lives, and we can go anywhere, and we can do anything. And we can be anyone. That getting out of ourselves is such an important aspect of what reading does for us. And it’s so valuable.

Passionate About Reading in Kansas

Marie Pyko Talks About the Big Read in Topeka

When Marie Pyko, public services director of the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, was earning her master's degree in library science, she didn't study public speaking, politics, or Internet technology—yet in the name of the Big Read, Pyko has tackled all these challenges. In 2006, during the Big Read pilot phase, Topeka celebrated Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This spring the community read Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. The NEA spoke with Pyko just as Topeka launched its 2007 Big Read.

NEA: What are you doing to kick off the Big Read of *Fahrenheit 451* in Topeka?

MARIE PYKO: We are hosting a Big Read Read-In, and we have invited people from all the Topeka/ Shawnee County area. Especially firefighters. The firefighters are going to talk about what they do and read from their favorite books. We've also invited some National Guardsmen to do a demonstration.

NEA: It sounds as though you've tried to create an event that appeals to a range of ages.

PYKO: The reading of this book can be a family event. Maybe your seven-year-old can't actually read the book, but they can understand who the good guys are in the real world.

NEA: Is there anything that you're deliberately doing differently, from last year, because you wanted to make a change?

PYKO: We've lined up an exclusive relationship with our local CBS station. This year, WIBW is a full-fledged partner. Their general manager made [*Fahrenheit 451*] required reading for everyone at the station. [The anchors] have been encouraged to banter about the book all month long. It's very cool. We're going to be on TV a lot. They're even doing the weather at the library.

We've also partnered with our public radio station. They're going to tape our interview with Ray Bradbury and broadcast it several times.

The other thing we did was reach out to other, smaller libraries. We had such a successful program last year that we were very interested in encouraging other libraries to get involved.



Firefighters participated in the Big Read Read-In in Topeka, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

NEA: You testified before Congress in March, Laura Bush mentions you when she speaks about the Big Read, and the *New York Times* article featuring quotes from you has been printed across the country. Do you feel like a spokesperson for librarians everywhere?

PYKO: I feel really honored, because I'm able to have some national recognition and really raise exposure of what librarians do. I represent Shawnee County. I can't be a spokesperson for librarians, but I really feel like I have the ability to be a spokesperson for my passion, and that's reading. When you really feel passionate about something, it's not hard to be an advocate.

In the News

NEA Celebrates *Muse of Fire* Premiere

U.S. Representative Todd Tiahrt (Kansas-4th District) introduced the premiere of *Muse of Fire* at the National Archives. Photo by Michael G. Stewart.

There were no spotlights, limousines, or glamorous dresses when the documentary *Muse of Fire* premiered March 14 at the National Archives. Instead there were U.S. servicemen and women—some still in uniform, some now retired—all of them the evening’s heroes. Lawrence Bridges’s poignant film captures readings and testimonies from more than a dozen members of the Armed Services whose

work was published in the NEA anthology, *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*.

U.S. Representative Todd Tiahrt (Kansas-4th District) introduced the screening. “War is not what we might see on a Hollywood set,” Tiahrt said. “These are real men and women, heroes but not superheroes. . . . In sharing their stories, they give us a glimpse of how the human soul reacts to the atrocities of war.” He was joined by Mary Foerster, The Boeing Company’s vice president for business support, communications, and community affairs, who voiced her company’s ongoing support for the NEA’s work with military families.

U.S. Representatives Joseph Knollenberg (Michigan-9th District) and Tom Tancredo (Colorado-6th District) also attended the screening.

Both the *Operation Homecoming* anthology, published by Random House, and the documentary feature excerpts from more than 1,200 entries submitted by returning soldiers and their families on the home front. Poet Marilyn Nelson, novelist Jeff Shaara, and other writers who served as mentors at the Operation Homecoming workshops also appear in the film.

NEA Chairman Dana Gioia, Shaara, anthology editor Andrew Carroll, and anthology contributor Army Captain Ryan Kelly took the stage for a question-and-answer session after the screening.

Muse of Fire will be screened on military bases and at select film festivals. Copies of the documentary also will be donated to nearly 500 military base libraries, schools, and education centers.

Longfellow Gets His Own Stamp

The NEA and U.S. Postal Service (USPS) threw a joint 200th birthday party for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on March 15. The poet’s present? A first-class commemorative stamp.

Chairman Gioia and officials from the USPS unveiled the stamp during the Spring Postage Stamp Mega Event, an annual philatelic convention held at New York City’s Madison Square Garden. Special guests Teika Monai Chapman and Vinh Hua, the 2006 Poetry Out Loud champions from New Jersey and Massachusetts, respectively, each recited a poem by Longfellow.

Although he wrote more than 400 poems, Longfellow may be most famous for his classic American narrative “Paul Revere’s Ride.” Artist Kazuhiko Sano depicted the patriot and his horse on the background of the stamp, with a portrait of the poet front and center.



NEA Chairman Dana Gioia and Katherine C. Tobin, member of the USPS Board of Governors, unveil the new U.S. postage stamp in honor of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Photo courtesy of U.S. Postal Service.

Sometimes Bigger is Better

The Big Read Expands in 2008



The Big Read's getting even bigger! With nearly 200 communities hosting Big Read programs in 2007, the NEA and its Big Read partners plan to double that number in 2008. The Big Read library is also expanding to 21 titles with the addition of nine novels that reach back into the 19th century and forward into the 21st.

Four new titles will be available in spring 2008: *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London, *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick, and for a cross-cultural Big Read, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy. Five additional titles will be added in fall 2008: *Washington Square* by Henry James, *The Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin, *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, and *Old School* by Tobias Wolff.

The Big Read goes international with Big Read Russia—U.S. communities

applying for a 2008 grant will have the opportunity to participate in a cross-cultural Big Read by celebrating Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The NEA and the U.S. Embassy in Russia plan to coordinate cultural exchange activities as part of Big Read Russia, including visits by Russian writers, scholars, and cultural specialists to participating Big Read communities.

The Russian regions of Saratov and Ivanovo also will host Big Read programs to celebrate Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Through a partnership with the Open World Leadership Center and CEC Arts Link, representatives from the two regions visited the NEA in April for a day-long training session on organizing a Big Read. Hosted by NEA Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason, the training spotlighted issues such as setting a timeline, building suc-

NEA Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason (second from right) leads a training session on the Big Read for visiting Russian representatives. Photo by Chloey Accardi.

cessful partnerships, and designing appealing events. The Russian delegation then traveled to Asheville, North Carolina, and Huntsville, Alabama, to observe two Big Read programs in progress and visit local historic literary sites, including the Carl Sandburg Home and the Thomas Wolfe Memorial.

The NEA is also welcoming a new Big Read partner: The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. The Pacific Northwest-based foundation will partially support program activities for communities in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington as well as support the development of the resource materials for *The Call of the Wild*.



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