

THE BIG READ

CASE STUDIES

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THE BIG READ CASE STUDIES

OVERVIEW

The Big Read evaluation included a series of 35 case studies designed to gather more in-depth information on the program’s implementation and impact. In Phase 1, Cycle 1, Rockman conducted 14 case studies, visiting 10 sites and interviewing grantees in four other sites by phone. Two of the sites we visited served as pilots, where we tested participant surveys and interview protocols while awaiting for approval from the Office of Management and Budget. In Phase 1, Cycle 2, we conducted nine additional case studies, five in person and four via phone. In both cycles, we made follow-up calls, to 12 sites overall, to talk with grantees about changes and related activities since their Big Reads. Some grantees were in the process of applying for second Big Read grants, and explained their choice of books, plans, and partners for the new effort.

During the first cycle of Phase 2, Rockman conducted 12 cases studies, visiting eight sites and interviewing four by phone. While we continued to talk to grantees about the basic components of a Big Read implementation—partnerships, promotion, programming—and the program’s impact on the community, these case studies also focused on Big Read participation and reading habits among teenagers and young adults. In addition to conducting interviews and focus groups with teens and young adults (N=388), we also asked them to complete a checklist on reading habits and preferences. Where possible, we also interviewed teachers, administrators, and librarians. One case study conducted by phone included a conversation with four students and their teachers. Two to three months following our visits, we conducted follow-up phone interviews with four grantees.

The case studies gave us a valuable first-hand look at The Big Read in context. Both formal and informal interviews, focus groups, attendance at a wide range of events—all showed us how participating communities and partners host a Big Read, and what impact it has on partnering institutions, the broader community, and reading habits. A rich complement to the quantitative data, these cases allowed us to explore or confirm trends emerging in the general data collection,

document memorable events or outcomes that define the unique, local character of Big Read implementations, and amplify elements of The Big Read that merited note or replication.

The full Big Read report includes vignettes from case studies and further information on sites, sampling procedures, and research methods. A separate section reports our findings from the Phase 2 cases about reading habits and Big Read participation among teens and young adults. (See *A Book Club for a Nation, Final Report*, pp. 112-27, for a discussion of participation by teens and young adults, and pp.160-63 for a description of case study samples and methods.) The following table lists all case study sites. Interview and focus group protocols appear in the Appendix.

The Big Read Case Studies P1C1, P1C2, and P2C1

	Site	Book	Pop. Size	Geog. Region	✓ = sites visited; ☎ = interviewed by phone
Phase 1, Cycle 1	Harris Co. Libraries, Houston, TX	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	L	S	✓
	City of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	L	NE	✓
	Timberland Regional Library, Tumwater, WA	<i>My Ántonia</i>	M	NW	✓
	Cumberland Co. Library, Fayetteville, NC	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	M	SE	✓
	National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, CA	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	M	W	✓
	The Cabin, Boise, ID	<i>A Farewell to Arms</i>	M	W	✓
	Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	M	NE	✓
	Montalvo Arts Center, Redwood City, CA	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	M	W	✓
	Vigo Co. Library, Terre Haute, IN (pilot)	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	M	M	✓
	Bloomington Area Arts Council, Bloomington, IN (pilot)	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	M	M	✓
	Washington Univ., St. Louis, MO	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	L	M	☎
	Newport News Public Library System, Newport News, VA	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	M	S	☎
	Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, Harbor Springs, MI	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	M	M	☎
	Peoria Public Library, Peoria, IL	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	M	M	☎
Phase 1, Cycle 2	Caldwell Public Library, Caldwell, NJ	<i>The Age of Innocence</i>	M	NE	✓
	Spoon River College, Canton, IL	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	S	M	✓
	Hometown Perry Iowa, Perry, IA	<i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>	S	M	✓
	Berkeley Public Library, Berkeley, CA	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	M	W	✓
	Will & Company, Los Angeles, CA	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	L	W	✓
	Writers & Books, Rochester, NY	<i>The Maltese Falcon</i>	L	NE	☎
	Research Foundation of SUNY, New Paltz, NY	<i>Bless Me, Ultima</i>	M	NE	☎
	Ironwood Carnegie Library, Ironwood, MI	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	S	M	☎
	Pinellas, Clearwater, FL	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	M	S	☎
Phase 2, Cycle 1	County of Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles, CA	<i>Bless Me, Ultima</i>	L	W	✓
	Aspen Writers' Foundation, Aspen, CO	<i>Bless Me, Ultima</i>	M	W	✓
	National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, CA	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	M	W	✓
	Cumberland Co., Public Library, Fayetteville, NC	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	M	SE	✓
	Together We Read, Asheville, NC	<i>My Ántonia</i>	L	SE	✓
	Hartford Public Library, Hartford, CT	<i>The Maltese Falcon</i>	L	NE	✓
	Performing Arts Society of Acadiana, Inc., Lafayette, LA	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	M	S	✓
	Muncie Public Library, Muncie, IN	<i>The Death of Ivan Ilych</i>	M	M	✓
	Waukeel Public Library, Waukeel, IA	<i>The Shawl</i>	S	M	Phone interview/ 4 students & teacher
	Peninsula Players Theatre Foundation, Fish Creek, WI	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	S	M	☎
	UMass Memorial Health Care, Worcester, MA	<i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>	M	NE	☎
Libraries of Eastern Oregon, Fossil, OR	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	M	NW	☎	

Small (S) = <25,000; Medium (M) = 25,000-99,000; Large (L) = 99,000+

TRENDS AND THEMES

1. Early Big Read promotion, where it was possible, paid off in numerous ways. It created a buzz about the program; brought partners up to speed; won the support of additional business or government groups, many of whom subsequently became involved in promotion and programming; and drew interest and contributions from community members, such as graphic artists, who offered services pro bono. This added to the base of support and created momentum that could be leveraged once events got underway. Pre-programming information and promotion also allowed community members to read the book ahead of time—especially important for a longer book or an initially challenging read like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—and allowed free books and read-and-release copies to circulate. Advance notice also allowed some schools and book clubs that choose books in advance to incorporate the Big Read book into planned activities.
2. In addition to museums, municipal offices, schools and universities, Big Read partnerships included new, somewhat non-traditional partners—public transportation, restaurants, churches—that made important contributions to promotion and programming. In Houston and Bridgeport, buses advertised Big Read events, as did restaurants and coffee shops, with free books, tie-in menu items, and placemats. In Waterbury, a church chamber choir led a program of music of the 1930s, along with dance and oration; in Baton Rouge, churches donated free advertising on portable billboards. In Canton, Illinois ministers in four churches delivered sermons about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In one, a smaller version of that town’s 7-foot tall *To Kill a Mockingbird* replica stayed on the communion table throughout The Big Read.
3. Newspaper partners not only sponsored and promoted events, but also explored declines in reading, *Reading at Risk*, and other Big Read-related issues (Terre Haute, Timberland), as well as topics about authors, e.g., “Why We Should Read Hemingway” (Boise). In Cumberland Co., NC, a weekly column entitled “At the Library” covered Big Read events; the column was popular—and still continues. These raised awareness about the program and the importance of reading, and kept the community conversation going after The Big Read.
4. Linking Big Read events to existing annual events, ending with celebrations, and bracketing the month-long program with festive kick-offs and finales drew crowds and built continuity and sustainability. Combining their Big Read with their annual international festival (IFEST) worked well for Houston/Harris Co., TX; final events such as the Steinbeck Center’s cross-generational celebration and The Cabin’s “gelato on the lawn” gave programs a festive, successful feel. Cumberland Co. had a natural audience by concluding their program and handing out awards for art and essay contests at the well-attended Dogwood Festival; a library Summer Reading program that came right on the heels of The Big Read linked the two.

5. Schools are a natural and frequent Big Read partner, with a ready audience, but several grantees found partnering with schools challenging. In some cases schools initially expressed interest, and often The Big Read title was on school curriculum or optional reading lists. The major issue is timing—and giving schools plenty of lead time—and, somewhat less so, finding the right contact and maintaining communication. For future Big Reads, grantees will start earlier, contact superintendents and librarians as well as teachers, and invite teachers and school personnel to join planning or steering committees. Among the factors that led to successful partnerships were: long-standing relationships with schools (Mattatuck), latitude for schools to engage students in different ways (Bridgeport), teacher briefing/training sessions and class sets of books (Cumberland Co.), and coordinators and event leaders (e.g., seniors who read with students in alternative schools) who are former teachers.
6. Free books were hugely successful, for readers of all ages and stripes, and giving them to youths who may never have received a free book of their own was gratifying for librarians and sponsors. Adults and seniors were as pleased as children to get reading kits; college students were glad to have a book “to add to their collection.” In Harris Co., TX, Chinese and Spanish translations of *The Joy Luck Club* were all enthusiastically—and quickly—claimed at the kick-off. In addition to sowing seeds of a lifelong interest in reading, the free distribution of paperbacks, Reader’s Guides, and Audio Guides built good will for sponsoring organizations and the program, which continued to spread as grantees donated books that had been in circulation to schools, literacy centers, hospitals and hospices, and troops overseas. Libraries documented increased circulation of alternative formats of the *Big Read* book—audio CDs, DVDs, eAudio books—during The Big Read as well.
7. Along with the books, The Big Read gave community members access to free, high-quality arts and literary events. Free admission to art galleries, museum exhibits, concerts, and theatre performances generated interest and audiences. Some institutions (Bridgeport’s Barnum Museum) distributed free passes at Big Read events for attendees to return. Bookstores also offered coupons as prizes. For some venues (e.g., Hollywood’s Arclight Cinema, which offered free film screenings for the first time), this was unprecedented.
8. Although communities had some very successful events at libraries, museums, and literary centers, many found that taking events out into the community also proved successful. Places where people gather (though not necessarily to read or discuss books)—e.g. city markets, floral festivals, parks, the steps of city hall—were effective, if somewhat unconventional, sites for Big Read events. Serendipitous venues where participants struck up conversations—beauty salons, grocery stores, laundromats drug stores, city buses—gave Big Reads an “anytime, anywhere” feel, and in some cases led to new book clubs, like the group of parents in Canton, IL who began a book conversation at weekly high school basketball games.

9. Successful implementations often seemed due to the energy, creativity, and perseverance of a single devoted organizer. In some cases, the organizer seemed simply to have the right role and skill set—a library marketing and communications manager had the skills and contacts to conceive, stage, and promote events. In other cases, a single vision seemed to inspire a team and get a lot of work from everyone. Finally, having the right contacts, in partner organizations, venue sites, schools, made things work. Whoever performed or inspired the work, most grantees were surprised by the time and energy a Big Read required. In the future, even successful grantees said they would delegate more and/or use a train-the-trainer model. Some suggested getting “a strong team in place, then finding someone to manage the details.” Others will scale down events to a more manageable number, secure very specific expertise for various details—and find someone retired or otherwise freed up to run the project.
10. The combination of the national prestige and imprimatur of the NEA, a local identity and endorsement, and repeat, high-visibility advertising helped Big Reads attract audiences. Grantees used proclamations by the mayor, recognizable officials on posters and in radio promotion, county commissioners as kick-off speakers. Roadside and portable billboards were also effective, as were the ongoing ads in library program fliers, newspapers, radio spots, and “What page are you on?” buttons.
11. Using readings, actors, and impersonators, communities found that bringing authors to life was a successful promotional and programming strategy. In the case of *The Cabin* in Boise, ID, the Hemingway look alike drew people, and even his cardboard cut-out became an immediately recognizable part of various Big Read events. In Timberland, a Chautauqua presenter engaged Big Read audiences of all ages in conversation with Willa Cather.
12. Scholars and biographers were well-received, not just book-club or adult literary audiences but by participants of different backgrounds and ages. Again, they helped bring authors and books to life, and often “amped up the conversation” about titles and themes. Community members seemed pleased to be engaged in higher-level discussions of books; teachers said these experts and scholars gave them new ideas about how to teach the book and engage students. Students were often flattered to host a biographer (who often signed a book) at their school. Once engaged in a book, by this or another means, students listened with interest to some fairly sophisticated talks about writers and books (e.g., scholar who talked about Steinbeck at various points in Hollywood High’s presentation of scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*).
13. Displaying books and other resources about the theme or historical period of the book gave participants more to choose from and deepened their understanding of a text. When the Cumberland Co. library created bookmarks that said “If you liked *Their Eyes Were Watching God...*,” and listed other Harlem Renaissance authors and other recent African-American authors, patrons took them up on the offer: one patron systematically found and

checked out all the titles. The power of one book and the endorsement of the library seemed to convince readers to venture further. This site also created displays for children about The Harlem Renaissance.

14. Big Read communities merged literary and literacy efforts in a number of ways. They:
 - a. designed events for young and old to bridge generational divides. These were most effective when seniors and younger readers really interacted or worked together—e.g., with seniors leading discussion youth groups (and baking cookies), or acting out scenes with younger actors, rather than just being invited to the same event.
 - b. took The Big Read to jails, prisons, and residential centers for incarcerated juveniles. The most successful of these reading groups were organized by experienced discussion leaders—e.g., teachers who had previously taught in prison programs, and required that reading groups have GEDs, to facilitate reading and discussion.
 - c. involved audiences in non-traditional learning environments—education centers for English Language Learners, alternative schools for students with behavioral and academic problems—and in creative activities such as art contests, talks by engaging speakers, etc. More and more, grantees seem to be including local literacy councils in planning and programming.
15. Several children’s Big Read activities also effectively drew parents, and some sites took advantage of this by having free books and lists of upcoming events on hand. In Cumberland Co., NC, a series of “jazzy” art sessions at the museum drew good audiences; in Harris Co., TX, activities connected with a children’s companion book, Amy Tan’s, *Sagwa*, involved younger and older readers.
16. Various data point to the fact that The Big Read has great public value, bringing communities together to read, reaching out across economic divides, generations, and ethnicities, and in some cases “changing the conversation” about issues such as racism and gender roles. Even, in a few cases offering a tonic for sensitive topics. A very positive public response seems at once nostalgic, harkening back to some bygone populism, a sense of togetherness, “the best thing since the WPA,” but also forward-looking, with coffee-house readings, read-and-release distributions, poetry slams, downloadable books, and frank conversations about issues.
17. The Big Read increased the visibility of libraries, museums, and literary centers, showcasing resources and helping restore the role of the institutions in American culture as well as the literature itself. The program also seems to be redefining roles. Librarians say they’ve reframed or expanded outreach, including hospices, for example. Some have

planned in-services for area teachers to introduce them to resources and databases. More community members see libraries and other institutions not just as book or artifact repositories but also event centers. New partnerships and cross-promotion compound those positive changes.

18. Most all proposal authors explained that they chose their book because they thought its themes would resonate in their communities. What's striking is the variety in how communities explored these themes. Harper Lee biographer, Charles Shields, who has been to numerous towns reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, said, "I haven't seen any two communities offer the same menu of programs." The book worked as well for small-town Illinois as for a tribal community, for a small, southern town as for a northern urban area. Elders and children in Little Traverse Bay and ELL mothers in Bridgeport talked about the book's view on the moral education of children. Hispanic students in LA were as moved by Steinbeck's story of migrant families as seniors in Arkansas remembering the Dust Bowl. It goes without saying that this is why these books endure, but it's nice to see it played out over and over again.

PHASE 1, CYCLE 1

Harris County Public Library, Houston, Texas

The Joy Luck Club

Region: South	Number of K-12 Schools: 15
Total Days: 41	Number of Teachers: 150
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 148
Population: 1,300,000 (Large)	Number of Attendees: 18,179
Number of Partner Organizations: 14	Adults, 9,768; Children 8,411
Number of Libraries: 6	Number of Book Club Meetings: 59
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 461
Number of Volunteers: 300	Adults, 431; Children 30

Harris County Public Libraries, in Houston, Texas, kicked off The Big Read at Houston's popular International Festival, handing out hundreds of free copies of The Joy Luck Club. As part of the International Festival's city-wide, month-long celebration of China, The Big Read contributed a literary focus, engaging participants around the city in conversations about culture, gender, generational relationships, language, and immigration.

Background

The Harris County Big Read Kick-off was planned in conjunction with Houston's annual International Festival. This year's festival celebrated China, which informed Harris County's choice of the *Joy Luck Club* as their Big Read book. Kicking off The Big Read at an established event that attracted thousands of people and already included multiple events proved to be an effective programming strategy. The partnership between the library and the city's Asian Pacific American Heritage Association—their first—was a key to The Big Read's success. By bringing together their respective partners and contacts, a sizeable and diverse group of organizations and agencies were able to implement a wide range of events and reach a broad demographic.

Partnerships

In her early planning meetings with potential partners, the director of the Harris County Big Read said she spent a lot of time educating others about the national Big Read program. However, once informed, partners were hooked, and contributed in effective and sometimes surprising ways. For instance, Metro, the city's public transportation system, created buttons, Big Read fortune cookies, and bilingual pamphlets listing Big Read events with a transit map highlighting bus routes to those events. Another partner new to the library was the local PBS station. It was their idea to draw in young children and their parents through promoting *Sagwa*, the television series based on Amy Tan's children's book *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*. They provided materials and training to any elementary school librarians who were interested. Eager to participate more fully in The Big Read and the city's International Festival, many took them up on the offer.

The Big Read program director took an open and flexible approach to partnerships: “We’re really the conduit,” she said. “We received the grant to help them do the program.” Partners were given plenty of room to conceive of the program on their own terms. Building capacity was an unanticipated outcome for Harris County Public library; they felt they were able to demonstrate their value to other city organizations as an effective point of contact with the public, a place to hold community events, and a strategic partner in city initiatives.

Programming and Participation

Harris County Libraries is a 27-branch system that encompasses Houston; it is one of the largest urban counties in the U.S. As part of The Big Read, each library in the county was required to host one book discussion. One branch held a training session for book discussion leaders that was attended by 61 people. While the library anticipated drawing those new to book clubs, they found many existing book club participants came to be sure they were doing it “right,” and get ideas. The library was excited to make that connection to community books clubs, and center the library more in those events. However, the session successfully trained those who began book clubs as a result—including several librarians.

Branch libraries also hosted discussions of *Joy Luck Club* in Chinese and Spanish. The Chinese book discussion was held in a home and attracted participants who were not library patrons. Yet, many of those participants then came to the library’s next Big Read event. Another powerful instance of a new book club arising from The Big Read was at the South Houston Library branch, a busy neighborhood library that serves a predominantly Hispanic community. There, six Spanish-speaking Mexican-American women participated in their first book club, having been personally invited by the bilingual librarian when she gave each her free copy of the book and Reader’s Guide. The discussion began with the showing of the short wordless film, *Perfection*. The film spurred an animated discussion, with the women quickly making connections to the book and their personal experiences. Although not acquainted with one another before that evening, the women told stories, laughed, disagreed, and realized their shared experiences as women, mothers, and immigrants—even though there was a wide span in age. All expressed their appreciation to the librarian and their eagerness to take part in another meeting.

Sixty-two school districts were invited to participate in the program, but The Big Read program director received little response. She knew it would be difficult to “sell” in May. However, in one suburban Houston school district, students of all ages participated in The Big Read. At the high school an English teacher who taught *Joy Luck Club* in a Gifted and Talented 10th grade class created an assignment of her own around the book, which she called a “character autopsy.” The high school librarian reported several students had come to the library to request copies of the book. In elementary schools, the librarians were reading *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* by Amy Tan as part of The Big Read and the city’s focus on China.

Harris County also effectively engaged the community college system in The Big Read. Two of Montgomery College’s five campuses have public libraries. One campus hosted a Keynote discussion with a panel of international authors that drew a crowd of 200 people. The discussion

illustrated the universal and cross-generational themes of the book, as discussants identified the similar ways they responded to themes in the book, despite their diverse nationalities. Another campus held a tea ceremony and book discussion where an international student from China brought her Chinese tea set and demonstrated how to make and serve tea in the same way she had learned from her mother and grandmother. Events at the community college level were successfully attracting international students, non-traditional students, staff, and faculty. According to the Harris County Big Read director, adults in the Lifelong Learning program also responded well to Big Read events.

Promotion and Media

Harris County produced many of their own promotional materials—an event calendar, buttons, bookmarks, pamphlets, fans, fortune cookies—in addition to those provided by The Big Read. The PSAs were delivered to Time Warner and three television stations and was hosted on the grantee’s web site via YouTube. The program director heard from just a few who had seen the PSA on television; many more had commented on the YouTube video. In an effort to disseminate materials to a wide demographic, thirty-six boxes of Reader’s Guides were distributed to grocery shoppers by Randall’s Safeways. Harris County would also have benefited from Reader’s Guides published in Spanish. Securing enough copies of the book was difficult, especially large print copies, unabridged audio editions, and translations in Spanish and Chinese. All were in high demand. The library also has an “Over Drive” program with downloadable books, popular with commuters.

All of the branch libraries featured Big Read displays. Again, the program director encouraged the libraries to be creative and left them to find ways to connect the book with their particular audiences. Branches displayed Chinese artifacts—ceramic fu dogs, bonsai trees, batik art, Cheongsam and Chinese jackets, for example. One library featured their Big Read display in the children’s section to attract the attention of adults who come to the library with their children.

Impact

It was apparent that *The Joy Luck Club* was an exceptionally good fit for a county library system that serves a diverse city like Houston, Texas. Readers related to the themes of immigration, language, culture, and Eastern/Western differences and their impact on cross-generational relationships. In discussions that transcended ethnic and national differences, women talked about the mother-daughter relationships at the heart of the novel. The Big Read director noted that “people really related to *The Joy Luck Club* and the universal themes in it. It showed all people share similar experiences.”

A few months after their Big Read program had ended, Harris County reported that more branches had begun book clubs for Spanish speakers, inspired by the successful event in south Houston.

Three months after their Big Read, the program director was excited that the local PBS station had come back to Harris County Public Libraries to ask for their partnership in promoting their new children’s show *Super WHY!* by holding *Super WHY!* Story times. Aamegy Bank, another first-

time partner, became a Friend of one library branch, committing \$500 to sponsor their Hispanic Heritage Festival. The Big Read resulted in a big increase in the number of events and program attendees during a typically slow library month. In April, 25,252 people attended events at Harris County libraries; that number increased to 60,000 during The Big Read in May. The average number of attendees each month is 29,322. Harris County also saw a rise in library card applications, with 21,556 new cards issued between April and June. The library also saw an overall increase in circulation of 2% during the month of May. While June is traditionally one of the busiest months of the year, this year the library experienced an overall decline—in contrast to the surge in participation in May, due largely to The Big Read.

Timberland Regional Library, Tumwater, Washington

My Antonia

Region: Northwest	Number of Teachers: 6
Total Days: 39	Number of Events: 38
Population: 449,000 (Medium)	Number of Attendees: 1,617
Number of Partner Organizations: 26	Adults, 1,335 ; Children 282
Number of Libraries: 27	Number of Book Club Meetings: 34
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 238
Number of K-12 Schools: 5	Adults, 238; Children 0
Number of Volunteers: 150	

Having organized two Timberland Reads Together programs in recent years, the Timberland Regional Library in Washington saw The Big Read as an opportunity to build and sustain its successful—and costly—program. With 34 libraries spread over a service area of 7,000 square miles, Timberland’s central administrative office used Big Read funds to bring high-quality arts programming—a repertory theatre group, music ensembles, and Cather scholar and stage performer—to even its smallest rural communities.

Background

Timberland Regional Library has 27 community libraries, five cooperative library centers, and two library kiosks spread across five counties surrounding the capital city of Olympia, Washington. The service area covers nearly 7,000 square miles and serves a population of more than 422,000 residents. Timberland launched its own successful community literacy program, called Timberland Reads Together, two years ago. What made The Big Read different was the funding to expand the program and offer more, high-quality events to more communities. The focus on a classic work was also a welcome facet of The Big Read. One of the library’s trustees noted that The Big Read had successfully raised the profile of Willa Cather as well as the confidence of those who read *My Antonia*. As a result, Big Read planners hoped participants would be more likely to read another work of great literature. Several branch librarians said it was exciting to be part of a national program and a larger effort that recognized the importance of reading.

Timberland kicked-off their Big Read with simultaneous events in six locations. In each of the six sites, at noon, community leaders and members of the local press read excerpts from *My Antonia* in outdoor public events held in the heart of each community—in the town square, on the steps of the courthouse, and in front of the Capital Dome. The Kick-offs generated a lot of buzz about *The Big Read* in the media even before they occurred, and the press continued to give *The Big Read* substantial coverage in local newspapers, on radio stations, and even on cable access channels.

Promotion and Media

Marketing and publicity are a focus for Timberland; the library system benefits from a strong and experienced central communications department that organized all the media impressions for The Big Read. Press releases, audio text for radio stations, pictures, and public service announcements were all individualized by the central office and distributed to media outlets across the five

regions. An 8-page tabloid was inserted into an estimated 67,000 newspapers, and an additional 3,000 tabloids were distributed at programs and in libraries and bookstores. Proclamations were very successful in getting local media attention. Pictures of city officials signing the proclamations were published in the local newspapers, and libraries framed the documents as part of their Big Read displays. Of the 400 participants submitting Event Cards, the most common ways they heard about The Big Read were through the library, newspaper, and word-of-mouth.

Programming and Participation

Timberland's Reference and Adult Programs Director saw The Big Read as an opportunity to connect the adult reading programs through a year-long "Where I'm From" theme on immigration, culture, and community that engaged adults in collecting stories, pictures, and artifacts from the past. These were used to create displays for The Big Read. The Big Read events were intended to appeal to a broad demographic of readers and non-readers; The Big Read planning committee's goals were to build a sense of community, enhance the reading experience, increase readership, and improve the visibility of the library and recognition of the services the library provides.

Timberland invited four different groups to provide events for The Big Read and scheduled week-long tours in several venues in the participating communities. The line-up included a repertory theatre that adapted a portion of *My Antonia* to actively engage the audience and provide new perspectives; a quartet who researched, found, and wrote musical selections based on the book; a Willa Cather scholar and impersonator who talked about writing *My Antonia*; and a Bohemian band. The Willa Cather scholar also performed in two high schools, engaging students in discussions about the book and her life; at an alternative high school in Hoquaim, the suicide of Mr. Schimerda was connected to that of Hoquaim-born musician Kurt Cobain and suicides of friends and relatives, with students also exploring these themes in art. Several students returned for evening performances in their communities, bringing family and friends.

These featured events attracted young and old and successfully appealed to both avid and lapsed readers. Sales of the book increased after the events, indicating that those in the audience came to listen to music or watch a dramatic performance and left with the book in hand, inspired to read it. In addition to these performances, libraries held book discussion groups, distributed books and materials, created displays, and planned other events. Circulation of the book in several formats including cassette editions, downloadable audio editions, large print editions, and regular print editions increased dramatically during the project, as did VHS, DVD and all A/V formats of *My Antonia*. Leaflets printed before The Big Read began boasted 65 free events; the total exceeded 75. An estimated total of 1,404 people (1,115 adults and 289 children) participated in the events. Event participants submitted 400 Event Cards. Nearly 95% indicated that they would like to attend other events about the book and reading.

Timberland struggled to get schools to participate. A curriculum director for one school district noted that participation seemed to hinge on teachers who were passionate about teaching the book. One high school actively partnered in the program by buying copies of the book to give to their city council members. Offers to bring events to the high schools were warmly received in a couple

of communities; but many more that expressed initial interest later declined. In communities where schools and libraries had already formed partnerships, it was much easier to incorporate The Big Read. Such collaborations typically involve elementary schools in family literacy programs; The Big Read, however, provided an opportunity to involve high school students in adult programs with the hope that they will sustain their participation as they grow older.

As a classic that many adults had read in high school, readers frequently voiced their surprise at the connections they made in rereading the book as more mature adults. Program planners commented that Big Read participants were “discovering a lot” in the book. This was also true for communities; *My Antonia* inspired the small, rural North Pacific towns to re-connect with their pasts. “This reaches deeper into our community,” commented a library trustee who is also a local historian. With articles that began as part of their coverage of Big Read events, one newspaper began a series on the town’s history. Through research inspired by reading the book, they had learned about the historic diversity of immigrants in the town—a black church and community that was the target of a parade of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and a large population of Japanese who worked in the lumber mills. Plans were being made to continue the research and the dialogue—an unanticipated, but welcome outcome of The Big Read.

Partnerships

Timberland relied largely on existing partnerships for The Big Read. They were able to incorporate a state-funded humanities grant, and collaborated with several bookstores for the first time. Another new strategic partnership was that forged with cities as a result of the proclamations. The Big Read program director said he would love to do more with schools, but the separation of youth and adult services in Timberland Regional Library makes that difficult. The director remarked that The Big Read was effective in raising awareness of the importance of literary reading; he had used information from *Reading at Risk* as a rationale for The Big Read and a rallying call for the library’s efforts. Although the events were successful, they attracted mostly educated, female readers; only 20% of event participants were male. The program committee was discussing how to bring more males into the program. The Big Read garnered interest in Willa Cather and her books, but event attendance showed that book discussions for the contemporary novels in the Timberland Reads Together program were slightly better attended. The committee speculated that because *My Antonia* is a classic people had read before, they didn’t seem to feel the same need to talk about it. Nevertheless, circulation data attested to a high number and diverse group of readers, checking out large print editions, as well as MP3 and downloadable copies.

A significant outcome for Timberland was establishing a relationship with the National Endowment for the Arts. “I know that the NEA is there now and available to work with,” said the program director. Previously, Timberland has worked mostly with the National Endowment for the Humanities; they felt The Big Read had been a valuable opportunity to learn more about the priorities and interests of the NEA. They also reported that participating in The Big Read caused a substantial increase in taking part in a national initiative. A few months after The Big Read had ended, Timberland said they had returned to where they had begun: with a new file for a 2009 Big Read proposal.

City of Bridgeport/Southwestern Connecticut Regional Collaborative

To Kill a Mockingbird

Region: Northeast	Number of K-12 Schools: 14
Total Days: 94	Number of Teachers: 25
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 50
Population: 900,000	Number of Attendees: 59,62
Number of Partner Organizations: 18	Adults, 4,373; Children 1,589
Number of Libraries: 4	Number of Book Club Meetings: 9
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 189
Number of Volunteers: 25	Adults, 160; Children 29

The Bridgeport program was literally a Big Read, including four cities, a potential audience of a million countywide residents, a visit from First Lady Laura Bush, and issues as charged now as they were in the 60s when To Kill a Mockingbird was written or in the 30s when it takes place. This big, high-profile program still gave participants a small-town feel, with read-alouds, free books, friendly buttons, and events scaled for families and targeted to those new to the community and its libraries and arts organizations, and to avid readers and regular patrons. One partner called it the most effective community effort since the WPA.

Background

The City of Bridgeport/Southwestern Connecticut Regional Collaborative Big Read included four cities along the I-95 corridor and Long Island Sound—Bridgeport, Shelton, Norwalk, and Stamford—and a potential audience of nearly 1 million Fairfield County residents. Fourth-district Congressman Christopher Shays initiated the collaborative and the application submission, which also had the active and very visible support of city officials who introduced events, posed for promotional “What Page Are You On?” posters, and sported the companion button. Two members of the collaborative, Shelton and Norwalk, had previous experience with community reading programs: Shelton through One Book, One Valley, a community reading program that brought citizens and community organizations in the Naugatuck Valley together to read; and Norwalk, through its four-year old Festival of Words, a reading and literary arts festival celebrating not just the spoken and written word but also the rich and varied cultural heritage of the area.

The Big Read widened the scope of these efforts, but retained their emphasis on honoring diversity and broadening cultural understanding through reading, dialogue, and the arts. Organizers chose *To Kill a Mockingbird* to encourage dialogue about community and racial equality, in the periods when the book was set and written and in the present day. There were, they noted, some reservations about tackling issues of racism, even concern that the mayor’s office would get “some backlash.” That, they were quick to add, “simply didn’t materialize.” On the contrary, The Big Read and *To Kill a Mockingbird* gave community members multiple forums—a poetry slam, book discussions, a city panel that drew a mixed audience and triggered an “explosive discussion,” a Service for Peace—to speak openly about racial tensions and tolerance. In one discussion, Yale Professor and discussion leader Mark Schenker called *To Kill a Mockingbird* a book “self-consciously about community,” a “test of a community and how it gets along when everyone isn’t getting along.”

Even though this Big Read addressed big issues in a densely populated urban area, it had, according to partners in all four cities, a distinctly small-town feel—“a sense of community,” said one Bridgeport partner, “you don’t often get in an inner city.” A Bridgeport librarian said The Big Read “gave our urban library a sense of small-town USA.”

Partnerships

The Bridgeport/Southwestern Connecticut Regional Collaborative involved two levels of partnerships: those formed between cities comprising the collaborative and those within each individual city. Both, according to community organizers and partners, were largely unprecedented. Until The Big Read, for example, the Bridgeport library and mayor’s office had not worked together, and municipal and cultural organizations in the four areas were more likely “to compete than collaborate” for funding, which limited the initiatives any one group could undertake and the audiences they could draw. Collaboration meant that there was more “unique programming” and “administrative or marketing opportunities that could be shared by all to strengthen the success of the overall program.” According to a representative from the Mayor’s office, they “really couldn’t step out of this one.”

The partnerships within communities reflected an overall emphasis on literature and literacy and efforts to bring diverse groups together. To invite input from its diverse community, Stamford, for example, established a committee of 11 people, made up of representatives from the Hispanic community and other minority populations, a university administrator, library program directors, youth and adult literacy and youth services representatives, and artists and theater professionals. Other cities formed similar partner groups, including as well churches, schools systems, reading clubs, community centers, and local businesses. Shelton’s Center Stage was an active partner, as was Bridgeport’s Barnum Museum. The Bridgeport Public Library worked with AEP (Association of Educational Publishers) to negotiate the sale of 5,500 copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for southwestern regional distribution. AEP also provided Spanish editions of the book, a large-type edition, and audiotapes for the vision-impaired and non-readers.

Big Read grant organizers in all four cities called the collaborative “a great success.” It made them look at partnerships in a “whole new way,” and all formed bonds that will extend well beyond the grant. Organizers were also candid about the challenges of managing and coordinating efforts. The Stamford Public library did not designate one person to administer the grant, which required considerable work from their grant writer beyond her day job. Bridgeport, which had strong support from the city, and nearby Shelton were able to combine local resources, but other grant administrators found that the initial excitement among local organizations did not always translate into active participation. Norwalk found that “programming that worked for other cities” did not always work for them, and that the focus on larger efforts sometimes meant that they did not reach local people.

Some cities also experienced unexpected challenges in ensuring school participation—related not to “initial interest” but to “follow-through.” Stamford and Norwalk had contacted schools over the

summer, and “all were supportive and exchanged ideas through email.” Come March, however, “school contacts were swamped.” In future *Big Reads*— and all looked forward to additional rounds—organizers plan to be more strategic, including “getting on the school list,” “getting the superintendent involved,” and “inviting a teacher” to be on the selection and planning committee.

Media and Promotion

The four cities and the greater Fairfield County area offered multiple media outlets—and a total of 6.2 million potential media impressions. Newspapers in each city carried *Big Read* ads, and local cable, university, and public TV stations and network affiliates covered programming. Bridgeport Library Media Librarian and Big Read coordinator Nancy Sweeney noted that this commuter area had a “very strong radio audience,” and that the radio PSAs were especially effective. Radio stations also gave The Big Read “a local identity” and helped with local outreach. A radio Q and A session with the Bridgeport Library’s head of Community Relations, Michael Bielawa, and mention that free book kits were available, generated a flood of phone calls asking for free books.

According to organizers, distributing free books promoted the program widely and effectively. Unable to keep up with demand, they ordered more books and set up distribution sites not just at libraries but also at community centers and local health departments, eventually distributing 4500 free copies. When stocks at one site ran out, some eager readers went to partnering cities to pick up books—some getting a library card in the process. One front-desk librarian, particularly gratified to see the smiles of inner-city youth who had never received a free book, reported that she “got a feeling from this that I haven’t ever had, and I’ve worked for the library for 27 years.” Using *Harry Potter* as a gauge, she had to set criteria for younger children asking “can I read this?”—if they could handle *Harry Potter*, they got their free copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The other popular, effective, and seemingly ubiquitous promotional strategy was the “What page are you on?” button. Over 2,000 were distributed throughout the area, prompting, according to Sweeney, conversations “in grocery store lines, at Walgreen’s, even in a pedicure salon.” The Bridgeport mayor sported the button *and* pressed the question. The idea was so successful that Shelton had a professional photographer take photos of locally recognizable people—the mayor, the police chief, the fire marshal—reading the book, made those into posters, and displayed them in high school media center, libraries, city hall, and the police department. Other city services and businesses got into The Big Read spirit: Bridgeport city buses donated and posted signs; a downtown restaurant featured *To Kill a Mockingbird* menu selections, including the Tuna Finch sandwich and Dill pickles. Bielawa explained that, although they actively “talked up” The Big Read early on, “eventually, they didn’t have to. Word simply spread.”

Publicity and excitement in Bridgeport reached its highest point with a visit from First Lady Laura Bush, accompanied by NEA Chairman Dana Gioia, Institute of Museum and Library Services Director Dr. Anne-Imelda Radice—and the announcement that this Big Read had been recognized as a model site.

Programming

The combined resources and outreach experience of the four-city collaborative produced a wide array of “very well received” programming. Some 50 events, kicked off with a talk by Harper Lee biographer, Charles Shields, “in a posh building in area where major businesses are located,” included book discussions, public lectures, art exhibits, and theatre and music performances. Particularly effective at drawing readers and ensuring steady interest in The Big Read were the daily noontime read-alouds at the Bridgeport Library, which drew those who stopped occasionally to listen and those who regularly followed along in their own (sometimes free) copies. The program started inside, but moved out to the sidewalk once the weather turned warm.

Events were designed for readers and non-readers alike, and young and old. Adults attended book discussions and panels on racial relations; children and teens took part in essay contests, ambrosia making, and a costume pageant hosted by Bridgeport’s Beardsley Zoo. Fourteen schools participated, in traditional and non-traditional ways. At St. Andrews Catholic School, 8th graders read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, kept a chart of “Boo sightings” and re-wrote parts of the story for younger readers. Students talked to the evaluation team about themes they thought had current relevance—race relations, child molesting, and law and justice—and shared stories their parents had told them about the book: one student learned she had almost been named Scout. Their teacher, a native of Poland, shared her personal affection for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the first novel she read in English. The principal told students and evaluators the book was like the Pythagorean Theorem: once you learn it, you never forget it.

Shelton involved high school students and the greater community in a theater experience. Fran and Gary Scarpa, owners of Shelton’s Center Stage Theater, well known in the area for their productions and close affiliation with schools, were initially approached about performing a short, 20-minute dramatization of some aspect of *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the high school—but instead suggested doing a full production as their spring series, with high school students as actors. Every performance in Shelton and Bridgeport was sold out.

Bridgeport’s Mercy Learning Center used multiple strategies to allow women attending the school—many with limited reading skills or English proficiency—to take part in The Big Read. They read segments of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, saw the movie, attended a theater performance and public readings, and discussed themes in class. One of the most powerful learning experiences was a poetry workshop based on the book’s themes, facilitated by a local poet. The women, most of them mothers, most who had spent their childhoods in other countries, talked with evaluators about how the book fit with their own thoughts on teaching and nurturing children and evoked memories of long summers when they, too, went barefoot and played made-up games for hours.

Bridgeport high school history students and their parents were invited to attend a talk about the Civil Rights movement by former student Ed Charles, poet, speaker on Jim Crow laws and other and member of the 1969 pennant-winning Mets team. Another class of arts students used diverse media—paintings, drawings, digital photography, sculpture, pottery, jewelry—to portray themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, such as conformity and individuality, race relations, superstitions, and

courage. Students, parents, and friends—many who had never been to an art gallery or cultural events in the city—gathered for an opening reception at the downtown City Lights Art Gallery. The gallery, which opened in 2004 to “exhibit the works of local, regional, and emerging artists” and “establish art as an essential part of our everyday life for the diverse population of Bridgeport, its neighbors, businesses, and visitors,” donated exhibit space for students’ work for three weeks, also displaying free copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and materials promoting upcoming Big Read events.

Impact

In a crossover of events, as exciting for the student artist as for organizers eager to see this kind of convergence between events and audiences, two attendees at a later Big Read book discussion reported that they had bought a piece of student art at the City Lights Gallery. Bridgeport Big Read coordinators Nancy Sweeney and Michael Bielawa saw this as evidence of impact not just on community members but on ongoing efforts to revitalize the city and bring people downtown. They and other organizers believe they also achieved both literary and literacy goals. Librarians cited the “buzz,” the “chats around the circulation desks,” the “mini book discussions at the counter,” as evidence of the program’s impact. Although their tracking mechanisms made it difficult to single out data that links changes specifically to The Big Read, organizers interviewed say they believe that attendance and circulation have increased, among those who came for free books, those who happened on the noontime readings, those who came for events. Readings and performances took the “spoken word” and made it “cool,” and made people “aware of how important literature is in our lives.”

Three months after the program, contacts in all four cities said community members were still talking about The Big Read. A Norwalk partner said, “we gave them a taste and...they liked what they tasted.” In a trend that one organizer called “infectious,” there were new book clubs and plans to continue cross-age meetings. In Norwalk, there were still holds on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in Shelton new paperback copies had circulated 45 times; audio books, 88 times; and videos/DVDs, 150 times. Organizers also cited evidence that The Big Read enhanced their outreach and “mission to expand programming and services to the community.” Stamford will continue to use literacy volunteers and the very popular *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a reader for ESL participants. The Norwalk hospital will provide readers and reading therapy to people in hospitals” and seek out other places where outreach is needed, such as senior centers, retirement facilities, hospices, the YMCA. “What The Big Read did for us,” said one organizer, “is it opened our eyes to the potential of ways and means to communicate to people.”

On a broader level, partners noted The Big Read’s “catalytic” effect on libraries’ image, visibility, and public relations. In Shelton, where The Big Read was timed to bring people back to the library after it was closed for renovation, organizers felt that the program had done that and more. Norwalk organizers said the program brought “stature” to an institution that is the “pearl in the oyster of the City of Norwalk.” Stamford coordinator Gerry Katz saw a change in the public discourse: The Big Read “made the people attending events really look at race relations. It brought about discussion that wasn’t there before.”

Librarians also reported that patrons were already asking about the next Big Read. Two communities will: Bridgeport and Shelton, as partners, and Norwalk received new Big Read grants. Both report that partners from the first program—the Fire Department, community college, Center Stage, real estate companies—are enthusiastically on board. Stamford will not do a Big Read, but coordinator Gerry Katz reported that the committee had stayed in close touch, started a listserv, and become “a real working organization for cultural activities for the city.”

Cumberland County Library, Fayetteville, North Carolina

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Region: Southeast	Number of K-12 Schools: 11
Total Days: 29	Number of Teachers: 15
Military Base: Yes	Number of Events: 44
Population: 302,963 (M)	Number of Attendees: 3,527
Number of Partner Organizations: 9	Adults, 2,767; Children 760
Number of Libraries: 11	Number of Book Club Meetings: 28
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 155
Number of Volunteers: 11	Adults, 155; Children 0

The Cumberland County Big Read had a jazzy, festive atmosphere, but at the same time engaged participants in stimulating discussions about race, roles, relationships between men and women, and the rich cultural and intellectual life of the Harlem Renaissance. Early promotion to schools and civic groups; effective partnerships with military bases, universities, bookstores, arts organizations, and the media; and creative programming and displays in branch and university libraries enabled the first-ever community reading program to successfully reach a diverse audience.

Background

Fayetteville is in the sandhills of southeastern North Carolina, not far from where the Cape Fear River forms, then narrows before it widens and turns south toward the Atlantic. This historical city—site of Tuscarora, Revolutionary, and Civil War battles, the first city in the nation named after the Marquis de Lafayette—is home to Pope Air Force Base and to Fort Bragg, the largest military installation in the world. It is also home to the Dogwood Festival, the largest of many southern floral festivals, which annually brings over 150,000 people to downtown Fayetteville to enjoy musicians, artists, crafts, and food. In spring 2007, festivities were shared with final events for *The Big Read*, held in Fayetteville from March 23-April 27, 2007.

The Cumberland County Library and Information Center, in downtown Fayetteville, is the headquarters of a seven-library system that includes five branch libraries and a law library located in the county courthouse. The library, which just celebrated its 75th year, serves just over 300,000 residents (121,000 within the city limits) with topical programming, electronic resources, multiple book clubs, a foreign language center, bi-lingual story times, and mobile outreach service targeted to homebound people. The library has a Large Friends of the Library program that brings in local authors and national authors with local ties, and takes part in other community literary initiatives, including Methodist College's Southern Writers Series. According to Marketing and Communications Manager and Big Read coordinator, Sally Shutt, The Big Read fit very well with the library's mission to "entertain and enlighten and enrich." A community read had often been discussed in long-range planning meetings—looking at successful one-book programs in other cities, Fayetteville "wanted to be a part of that," they "didn't want to miss the boat." When the library read about in an ALA notification, they "threw themselves into making the deadline."

Their Eyes Were Watching God was an obvious choice for the library management team, which wanted a southern setting and author, a minority author, and a title with “universal themes” that would “appeal to a diverse community.” Zora Neale Huston biographer Valerie Boyd was in Atlanta, and scholar Trudier Harris, author of *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor and Randal Kenan*, was at the University of North Carolina in nearby Chapel Hill. Shutt noted that they also wanted “a book not as widely known as the others.” What they found was that this was the case among the all-white selection group, but not in the African-American community—a fact pointed out by an African-American newspaper columnist who wondered why they chose “a book that everyone had read.”

Partnerships

Cumberland County was one of The Big Read communities that took advantage of the Kellogg Foundation’s match, and the local community foundation played a fairly active role in the local program. The foundation “heartily” encouraged the application, and, at the prompting of Shutt, who had heard at The Big Read orientation how many books other communities were purchasing, raised \$7,200 from donor funds to support promotion and purchase 23 audio books and 1,150 books, 325 of which went into the school system, and the rest to library locations and Fayetteville State University and Methodist University, both Big Read partners.

Boeing provided 100 books each to the Pope Air Force Base library and the Throckmorton Library at Ft. Bragg. The Cumberland County library had worked in the past with base libraries on a Smart Start program, a literacy program for mothers and young children, but not on adult programming. Base librarians opted to include enlistees and families in two different ways: The Pope base librarian worked with the Educational Center and professors from 3 universities who teach at the base. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 16 classes and 216 airmen and soldiers; at Ft. Bragg, the librarian handed out books and resource kits and held a series of book discussions for soldiers and families.

Other partners included the Museum of the Cape Fear, the Fayetteville Museum of Art, Barnes & Noble, and nine high schools. Shutt shared guides and Big Read information with teachers during an in-service briefing, and, if teachers were teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, provided classroom sets of the novel and pulled books on related topics from the library’s collection. In the end, 9 high schools, 15 teachers, and 787 students in 37 classes took part in The Big Read, as did 10 home-schooled students. Higher education partners included Methodist College, Fayetteville State University, and Fayetteville Technical Community College. Joining other local media in promoting programming, *The Fayetteville Observer* gave Shutt a weekly column in the Saturday *Extra* section of the paper. Base publications signed on as well.

Promotion

Knowing that spring break and school testing could interfere with promotion and programming, and that readers would need time to get used to the dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Shutt began promotion on March 1, a full month ahead of scheduled events. The library showed the public service announcements on its web site in March (and continued through April), Time

Warner Cable also aired the PSA, and the local community channel broadcast a 30-minute show about *The Big Read*; Bragg TV also carried some promotion. Shutt purchased “strategic radio time”—on a popular AM station during morning drive time, and additional time on an urban station with adult listeners and an AF/AM station that draws a younger audience. To make sure the familiar banner could be seen across the area, Shutt ordered additional banners for all branch and base libraries, the latter paid for by Boeing.

In addition to the in-service briefings for teachers, Shutt and Library Director Jerry Asher also made presentations to five governing boards, the Rotary Club, United Way, and Net Worth, a professional women’s association, at which they gave out books and reader’s and audio guides. During these programs Thrasher, also president of Literary Connections, made a point of talking about the *Reading at Risk* report, and driving home the purpose and urgency of *The Big Read*. (Shutt explained that because partnerships, promotion, and programming often overlapped in their *Big Read*, she asked Arts Midwest whether presentations such as these should be counted as events or promotion.)

Organizers also gave out books and audio guides as door prizes at the kick-off and other jazz concerts and arts events, and, to reach less mobile audiences, distributed book kits at senior centers, the Cape Fear Valley Hospital Waiting Rooms, and the Army Hospital. To engage high school audiences, they held essay, art, and poster contests, winners of which received a \$25 gift card from Barnes & Noble. High school students who brought hot sheets they received at school to a branch library had their names entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift certificate to WalMart, sponsored by the Friends of the Library.

To broaden promotion and pique additional literary interest, Shutt and branch librarians drew on library resources to introduce patrons to other Harlem Renaissance authors. They created bookmarks that said, “If you liked *Their Eyes Were Watching God...*” try other more recent African-American authors, including Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan. The bookmark’s flip side listed fiction by other Harlem Renaissance authors such as Arna Bontemps, W.E.B. Dubois, and Langston Hughes, and other books by Hurston and about the Harlem Renaissance. A loop about the Harlem Renaissance ran on computer at one of the branches, which also mounted displays to introduce younger readers to *The Big Read* and the Harlem Renaissance.

Programming and Resources

Much of the Cumberland programming was designed to bring together, in downtown and branch venues, community groups that might typically attend one kind of event but not another. That was definitely the goal of the Kick-off, which featured food, free books, the Fayetteville State University jazz band, and a personal talk about the book’s impact by a County Commissioner—and drew 359 people of all ages. Some 80 teens, older couples on dates, and families attended a rural-branch film screening, with pizza. The Fayetteville Museum of Art sponsored six sessions of stories and “jazzy art for kids,” which drew children and their parents. Student drama groups performed scenes from Hurston’s book, as did students in. A public reading of scenes from the novel by an undergraduate English class successfully attracted university students and community

members, who, like the readers, found that hearing the novel “brought things to life they hadn’t noticed before,” and made difficult dialect “come alive.”

Events also included numerous book discussions at libraries, bases, universities, and Barnes & Noble; jazz and blues performances; documentary films about the Harlem Renaissance; and museum programs local and historical perspective on the novel and post-emancipation and early twentieth-century South. Programs for youth and children included poetry jams and open mic poetry, a performance in which an elementary school dance team “stepped up the beat.” Acknowledging both Hurston’s fondness for hats and a fine southern tradition, The Big Read included A “Hat-itude Southern Tea and Hat Show.

In what Shutt called the “meat and potatoes” of their programming were public talks by Trudier Harris, author of *The Power of the Porch*, and Valerie Boyd, author of the Hurston biography, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, made possible by Big Read funding. Shutt noted that both promotion and programming benefited from the “wonderful materials” provided by the NEA. Teacher’s Guides, she said, went quickly, and when they referred teachers to the website and, teachers were “thrilled” to find free resources for this and other Big Read titles.

Impact

As in other communities, the Cumberland County Big Read brought visibility to libraries—not just the sponsoring Cumberland County library and its seven branches, but to partner libraries as well. Tracy Morgan, librarian at Methodist University, said that The Big Read brought publicity to the library and the classes the university offers for students. Perhaps more importantly, she explained, it also made college students, often too busy for recreational reading and too strapped for funds to buy books, a part of a larger reading community. Introduced to the public library resources and reminded by Morgan that, in college, they have a “local address,” some got public library cards. Morgan also observed that, even though book clubs are growing in communities and public libraries, the trend doesn’t seem to affect university libraries. The Big Read may have changed that, inspiring students and faculty to start campus book clubs. Morgan also said that free books were “a big deal” to students, and she was heartened to hear students say they would add the book to their “collections.” The book, she says, and the story of how Janie found her voice, are “things they’ll carry with them.”

According to Sally Shutt, the positive response to the book, from those who had previously read the book and those who hadn’t, told them that the choice was the right one for Fayetteville. The Big Read attracted a “true cross-section of the community,” and prompted discussions about the themes and issues portrayed in the book. Not exposed to Huck Finn, in dialect. Don’t talk enough about race.

Teenagers sat beside seniors and shared their views on Janie, Tea-Cake an Joe Starks. African Americans and whites discussed their favorite passages and voiced their views on Janie’s and Zora’s choices. One audience member noted on her feedback form after the Trudier Harris lecture: “Good to see diverse

audience—men and women, young/old, students/non-students, academics/non-academics, black/white.”

Three months later, Shutt shared additional evidence of The Big Read’s impact. According to their figures, they successfully attracted a diverse audience, especially their African-American population: 65% of event audiences were African-American, higher than the proportion in the general population, which is 36.7% African-American and 51.8% White. Interestingly, the ethnic representation of Cumberland County Big Read Participant Online Survey respondents shows somewhat smaller percentages of African-Americans than the library’s data (42.6% compared to 65%), but higher percentages than in the general population (42.6% compared to 36.7%), and a far higher percentage than in the overall Big Read survey respondent pool, which is around 8% African-American; there were also more Hispanics among Cumberland County survey respondents than in the overall pool, 4.3% compared to 2.3%.¹

Circulation data and library participation data also indicate a marked impact of The Big Read and promotion and programming efforts. During April, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* circulated 522 times at the main library; in May, June, and July, 88 times. Overall during The Big Read, the seven-library system recorded 1,271 uses: the book circulated 1,185 times, and the audio version, 86 times. Early in the program, librarians made the book a 7-day rather than the normal 3-week checkout, and waived any late fees. Shutt also noted that, for April 2007 (The Big Read month), programming for all age groups was up 44.43% over April 2006—which “can be directly linked to the additional Big Read programs and the tremendous amount of publicity the library received for this project.” She also cited a “huge jump in programming for children, teens and adults,” though they did not report that separately. A reception with local artists and jazz musicians drew 250 people, the largest attendance ever recorded for an adult program at the library’s north regional branch. Data from the library’s FY2007 Annual Report show:

- Total Items Borrowed (+5.1%)
- Children’s Programs (+6.4%); Audience (+22.7%)
- Teen Programs –(+169.1%); Audience – (+231.5%)
- Adult Programs –(+26.5%); Audience – (+64.5%)
- Total Programs (+20.2%; Audience – (+37.9%)
- Meeting & Conference Room Use – (+26.0%); Audience – (+41.9%)
- Total Active Library Cards (+14.5%)
- Information Questions Answered (+10.9)
- Public Computer Use – (+20.5%)
- Electronic Database Searches – (+398.0%)

¹ Other survey and card data indicate that this Big Read attracted, or gathered responses from, an audience more diverse than the overall respondent population: there were more young adults and middle-aged attendees; fewer children and seniors; fewer graduate degree holders; fewer avid readers; more who said this was a “new read.” Other data about point of contact and reading habits showed that this was definitely a library group.

Other evidence of community- and capacity-building includes Shutt's newspaper column, which continued after *The Big Read*; librarians do two columns a month and are guaranteed their Saturday column. Library staff have continued the teacher training begun with *The Big Read*, to take the program directly to the teachers, and shared information with teachers about the library's literature finder databases. *The Big Read*, says Shutt, also "opened the door" for offering services to disciplines other than English. After *The Big Read*, Shutt was invited to speak to teachers in fine arts, science, and social studies, and to English instructors and other providers of satellite courses at Campbell College.

Cross promotion resulted in new collaborations with *Big Read* partners and new collaborations with new partners. Shutt and the symphony is collaborating to create a *Symphony at the Library* series at which the conductor provides background on composers and promotes concerts, but also promotes related library resources.

Shutt is pleased that Fayetteville is now part of not just a state but also national community reading "movement." She and partners—all on board again—are excited about their upcoming second *Big Read*. She's confident that experience from the first round will serve them well. They applied through the Friends of Library, having found that going through a non-profit doesn't require the budget revisions required by County Commissioners. She is especially excited about doing more with military bases: they anticipate more coverage from Bragg TV, "not easy as a civilian" because "everything has to go through the chain of command." And, the 20,000 82nd Airborne troops who were deployed just after first *Big Read* began will be redeploying back this year.

The Steinbeck Center, Salinas, California

The Grapes of Wrath

Region: West	Number of K-12 Schools: 4
Total Days: 37	Number of Teachers: 26
Population: 146,431 (Medium)	Number of Events: 34
Number of Partner Organizations: 20	Number of Attendees: 7,139
Number of Libraries: 11	Adults, 4,406; Children, 2,733
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Meetings: 14
Number of Volunteers: 75	Number of Book Club Attendees: 325
	Adults, 304; Children, 21

The National Steinbeck Center's Big Read used The Grapes of Wrath to build and define a community. Events attracted a diverse array of participants eager to share their California Journeys and share ideas for moving forward together.

Background

When *Grapes of Wrath* was first published, it was burned in John Steinbeck's birthplace of Salinas, California, because some found the book's honest and often graphic descriptions coarse and repellent. Fifty years later, the novel was the centerpiece of an effort to unite economically diverse Monterey County through the National Steinbeck Center's Big Read program. Organizers held book discussions, film festivals, readings and other events to celebrate the community's literary heritage and the stories of the people who have journeyed to the area.

Salinas is an agricultural community of 150,000 people located 20 miles from coastal Monterey. The surrounding landscape appears to have changed little since Steinbeck's day. The city's center is surrounded by miles of farmland and seasonal workers harvesting artichokes, strawberries or salad greens. The community has weathered many challenges to its economic livelihood of late, most notably the Fall 2006 *E. coli* scare in local spinach fields. City finances have been tight; funding for the local libraries was at risk until literacy advocate and then-mayor (and current state assemblywoman) Anna Caballero managed to secure state support. Monterey County as a whole is divided by a "Lettuce Curtain" that separates people by valley and coast, economics and class. The affluent coastal communities like Carmel depend largely on tourist revenue, while towns further inland like Salinas rely largely on agriculture. Accordingly, the county has a diverse population separated by class, ethnicity, and level of education. Big Read organizers intended to transcend cultural and economic barriers by spreading its programs countywide and bringing the community together to read and discuss the same book.

The National Steinbeck Center (NSC) is located in downtown Salinas, blocks from Steinbeck's birthplace. Its mission, as described in The Big Read proposal, is "to explore the works and themes of John Steinbeck, and to provide and support educational experiences that inspire audiences to learn about human nature, literature, history, agriculture, and the arts" (proposal narrative, p. 5). Applicants saw The Big Read as an opportunity for the NSC to "extend its programming to new audiences,

promote its identity as a forum for learning, and expand its capacity to inspire people to turn to literature for an understanding of human nature and the universal themes of life” (proposal narrative, p. 5). Nearly 8,000 adults and children attended Big Read events over a two-month period.

Programming and Participation

The Big Read kickoff event was held the weekend of February 24-25, 2007 and coincided with a celebration of John Steinbeck’s birthday. The opening ceremonies brought remarks from a representative from Governor Schwarzenegger’s office, assemblywoman Caballero, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Nancy Kotowski, and Salinas Mayor Dennis Donahue. Thom Steinbeck, John’s son, also attended and said of his father, “as a poet he was a great novelist and as a novelist he was a great poet.” Speakers took turns reading from the first chapter of *Grapes*, and then actors from The Western Stage acted out scenes from the novel. The NSC offered free admission to residents of Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties throughout the weekend to attract a diverse audience.

One of the most successful events was a screening of the 1940 film version *Grapes of Wrath* for 37 adult and child residents at the Camporo Labor Camp in Salinas. Abby Pfeiffer and Lori Wood from the NSC described the event in a three-month follow-up interview:

We partnered with one of the farming organizers who wanted to do this as a way to build trust and open a conversation with the workers. Staff from the Steinbeck Center brought hot chocolate and pan dulce, there were children running all over the camp and the farming organizer gathered people together using a bullhorn. The scene was one of great cacophony and joy. It was one of the best activities we did. It was interesting watching peoples' guard come down.

Other events emphasized the theme of California Journeys. From the kickoff through the closing event, Big Read organizers encouraged participants to share how and why they came to live in Monterey. In the final report, grantees observed, “Over and over again, we realized that the Dustbowl Era, the Depression, and the westward migration were not history among many members of the community; they are events that continue to affect lives in the same way serving in a war affects a soldier’s life forever and never really becomes the past” (p. 2). During the follow-up interview, grantees described a book discussion in Monterey Valley in which a woman whose family had been farmers and landowners during the Great Depression talked about what it was like to experience the influx of so many hungry families looking for work. “You have to be willing and open to all human perspectives,” said Pfeiffer and Wood.

Partnerships

NSC partnered with several high schools and colleges for The Big Read. Eleventh graders from Northern California were invited to participate in the Seventh Annual Comcast Multimedia Scholarship Contest and submit an original multimedia project based on an aspect of *Grapes of Wrath*. Entries (see samples) were on display at the NSC during The Big Read’s opening weekend. NSC patrons cast votes to determine the winners. Additionally, 130 students Salinas High School read *Grapes* and then attended a panel discussion at California State University at Monterey Bay

(CSUMB). This opportunity arrived fortuitously when a teacher from Salinas High School came to the NSC looking for curriculum materials. The NSC was able to give her \$250 from the Big Read budget to help her, a gift which she greatly appreciated. In the future, the NSC hopes to have more lead time in Big Read planning so it can involve more schools in its programs.

Partnerships with local colleges produced a variety of panel discussions, photography exhibits and book discussions. Pfeiffer describes activities from two campuses in her grantee survey:

Monterey Peninsula College (MPC) held a one-week on-campus Big Read that included in-class discussions, two film screenings, library display, essay assignments, and presentation of a multi-department panel that offered views of the novel from instructors of women's studies, history, literature, ESL, and political science. CSUMB also held a multi-disciplinary panel, same general format, with the addition of an environmental scientist. Both were excellent events--we remarked that the NEA would have been proud to know it was the catalyst for these events.

Several successful partnerships were attributable to the enthusiasm of one dedicated person from an organization. The chair of MPC's English/ ESL department coordinated and staffed the college's events, relying on the NSC for marketing and materials. Likewise, the activities director of a senior center created multiple events, some of which Pfeiffer described in her grantee survey: "One senior living center had Monday afternoon screenings of Steinbeck films all month, and a final event that was family-oriented and included 'Dust Bowl music,' a professional oral historian on site to record histories of audience members, lettuce bowling for the kids—very inventive!"

Promotion and Media

The Big Read received media coverage in seven newspapers and on five radio stations. The local NBC affiliate, KSBW was a Big Read media sponsor and devoted a 30-minute interview to it on its "Feedback at Five" show. The NEA's television PSA aired over 200 times throughout The Big Read, with an estimated 220,000 impressions per broadcast. They also aired the radio PSA nearly 300 time, with an estimated 31,000 to 61,000 impressions per broadcast, depending on the station. The NEA's promotional resources were also effective marketing tools. For instance, the NSC distributed bookmarks to local merchants and libraries to publicize the Big Read, and appreciated having Spanish-language materials since 48 percent of Monterey County is Hispanic. Finally, the NSC took advantage of informal print materials, such as calendars, newsletters, and postcards, to promote the events.

Impact

Grantees felt that The Big Read "put a new face on the Steinbeck Center and increased its accessibility." They observed that attendance at the annual summer Steinbeck Festival was double what it had been previously, a fact they attribute at least in part to The Big Read. They've also established trust among their partners so they know they can call organizations and set up meetings. For instance, Pfeiffer met with someone from the Western Stage to discuss ideas for another Big Read proposal. She commented that "We've developed trust and share the common goal of creating a

visceral experience – there’s so much power born of working together.” At the same time, The Big Read has “changed expectations for what we’re doing next. We had calls the month after asking what book we were doing for this month. But it was also an expensive program.” Grantees were able to get their funds doubled because of a Kellogg matching grant, but expressed concerns about the availability of additional funding in the future.

Overall, Pfeiffer and Wood felt that the NSC’s Big Read was “a breakthrough in programming, a sustained conversation with the community with opportunities for programming.” They recommend keeping the number of events manageable, especially when working with a small staff. They also advise going beyond “obvious partners when thinking of event hosts and venues—our experience with the [senior center] made us realize that The Big Read is as much about creating community as it is about reading and teaching Steinbeck.”

Montalvo Arts Center, Redwood City, California

Fahrenheit 451

Total Days: 29	Number of Teachers: 30
Population: 60,000 (Medium)	Number of Events: 28
Number of Partner Organizations: 6	Number of Attendees: 2,738
Number of Libraries: 3	Adults, 1,209; Children 1,529
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Meetings: 18
Number of Volunteers: 57	Number of Book Club Attendees: 174
Number of K-12 Schools: 3	Adults, 150; Children 24

The Montalvo Arts Center partnered with the Redwood City Public Library to host a series of activities around the themes in Fahrenheit 451. Programs such as book distributions and a teleconference with Ray Bradbury were especially successful at reaching low-income middle school students.

Background

The Montalvo Arts Center's Big Read on *Fahrenheit 451* communicated the importance of reading and the consequences of censorship to a range of age groups. Programs were especially successful at reaching students in the intermediate grades, many of whom were English Language Learners. This success was made possible by the partnership between Montalvo Arts Center and the Redwood City Public Library, as well as the financial resources and program support provided by the NEA and Arts Midwest.

Programming and Participation

Broadly, Montalvo's Big Read consisted of 46 events over the span of one month. Events were concentrated in Redwood City and the Sequoia Union High School District, but were marketed to a regional population of over 200,000. Public activities included panel discussions on censorship at Cañada College and the downtown library branch, talks by nationally known science fiction authors and biographers, and a film series chronicling the fight against censorship and repression. Children participated in activities about the "freedom to read" including a book-making workshop and story-readings.

Montalvo also commissioned artist-in-residence Svetlana Mintcheva of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) to create an interactive art piece entitled *Exposing the Censor Within*. Individuals entered a booth in which they wrote examples of the ways they either censored themselves or had been censored. The booth was situated at the Redwood City Public Library's downtown branch for the majority of The Big Read, and was brought to the closing street fair in Courthouse Square. A similar confessional was placed on Montalvo's Big Read website. Rosalind Kutler of the Redwood City Library expressed an interest in working with an artist-in-residence again, including but not limited to part of a citywide reading program. The combination of "interactive art, classic literature and opportunities for critical thinking" captured press attention in a region with an abundance of arts activity.

Grantees reported that their most successful events focused on children and youth. This is in keeping with Montalvo's recently revised institutional vision "to focus on the concerns of our times with a special emphasis on how they relate to youth" (final report, p. 5). The center collaborated with the Anchorage Municipal Libraries (another *Fahrenheit 451* Big Read site) to sponsor a live teleconference with Ray Bradbury. The event drew 75 participants from Redwood City, including students from local schools. Bradbury had asked the students to submit questions to him in advance and made sure to acknowledge the location of the questioner in his answers (e.g., "A student from Redwood City asks..."). His remarks went beyond *Fahrenheit 451* to encourage youth to pursue their passions. The final grant report describes participants' delighted reactions: "He received an enthusiastic standing ovation, with tearful audience members hugging each other at the conclusion of his inspirational life-changing remarks" (p. 1).

Other forms of targeted programming were also successful in reaching youth and families. Grantees report that "26 teachers at Sequoia High School taught *Fahrenheit 451* to 1,000 students ages 13-17, the majority of whom spoke English as a second language and read English at a fifth grade level" (final grant report, p. 1). Thirty-one students at Kennedy Middle School also studied the novel, while 25 students from Selby Lane School (another middle school) read the book during study breaks. All students received copies of *Fahrenheit 451*, a rare opportunity for young people who had never owned a book.

Big Read programmers also sponsored a Middle School Student Masterpieces activity in which 27 students made posters about the book and its themes of censorship. The posters, samples of which are seen below, were on display at the Big Read's closing event, a fair on Redwood City's Courthouse Square.

Partnerships

The secret to successful school partnerships in Redwood City was a commitment from key individuals. The director of English Language Learning for the Sequoia Union High School District coordinated The Big Read activities for 1,000 students. She recruited teachers, gave them resources from the NEA, and oversaw their work with the book. Having an advocate in the schools was critical to overcoming the obstacles of partnering with schools. Rosalind Kutler (Redwood City Public Library) acknowledged in the grantee survey that "working with schools on a tight timeline was a big challenge because the schools have so many other deadlines and so much bureaucracy to contend with." In a follow-up interview, she said that the idea of working with teachers had come from The Big Read orientation. The experience "made me rethink again how hard it is to reach teachers who have such limited time but such need for resources. It also made us think about distributing books to schools. I've made some contacts with high schools and am hoping to contact them for future partnerships."

Several community events appealed to multiple age groups. Kutler observed in the grantee survey that "Tad Williams (a Science Fiction Author) did an amazing job bringing children and adults in the audience together, even though that was not the intended focus of the event." Families were also

abundant at the closing Fair on the Square, which had a variety of activities that appealed to the young and old. A local art gallery whose owner “wanted to support the community” distributed small books in which people could record their ideas. A storyteller also drew crowds, as did children’s book character Spot the Dog.

Promotion and Media

Big Read activities were promoted through a variety of outlets, including an interview on community television and articles in the local papers. The City Manager sent weekly emails to all Redwood City employees informing them of Big Read events, and Big Read posters and banners were displayed in front of libraries and other downtown locations. The project’s Big Read website was designed by graphic design students at Mission College in Santa Clara. Grantees considered the site to be the most successful form of outreach and noted that it was selected for a Merit Award from the California Community Colleges’ Media Arts Award Program. Some participants were also attracted by word of mouth and Big Read materials. The censorship panel at Cañada College succeeded in bringing additional student volunteers to Big Read events. The students had picked up copies of the *Fahrenheit 451* CD and attended subsequent activities so they could help promote reading in their community.

In addition to the Big Read CDs, grantees distributed bookmarks, teachers’ guides, and readers’ guides. Grantees especially valued the availability of Spanish-language materials for attracting community members, 36% of whom are Hispanic or Latino. These materials allowed organizers to extend their outreach beyond what they had done in previous community reading programs. This may be one reason why participation in this Big Read was nearly four times as great as the previous year’s program (3,900 community members in 2007 versus 1,000 in 2006).

While grantees were able to identify immediate impacts of The Big Read on community participation, they were unable to identify changes since the programming. In a three-month follow-up interview, Kutler was unsure if there had been changes in attendance at library events, or increases in circulation of materials. Even if there were changes, she felt it would be difficult to know whether to attribute them to The Big Read. Kutler believes that the biggest evidence of The Big Read’s impact will be for the recipients of the 1100 copies of *Fahrenheit 451* that grantees distributed: “Students will remember the book and that someone cared about them.” The NEA’s *To Read or Not To Read* report notes that reading for pleasure is strongly correlated with academic achievement (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). Giving young people books is a positive step toward engaging them in literature for life.

The Cabin, Boise, Idaho

A Farewell to Arms

Region: West	Number of K-12 Schools: 8
Total Days: 56	Number of Teachers: 8
Military Base: Yes	Number of Events: 19
Population: 193,161 (Medium)	Number of Attendees: 1,982
Number of Partner Organizations: 21	Adults, 1,727; Children 255
Number of Libraries: 10	Number of Book Club Meetings: 9
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 96
Number of Volunteers: 50	Adults, 84; Children 12

The Big Read allowed The Cabin to expand its mission as a literary center, increase its partner agencies, take events out to the public, and cover a wider geographic area. Although an impersonator and life-size cardboard cut-out created a Papa Hemingway presence at events, Big Read programming went beyond the Hemingway mystique, engaging community members in wide-ranging discussions of the man and the writer; love, war, and the historical/ biographical context of A Farewell to Arms; the mental and emotional effects of war trauma; and Idaho's kinship with a literary icon.

Background

A novel by Hemingway, who spent his last days in Ketchum, near Sun Valley, 90 miles east of Boise, was a natural choice for The Log Cabin Literary Center, and The Big Read was a natural fit for a place devoted to the “pleasure and power of reading.” Incorporated in 1995, The Cabin has become the “heart of Idaho’s literary life,” a retreat for writers and readers, from Idaho and around the country. It’s a place where local book clubs and MFA students gather, where young authors launch their first books. Their Readers & Conversations and other popular literary series have recently featured Billy Collins, Marilynne Robinson, Anne Lamont, Richard Ford, Amy Tan, and Barry Lopez. The library includes an archive of first editions and signed copies, books related to western writers, and resources for teachers. The Cabin’s model education programs, which include Writers in the Schools (WITS) and the Idaho Summer Writing Camps, has reached over 7,000 Idaho students, including at-risk students. (Background information from The Cabin brochures and *Big Read* proposal.)

Even with its impressive list of programs and guests, The Cabin is an unassuming, rustic cabin that sits alongside the Boise River, on the city’s main street, beside the Anne Frank memorial park and The Library! (emphasis part of the signage). Built with the help of the Idaho State Civilian Conservation Corps for the Idaho State Forestry Department, the cabin’s construction includes native timbers, each featured from room to room. Literary to its core, The Cabin subtly honors another American icon and Big Read author with another pattern: the backsplash tiles in the kitchen spell Steinbeck in Morse Code. From mid-March through May 2007, The Big Read banner greeted visitors at The Cabin’s front door.

The Big Read was the sixth community read for Boise, which held its first community read after an *Idaho Statesman* editor (and Big Read partner) Dan Popkey heard a story on National Public Radio about a community reading program in Rochester, New York. He called Cabin Executive Director Paul Schaffer, who called Nancy Pearle in Seattle. Popkey wrote a column in the newspaper and he and Shaffer talked to the library director—and a community read was born. Past titles and community events include Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*, contracted with actors and the Idaho Opera; *Caramelo*, by Sandra Cisneros, who visited Boise and spoke at an Hispanic Cultural Center event; and Idaho native Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*. The Cabin was also a pilot Big Read project, reading *Fahrenheit 451*.

The difference between earlier programs and The Big Read was the expansion in programming and the expansion into the community and beyond Boise into Idaho’s Treasure Valley area, both made possible by the additional funding. According to Cabin Managing Director Margaret Marti, the geography covered was “the widest yet: all the way to Sun Valley.” A grant from the Community Foundation—which was itself new because they had not had a “through line” before—and the Kellogg match allowed The Cabin “to develop partnerships aggressively,” and distribute books, the 140 of which at the Boise Public Library were all checked out in the first 24 hours. According to Shaffer, the NEA’s “imprimatur” gave The Cabin and The Big Read authority—that made potential partners and community members take notice. It’s hard, he noted, “to over-estimate the importance of this kind of support and advocacy.”

Partnerships

For their Big Read, The Cabin brought together 21 partners—libraries, schools, local newspapers, the state humanities council—which was “a broader circle” of partners than they had drawn for other efforts. In approaching potential organizations, they looked for promotional and programming partners who could extend their reach, partners with built-in populations—schools, the Mountain Home Air Force Base, Ft. Boise veterans Hospital—and partners who shared their core mission. They continued the close partnership with *Idaho Statesman*, which had regularly run articles about The Cabin and about literature and reading, including an article entitled, “Why read Hemingway?”

The partnerships with schools was not itself a challenge, but participation was: Even though *A Farewell to Arms* was one of the choices in the junior/11th grade American Literature curriculum, not many teachers were actually teaching it. Teachers, they found, plan their curriculum a full year ahead, so The Big Read came too late unless teachers were willing to make last-minute changes. Even then, it was hard for teachers to acquire enough books for students; building funds could be used for such purchases, but there were numerous other good causes competing for the same limited funds. Next time around, they plan to work more with librarians, who are “more likely to have their fingers on the pulse and a better sense of high school English teachers.” Plans are to have a representative from the school district on committee to discuss the fit of a title.

Other new challenges became apparent as the project grew and events were expanded to reach audiences not just in Boise but in the surrounding valley and other rural areas. There were logistical challenges, and challenges developing relationships with new partners.

Promotion and Programming

The Cabin targeted a number of events and promotion to a demographic different from their typical literary audiences. In addition to those in more rural areas around Boise, they also targeted those moving back into Boise's downtown, as part of new condo and development projects. They also enlisted the help of those involved in downtown life and revitalization, and chose event venues with ready-made audiences and reading-friendly atmospheres, hoping to attract, too "shoppers and walkers."

The Cabin offered media outlets two options: they could use the local public service announcement, which the Fox station had asked to produce, or the NEA's. Four stations opted for the local PSA, and one ran the NEA's. The public television station declined because they do not run commercials. The local ABC affiliate also promoted events during weekly "newsmakers" program. Other promotion included more advertising and packets than The Cabin typically provides, and a Read & Release book distribution effort, to which Cabin Board member Scott Guill and wife and Hemingway scholar Stacey contributed 400 books. The book bags included a copy of the book, the reader's guide, Cd, a bookmark, information about the NEA's and Cabin's websites—and instructions to read the book then pass it along.

Hemingway himself often seems larger than life, and another key element of promotion was a Hemingway presence and "Where's Papa?" promotion, designed to give The Big Read "a face, a personality." This took the form of Hemmingway impersonator, David Blampied, a life-size cardboard cut-out of Blampied as Hemingway, and a "Hemingway in Idaho" display from the Hemingway Center at Boise State University, all very successful.

Continuing their promotional strategy, The Cabin—though it more typically invites people into its friendly, serene reading and writing rooms—took Big Read events out to the public. The 19 events, held over 8 weeks, were designed to be widely "accessible." The Cabin's *Big Read* Kick-off was at the Saturday market, a "very public and friendly place where people already gather"—around 100 at this event. The mayor participated, endorsing the program with "The Big Read is a big deal. Other programming included readings from MFA students, an interactive trivia contest based on *A Farewell to Arms*, "an interview with Papa," with Blampied and Hemingway enthusiast Ted Dyer, and a final "gelato on the lawn" event, with Valerie Hemingway.

Not surprisingly, The Cabin took a fairly scholarly or at least literary approach to some programming. It enlisted the help of Hemingway scholar Susan Beegel, editor of *The Hemingway Review*, who talked to teachers and City Club members about Hemingway's life and the historical and biographical context of *A Farewell to Arms*. At an evening discussion of the state's kinship with Hemingway, Hemingway Preservation Foundation director Marty Peterson joined Beegel to talk about the Hemingway mystique and "what we want from writers." The lively conversation ranged from the "Hemingway cult" and "Idaho tourism pimps" (though he completed *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in Ketchum in 1939, and died there in 1961, Hemingway wrote only 11 words about Idaho), to reflections on connections to place, to a frank look at how—in face of American foreign policy and an embargo of Cuba that prohibits sending architects to Cuba—to protect Hemingway manuscripts from

the tropics and hurricanes. In a final consideration of writers and books endure, Beegel, Peterson, and the audience talked about the state of reading as reported in *Reading at Risk*.

In what Cabin staff consider one of their most effective events, they partnered with the local Veterans Hospital to convene a panel discussion, entitled “Recovering from War,” about the human cost of war, now, and as portrayed by Hemingway’s description of his experience on the Italian front in World War I. The panelists included a psychiatric clinical nurse and parent of a son serving in Iraq, and Dr. Larry Dewey, Chief of Psychiatry at the VA Hospital and author of *War and Redemption*, a book on post-traumatic stress syndrome. Although the event did not draw the general public in large numbers, it did draw veterans, and adult children and parents of soldiers.

Impact

Cabin Director Marti and Events Coordinator Michelle Coleman reported that they saw new faces at The Cabin, and faces that, by the end of The Big Read, had become familiar, some of whom “took this on like a course.” They also noted that the program gained momentum” as it went along, and that the “buzz of the media campaign became contagious.” Presenters and attendees alike seemed to respond positively to both the “fun-spirited” and thought-provoking events. Other indications that The Big Read was making a difference included the Guills’ (contributors) experience of seeing a young girl sitting outside, book in hand, with the contents of her book bag spread around her; or a Cabin board member’s story of how he, his daughter, and wife were all talking war, violence, and sex—because they were all reading *A Farewell to Arms*.

The Big Read was important to the community, but, in this site, it seemed important on a personal level as well, to The Cabin staff, who were able to accomplish the goals of the program and advance the mission of the organization. In a follow-up interview, Executive Director Shaffer noted that, in many ways, The Cabin shares the “critical task” of the NEA and The Big Read, not just of “engaging communities in literate pursuits” but of “engaging minds and hearts.” He noted that, with this program, there is always that lingering sense that they are “preaching to the choir”—to a reading community that would “use discretionary income for season’s tickets to a reading series,” and show up, in numbers close to a thousand to hear Barry Lopez read.” Even with this audience, says Shaffer, they “amped up the conversation.”

Shaffer cited a few things that led to their success, which, he thinks, can eventually broaden the audience. It took, he noted, “significant and sustained and deep work,” like the thoughtful programming and sustained effort staff and partners put together. It also depended on partners whose “missions merge,” so that a program like The Big Read “attaches to the organization in a long-term, meaningful way.”

Shaffer also had some ideas for involving a younger demographic and making reading “cool.” (Their attendance, like that in many other places, did skew to older readers, and *A Farewell to Arms* did not seem to be as successful with youth audiences as the pilot title, *Fahrenheit 451*.) Shaffer suggested more tie-ins to assignments and residencies for students. Although it would be a shift for The Cabin,

Shaffer suggested a MySpace presence, more condensed programming, more special events, ways to offer titles in an NEA-sponsored “Net Library” of downloadable books. He also suggested empowering kids by giving them grants—to, for example, design their own web-based book club.

The Cabin’s next Big Read selection, *My Ántonia*, seems as natural a fit as *A Farewell to Arms*. It’s a choice with special meaning for a western state, where, says Shaffer, landscape is important and the past is steeped in pioneer spirit and hopes of new beginnings; on a broader scale, he adds, “we’re all dealing with issues of immigration.” Previous partners are back on board, and, to reach out to their “growing, vibrant Hispanic community and refugee community,” they have enlisted new partners with similar missions, such as the Agency for New Americans. Plans for fun-spirited public events—a barn dance in a large stone barn, with pie and ice cream—are already underway.

Mattatuck Museum Arts and History Center, Waterbury, Connecticut

To Kill a Mockingbird

Region: Northeast

Total Days: 30

Military Base: No

Population: 107,902

Population Size: Medium

Number of Partner Organizations: 35

Number of Libraries: 1

Number of Museums: 1

Number of Volunteers: 33

Number of K-12 Schools: 9

Number of Teachers: 25

Number of Events: 20

Number of Attendees: 2,221

Adults, 1,310; Children 911

Number of Book Club Meetings: 5

Number of Book Club Attendees: 289

Adults, 203; Children 86

The Mattatuck Museum, a community-based organization already very experienced in partnering and implementing a robust schedule of public programming, felt several factors were integral to their very successful Big Read. Their book selection, To Kill a Mockingbird, with its themes of racism and outsider issues, was meaningful to their community and a catalyst for bringing people together to learn and understand one another's history and experiences. A memorable kick-off created a great buzz in the community. Local branding and information on promotional materials, and the engagement of local public schools and local arts organizations, seemed to engage the community on a more personal level, engendering a sense of community pride.

Background

The Mattatuck Museum Arts and History Center, in Waterbury, Connecticut, houses collections and exhibits that focus on regional history and the stories of work, family life, and community in west central Connecticut from 1650 to 1950, with special emphasis on the industrial developments in the central Naugatuck Valley and related stories of urban growth and immigrant experience. The art galleries feature the work of Connecticut painters from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Included in the collection is a permanent exhibit of over 10,000 buttons from all over the world, assembled more than 50 years ago.

According to Museum Director Marie Galbraith, the community-based Mattatuck Museum is experienced in partnering with other organizations and implementing a robust schedule of public programming. The Big Read was its first community-wide reading program; however, as a museum of art and history, reading has always been an integral part of their broad programming efforts, which attempts to break down racial and economic barriers, and get people to know each other as classmates, colleagues, and perhaps friends. The museum has a long-standing association with The Enlightenment School. A museum that has not only designed exhibits and programming to interest different groups, but has also opened its doors and spaces: during our visit, Galbraith cheerfully offered their 19th Century room, with oriental rugs, grand piano, and period paintings, to a middle-school, after-school students in need of a space to practice rap.

Waterbury and the Mattatuck Museum selected *To Kill a Mockingbird* because they felt it would be meaningful to their community, not only because it deals with racism but also because it deals with outsider issues—people who are disenfranchised. Waterbury is in many ways a city of immigrants, with 38 different languages spoken in the homes of Waterbury school students. (Museum and other background information from proposal, museum brochures, and the final report.)

Partnerships

Thirty-five community organizations partnered in The Big Read, the strongest being the Waterbury Public Schools, the local arts organizations, and the Naugatuck Community and Technical College. They employed several strategies for engaging the public and motivating participation: First was to host a memorable kick-off event to create a great buzz in the community, and create interest in the book and in the roster of 16 public programs. They used city leaders and other local public figures, to read passages. Several local arts organizations meant that the program had a community-wide impact and engendered a sense of community pride. Third, the project had (in the Mattatuck Museum) a strong central coordinating organization to oversee and manage the project, the partners, and the events.

Galbraith reported that the museum's well-established partnership with the school system also contributed to the success of the project, as did the support from school district officials who declared *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be a part of the 9th grade curriculum. Even students from the Enlightenment School, an alternative high school for students with behavior problems, became very engaged. The teacher taught the book using a progressive approach, first showing the video, then listening to the tapes, and, certain of students' comprehension, reading the novel.

Waterbury saw the engagement of local public schools and local arts organizations as the core reason their community had such a successful *Big Read* experience.

Materials and Resources

The Big Read grant provided vital funding to purchase books, books on CD, and to pay the artists whose participation was crucial to their ability to interpret the book through the arts and reach out to diverse audiences. Teachers found the Teacher's Guides and Audio CDs very useful in teaching the novel. The brochures that listed local events were most popular.

Everyone who attended a program was given a copy of the Reader's Guide, a Big Read Survey form (which was collected at the end of the program), and a Big Read brochure containing a list of all *Big Read* events. The Reader's Guide was always popular, according to Galbraith, who speculated that "People don't want to be told what to think about; they just want to read the book and talk about it." Nursing homes, book clubs, church groups, after school programs held in community settings, and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts received copies of all of these materials as well.

Media

Waterbury applied multiple approaches (the newspaper, the radio, TV, brochures, etc.) numerous times, so people had many opportunities and methods for learning about (or being reminded of) upcoming events.

The media provided by the NEA had mixed reviews: The PSAs were used minimally because of the cost of running them. Banners were hung in various downtown buildings, though Galbraith noted that the black background sometimes made them disappear in the streetscape. The posters were not as useful as their own, locally produced brochures, which included information on how to participate, the schedule of programs, and all of the community partners. The bookmarks were very popular. They suspect that the website was not a significant factor in informing their residents about programming.

Demographics and Participation

The Waterbury community became actively involved in supporting The Big Read and recruiting participants. Church clergy based sermons on themes from the book and announced, “I want everyone in my congregation to read this book!”

According to the Museum’s director, one of the key factors for the high level of participation in Waterbury’s Big Read was rooted in the emotional experience of community members. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the catalyst, the tool that let everyone come together to learn and understand one another’s history and experience. The residents of this multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious community came together around an issue (civil rights) that was of grave concern to them. “That’s why they showed up at everything and why they read the book. They wanted human contact, and The Big Read was an opportunity for them to say, ‘These are the values that we share,’ and say it in different forms—different ways—with different forms of expression, and with conviction!” The dance programs, the community choral concert, and the book discussions were filled with emotion as the (often cross-generational and multi-ethnic) performers and the audience confronted the issues of racism.

Galbraith explained that, although it’s important that everybody read the book, it’s more important that they come together and talk about what it means. High school students agreed: After a lecture-only event, students said they would have liked more opportunities for the audience to speak. They generally preferred active involvement, and suggested activities such as debating, discussing controversial ideas or themes, and responding to challenging questions. Students also participated through their artwork and a multi-school essay contest.

Non-readers were engaged through a variety of public programs in nursing homes, cable access television, theater and dance performances, movie showings, and access to the book on CD.

Impact

Considering all aspects of Waterbury’s successful Big Read, two recurring themes emerged as having the greatest potential to impact reading habits: “Local” and “Relevant.” Local branding and

information on promotional materials, local officials supporting the project, performances by local arts organizations—all seem to engage the community on a more personal level. The impact of The Big Read experience on literary reading habits was closely tied to the relevance of the themes of the book, which were tied to their own community history and current issues.

Everyone wanted to be part of a program that brought the region together around an issue that is still potent and unresolved.... We received many phone calls and notes from museum members and non-members who wanted us to know they were reading the book. The regional impact was very gratifying and exciting.

The relevance of the themes in the book also changed the conversation about the city both in the city and in the suburbs. The stories in the regional newspaper inspired both formal and informal book clubs to read the book. Through word-of-mouth, hearsay, and informal reports, the Museum learned there were many different groups reading the book, and many were outside the typical, defined audiences that a school or public program might attract. “I’m grateful that the NEA did this—and not only because it’s about reading (which is very important) but because it is about community-building through reading.”

The Mattatuck Museum is very much in touch with the Waterbury community where, says Galbraith, racism still exists. Even though the Museum already reaches out to all types of audiences in their community, what was different about The Big Read was that it provided an opportunity for these audiences to come together and have a conversation. As the Museum director commented, “Reading the same literature creates a synergy.”

There was other evidence that *The Big Read* had an impact on reading habits: The Mattatuck reported,

There were people who called the Museum just to tell us: “We are reading the book!” These calls were from across the board - many whites from suburbia & many blacks. And the book discussions were very interesting. People would say: “I never thought of it that way.” That’s how you learn. And people want to talk about what they have read. Some people showed up who said, “We don’t belong to any book club, but we read the book.”

The Enlightenment School

Finally, there was some evidence that even the most reluctant readers experienced a change of attitude about reading. The teacher at the Enlightenment School, the alternative high school, reported she felt that her students’ Big Read experience had an impact on their interest in reading.

...There was a point where I think some of them understood the importance of literacy, and the idea that you can have information at your fingertips. They found out how much they didn’t know, and that they could read and find out more – and actually enjoy what they’re reading!

More on the Enlightenment School

The Enlightenment School, a public alternative school serving primarily minority students unable to succeed in traditional public school, has maintained a close partnership with the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury for several years. Most of these students have difficult family circumstances and many face personal challenges as well.

*Susan, the teacher at the Enlightenment School was excited about the opportunity for her students to participate in The Big Read, because "...my students tend to be so disenfranchised—generation after generation. I wanted to make them feel like they were part of something that was a big deal ...that people all over the country were doing this and 'you are a part of it too.'" When consulted on a book choice, she recommended *To Kill a Mockingbird* because the themes were more accessible and relevant to her students.*

Receiving free books was "monumental"—both for Susan and the students—since she is used to operating without any teaching or learning materials. All middle and high school students participated—even the EXCEL classes (for students who have been expelled or are awaiting a hearing). A language arts teacher, Susan used the book as the focus for developing lessons based on state standards, especially response to literature. She frequently used quotes from the book—such as the one about putting yourself in someone else's skin—to discuss with her students what it means to the character, to the story, and to human nature in general. She used the NEA's Teacher's Guide, breaking the lessons down into a more realistic timeframe for her students, so 10 lessons became 45 smaller lessons. The book helped her cover the concepts of hyperbole, simile, metaphor, and personification.

There were several other ways Susan expanded her curriculum to include the book. Her students participated in a re-enactment of the courtroom scene at a Big Read event at the Mattatuck Museum. She collaborated with the science teacher to develop an art contest where students created Mandalas that were a character analysis of one of the book's characters. There was a formula to apply, but first students had to research life science by looking at different kinds of animals and plants and earth science by looking at different minerals, weather patterns, and elements in nature. Susan was surprised by her students' engagement in the project, and how poetically they revealed their understanding of the concepts: "I'm an acorn because I don't come out of my shell," or "I'm like a tree because they want to cut me down."

The students were very invested in Susan's reading the book aloud in class, and became engaged on an inter-personal level. She noticed students were having dialogues with each other, and—in this very transient and truant population—when kids would miss parts of the book, classmates would catch them up.

Susan felt her students' Big Read experience had a positive impact on their interest in reading. "I think some of them understood the importance of literacy and the idea that... any information is at your fingertips." It was powerful for her students "to find out how much they didn't know, and to find out they could read and find out more, and they [could] actually enjoy what they're reading"

Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, Harbor Springs, Michigan

To Kill a Mockingbird

Region: Midwest	Number of K-12 Schools: 4
Total Days: 43	Number of Teachers: 0
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 40
Population: 57,527	Number of Attendees: 1,846
Population Size: Medium	Adults, 1,535; Children 311
Number of Partner Organizations: 8	Number of Book Club Meetings: 16
Number of Libraries: 7	Number of Book Club Attendees: 292
Number of Museums: 1	Adults 291; Children, 1
Number of Volunteers: 36	

A first community reading project for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians (LTBB), The Big Read brought the Tribal and greater community closer together through joint planning and events. They attribute their successful project to several factors: their inclusion and expansion strategy for developing partnerships—where primary partners reached out to additional organizations; the relevance of the themes of To Kill a Mockingbird; the diversified programming targeting all audiences; and the extensive media and photo coverage in local newspapers, featuring various Tribal and community leaders.

The Education Department of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians (LTBB) was drawn to participate in *The Big Read* because it reinforced their own focus on literacy, and provided an opportunity to develop collaborative partnerships between the Tribe and various community organizations. Their book selection, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, contained the thematic components of intergenerational relationships and racial issues and socioeconomic issues very relevant to their community.

Because the project covered a large geographic area—the greater Northern Michigan community—and the committee wanted to encourage participation from the whole community (not just the Tribe)—they developed creative outreach strategies to encourage participation.

- Putting the novel in the hands of their rural and socio-economically diverse community members was a top priority. They used multiple avenues of distribution, such as schools, churches, libraries, arts and cultural centers, and community functions.
- While high school and adult readers were the primary audience, they involved younger readers as well by generating a “read-alike” list of age-appropriate books with similar themes and content areas to help educators develop read-aloud projects, thematic projects and storytelling events.

- They chose Children’s Literacy as the theme and focus of their Annual Resource Fair, an event geared to offer free information, resources and materials to children and families. *The Big Read* table handed out “Brown Bags” containing books, treats, and information.
- The Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra director, seeking unique ways to offer programming to various audiences, commissioned an original composition titled “Scout.” The concert was narrated by the actress who originally played Scout, Mary Badham, who also attended other functions within the Tribal and greater community during her visit—which led to other programming opportunities and relationships within the community.
- Extensive media and photo coverage in local newspapers featured various community leaders endorsing the Big Read through a “Caught Reading” Campaign. The photos cleverly “caught” them reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* (instead of doing their job), and also caught the attention of the community,
- Diversified programming created a dynamic program that served even the most isolated communities. The calendar included events such as concerts, staged readings, movie showings, pre-school story hours, and a lecture series. As the LTBB Education Director noted, there were pros and cons to this extensive effort: “There was such a large group of organizations and agencies deeply excited and committed to the project that the ideas and energy were endless. However, it also made the project sometimes hard to logistically manage.”
- The LTBB Tribal Chairman was a wonderful supporter of the project, often speaking publicly about The Big Read project. As a keynote speaker at one event, he talked about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the issues of racial and socio-economic differences, and diversity. He also compared some of the racial incidents in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to incidents experienced by the Native Americans growing up in Northern Michigan.

Overall, The Big Read brought the tribal and greater community closer together through joint planning and events. This opportunity opened doors for discussions, dialogue and relationships that will continue to flourish. Furthermore, it gave the community an insight into the Tribal community beyond what is often perceived as casinos and “gaming.” The Tribe’s commitment to education and literacy was certainly recognized.

In summer 2007, Rockman conducted follow-up interviews with three sites that completed their Big Reads early in the program's first cycle, before the evaluation got underway. These were not the only sites with early Big Reads, but rather ones we heard from or about through emails. The briefs below share highlights from these sites, based on interviews, proposals, and final narrative reports.

Newport News Public Library System, Newport News, Virginia

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Region: South (South Atlantic)	Number of K-12 Schools: 6
Total Days: 33	Number of Teachers: 18
Military Base: as partners	Number of Events: 9
Population: 400,500	Number of Attendees: 1,239
Number of Partner Organizations: 1	Adults: 289; Children 950
Number of Libraries: 12	Number of Book Club Meetings: 10
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 171
Number of Volunteers: 50	Adults: 171; Children 0

The Newport News Public Library System partnered with three public and three academic libraries to host events for Their Eyes Were Watching God. Each institution designed events with its own audience in mind, thereby drawing diverse audiences to diverse events. According to The Big Read coordinator, the partnership “turned what used to be a competition between organizations into collaboration.” Pleased with their efforts and reluctant to part company, the group subsequently created The Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium to continue to “put reading on the forefront of the cultural life” of their citizens.

Background

Newport News is located on the lower end of the Virginia Peninsula—referred to locally as just “the Peninsula”—which is bordered by the York River, the James River, and the Chesapeake Bay. In addition to Peninsula residents, the Newport News Public Library System serves men and women stationed at nearby Langley Air Force Base and Ft. Eustis, or on board ships docked at local shipyards. A recipient of several statewide library awards, the Newport News Public Library offers services that range from technology programs at three Community Technology Centers created to provide equitable access to all local citizens, to cultural programs like *Explore Your Community Roots*, a series of book and film discussions undertaken with twelve cultural groups that reflect the ethnic diversity of the area. Just prior to The Big Read, the library had mounted its own efforts to address declines in reading with a year-long series of programs entitled *The Power of the Book*.

Partnerships and Promotion

Although libraries up and down the Peninsula were invited to participate, the main partners for The Big Read implementation were three public and three academic libraries: the Hampton Library System, the Poquoson Public Library, and the York County Public Library; and libraries at Christopher Newport University, Hampton University, and Thomas Nelson Community College.

The program also included media partners and the two nearby military bases, Langley AFB and Ft. Eustis.

According to Special Projects coordinator Judy Condra, they invited these organizations to participate with “no specific demands or commitments necessary.” Each group, doing its own promotion to its own constituency, “figured out how to attract audiences.” In combination, the partners served a diverse demographic. Christopher Newport University, for example, serves a predominately white university audience; the Poquoson Public Library, a white rural audience. The four Newport News library branches each reached a slightly different demographic: about half of the main library’s service area is African-American, and areas served by branch libraries, predominately African-American. Together, said Condra, they “sharpened ways to reach audiences and [could] do it quickly because we’re not just one organization.” The local newspaper supported their efforts with three major articles. They weren’t, according to Condra, as successful in reaching military audiences as they were in reaching civilian ones—perhaps, said Condra, because their military contact was in charge of PR “for the whole East Coast.”

Programming

Programming also varied from location to location. During events at the main Newport News library, participants “spent a long time” just discussing the book. Other branches hosted less formal book discussions that included food and more socializing. Among the universities, some held book discussions; others, larger events. Thomas Nelson Community College provided scholars to lead book discussions, and, according to Condra, the professor who coordinated this was “beyond good.”

Hampton University held a day-long program, one of the “best attended,” with a panel discussion and film screening. Lucy Ann Hurston, the author’s niece a Hampton alumna, spoke at some events, in connection with which Barnes & Noble sold copies of her book—at a considerable discount (\$8.98 vs. the \$30.00 retail cost). When Barnes & Noble’s 60 copies sold out, Condra said they “sent people all over the area—to Richmond and Williamsburg, up to two hours away round-trip—to get additional copies for the next speaking engagement. The Zetas, Lucy Ann Hurston’s sorority, gave “their money and their muscle,” volunteering at events and donating \$200.

An exhibit of paintings of Zora Neale Hurston’s hometown, done by artist Andre Smith in collaboration with Hurston, and lent by the Maitland Museum in Maitland, Florida, was also successful with audiences. The event also included a University of Richmond folklorist, who spoke about the images in the book.

Impact

According to Condra, the Newport News Public Library had 963 library card applications during The Big Read, and 1,829 the month after. Although some applications could, she noted, be attributed to summer reading programs, the staff who ran the statistics thought it was unlikely that a near doubling of applications could be entirely due to summer programs. Condra also cited other, less tangible evidence that The Big Read experience, which she said went “beyond anything we ever imagined,” enhanced their efforts to “build a community of readers.”

It brought libraries together, gave us a focus. It put reading on the forefront of the cultural life of our citizens. I can't imagine there would be a community that fulfilled the goal of The Big Read better than we did.

Condra also said that the programs were “so incredibly successful that the group didn’t want to break up.” To continue the good work, they formed the Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium (<http://www.newport-news.va.us/library/events/tan>). The goal of the Consortium is to provide free literary events to the public and to “level the playing field so that everyone can have these experiences.” As of this writing they are not yet a 501(c)3, but can receive funds from humanities organizations such as the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and other library friends. As one of their first activities, the Consortium invited Amy Tan to speak in September 2008, and Christopher Newport University offered room at their new events center. The talk was first planned for a 500-seat venue, but because of the demand for tickets was moved to a 1,700-seat theater, and still quickly sold out. They want the Amy Tan talk to become an annual event. Bill Bryson’s press agent also contacted them to explore a Bryson visit.

The Big Read, said Condra, “turned what used to be a competition between organizations into a collaboration.” Hampton University applied for a 2008 Big Read grant, as the lead organization, supported by the newly formed Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium.

Peoria Public Library, Peoria, Illinois

To Kill a Mockingbird

Region: Midwest (East North Central)

Total Days: 18

Military Base: No

Population: 112,936

Number of Partner Organizations: 28

Number of Libraries: 4

Number of Museums: 1

Number of Volunteers: 45

Number of K-12 Schools: 18

Number of Teachers: 26

Number of Events: 22

Number of Attendees: 1827

Adults, 1,196; Children, 631

Number of Book Club Meetings: 4

Number of Book Club Attendees: 69

Adults, 67; Children, 2

Prior to The Big Read, the Peoria Public Library had conducted five successful Peoria Reads, all in collaboration with the Common Place Family Learning Center, an organization that helps low-income families overcome the effects of poverty and social injustice. The Big Read and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird fit easily with both institutions' goals of promoting literacy and bringing readers and non-readers together to discuss books and issues that resonate locally. The Big Read, says project coordinator Roberta Koscielski, was also helpful in "getting the library's face out there," and deserves some credit for approval of a local library referendum, which passed with 72% yes, "a record for the state of Illinois."

Background and Partnerships

A veteran of five community-wide Peoria Reads! programs, the Peoria Public Library had a stable of over twenty partners to draw on for The Big Read. The library's primary partner, in this and the five previous initiatives, was Common Place Family Learning Center, a social service agency with a forty-year history of working with low-income families, especially in the area of adult literacy. As they had in previous reading programs, the library and Common Place included adult learners in The Big Read book selection. Peoria also had "great cooperation" with other public libraries, especially in nearby Chillicothe, where the public library took The Big Read on "as their own." The Peoria Public Library also partnered with eighteen schools and area colleges and universities, and the local Federation of Teachers continued its sponsorship of school essay and art contests and purchased companion books to support Big Read participation by schools in neighboring counties. Media partners included the *Peoria Journal-Star* and WTVP Channel 47.

Promotion and Programming

According to Peoria librarian and Big Read coordinator Roberta Koscielski, the most obvious difference between The Big Read and prior initiatives was that The Big Read had more publicity—though banners, radio ads, other promotional resources provided by the NEA, and enhanced programming—all of which brought more recognition to the library. Reflecting on their decision to apply for a second Big Read grant, and what she hoped was a succession of Big Reads, Koscielski said it was largely because of the "availability of resources and publicity." The increased awareness meant that they didn't have to "start from scratch...informing people every

year...because they know what to anticipate.” And, she added, “The books chosen are outstanding. Just by choosing the book you’re getting publicity.”

The selection of *To Kill a Mockingbird* departed somewhat from their usual practice. For previous community-wide reading programs, Peoria had selected contemporary titles, fiction as well as non-fiction, which they hoped would introduce the community to lesser-known authors and get diverse audiences talking about community issues. For example, the likelihood of the death penalty for an African-American teen charged with a local murder prompted the choice of Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*. Dim economic forecasts affecting many local citizens and much of the Midwest led to the selection of Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*. When the budget allowed, they had also brought in authors and local experts to lead and inspire discussions.

To Kill a Mockingbird, said Koscielski, brought people together in a different way. An immediate benefit came from “the joy of re-experiencing books” and returning to titles first encountered earlier in life. With its themes of tolerance, and accessibility to adult learners and nonreaders, *To Kill a Mockingbird* also fit well with their goal of bringing people together to discuss thought-provoking issues. Koscielski said that community members from various “racial, economic, and ethnic backgrounds” found common ground in talking about the book’s timeless, universal themes, as relevant today as they were when the book took place and when it was written.

The library was especially pleased to bring Harper Lee biographer, Charles Shields, to Peoria for a busy ten programs in two days, each one different, “tailored to high school students, adults, college students.” The visits at the high schools, said Koscielski, received very good responses, “with people asking for autographs.” She drove Shields to one event, and had to drop him off a block away because there were so many school buses parked out front.

Koscielski also reported that some people went to multiple talks, and that Shields added an unscheduled talk at a community college about techniques for researching and interviewing people. The last program at a branch of the Peoria Public Library was a “sardine situation” with many people squeezed into limited space. Koscielski thought it was likely that word-of-mouth drove attendance: People had heard about earlier programs and knew that this was their last chance to see Shields. Her only regret was that Shields was not around for the mock trial performed the day after he left by an after-school high school program made up of all African-American students, accompanied by the high school’s chorus.

Impact

After The Big Read, Peoria library staff saw changes in the circulation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Compared with the past few years, circulation of print copies was up 45%. Koscielski also reported a significant increase in circulation of large-print editions, DVDs, audio books—and *Mockingbird*, Charles Shields’s biography of Harper Lee. She also saw more attendance at events and more interest and use of the library by teachers and their students.

According to Koscielski, The Big Read also spurred an interest in classic literature, not only among regular patrons, but also among readers new to literary fiction, those cardholders who rarely checked out literary texts or attended library events. Koscielski noted that in promoting the library and classic literature to this group, they assured them that “books are painless—they’re as good or better than the things you’ve been reading.”

The interest and excitement generated by The Big Read also seemed to spill over into summer reading programs and strategies for recruiting parents and children. Common Place held family reading programs with the theme of “Once Upon a Time.” Parents read classics like *King Arthur*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Little Women*; children read about Anansi, the spider, and South-African folktale character, Abiyoyo. Parents wrote about their books and children did arts and crafts. Participants in the library’s family summer reading program received prizes for the number of weeks they spent at least three hours reading. Around a thousand people attended a closing party at the zoo, covered by the local newspaper. One of the program sponsors commented on how diverse the party was, compared to previous summers’ events.

Koscielski also shared anecdotal evidence about the impact of the program from local surveys. After hearing Charles Shields’ talk, one community member had, during a vacation in the South, included a visit to the café that Harper Lee and her sister patronize. There were stories of cross-generational interest among homeschoolers, and of families reading together, including two mother-son pairs. Koscielski also shared the story of a little boy who received a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a prize in a raffle and got autographs from their Congressman and other celebrity readers. “I don’t think,” said Koscielski, “we’ve experienced this with other programs.”

A Second Big Read

Peoria applied for a second Big Read grant, to read *Fahrenheit 451*. Koscielski anticipated that they would continue existing partnerships, certainly their long-standing partnership with Common Place. With their shared focus on literacy, they planned to announce the second Big Read selection at an annual luncheon to honor literacy volunteers, which they hoped would get tutors excited and win publicity from newspapers. The keynote speaker at the luncheon was to be the manager of the state’s literacy programs, which would also allow them to connect with state officials. Koscielski also noted early interest from past partners: public officials had already asked to be included as celebrity readers in the next readathon, and The Apollo Theatre, which had sponsored a standing-room-only film screening the first time around, was eager to hold another film festival.

As part of their second effort, Koscielski and partners planned to encourage more area libraries to participate, in part through a partnership with the Alliance Library System, one of nine multi-type library systems working together to provide essential services to the citizens of Illinois and technical assistance to libraries. Plans included workshops about The Big Read at the Alliance’s headquarters, where participants would learn about the program, listen to sample book discussions, and pick up materials. The library also planned to expand outreach to school and public libraries, neighborhood organizations, and social service organizations, by offering support, discussion

leaders, materials, and free copies of *Fahrenheit 451*. Changes included fewer events and speakers, to give them sufficient time and publicity for the most popular events, such as the Readathon.

Although their second Big Read would rely on pre-existing partnerships and an ongoing focus on literacy, Koscielski said that the national program had changed the way they think about partnerships and promotion. Through partnerships, she said, they were “working on tying things together,” looking at—and helping the community see—the big picture. When they got the word out about events, they wouldn’t just be announcing an isolated program. They would also be promoting the public library, literacy, and classic literature.

Postscript

The Peoria Public Library’s second bid for a Big Read grant was successful. So was a local library initiative, which passed with 72% yes—“a record for the state of Illinois,” says Koscielski, and due in part to The Big Read and its help in “getting the library’s face out there.”

Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
Fahrenheit 451

Region: Midwest (West North Central)	Number of K-12 Schools: 7
Total Days: Jan.-Feb.	Number of Teachers: 30
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 50
Population: 2,600,000	Number of Attendees: 6,031
Number of Partner Organizations: 20	Adults, 3,628; Children, 2,403
Number of Libraries: 5	Number of Book Club Meetings: 36
Number of Museums: 4	Number of Book Club Attendees: 972
Number of Volunteers: 0	Adults, 373; Children, 599

Washington University partnered with local libraries, school districts, municipal agencies, and arts, literary, and media organizations on a multidisciplinary Big Read designed to reach out to the greater St. Louis area. A key audience was students in underserved areas, who, to their delight, received free books and took part in museum visits, theatrical performances, book discussions, and film festivals organized around Fahrenheit 451. Washington University saw The Big Read as a prototype for partnerships with local bookstores, libraries, museums, and arts organizations, in support of outreach to the community, especially to students who have few such opportunities.

Background and Partners

Washington University in St. Louis is probably better known for its teaching and research programs, and the rich array of courses and majors it offers almost 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students, but the university also has a strong outreach program to metropolitan St. Louis that provided a base for The Big Read. Previous outreach efforts included a science outreach program for K-12 teachers, students, and families; a literacy program for elementary school students; and exhibits developed in collaboration with the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.²

Partnerships and Programming

The Kemper Art Museum was also a Big Read partner, joining the university and some 30 other partners to reach different parts of the community with different events and through different mediums. In their final report, Washington University described the partnerships with the museum and the university's Edison Theatre as two of the most productive.³ They collaborated with the Kemper Museum on the *Reality Bites* art exhibit, and with the theatre on performances of *Hana's Suitcase* and *1984*, both of which gave participants different ways to relate to the themes of *Fahrenheit 451*. Working with their Life Long Learning Institute, Washington University also created programming for adult learners. All events in one way or another focused on the themes of censorship and repression of knowledge, and encouraged audiences to discuss "the role of the book, printed word and literacy as essential ingredients in the development of citizens who are engaged in their communities and in the pursuit of learning" (Big Read proposal).

² Information from Washington University's Big Read proposal.

³ Washington University, Big Read Final Report Project Narrative.

Washington University also partnered with seven area schools, where teachers and students discussed the novel, participated in museum tours, and viewed art exhibits and films. The Big Read grant funds went largely to the purchase of over 2,000 free books for students, adult learners, and library districts. According to the final report, students in the St. Louis public schools, where resources are scarce, were “especially appreciative.” University instructors also paid visits to schools to assist teachers and talk with students, and in the course of their discussions learned that students in an American Literature survey did not read individual novels because none were available. Instead, they read aloud from a shared anthology, which students were not allowed to take home.

Promotion and Resources

Media partnerships were also a key part of this multidisciplinary Big Read. Fox 2 news channel and the Higher Education Channel sponsored Round Trip videoconferences of live book discussions about technology and privacy issues, broadcast to over 500,000 cable television subscribers. The Mayor used a blog to reach the community, and the local NPR affiliate and city, university, local and alternative newspapers also provided coverage. Washington University found the PSA to be too long to appeal to local media outlets, but most other NEA resources were widely distributed. The national Big Read website, they reported, was “indispensable.” The university also built its on project website, which turned out to be an effective promotional tool. The Audio Guides were most useful; although the Reader’s Guide and Teacher’s Guide was helpful, university sponsors found the former too simple for advanced high school and college students, and the latter too basic to offer teachers “new tips for analysis of the book” (final report). In a nice convergence of events, support from the St. Louis Arts Commissions enabled The Big Read to co-sponsor the regional competition of *Poetry Out Loud*, another NEA literature initiative.

Impact of the Program

Washington University reported that the book discussions, film festivals, exhibits, theatrical performances, and other multimedia, multidisciplinary events “made it seem as if The Big Read was everywhere.” Reflecting on their saturation of the community with Big Read events, Community Relations Director and Big Read coordinator Cheryl Adelstein said that they were very pleased, but concluded that “quality not quantity” should be the goal. “The most rewarding and useful events,” their final report noted, “were those that engaged high school students and non-readers” along with those already interested in literature.”

Although they’re not sure whether they’ll apply for another NEA grant, Adelstein says they see The Big Read as a “prototype” for future collaboration, and that the seeds that were planted during The Big Read have continued to bear fruit. The Big Read, she says, was “incredibly valuable for the connections,” and has “shown that the university can be a committed, responsible partner.” She’s now associated with The Big Read, and continues to get phone calls from organizations about the program, asking if it will happen again, wanting to be involved. Adelstein has had calls from a community college in St. Louis, and a theatre company has asked her to be part of its planning session and sent her an invitation with the request “Think big with us!” Adelstein is also working

with a local high school that serves low-income students. The school is reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and the university is a partial underwriter of the project, which includes purchasing books for the students and bringing in an arts organization. One of the central themes of the book is disability/autism, so the Disability Theatre Project will be working with the students to select and dramatize scenes from the book. Based on student and teacher interest, students will be invited to visit the campus.

Based in part on their success with The Big Read, Adelstein has connected the university's Freshman Reading Program (<http://www.frp.wustl.edu>) to the greater St. Louis community in three different ways designed to reach students with different bents: local libraries will have their own discussions of the FRP book (*Einstein's Dreams*); high school students in AP English and AP Physics classes will have the opportunity to come to campus, take a tour, discuss the book, and be treated like first year students; and an art museum will provide a docent-led tour on the impact of the theory of relativity on modern art. Adelstein says she also plans to select a book from The Big Read list for next year's Freshman Reading Program, and, should they reapply and win another award, make the FRP a part of Washington University St. Louis's Big Read.

PHASE 1, CYCLE 2

Berkeley Public Library, Berkeley, California

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Region: West/Pacific	Number of K-12 Schools: 2
Total Days: 19	Number of Teachers: 10
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 14
Population: 100,744	Number of Attendees: 390
Number of Partner Organizations: 5	Adults, 293; Children, 97
Number of Libraries: 1	Number of Book Club Meetings: 11
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 139
Number of Volunteers: 1	Adults, 117; Children, 22

*Berkeley, California has a reputation for marching to the beat of a different drummer. Underlying the town's well-known political rallies and progressive values is a strong commitment to diversity and individuality, which came through in their Big Read. Staff and volunteers produced a multilayered series of historical and cultural events around Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, designed to appeal not only to the grant's target audience of seniors, but to youth in the community as well. Berkeley's Big Read had trappings common to many other projects across the country, but it also infused its programming with a character that was uniquely its own, uniquely Berkeley.*

Background

One of the first publicity events for The Big Read was, fittingly, the *How Berkeley Can You Be?* parade. A contingent of library supporters carried Big Read posters and a Berkeley Public Library banner. Their parade slot was after the local Tibetan association and before a peace sign-laden float from a progressive elementary school—very Berkeley indeed. At the festival that followed, library staff and volunteers staffed a table with information about The Big Read and other library programs. A perfect way to promote a Big Read designed to add to the life of the community and inspire community members to find their voices and tell their stories. Big Read programmers focused on the storytelling aspect of Hurston's life and work by asking the community "What's *your* story?" Library staff held storytelling sessions at Berkeley senior centers where seniors could record their stories to be distributed via podcast. Big Read programmers also made a conscious effort to reach out to teenagers, children and reluctant readers. As they explained in their report,

We reached out to non-readers by making connections between literature and the arts. We tried to make the connection between Zora Neale Hurston's passion for storytelling and potential readers' own stories. We made every attempt to concentrate on the accessibility of the novel—to link this literary work with art, music, dance, folklore and storytelling.

Promotion, Volunteers, and Partnerships

Berkeley relied on volunteers and nontraditional locations to reach out to the various target audiences. Student community service members distributed Reader's Guides in locations such as laundromats and in lower-income areas of the city. Librarians distributed 200 free copies of the book at Big Read events, twice as many as they gave away during previous reading events. Each copy of the book contained a "Pass It On!" sticker to encourage sharing. Big Read funding also allowed programmers to do more outreach in the community.

The Big Read statistics at the beginning of this case study say there was one volunteer, but that number does not do this volunteer justice. Sarah was a Masters of Library Sciences student at California State East Bay who had started volunteering at the Berkeley Public Library just prior to the planning of The Big Read. One of the librarians recommended that she attend a Big Read planning meeting and when the original grant coordinator left the library, Sarah and another librarian took over. Sarah's Cal State connections were fortuitous for event planning. She recruited an English professor at the university to lead a discussion on the Harlem Renaissance, an event that was well-attended and received. Big Read programmers also relied on partnerships established through its ongoing Berkeley Reads (adult literacy) and Berkeley Reading Together (children/teens) programs to work with seniors and adolescents. Other Big Read partnerships were formed through the interests and resources of Library staff. The Afro-Haitian dance troupe at The Big Read kick-off came by way of a Library security guard who dances with the group.

Programming

Grantees felt this kick-off event, held on October 13th, was the highlight of their Big Read experience. The program began with an introduction to The Big Read and welcomes by Mayor Tom Bates and a representative from Congresswoman Barbara Lee's office. The audience was then treated to a dramatic reading of *Eyes'* first chapters by high school students from the Berkeley Rep School of Theatre. As grantees noted in the final report, "members of the audience were visibly moved—some to tears." Afterwards, audience members commented on how impressed they were with the students' command of the complicated dialect, and how hearing the text read out loud would help them as they tackled the book. The kick-off ended with an energetic performance from an Afro-Haitian dance troupe. The dancers' bright costumes and joyous, rhythmic movements brought the audience to its feet.

Berkeley's Big Read sponsored a two-week workshop for students in Berkeley High's Life Academy, a program designed to help ninth-grade students transition to high school. Students, too, were invited to tell their stories, in this case by developing and painting a mural.

Big Read programmers sponsored three other major events, all of which explored the historical and cultural context of the book and its author. Events were held at the main branch of the public library or at one of the city's three senior centers. Programs covered the Harlem Renaissance, the music of the 1930s, and the life and times of Zora Neale Hurston. For the latter event, educator and actress J.P. Myrick performed a one-woman show as Hurston and told audiences her life

story and the folktales that shaped her writing. The performance was so convincing that in a question and answer session with the actress, an audience member addressed her as “Zora,” expecting her to answer in character. The event attracted a small but diverse audience of about 20 people, mostly seniors who had heard of the program through notices in the *Berkeley Daily Planet* or posters at the senior centers. At least one student from the University of California, Berkeley also attended. His professor was offering extra credit to students who went to Big Read events.

Impact

Grantees estimated that about 400 people attended Big Read events. One person in the audience for the J.P. Myrick performance observed that it was difficult to draw people to library events because of the proliferation of so many other literary activities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Grantees distributed press releases and PSAs to about 45 media outlets but commented that “the local press did not cover the Big Read as well as we had hoped.” On the other hand, partners placed banners in very public locations, including the local high school and the “highly visible” school district office downtown. That banner remains hanging to this day.

The story-telling events at the senior centers did not attract as many participants as hoped, but seniors appreciated the opportunity to participate in book discussions they would otherwise be unable to attend. The art workshop for youth was considered a great success, as an example of effective programming and a productive partnership. Not only did it give students a rare opportunity to do art, it expanded at least one student’s view of art as a form of personal expression. The mural created by Berkeley High’s Life Academy was placed in the Teen section of the West Branch Library, where the artists were celebrated at a November reception.

All told, Berkeley’s Big Read infused art, history, culture and context into the promotion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Unlike the library’s previous community reading programs, The Big Read allowed organizers to “present speakers and performers that added layers of understanding about the novel.” Such programming made the book more accessible to seniors, teenagers, and reluctant readers and built excitement for it. Participants requested more events like this, and library staff learned of the benefit—and need—for community outreach. The grantees noted that “The Big Read mindset gave us the opportunity to think outside the box,” a concept very much in keeping with the vitality, creativity, and diversity that *is* the City of Berkeley.

Ironwood Carnegie Library, Ironwood, Michigan

The Grapes of Wrath

Region: Midwest/East North Central	Number of K-12 Schools: 3
Total Days: 29	Number of Teachers: 4
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 18
Population: 14,687	Number of Attendees: 901
Number of Partner Organizations: 7	Adults, 258; Children, 643
Number of Libraries: 3	Number of Book Club Meetings: 57
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 753
Number of Volunteers: 8	Adults, 470; Children, 283

The former mining towns that came together for this Big Read tend to be independent and self-sufficient—each with its own mine, its own immigrant populations, its own company stores—but this experience proved the value of collaborating and consolidating interests. The Grapes of Wrath was not an easy book for Ironwood: long for a first community read, Steinbeck’s novel also hit a little too close to home for a community still adjusting, even after 40 years, to the closing of the iron mines and the economic downturn that followed. But the challenge to read harder books turned out to be good for the community. It encouraged residents to read more classics, changed their view of the library, and inspired the library to apply for another Big Read grant.

Background

Three libraries—the Ironwood Carnegie, Bessemer and Wakefield Public Libraries—came together in an unprecedented collaboration to bring The Big Read to Gogebic County. Located in the westernmost part of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Gogebic County was once home to many prosperous iron mines, some of the deepest underground iron mines ever developed in this country. In 1906, Ironwood’s Norrie mine was in fact considered the greatest iron mine in the world. Profiteers made fortunes, and immigrants flooded to these iron-rich hills for several decades, where they found gainful employment, if not entirely fair labor practices. Sixty years later, when it became cheaper to import lower-cost ore from other countries, the mines closed and the area lost its economic base.⁴ For the communities that counted on the mines to provide a livelihood, it was, according to Elaine Erickson, Library Director at Ironwood Carnegie, difficult to adjust. The median household income in the county is still about \$27,000, almost \$15,000 below the national average of \$42,000.⁵

The three towns that participated in The Big Read have a long history of competing with one another as mining towns, and little history of working together. The Big Read, said Erickson, was “good timing: [we] wanted to do something to bring the communities together for discussion and bring something positive to the area—besides where the next meal is coming from.” The libraries had actually applied, without success, for a Big Read grant in the program’s first cycle. Undeterred, the libraries selected another book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and tried again. For a

⁴ Downloaded from <http://www.mg.mtu.edu/shaft3.htm>.

⁵ Census 2000. Downloaded from <http://www.census.gov/>. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.

community that has higher than average populations of seniors, at-risk youth, and senior parents, the librarians felt the themes would resonate with the population. “[We] saw *The Grapes of Wrath* as a good book to bring people together to discuss the Depression—those who were born in it, [and those] whose parents experienced it.” In an area familiar with farming and mining, they thought the universal themes of poverty and struggle, family, land, and weather, would resonate locally, forging connections between past and present.

In addition to bringing the communities together, The Big Read organizers also hoped that:

- Residents of all ages who participated in the events and read the book would feel a greater sense of confidence in their ability to read, enjoy, and analyze a more literary reading choice.
- Because of this experience, readership of classic novels would increase in the three communities.
- Participants would gain an appreciation of the relationship between literature, history and the arts.
- Participants would also gain a better understanding and increase their use of the different non-fiction resources available at the three libraries concerning literature.⁶

Partnerships

The Big Read was the impetus for forming several new partnerships. One that turned out to be very successful was with the local correctional facility, where libraries worked with a class that regularly reads and discusses books. Having joined them for their discussion of The Big Read book, Erickson observed, “*The Grapes of Wrath* had a lot of entry points for the fellows who were reading it. At first, they were really quiet, but then began to talk about the characters, the prison experience and coming out of prison. There were a lot of things in the book that resonated with these folks. It was a lot of fun to be there and discuss it with them.” Erickson called it “a wonderful experience,” and said they “are looking for ways to do more.”

According to Erickson The Big Read was also a “big success with seniors,” as was their new partnership with the two local senior centers. As a natural extension of the library’s services to some of its most loyal patrons, Erickson brought The Big Read to the centers by regularly visiting to read the book aloud, a couple of chapters at a time. The Big Read was also successful in reaching schools, establishing new partnerships with the Catholic school and a public school. Students studied *The Grapes of Wrath*, or, at the middle school level, opted to read Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, the title the libraries selected as a companion book for The Big Read. Students also interviewed community members for a Big Read project. Extending across state borders, the Ironwood Big Read team partnered with the library in nearby Hurley, Wisconsin, a partnership that Erickson said “gave us a forum for reaching out” and initiated a long-term collaborative partnership to create and implement programs together. The Big Read, said Erickson, “definitely cemented our partnerships. We have a strong partnership with the other libraries, [and it] helped us seek out another partnership [with Hurley].” Other new partnerships included the local coffee

⁶ *The Power of Words: The Novel as Cultural Change Agent*. From Proposal for The Big Read, submitted by Ironwood Carnegie Library. Expected Outcomes, p. 3.

house, where the library has continued to schedule programs, the area's 4-H and Kiwanis programs, and the local public housing project.

Key to their success with all their partners, said Erickson, "was picking those partners who were willing to be active participants. That could only happen if you had discussions ahead of time and established that level of participation."

Programming and Participation

Big Read organizers distributed over 400 free copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the three participating communities. Not just books but also Reader's Guides blanketed the area, available for people to read while they were waiting at doctors' offices, cash advance outlets, fast food restaurants, and laundromats. Labels on the books and materials encouraged potential readers to take them, read them, and pass them along. The libraries also purchased extra copies for circulation. "That all 420 free copies disappeared and the circulation of the books at the libraries was high show[ed]," said Erickson, "that people were interested."

To expand the audience of Big Read participants and include children in the larger community's conversations about the Depression, Ironwood and its partners purchased 60 copies of *Out of the Dust* as a children's companion book to *The Grapes of Wrath*. "Choosing a companion book was a really good idea for The Big Read," said Erickson. "[It] introduced kids to the historical period, to those universal themes of poverty and family." Written in free verse, *Out of the Dust* is, said Erickson, a "fabulous book and quick read...sort of like an intro to *The Grapes of Wrath*," that will hopefully provide younger readers with a positive lead-in to reading Steinbeck's classic in high school.

Ironwood and its partners incorporated "a lot of ancillary activities" to attract and appeal to a wide audience. For a community that generally appreciates the arts and includes several musicians, The Big Read line-up naturally included four musical activities, one of which featured three generations of a family actively involved in local school music activities: a retired school band director, his daughter—a current choir teacher—and her daughter, a musician and teacher in another community. As part of a musical exploration of the roots of jazz, they performed pieces related to the book. Another highlight was a lecture given by a Steinbeck scholar from the University of Duluth, who, according to Erickson, stimulated a "wonderful discussion about whether art should be political." The Big Read enabled the libraries to bring these events to the area, and got people "used to looking for some of those events" at the library. That, according to Erickson, "is a huge step forward. People will now get excited and look for those opportunities."

Promotion and Media

Having never done a community reading program before, Ironwood and its partners felt they needed to introduce The Big Read both to communities as a national program, and to the libraries as an outlet for programming. They underestimated how much time that would take. In retrospect, Erickson said, "a lot of things we should have been doing ahead of time—getting the book out,

doing promotions, getting the word out and getting people excited—and then do a month of events.”

Erickson discussed the program on a weekly radio coffee klatch program about a month ahead of time and again during the first week of The Big Read. Twice more during The Big Read, another local radio station featured Erickson as a guest on a history show that gave her an opportunity to promote The Big Read program and local events. Erickson felt their radio and other newspaper efforts were successful, to the extent that people were intrigued and came to the library to get the book. Library staff working the front desk agreed that the promotion “definitely brought people in” to the library they had not seen before and that these new patrons came in “specifically looking for the book. They wanted to read it because they heard Elaine on the radio.”

Even so, Erickson said, it took about three weeks before she felt people really understood what The Big Read was: “This community had never done anything like this before. Even the idea of free books and the notion that we would bring communities together to discuss was so foreign. People didn’t really even catch on until the very, very end.”

The Big Read materials were greatly appreciated. “[They] saved us a ton of money, were very helpful, wonderfully done,” said Erickson, adding that it was “nice to have materials to give out to people.” Erickson said they scrambled to distribute the materials that arrived late, and would have liked to have had everything a month early. Formatting The Big Read logo for bookmarks, letters, calendars, and postcards also presented promotional challenges.

Impact

Looking back, Erickson said *The Grapes of Wrath* provided “good fodder for conversation.” Parts of it, though, “hit too close to home and that caused some reluctance to get in and talk about it.” “Frankly,” Erickson added, “[it’s] a long book, dense with beautiful passages, but a hard book for people to tackle. A lot of the reaction at first was, ‘I read it in high school and hated it.’ That negative connotation was set already. [It was] hard to convince people to take another look; a harder sell than other books might have been. We had never had a community read program here, [and] right off the bat we picked a really hard book.”

However, all three libraries saw a lot of new patrons in the library, responded to a lot of requests for the book, and heard a lot of stories from people about how The Big Read had encouraged them to get back into reading. Erickson emphasized that progress should be measured “one person at a time...Reading is a slow activity. Not something where all of a sudden people are going to decide to read the classics.”

The community’s interest in getting together to talk about books and the key role the library could play in connecting people led Ironwood partners to rethink their book discussions and how they promote them. In their programming more generally, as well as specifically for their next Big Read, they plan to promote their book discussions as conversation cafés. Erickson said the change should dispel notions among community members that book discussions are formal events: “In

our area, when you say book discussions, they get all nervous. They want to talk about the book,” said Erickson, but such opportunities need to be promoted as “informal and casual.” It was their partnership with 4-H that generated the idea to give participants mugs and market the discussions as friendly conversations around a cup of coffee.

The Big Read also provided the energy and the inspiration for continuing new partnerships, and the library planned to continue to partner with the correctional facility, most notably on their next Big Read proposal, and with the senior centers. A recent grant to the library from AT&T will extend their efforts with computer training for residents of both centers. School partnerships extended beyond The Big Read as well: the Catholic school’s 5th and 6th grade classes have performed readers’ theatre on behalf of the library for public school elementary students, and Erickson says she continues to visit the public school to read books.

Follow-up

Three months after their Big Read, Erickson still saw interest in Steinbeck and the Great Depression, as well as in other library programming. A group of middle school students who came to two Big Read discussions read *Out of the Dust* afterwards. Non-fiction books, both for children and adults and purchased for The Big Read, continued to circulate well. “It really helped to cement in people’s minds that literature has a context,” said Erickson. “We can point them to those [titles] and [readers can] have a fuller experience of literature.”

Erickson believes that The Big Read will have a lasting impact on the libraries, in part because of the groundwork it laid. For the first time, Ironwood is participating in the Great Michigan Read. Erickson said that communities are “used to the library taking a more proactive stance” and are “looking toward the library as a place to experience programming.” The Big Read also demonstrated the value the Ironwood Carnegie Library and its two partnering libraries bring to their communities. Economically and politically, said Erickson, it has been difficult for libraries in Michigan, and especially in the U.P. The Big Read provided a “very tangible way that we showed our value.” The Big Read was also timely, increasing the library’s visibility at a time when Ironwood was trying to get a millage passed to renovate the library. On many levels, it was necessary to “show how a library can bring a community together and be a fulcrum to bring together those community partnerships.”

The diversity of programs and events included in The Big Read also carried over to other efforts and partnerships. Now, said Erickson, “When we do something, we think more creatively about it.” The library has also realized the role it can play in planning arts programming. Before the Big Read, Erickson said they felt they had little to offer partners. Now, she said, “We stop and say who can we involve in this? That is a direct result of the Big Read.”

Erickson said the Big Read educated them about the importance of promoting their programs, and provided effective tools for doing so. Having enjoyed a regular presence in the local newspaper during The Big Read and seeing the dividends of that in increased attendance and greater awareness, they have continued to promote events at least twice a month. She admitted they had

concerns that if they promoted The Big Read too early, people would get tired of it or forget about it. However, they found the opposite was true. While libraries are typically “shy and humble about what we do,” Erickson said they learned how important it was to “create excitement of The Big Read ahead of time...[and] stress that promotional component.” Ironwood is now working with a non-profit agency that assists other non-profits with marketing and promotion. Erickson said they are focusing on targeting youth, and plans to survey community youth and design a promotional campaign to continue to bring youth to the library.

At the broadest level, The Big Read succeeded in communicating the national importance of reading for these communities. While the impact of The Big Read may be “subtle and not easy to measure,” Erickson is assured “it’s out there.” She pointed to the several hundred community members who participated in some aspect of The Big Read and the conversations it inspired—“wonderful conversations about art, politics, and music and how the arts are all related.”

Postscript

Ironwood and its partners were successful in their bid for another Big Read. This time, they will be reading Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*—“We thought we’d try a thinner book,” said Erickson. They are excited about the many possibilities the book provides to draw in reluctant readers and youth yet also appeal to the community broadly. She added, This community is such a perfect place for a Big Read....For the first time, the three communities are doing something together. We’re hoping that is the start of a bigger conversation.” Nationally, said Erickson, The Big Read also comes at a critical point, offering the opportunity, during a controversial war, to

...step back and realize how important reading is in our communities and raising good moral human beings.... Nothing can help you walk in someone else’s shoes like books. While it may not be stimulating the economy through providing jobs...the significance of The Big Read should not be underestimated. What it does is bring our nation up to a higher level. Without that, none of what we do is worth anything. If we are not intellectually and culturally strong, then we are not anything. We are big bullies with guns. That’s not the nation I want to be part of. I want to be part of a nation that reads.

Hometown Perry, Iowa

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

Region: Midwest, West North Central	Number of K-12 Schools: 1
Total Days: 18	Number of Teachers: 3
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 6
Population: 10,000	Number of Attendees: 277
Number of Partner Organizations: 2	Adults, 237; Children, 40
Number of Libraries: 1	Number of Book Club Meetings: 18
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 144
Number of Volunteers: 24	Adults, 139; Children, 5

Hometown Perry, Iowa's first community-wide read did what the museum sees as part of its own core mission: it invited community members to see their own lives through the stories and small-town lives of others. Pooling the resources and talents of those from arts, education, business, and government organizations, this Big Read built a bridge between contemporary residents of this small, midwestern town and those of small-town Georgia in the 1930s.

Background

The mission of Hometown Perry, Iowa (HPI) is to “study, understand, communicate, and celebrate the vital contribution small towns have made to American life as seen through the prism of the immigrant experience, in Perry, Iowa, and other small towns across the Midwest.”⁷ At first glance, a novel that takes place in the Depression-era South and tells the story of four lonely misfits who confide in a deaf-mute may seem an odd choice for a midwestern museum devoted to celebrating the immigrant experience. What links *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and the Hometown Perry, Iowa Museum is a belief in the power of stories of ordinary people and small-town life to recite a larger narrative of human existence. Hometown Perry’s collection of artifacts, displayed on the museum campus as well as in exhibits at the high school library and cafeteria, a coffee house, and the Carnegie Library, is “anchored by the personal stories of hundreds of Perry area residents.” The tone of Carson McCuller’s first novel may be one of isolation, but her characters’ attempts to connect resonated with Perry residents, and made it a fitting choice for an institution that invites patrons to “come and find oneself in the stories of others, both past and present,” and see the connections between people, story, and place.⁸

Partnerships and Participation

The Big Read was Hometown Perry Iowa’s first community literacy initiative, and the museum rallied its partners—the Perry Public Schools and Public Library, the City of Perry and the Chamber of Commerce—early on. Initial meetings took place even before the proposal was written, and continued throughout the implementation. According to Iris Coffin, The Big Read coordinator and HPI Associate Director for Development, the monthly meetings and ongoing

⁷ Hometown Perry, Iowa, and Hometown Perry, Iowa. Purpose Statement.

⁸ Information about HPI from “What is Hometown Perry, Iowa?” Flier published by Hometown Perry, Iowa.

collaboration contributed to a “great spirit of cooperation,” not, she also noted, always the case even in this closely-knit small town. Partnerships with schools and municipal groups were not new to a museum whose extended campus includes the town itself. What The Big Read did, says Coffin, was help solidify the relationships and strengthen their ability to work together to bring such a program to Perry. It was a program to which major partners and volunteers alike were more than willing to contribute their time.

Although HPI had previously enjoyed a good relationship with Perry Public Schools, the school superintendent saw The Big Read as a valuable opportunity for the high school to take part in a community event in a different way. He invited the high school English department chair to be on the planning committee and “weigh in” on the selection of the book. That turned out to be a wise decision, for a number of reasons. Of the several Big Read selections that HPI put forth as options, the Chair recommended *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Explaining her choice in a later interview, she said she didn’t want to choose a book because it would be an easy read. She holds high expectations for students, and wanted a challenging piece of literature. The choice in the end was one that worked well with students and the community. The English department chair was also instrumental in getting a book not typically read in high school adopted—“no easy task”—for its sophomore English II and Honors English classes. Since HPI had initially planned to apply for Cycle 1, conversations with the Perry High School English department had begun early enough for teachers to incorporate the book.

Each of the partners in HPI’s Big Read hosted a book discussion, which meant that each discussion took on a “life of its own.” For example, Bill Clark the President of HPI, hosted and facilitated a book discussion with the Rotary Club—a group he meets with for a monthly lunch. He said he had begged the group to read the book, but invited everyone to come even if they hadn’t. He need not have worried: although Clark had been prepared to background and facilitate the discussion in case the businessmen around the table had not read the book or were reluctant to talk, eight of the 30 Rotary members came, and all had read the book and immediately launched into a discussion of capitalism and racism—a conversation far beyond anything he had ever experienced at a Rotary meeting. That conversation alone, Clark said, made The Big Read worthwhile.

Others who moderated book discussions—the mayor, adult and teen librarians, the chamber of commerce, the organizer for Iowa Reads—shared similar stories. Success came not just from having different groups moderate, but also from holding the discussions in a number of locations, including private homes. Diverse locales fit well with HPI’s mission is to “study, understand, and communicate,” and tell the stories of a town through the lives of its citizens, but beyond that it resulted in a largely unanticipated outcome of making the discussions more varied. Asking partners to host and facilitate the discussions will, says Coffin, be a key outreach strategy for their next Big Read program. She also saw the value of planning and promoting book discussions around particular themes or elements of the book to encourage participants to attend, also “something now that we want to keep rolling.”

Programming

Perry's Big Read also featured an impressive line-up of events featuring performers and speakers with local and national profiles. The Kick-Off began with a welcome by the town's mayor, and musical selections that run through the book, mostly through the character of Mick Kelly, played by a local classical pianist. Featured speakers included Dr. Carlos Dews, a McCullers expert, and author and founding director of the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians, and Erika Koss, Literary Specialist with the NEA. The keynote speaker, introduced by Iowa's former first lady Christie Vilsack, was Cathy Fussell, Director of the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians in Columbus, Georgia.

Approaching the book through the life and writings of Carson McCullers, the Kick-Off gave Perry readers an entrée to the novel's complex characters and social issues. It effectively, says Coffin, "gave people things to talk about," and started a conversation that continued throughout The Big Read. Those who conducted subsequent book discussions reported that the biography of Carson McCullers seemed to build a bridge between contemporary residents of Perry, Iowa and those of small-town Georgia in the 1930s, and that participants frequently drew on what they had learned in these events.

Much in the same way that they varied sites for book discussion, HPI deliberately selected a variety of venues for Big Read events. The Carnegie Library Museum, the Shoppe of Oddities, the Security Savings Bank, the Town/ Craft building, and the United Methodist Church—all hosted events and donated their space. These venues brought both venue regulars *and* new faces to Big Read events. The Big Read concluded with a celebration at the Highland Elk Coffee House and Bistro, where participants and partners received awards, and where local Big Readers had a chance to compete in a *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* trivia contest—and vote on the next Big Read book.

Visual cues also contributed to the feeling that The Big Read was ubiquitous, turning up everywhere around town. All partners prominently displayed Big Read banners in several downtown locations, and HPI paid to get one banner backed with thicker board in order to install it on the outside of the brick HPI building, located on a prominent corner of the downtown area.

Promotion, Media, and Materials

The local radio and newspaper also did their part to keep Perry's Big Read visible. HPI organized a daily radio reading of the book, broadcast each evening on KDLS radio; the station contributed half the costs as an in-kind donation. Every week during October, the local newspaper, *The Perry Chief*, ran a series of essays about the book written by community members (one adult and one student). The paper also donated space in the daily news brief (the "Chat Sheet") to promote upcoming Big Read events. The mayor of Perry addressed The Big Read in her televised city council meetings and in her monthly radio interview.

As part of their promotional efforts, HPI also personalized, extended, and supplemented The Big Read materials. Concerned with what they perceived as a conflict between the content and tone of

the audio public service announcement and the book, HPI used clips from the Audio Guide to promote The Big Read. The local radio station divided the Audio Guide into 30-second spots that aired regularly during the month. HPI pre-recorded a message that the radio played before reading the book (from 6:30-7:00 pm nightly) with a brief description of The Big Read, The Big Read partners, and local sponsors who paid for the permissions and radio costs associated with the book reading. Another pre-recorded message from HPI, this one thanking their sponsors, wrapped up the evening readings.

Teacher's and Reader's Guides were distributed to all those who led book discussion groups, as well as to participating high school English teachers, who adapted activities to students' needs. Supplementing activities that relied heavily on discussion with more "hands-on" activities for her general level sophomores, one of the English II teachers created 2-column poster-sized charts for each of the characters and taped them to the classroom walls. As they read the book, students added details about the characters. For their participation, teachers received the Educator's certificates, which were also modified to acknowledge those participants who had written essays published in *The Perry Chief*, conducted discussion groups, or volunteered in other capacities and awarded at the celebration.

HPI distributed free copies of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* at the library, HPI, and at the Carnegie Library. Those who received copies were asked to leave contact information that was used by HPI to invite them to key Big Read events. HPI also compiled this information with their own contact list, as well as those from the school corporation and library. The combined list included 6,000 people, all of whom received locally designed postcards about Big Read events. In addition to the postcards, HPI created several of its own promotional materials, including:

- Programs for each key event.
- Fliers about the book discussion groups.
- Ceramic pins, magnets, and tiles made by a local artist to give to those who attended the book discussion groups or participated in special events.
- T-shirts with the slogan "Take It To Heart! Perry, Iowa" and The Big Read logo on the front, and the Carson McCullers caricature on the back.

Impact

Hometown Perry Iowa's organizers and partners felt they were quite successful in promoting the program to a wide cross-section of readers and engaging them in Big Read events. Those involved in planning The Big Read were pleased at the participant turnout at events—especially the Kick-Off, Keynote and other large events. On a weekend evening, over a hundred people came to the library to watch the film showing. Although the book discussion groups were small, they each targeted and attracted different demographic groups. The distribution of free copies of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* brought new faces to the library and museums. In all, about 5% of the population of Perry came to the public library, HPI, or the Carnegie library to pick up a free copy of the book—many of whom were not in the databases of those organizations. There were early indications that the Big Read had increased circulation at the public library (an increase of

8.5%) and the Carnegie Library & Museum (an increase of 9%) during the month of The Big Read.

Perry residents were engaged not just in events but also in an ongoing conversation about the book. Repeatedly, we heard people describe The Big Read as “ubiquitous,” and tell stories of spontaneous book discussions at football games, cross-country meets, and hair salons. Those who led the more organized book discussions noted that “People really wrapped their arms around it,” adding that “Although the story is set in the Deep South during the Great Depression, the themes of poverty, racial diversity, compassion, and small-town life still resonate with readers today.”

Hometown Perry, Iowa focused their program on those who read but who don’t read great literature, and HPI and its partners felt the Big Read had reached a good number of these lapsed readers. According to The Big Read coordinator, many participants commented on the event feedback cards that *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* wasn’t a book they would typically read (or finish once they started), but because they wanted to attend a discussion or event, and knew the rest of the community was reading it, they were inspired to pick it up and motivated to finish reading it. We talked with readers who more typically read newspapers, magazines, self-help and spiritual books, but who enjoyed *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and The Big Read events they attended.

On a personal note, the Big Read coordinator at HPI said the Big Read renewed her mother’s interest in reading. Formerly an avid reader, this senior citizen was curious about The Big Read due to her daughter’s involvement. She read the copy of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* her daughter brought her and, unbeknownst to her daughter, attended a book discussion as well. A few weeks later, she asked her daughter to recommend another book. The Big Read coordinator said it was wonderful to see her mom turning off the TV and reading again.

Younger readers who might not choose this particular book became engaged in it as well. The two English II teachers we spoke with said the book was a challenge for their students, but they were glad they did it. The teachers gave extra credit to students for attending Big Read events. This seemed to be effective—students were well represented at several events, including the Kick-Off and Keynote, and the final celebration where they voted on the book for Perry’s next Big Read. One of the librarians who facilitated a book discussion for home-schooled teens after showing the movie said they talked for over an hour. Most hadn’t read the book, but she had since followed up with a few who had.

In our conversation with students in the Honors class, they said they had passed along their free copies of the book to friends and family members to read, and had enjoyed being part of a larger, community conversation about a book they were reading in school. Many described conversations about the book that they’d had with parents, grandparents, and friends. The Big Read also sparked conversations in school hallways, and the Honors students said they enjoyed being able to talk about the book with their friends in English II. When asked by their teacher whether they would participate in the next Big Read—considering they will not be in one of the

classes requiring students to read the book—almost three fourths of the students raised their hands.

Since *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is not available in Spanish, the librarians, mayor, and others voiced their regret that Perry's Spanish-speakers were, in large part, excluded from The Big Read. One teacher taught *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* instead of *Animal Farm*, and said it was difficult to teach to English Language Learners without Spanish resources. He found a copy of the audio book, but that was read with a southern accent and difficult for the students to understand.

The Big Read made reading “a community event” in Perry, Iowa and when the banners go up for the next one, the community is sure to respond with enthusiasm. The Director of HPI said that he approached The Big Read as a long-term commitment—not something to try out once. They see the Big Read as a sustainable program and look forward to making it bigger and better each year. They hope the Big Read will continue to fund small town efforts and acknowledge the costs that bringing quality events to smaller towns cost: HPI received a \$16,000 grant and could not do it for less and maintain the quality of the program. The Big Read also requires an immense amount of time: even with a sizeable cadre of volunteers, the coordinator commented that it would be important for the success of the next Big Read to increase the number of people on the planning team from each partner agency to help share the workload.

Postscript

Sadly, Hometown Perry, Iowa permanently closed its doors to the public December 31, 2007, two months after The Big Read ended. However, The Big Read will continue in Perry. The Perry Public Library, a partner in HPI's Big Read effort, applied and received a Big Read grant for 2008-2009, and will be reading *The Great Gatsby*—the book that received the most votes at the final celebration of the October 2007 Big Read.

Pinellas Public Library Cooperative, Clearwater, Florida

The Great Gatsby

Region: South/South Atlantic	Number of K-12 Schools: 25
Total Days: 27	Number of Teachers: 75
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 40
Population: 924,000	Number of Attendees: 67,884
Number of Partner Organizations: 6	Adults, 64,706; Children, 3,178
Number of Libraries: 15	Number of Book Club Meetings: 35
Number of Museums: 3	Number of Book Club Attendees: 25,382
Number of Volunteers: 250	Adults, 335; Children, 25,047

The Pinellas Public Library Cooperative had sponsored five community-wide reading programs prior to The Big Read, but interest had begun to wane. An infusion of Big Read funds and resources, and the cachet of a national program, allowed them to add more events and reach more residents in more locations. By channeling energies and funds into promotion and programming, they offered film screenings of The Great Gatsby, book talks, Charleston lessons, music, food, teen activities—often in a single event. Pinellas is not sure whether their next community read will be big or small. In either case, The Big Read provided a shot in the arm they needed. It revitalized interest in reading and reading programs among community members and elected officials, and raised awareness of “the value libraries bring to their residents.”⁹

Background

With five “Read Around Pinellas” programs to their credit, the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative was a veteran at bringing residents of this Gulf Coast community together to talk about books. Bordered by Tampa Bay on the east and the Gulf of Mexico on the west, Pinellas County offers sun-drenched beaches, parks, lakes, wildlife refuges, and temperate climates year-round. Not surprisingly, many Pinellas residents are transplants. To introduce them to the state’s history and culture, the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative had previously chosen Florida titles, topics, or authors. In choosing a Big Read title, they wanted to maintain that Florida connection but also expand their reach to students and teachers, which meant choosing a book included in the high school curriculum. Hemingway certainly had strong ties to Florida, having lived and written in Key West for ten years. And Hurston was a Florida native who, as a trained anthropologist, had collected Florida folk songs and stories in the 1930s as part of the WPA’s Federal Writing Project. But *A Farewell to Arms* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* didn’t routinely appear on the area’s high school reading lists. *The Great Gatsby* did, and Scott and Zelda had vacationed in St. Petersburg. The aura of that fabled couple, the styles and spirit of the 20s, the jazz age—all gave organizers a lot of ideas for programming and events.

The Pinellas Public Library Cooperative (PPLC) was well positioned to assemble area libraries and community agencies to plan and host these events, not only because of its five-year “Read Around Pinellas” record, but also because of its composition and capacity. A little different from other Big

⁹ 2007 The Big Read Final Report, Pinellas County, FL, p. 1.

Read library grantees, PPLC, a 501(c)(3) is the coordinating agency for its twenty-three service outlets and fourteen member public libraries, their staffs, and their governing bodies. As such, PPLC plays a leadership role in providing the residents of Pinellas County with access to numerous resources, services, and technologies, including adaptive library services, and in acquiring funding and managing grants from local, state, and federal government agencies and from private corporations and foundations. Collaborative capacity for The Big Read included the PPLC membership as well as TV and print media in Clearwater and St. Petersburg, arts agencies, and bookstores that had been active partners in previous local reads.

Comment [MH1]: I've also seen it written as 501(c)(3)

The down side to longstanding partnerships and five consecutive reading programs was that partner interest had “started to wane,” according to the cooperative’s Coordinator for Special Projects and Grants, Paula Godfrey. The Big Read, she said, gave partners the “punch” they needed. “It wasn’t,” Godfrey explained, “really the money.” The \$10,000 they received was similar to previous funding levels. The difference was that The Big Read was a national program—or, as Godfrey said, “The branding is what did it.” For residents and partners, she added, “there was enormous pride in being part of a nationwide effort,” an association especially important in an area “where communities are very competitive. They loved telling their colleagues ‘have you been on The Big Read site? We’re on there!’”

Partnerships and Partner Activities

According to Godfrey, the PPLC was able to “pick and choose from partners we had worked with in the past on community-wide book programs, and select those we thought would work the best.” For The Big Read, they assembled six major partners:

- The Pinellas County Schools
- *The St. Petersburg Times*
- The City of Clearwater
- The City of St. Petersburg (one of the five largest cities in the state of Florida)
- The Florida Orchestra
- The Suncoast Dance Academy

Godfrey felt that school partnerships were some of the most productive. The Supervisor of Secondary Languages for the Pinellas County Schools purchased classroom sets of books, distributed, along with Reader’s Guides, Audio CDs, and Teacher’s Guides, to 10th and 11th grade classrooms in 41 schools, including high schools and vocational schools. School-based Big Read activities included book discussions for teachers, faculty, and staff, as well as classroom activities for students. Those students who participated in book discussions, scholars’ talks, and teen lock-ins outside of school received extra credit. Not all 41 schools read *Gatsby*: some classes read other books or authors from the period, among them Gertrude Stein. In all, the Library Cooperative awarded 25 educator certificates. Middle school teachers also encouraged students to read the book and attend events, and The Big Read materials were provided to St. Petersburg College librarians, who distributed them to their Freshman English classes.

Other partnerships that proved to be especially effective in drawing the community’s attention to The Big Read were those with local newspapers and public officials. The St. Petersburg Times, a member of the planning committee, promoted events throughout The Big Read, and in the end contributed just over \$18,000 in marketing ad space—almost double their previous in-kind donation.

Promotion and Resources

The mayors of both St. Petersburg and Clearwater also proclaimed October as The Big Read month, and the value of these mayoral proclamations should not, says Godfrey, be underestimated. They were, first of all, more than just ceremonial gesture: a legal paper, with an official seal, was read in front of the council and adopted by council vote. More than stamps of approval, these proclamations signified the city’s commitment to read the book and participate in activities—and issued an invitation to citizens to do the same. They essentially said: “this is important, let’s do this as a community.” Godfrey added that, “once one city came to us with the idea, the other city wanted to do it, too, then the school systems wanted to do it.” The latter made a formal proclamation before its entire school board.

Another official endorsement, less formal perhaps but very public, came from a county commissioner who asked to be pictured on a billboard reading *The Great Gatsby*. After some finagling to get permission from Scribner’s to reproduce the cover image, the billboard went up alongside a major thoroughfare, promoting The Big Read and the url for the Pinellas Big Read website to morning and evening commuters and other drivers.

Providing local contact information in their promotions and materials was important for Pinellas. For the most part, says Godfrey, organizers and partners were very pleased with and made good use of the high-quality, ready-made NEA resources, especially the Teacher’s Guides, and the Reader’s Guides, 20,000 of which were distributed around the county. Having the resources in hand allowed the PPLC to divert funds to programming and additional promotion. Their only complaint was that, as important as the national branding was, materials they could customize with local branding and information would have been preferable. This was true of the PSA, as well as the posters and bookmarks. The St. Petersburg PBS channels ran the PSAs, along with footage of the proclamations, the Kick-Off event, and other special events and programs, but some local TV and radio stations chose not to run them. Pinellas created some of their own ads, posters, and bookmarks, to make sure community members had contact names, phone numbers, event details, website addresses, and any other key information that would bring them to events.

Programming

One of the reasons Pinellas chose *The Great Gatsby* was that it offered creative programming opportunities, including jazz era music, dancing, and art programs. According to Godfrey, they took special pride in the Kick-Off event, their biggest ever. Organized by member libraries and heavily promoted in schools, local media outlets, and online, the Gatsby Gala, held at St. Petersburg’s historic Coliseum, attracted over 400 people. A number of those apparently attended, says Godfrey, because of “promotional serendipity.” While scanning the media, organizers discovered a group called “meettampabay.com,” a site where Tampa Bay area residents can organize affiliate groups.

According to Godfrey, a group of 10 women who organize monthly events selected The Big Read Kick-off “as their event,” because “they thought it would be fun!” Godfrey added that “the group was all decked out in their 1920’s Gatsby gala clothes, and had pictures taken with big cardboard blowups of the jazz players, a balloon artist making 1920’s theme balloons.” The mayor of St. Petersburg also came out, as did two TV stations and the *St. Petersburg Times*, which had run articles beforehand. “Everything we saw,” said Godfrey, “was very positive—everyone was talking about it—even the city council members.”

A series of events aimed at teens and tweens—teen film screenings, teen book discussions, teen lock-ins—also drew in the crowds, some 2,000 in fact. Lock-ins, especially popular among younger readers, came about through the collective efforts of teen librarians in Pinellas County. Every Friday throughout The Big Read, teenagers who were reading the book in their high school English classes could come to one of the libraries after hours (7pm-10pm). Librarians locked the doors, and, as Godfrey described it, teens “basically had a party,” which included Gatsby trivia contests, games, candy, and fads from the 1920’s period, like the Yo-Yo. A dance instructor came in to teach teens the Charleston and other dances guests might have done at one of Gatsby’s glamorous parties. Godfrey said that teens enjoyed the lock-ins, which added the “real flavor of the time period and a sense of American culture at that time” to the “studious part” of reading the book in the classroom.

Although Pinellas also had traditional book discussions and film screenings, Godfrey believes that this type of multi-faceted programming “worked best for their community,” allowing residents to pick and choose what they wanted to do. They might, as Godfrey described it, “have food and listen to an orchestra, OR do kid games OR listen to a lecture OR look at artwork from the era. It’s almost like a learning center concept. If you have this many people, not everybody wants to do the same thing at the same time.” They also found that, no matter what the main event—a book discussion, an afternoon tea at a historic building, actors reading the book out loud—people usually like “to eat a bit.”

This programming strategy, designed to appeal to the diverse interests of audiences typically drawn to community social and literary events, was coupled with promotional efforts aimed at those not typically or previously in attendance: posters and book discussions at Borders and Barnes & Noble for bookstore goers; verbal invitations, extended through the literacy councils, for those who might not be able to read the book but who could enjoy an outdoor arts event. Although not able to offer a Spanish translation, the PPLC held book discussion groups for their Hispanic population, which in the past had shown an interest in book talks, especially those held at a nearby branch library. Some events also targeted seniors, publicized through publications such as *Senior Voice* and *Aging Well*. Organizers also tried hard to accommodate busy schedules with events throughout the month, on both weekdays and weekends: even if community members “couldn’t make one event one night,” said Godfrey, “they could do a different event at a different time. We didn’t want people to feel that if they couldn’t make it to a particular event, they couldn’t participate.”

Pinellas’s closing Big Read weekend took place in conjunction with the annual book and reading festival, hosted and promoted by *The St. Petersburg Times*. Again, participants—an estimated 150— had their choice of activities, including a book discussion by the NEA’s Molly Thomas-Hicks and the Afternoon Tea at The Plumb House.

Impact

Even though The Big Read was the PPLC’s sixth initiative, Godfrey said, “there are people who never knew we had done previous community reads before...until this year.” Looking back over their various events, strategies, and participation figures, Godfrey said, “We’ve done pretty well. We hit a wide variety of folks.” She felt that they were perhaps most successful with those who can read but don’t, or who like to read but don’t always read as much as they’d like. Godfrey observed that many of their participants “were people who were very literate and avid readers but whose lives had gotten very busy and they had just stopped picking up books.” Godfrey added that *The Great Gatsby* was a book people had “meant to read but hadn’t,” or had read when they were younger and happily picked up again. The Big Read, she said, “got people reading again.” People “made time to read as part of this program.” Just saying, “Are you participating in the Big Read?” got people reading and started a community dialogue.

Comment [MH2]: Kay—missing a pair of quotes

Conversations about books took place at home, too, and got parents talking to children about reading. Godfrey shared the story of the school superintendent who had noted that, “We always thought we were so literate in my family, but this experience raised the level of conversation at home.” He had said to his son, “You know Pinellas County is reading *The Great Gatsby*. Are you reading *The Great Gatsby*?” Once they cleared up some confusion between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Frances Scott Key, “they started reading [*Gatsby*] together...and they checked in periodically and had discussions about the book.” An added benefit was that The Big Read also raised adults’ awareness of what their children were doing in school. “I think,” said Godfrey, “it started a dialogue that would not have otherwise been there.”

The Library Cooperative decided to apply for a Big Read grant because they thought it would raise their visibility in the community and strengthen partnerships they already had. According to Godfrey, their instincts were right. The visibility of their organization was “significantly raised,” as was the level of expectation for next year and the perception of the value of the library and its Big Read partners. “We were able to generate so much interest and real support from our partners and our local government. They saw the Library as a valuable tool, strengthening the people in the community, and providing quality and value in their lives.” These benefits accrued to partners as well: “I think,” said Godfrey, “the partners walked away from this program feeling that their Library and their Community did that for them.”

Future Big Reads

Would they do it again? “We’ve actually talked about it,” says Godfrey, “and at this time we would say ‘No.’” Their reservations have nothing to do with the goals of the national initiative. “Programming like this is fantastic,” said Godfrey. “We are absolutely committed to this kind of programming. It was good for our community and got our partners enthused about reading.” The

materials were “great,” as was the communication and interaction with the NEA and Arts Midwest. She also believes it is vitally important that legislatures see “that reading is important and valuable to a country and its people.”¹⁰

Their reservations stem from the amount of effort required to run this program and “run it at the level that the NEA and Arts Midwest expect.” Godfrey estimates that took “a good 50% of my time for 3 months,” a level of effort, she says, that exceeded the commitment required by other, larger grants she has administered. Following on the heels of the extraordinary effort needed to run the program, she says, is the considerable accounting and reporting required, which she felt was a burden not just for her and her development office but also for partners supplying data.

Godfrey is concerned that the level of oversight and reporting may be “difficult for a lot of organizations to commit”—especially smaller or less experienced organizations—and ultimately temper the success and “national disbursement” of an excellent and much-needed program.¹¹ Her suggestion: don’t “make the guidelines get in the way of them being successful.” She also believes that, even without such rigid requirements, granting agencies would actually get a lot of the information they need from participants, because they “want their programs to be successful and they want to tell you why they were.”

¹⁰ Final Report, p. 5.

¹¹ Final Report, p. 5.

SUNY New Paltz, New Paltz, New York

Bless Me, Ultima

Region: Northeast	Number of K-12 Schools: 3
Total Days: 18	Number of Teachers: 79
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 16
Population: 12,830	Number of Attendees: 763
Number of Partner Organizations: 24	Adults, 369; Children, 394
Number of Libraries: 2	Number of Book Club Meetings: 12
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 191
Number of Volunteers: 20	Adults, 191; Children, 0

The SUNY New Paltz Big Read program built on an existing One Book program to bring the university community and those in the larger New Paltz and Mid-Hudson Valley region together to read Bless Me, Ultima. Big Read planners chose Anaya's book to appeal to a cross-section of the community, which has undergone some dramatic changes in recent years, as Hispanic migrant workers move to fertile farmlands in search of employment and New Yorkers look northward in search of second homes. Their book choice stirred some controversy, but project organizers agreed that the community's mixed feelings about the book also created valuable, engaging discussions.

Background

The New Paltz campus of the State University of New York, located about 75 miles north of New York City, is the only public institution of higher education in the Mid-Hudson Region. Farmlands surround the town, in an area long known for its apple orchards and vegetable farms. Due in part to these farms, and the migrant workers they attract, the Hispanic population has grown to more than 1,000 in recent years, and now represents 8.2% of the New Paltz population. The town has also seen an increase in the number of residents and second-home owners from New York City. One of the major goals of Big Read organizers was to create opportunities for positive interactions between this increasingly diverse population, the university community, and long-time residents.

Partnerships and Promotion

Four local municipalities participated in The Big Read, including The Village of New Paltz, the Town of New Paltz, the New Paltz Public Schools, and Ulster County. Twenty local businesses, government agencies, and non-profit organizations were also involved. According to New Paltz's final narrative, "Community-wide enthusiasm for the program was evident, and all were productive partnerships." As program organizers also explained, partnerships sometimes grew more "organically and serendipitously" than strategically, in part because the SUNY New Paltz Outreach team is volunteer-run, and they sometimes found that, being new to federal grants, they underestimated the time commitments involved in establishing and maintaining partnerships.

The SUNY New Paltz team considered themselves fortunate to have a professional PR volunteer who helped create a comprehensive promotional campaign for their Big Read. In addition to

traditional promotion through local media and print outlets (including Spanish-language media), the plan included putting flyers in locations around town that cater to and attract minority patrons. The New Paltz team, with the help of its PR partners, was also successful in using online promotional venues such as Facebook and YouTube.

Programming and Participation

An overarching goal of the The SUNY New Paltz Big Read planners was to balance the cultural aspects of the program with the literary elements, or to advance appreciation of diversity as well as literary reading. As Gerald Benjamin, a Dean at SUNY New Paltz, explained, “Our concept, from the beginning, was not only about reading, but to make it about the implications of the book and the meaning of the book, and how these meanings manifest in our community.”

To appeal to Hispanics within the community *and* increase awareness of Hispanic culture among non-Hispanics, many events had themes and activities tied to Hispanic culture. The kickoff event, held on the Day of the Dead, set the cultural tone for the program. Other events included a musical performance and community dance, lectures, art exhibits, and film screenings. Book discussions were held at various locations throughout the town, including churches, synagogues, and bookstores. To further the reach of the program to the area’s Hispanic population, SUNY New Paltz also offered book discussions in Spanish and Spanish translations of books and materials.

Although the local school system was actively involved, the timing of The Big Read wasn’t right for getting the book adopted as required reading, district-wide or school-wide, as had been the case in past One Book/One New Paltz programs. Nonetheless, teachers in each of the four schools in the New Paltz Central School district used the book and the NEA resources, and estimates indicate that 250 students were at least exposed to some portion of the book and its cultural themes. At the college level, the book was incorporated into Freshman Composition, Analysis and Interpretation, Survey of Latin American Literature, Culture of Latin America, and Mexican Literature courses.

Impact

Participants liked the program, but not everyone liked the book. *Bless Me, Ultima* had actually been banned by one of the local school districts in the past. Interestingly, one of the teachers who had been involved in the effort to ban the book participated as a book discussion leader. Religious symbolism within the book also created controversy among Jewish members of the community.

In considering changes or the success of various program elements, project facilitators felt that a more targeted effort may have proven more successful. The extensive programming, they concluded, sometimes spread their volunteer staff too thin. Some volunteers and partners failed to collect the requested data about event participants, so they were uncertain how successful some events were, or how successful they were in reaching lapsed readers. Project facilitators thought some cultural activities, while engaging and fun, attracted many people who didn’t read or have interest in the book. About 10% of the town’s Hispanic population is estimated to have

participated in discussion groups—many taking advantage of the discussion groups that were held in Spanish. There were fewer events, however, that succeeded in attracting the diverse, cross-over populations organizers had hoped for.

Organizers felt somewhat constrained by the list of Big Read options, especially in comparison to past years when they were free to select any book that community members were interested in for the local One Book/One New Paltz program. “Classics are not necessarily the choice of our constituents,” noted one program facilitator.

Still, SUNY New Paltz cited evidence that suggested that people were reading the book, and that improved access to materials—especially the high-quality and bilingual materials that the Big Read was able to provide—inspired interest. The local bookstore reported that it couldn’t keep the book in stock, and the copies that were purchased by the local library were constantly in circulation. Though the community had mixed feelings about the book, project organizers concluded that the lively, engaging discussions stirred healthy controversy.

Writers & Books, Rochester, New York
The Maltese Falcon

Region: Northeast/Middle Atlantic	Number of K-12 Schools: 3
Total Days: 43	Number of Teachers: 12
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 40
Population: 298,321	Number of Attendees: 16,243
Number of Partner Organizations: 10	Adults, 16,090; Children, 153
Number of Libraries: 18	Number of Book Club Meetings: 18
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 212
Number of Volunteers: 20	Adults, 212; Children, 0

Once a traveling book distributor and now Rochester's community literacy center, Writers & Books had sponsored seven community-wide reading programs prior to The Big Read. With the additional resources, they added new events and partners and a new genre—detective fiction—to their repertoire. Selecting The Maltese Falcon allowed them to draw on the Eastman film archives and the support of local film experts and enthusiasts. Along with the opportunities offered by an arts-rich city, they also encountered challenges: competition for sponsors, they found, could be stiff, and more events did not necessarily result in larger audiences. Still, Writers & Books made valuable contacts and hope to apply for another Big Read grant, alternating between their local program and the national initiative.

Background

Writers & Books began in 1973 as a traveling book distributor that introduced people in the northeastern U.S. to lesser-known writers. Today, it is a vibrant literary center that has been recognized by the New York State Council of the Arts for making a significant contribution to the cultural life of the city and the state. The fact that, for much of its thirty-four year history, Writers & Books has resided in a former police precinct building may have steered Big Read planners toward Dashiell Hammett's, *The Maltese Falcon*, but there were other reasons as well. First and foremost was the local connection to the book: the George Eastman House has a copy of the famous 1941 Humphrey Bogart film, as well as copies of two earlier film versions of the book. Second, based on participant feedback, Writers & Books was seeking new, lighter fare for their seven-year old community reading program, and detective fiction offered a new genre and fresh ideas for events.

Partnerships

In their previous "If All Rochester Read the Same Book" programs, Writers & Books had reached seven counties and over 15,000 people. For The Big Read, they expanded their service to over a dozen more neighboring communities. Libraries were the backbone of their partnership network—with 36 partnering branches in Rochester and more than 20 other individual libraries in nearby areas. Participation levels varied from site to site, but nearly 60 libraries received Big Read promotional and support materials. As part of their outreach efforts, Writers & Books also partnered with other cultural organizations, local high schools, colleges, and community colleges.

Many were groups or businesses with whom Writers & Books had partnered with in the past, but they also developed new partnerships, including a new university partnership.

Unfortunately, due to timing, local schools were not as involved as Writers & Books had originally hoped. By the time The Big Read was planned and announced, teachers' curriculum and syllabi were already set and selected texts purchased. In the future, they hope to plan further in advance so that schools and teachers can join in their efforts.

Promotion and Media

While Writers & Books and the Rochester community had prior experience with community reading programs, they found that the NEA branding gave their program "a much higher profile." The high-quality, professionally-produced resources and promotional materials also, they believe, helped "generate instant buy-in." To create awareness and promote specific events, they did some traditional print advertising before and during The Big Read. They also experimented with less conventional promotion, advertising upcoming Big Read events, for example, before feature films at a local five-screen movie theater. Writers & Books found their website to be a "dynamic and fluid component" of their promotional efforts, and over the month-and-a-half Big Read they used it to post a calendar of events and weekly interactive trivia questions. The website also included links "continually refreshed content" and multimedia resources, including an audio version of interviews conducted in connection with a radio play.

Rochester has no shortage of arts and culture organizations, and Writers & Books often found themselves in competition for free media coverage. As they put their proposal and program together in Spring 2007 and recruited corporate sponsors, they found that at that point in the fiscal year many would-be donors had already spent their allotment for community outreach and sponsorship. Writers & Books subsequently fell short of their projected budget for community sponsorships to supplement grant funding.

Programming and Participation

Despite shortfalls in sponsorship, Writers & Books offered a variety of events to excite the community and engage people in reading *The Maltese Falcon*. In its first formal foray into the detective fiction genre, Writers & Books took advantage of the expertise of local film experts. The kick-off event featured keynote speaker George Thompson, author of *Hammett's Moral Vision*. They also held 21 book discussions, 28 film and video screenings, seven lectures, two live performances: the radio play was performed in a local theater, and a local author wrote a new play, "The Maltese Buffalo," a parody of *The Maltese Falcon*. Other special events included a gallery exhibition, falconry exhibition, and a costume gala set in 1929 San Francisco. Overall, nearly 25,000 community members were involved in Big Read events at two-dozen town and branch libraries, three museums, two universities, three schools, and other cultural organizations.

Some 5,000 public school students were also involved in the program, but the timing made it unlikely that teachers formally taught the book or required students to participate. Efforts on the part of Writers & Books to sponsor creative events for younger children also ran into challenges,

in part because schools had already spent the bulk of their budgeting for special programming. One of the project leaders recounts the following anecdote:

We booked a children's author who wrote a series of children's books based on The Maltese Falcon—starring a gecko. We booked him in 3 schools, but none of the schools had budgets left to pay for him. So we were too hopeful about the schools buying into it and hiring this author/speaker. ...We lost a LOT of money on that effort. It was our "gift" to the school system!

Impact

Writers & Books also used their Big Read funding to purchase copies of *The Maltese Falcon*, and estimated that their efforts made it possible for over 900 readers to read the book. Director of Special Programs, Karen VanMeener, also cited the large number of Reader's Guides that were distributed as evidence that their efforts encouraged people to read *The Maltese Falcon*. "We know materials went out. For the first time people (partners) were asking for more materials when they ran out. That was very positive. Librarians were paying attention!" said VanMeener. Partnering libraries also saw an increase circulation of related materials and felt "very confident" in attributing it to The Big Read publicity and their increased visibility in the community. They saw many familiar faces from past literary events, suggesting that many of their participants were avid readers and regular patrons, but VanMeener also believes that the film screenings attracted many lapsed and/or non-readers.

In a follow-up interview, VanMeener said that, although they considered their Big Read a success, one thing that might have led to greater success was fewer events. They were so "gung-ho," said VanMeener, so excited to be a part of The Big Read, that they wanted to do everything. Having more money made them believe they could do far more than was feasible, and contributions from schools and corporate sponsors that never materialized meant that their money had to be spread more widely.

To be honest, we tried to do too much, because we saw a much bigger budget than we were used to working with...and we got excited about the prospects. But it was all very positive, and we learned a lot about our capacity.

But, said VanMeener, "we'd do this again in a heartbeat." In addition to gaining valuable experience, she said that they greatly expanded the capacity of their website and "found inspiration for new events" from the NEA website. They hope to continue offering The Big Read, along with their original "If All Rochester Read the Same Book" program, establishing a year-round cycle that alternates between the works of living, contemporary authors and more classic texts.

Caldwell Public Library, Caldwell, New Jersey

The Age of Innocence

Region: Northeast/Middle Atlantic	Number of K-12 Schools: 5
Total Days: 30	Number of Teachers: 23
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 21
Population: 7,500 (40,247, County)	Number of Attendees: 32,768
Number of Partner Organizations: 14	Adults, 22,036; Children, 10,732
Number of Libraries: 3	Number of Book Club Meetings: 14
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 164
Number of Volunteers: 148	Adults, 157; Children, 7

The Age of Innocence was a good fit for this northern New Jersey borough, not only because its proximity to New York City, the setting for Wharton's novel, but also because the novel takes place around the time the library was opening its doors. The Big Read helped young and old alike celebrate the library's 90th birthday, Caldwell's history and heritage, and literary reading. An energetic promotional campaign and creative programming efforts involved local officials, businesses, churches, public and private schools, scout troops, and other community members in some aspect of the program and helped make it a success. As a result, says the library and Big Read director, people see the library "as a key community organization...as opposed to a place with dusty books and shelves that only a few people access."

Background

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* added an elegant backdrop to Caldwell, New Jersey's celebration of the library's 90th birthday. Already on display at the library, a Carnegie library housed in a stately building across the street from Grover Cleveland's birthplace, was an exhibit entitled "Caldwell's Age of Innocence: Early Photographs from the Gene Collerd Archive." For their kick-off, the library secured the carriage used in Martin Scorsese's 1993 film adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, which only added to their efforts to portray life at the turn of the century. The novel and birthday celebration also helped community members see the turn of the century as a time not only of elegance but also of change, and consider the ways their own customs and mores had evolved in the intervening century.

Promotion and Partnerships

With the help of a PR professional serving on the library board, the Caldwell Public Library launched a Big Read promotional campaign that included traditional media outlets as well as the creative efforts of local businesses and organizations. The library commissioned original PSA's and radio spots, and newspapers covered events and ran articles on related activities, such as local Boy Scouts earning reading merit badges. Local bookstores set up displays featuring *The Age of Innocence* and other books by Edith Wharton, and other local businesses played announcements over loudspeakers. Some local taverns and restaurants used placemats or menu inserts that provided information about The Big Read or offered a 20% discount to patrons who showed a copy of the NEA Readers's Guide or a copy of the book; proceeds were donated to the library. Announcements in church bulletins and school and business websites urged community members

to participate. Boy Scouts, and Brownies dressed in rented costumes from the turn of the century handed out materials at local festivals—all to help promote the book and The Big Read.

Library staff relied heavily on the NEA resources for promotion, and reported that community members were pleased. Given the high production quality of the Audio CD and music of Elmer Bernstein, some, said Big Read project director Karen Kleppe-Lembo, “couldn’t believe it was free.” One community member even re-read the book after hearing the Audio Guide commentary to see what she had missed. As part of their Big Read effort, the Caldwell Public Library also created a DVD set of community members reading the entire book. This resource, available at the library, featured readings by the mayor, the project director, library board members, media personalities, and community members.

According to Lembo, the library benefited greatly from the programming and promotional partnerships with community businesses, organizations, and educational institutions. Lembo also noted that the way she thinks about partnerships has changed as a result of the Big Read: “Any single conversation or point of contact is an opportunity for partnership. We’ll find a way to partner with anyone.” The residents of Caldwell, added Lembo, not only benefited from The Big Read, but also helped to make it a great success: “Every single person involved brought other people in, to either share their talents or join a book group, or attend a program.” The mayor and her office donated time to appear at events and help with fundraising efforts. At the annual street fair a bookstore employee hosted a book discussion group, offered reader’s guides, bookmarks, and posters, and sold the book at a discount. The local garden club organized tours of historic public gardens. The Big Read, said Lembo, “was a ‘win win’ every step of the way.”

Programming and Participation

Caldwell held two kick-off events, one for the general public and another for teens. The library hosted a booth at the 17th annual Rotary/Kiwanis Street Fair, which typically attracts an estimated 30,000 people. The centerpiece of the booth was the carriage from Scorsese’s film, alongside which volunteers dressed in turn of the century clothing handed out copies of the book and Reader’s Guides. A second kick-off event for teenagers included professional actors performing a dramatic reading of a chapter of the book. There were also film screenings and discussions, public readings, and special appearances by dignitaries and visitors sharing their thoughts on Wharton’s novel and reading, including Virginia Long, a New Jersey Supreme Court Justice, and NEA Literature Consultant, Erika Koss.

The library partnered with three high schools, one public and two private Catholic schools—an all-boys school and an all-girls school. The public high school included *The Age of Innocence* on their summer reading list for junior honors English, and students from two classes participated in *The Age of Innocence* book discussions at off-site Big Read. A local all-girls’ school also participated in book discussions, and a photography class used the book as the theme for their semester projects, which involved photo essays and a closer examination of photos of flowers, eyes and windows, three prevalent images in the book. For their projects, students could choose to create photographic images for either the cover art of a reprint of *The Age of Innocence*, or for

a display ad featuring a fragrance based on the book. The photographs in which these young women translated Wharton's novel into images were then put on display for the public to view at the library.

Since it was difficult to find a children's companion or alternative to *The Age of Innocence*, Caldwell hosted an American Girl tea party featuring Samantha Parkington, one of the American Girl dolls who "lived" during the period in which *The Age of Innocence* was set. About fifty girls, ages six through ten, attended the tea party, making "flowered and butterflyed" hats, listening to the book, and of course having tea. Teen volunteers assisted with the event, including the mayor, who helped make hats.

The library found that there were very few males between the ages of 20 and 65 at their events, and in the future they plan to partner with the local Rotary Club to attract more. They also plan to do more outreach to community members with special needs in the future (e.g. children with autism, or English Language Learners).

The final Big Read event, entitled "At Home and in the Garden with Edith Wharton," featured a presentation by Dr. Eleanor Dwight, author of *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life*. Dwight provided participants with insights into the experiences that shaped Wharton's life and writings, and introduced them to Wharton's non-fiction writing on garden and home design, (e.g., *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, 1904, and *The Decoration of Houses*, 1897). Caldwell's culminating event also evoked Wharton's fiction and non-fiction: a celebration at the Greenwood Gardens, a public garden in Short Hills, New Jersey, on the national register of historic places, allowed community members one last opportunity to come together to talk about the book, hear dramatic readings, and take a tour of the 28-acre early 20th century estate. Lembo said that "no one wanted The Big Read to end," but holding the last event in a lovely, evocative setting seemed a fitting tribute to Edith Wharton and her Pulitzer-prize winning novel.

Impact

In an interview, Karen Kleppe Lembo described the differences between The Big Read and other library initiatives, and the changes The Big Read brought about in how the community and library staff view the library's role. In her tenure with the library, said Lembo, they have never had an opportunity to engage an initiative on such a broad scale: they had not, for example, had funds to offer honoraria to speakers or commission professionally produced resources to accompany and promote programming. The Big Read, she said, enabled them "to do business in an extremely professional manner...and the results were incredible."

Lembo emphasized that getting The Big Read grant and being part of a national project was a "big deal" for the Caldwell Public Library, which was able to offer more and different types of events than ever before. "We showed that we may be small but we did something big." Lembo now sees "a much stronger community conviction and commitment to the library," which had struggled to find its niche. Now, said Lembo, the library is invited to be involved in several new programs, and there is a greater sense of "confidence and credibility." People have come to see

the library “as a key community organization, as a hub for lots of things, as opposed to a place with dusty books and shelves that only a few people access.”

Lembo said the community embraced the notion of a one-book reading program. “...People would talk about the Big Read in the grocery store and ask each other if they had read the book or what they thought about some point in the book.” After their first Big Read ended, at least one book discussion group continued reading other books on The Big Read list—using the NEA’s Audio Guides and Reader’s Guide to support their effort. Lembo has also urged community members to take part in Big Reads in nearby communities.

Lembo reported a 9.88% increase in circulation during The Big Read, and “more fiction go out from the circulation desk,” and “an increase in the number of people coming to the library for the first time—new patrons, new book discussions, people asking for more Edith Wharton books, and more people checking out Edith Wharton.” One Big Read participant shared the following comment with the library board: “I never have time to read for thought—and being in the book discussion required me to be a thoughtful reader.”

The book, she said, also had a big impact on teens. Lembo was pleased to see that teenagers were frequently present at community events, including book discussions, presentations, and dramatic readings. One teenaged reader said that *The Age of Innocence* was a real struggle to read, but she wanted to be able to discuss it so she kept going—and got a lot out of it. Lembo believes that the library has a better connection with the teens and youth of Caldwell as a result of The Big Read, and that the experience brought teens and the community together, promoting a new level of discourse and discussion among young and old. For the first time, said Lembo, “kids and adults are having meaningful conversations and really sharing differing opinions and perspectives.”

Postscript

In December 2007, the mayor hosted a gala event that helped to raise an additional \$16,000 for the Caldwell Public Library, which was also later recognized for their efforts with a community service award from the local Kiwanis chapter. The Big Read experience has helped the library see what is possible with funding that enables publicity and paid speakers. They have since created a library foundation with 501C3 status so that they can continue to raise funds for similar events and other supplemental programming. In 2008, the Caldwell Public Library applied for and received its second Big Read grant, for Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*.

Will & Company, Los Angeles, California
The Grapes of Wrath

Region: West/Pacific	Number of K-12 Schools: 28
Total Days: 42	Number of Teachers: 45
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 41
Population: 390,000	Number of Attendees: 2,409
Number of Partner Organizations: 9	Adults, 1,299; Children, 1,110
Number of Libraries: 17	Number of Book Club Meetings: 15
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 239
Number of Volunteers: 75	Adults, 239; Children, 0

For 20 years, Will & Company has been “making the experience of reading a richer one” for students by bringing the words alive on stage, which they did with The Grapes of Wrath and a group of Hollywood High School students. Artistic Director Colin Cox said Steinbeck’s novel “linked beautifully to the Latino population,” which makes up a large part of California’s large migrant worker population. Staging scenes from the book, Will & Company together joined young and old, “wisdom and eagerness,” and novices, amateurs, and equity actors.

Background

In the culminating event of Will & Company’s Big Read, senior citizens from the Las Palmas Senior Center, equity actors, and students from Hollywood High, most Hispanic, some from migrant families, shared the stage. Each group performed different scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*, joining hands at the end in a dance symbolizing the communities that developed among migrant families traveling west, when “twenty families became one family.” That, says Will & Company Artistic Director Colin Cox, is what The Big Read is all about: bringing different generations together, getting the word “off the page and into their bodies,” and “making literature live—that’s what we do.”

Will & Company, a not-for-profit theatre ensemble based in Los Angeles, has been doing this for two decades. It began as a Shakespeare company, but over the years has expanded its repertoire to include other classics and contemporary works. The company has worked with the Orange County Performing Arts Center and LA Music Center to provide arts workshops for students, especially for those in underserved areas, and arranged long-term residencies in schools and universities. Students, from the very young to college-age, read and retell the story, come up with their own dialogue, and “really own the story and the characters.” Will & Company has been successful with reluctant readers, students with attention deficits, and English language learners. Working with high school students, they sometimes put students into the production on the spot, and sometimes invite students to join the cast—as they did with the Hollywood High students—and perform for others.¹² The goal, Cox explained, is not just to bring new audiences to the theatre, it’s to bring them to books, which is why, he added, “The Big Read fit like a glove.”

¹² See <http://www.willandcompany.com>.

“When we started the company,” said Cox, “we thought, ‘If one student goes back and reads the book, we’ve done our job.’” He shared the story of a child who came up after a series of school performances with library copies of all six Shakespeare plays from which Will & Company had performed scenes. The child, a special education student, had actually been suspended from this school, but had snuck back in to go to Will & Company’s Shakespeare class. Cox is confident that making words come to life can inspire any child to read.

Partnerships

According to Cox and Sam Robinson, Managing Director and Director of Education, The Big Read deepened existing partnerships and helped them form new ones. Their lead partner was the Beverly Hills Public Library, which mounted an exhibit and sponsored reading groups and other area events. In addition to Hollywood High School and Las Palmas Senior Center, they also partnered with the City of Beverly Hills Community Services; the Hollywood Heritage Museum, which also mounted an exhibit; and Arlight Cinemas, which donated space—a first-time event—for the screening of the 1940 John Ford film of *The Grapes of Wrath*, starring Henry Fonda, which was watched by over 400 students. Borders Bookstore sponsored an event with Darryl Hickman who played Winfield Joad in the film.

All of the organizations that participated, said Robinson, were interested in the community collaborative aspect of the program—“getting multiple generations together, getting new audiences in place, and connecting with a great piece of literature.”

Will & Company joined with their community foundation to get matching Kellogg Foundation funding, but found the process confusing and time consuming, and in the end the community foundation didn’t get it [the necessary paperwork?] in on time. The most disappointing aspect of their Big Read, said Cox and Robinson, was the denial of rights to produce the play of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Los Angeles. (It was never made public who owned the LA rights, but they suspected it might be the Fonda heirs.)

The denial in LA did bring about a new partnership, with fellow Big Read grantee Yakima Community College, where Will & Company could get rights and did mount a very successful production.

Promotion and Resources

Robinson and Cox believe that one of the best things about The Big Read is that it’s a grassroots effort supported by resources from, and the status of, a national organization. They distributed Big Read materials “all across the city,” in libraries, coffee shops, and schools, through the LA Unified School Districts’ Artspace mailings. They also handed out materials at the West Hollywood Book Fair and during the Latin American Book festival, held just across the street from Will & Company’s home at the Ricardo Montalban Theatre. Big Read banners also hung in the theatre lobby throughout the month. More Teacher’s Guides, Robinson said, could have helped with schools (possibly in exchange for fewer Reader’s Guides).

Media attention was a challenge. In a city like LA, says Cox, media outlets are already well saturated with events, and the media follow celebrities. Even if they might attract the attention of a celebrity or politician, “it takes six months to get on their calendars.” Cox and Robinson believe that as The Big Read becomes more established, it will draw media attention. Broader-based funding was also a challenge, though the fact that The Big Read is a national initiative helped. Because grassroots efforts don’t work as well with bigger politicians, funders, and media outlets, said Cox, “it’s critical to have the support and imprimatur of the NEA.” He believes the NEA branding helped them, for example, get additional funding from the California Arts Council. Again, once The Big Read acquires a stronger identity, said Cox, they will have little trouble getting additional funding. “Foundations,” he said, “are going to love it.”

Programming

LA is a city of freeways, said Cox, and communities often don’t mix, so an important goal for Will & Company was not only to reach underserved audiences with The Big Read but to connect them to places they don’t typically visit and to connect them to one another. The Hollywood Heritage Museum had wanted to connect with local schools but hadn’t been able to do so. With Big Read funding, Will & Company made that happen, taking Hollywood High students to the museum to see presentations entitled “An Evening at the Barn, Films of the Depression Era” (*Our Daily Bread*, 1934, and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936) and exhibits on the Great Depression. The City of Beverly Hills Community Services, in collaboration with the Beverly Hills Public Library, coordinated “Remembering the Depression,” a video presentation featuring seniors and teens in a conversation about life in the 1930s.

The Beverly Hills Public Library sponsored an exhibit entitled *Facing the Depression: American Popular Culture in the 1930s, An Exhibition of Historical Letters and Vintage Images*, presented in collaboration with Profiles in History. To engage school-age audiences, the library’s young adult department created a list of over 30 related books for teens and young adults, “Hard Times: Then and Now, A Tribute to John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*.”

The final Big Read event was, for Will & Company, the most rewarding of their efforts to reach new audiences and connect younger and older members of the community. Hollywood High School students worked in class to develop the scenes and corresponding dialogue based on their interpretation of the book and its characters and events. Prior to this, none of the student participants had any performance experience. As one parent proudly said later, “None of my children has ever done anything like this!” Student performers were also captivated by the seniors’ performances, and those of the Will & Company professional actors, and by commentary between scenes, provided by Cox and a Steinbeck scholar. The students said that they had enjoyed their reading experience and felt that their involvement with The Big Read made the book much more interesting. One student said she was having trouble reading other authors, whose “metaphors weren’t as beautiful as Steinbeck’s.” It was a new experience for seniors as

well. Some had read the book earlier in their lives, but enjoyed re-reading, and watching the students.

According to Cox, Will & Company's co-performance of the stage play for *The Grapes of Wrath* with Yakima Community Valley College was a great success. "They made it happen," said Cox, whose actors had joined Yakima's theater department only the day before the performance. "We literally had 13 students that had never seen the 5 actors 'til they got there, and it worked beautifully. So much so that we're going every year." Cox called it "a life-altering experience among kids in Yakima," one that starts with "utter fear" about working with professional actors, "then turns to sheer excitement. They are all planning to move to LA."

Impact

The success of the Yakima production and the collective excitement and spirit of *The Grapes of Wrath* cross-generational dance assured Cox and Robinson of the impact of their work and The Big Read. In a broader sense, says Cox, they are engaged in a kind of "social activism" which makes classics and professional theatre accessible to a broad, diverse, often underserved audience. They tell stories of students from impoverished inner-city high schools who become more engaged in school through an interest in literature, and go on to attend and succeed in college. It's of course too early to tell if their Big Read activities will have this kind of long-term impact, but Cox sees it as an initiative that fits easily with their mission.

Cox also sees their success with The Big Read, as a theatre group, as an indication that other arts groups can play an important role in encouraging reading in their own communities.

Follow-up

In a follow-up interview, Cox was happy to announce that they have received a \$50,000 grant, from the James Irvine Foundation, which Will & Company hoped to split into the next two Big Reads. This, he said, would help in their marketing and program planning, whether it is local event planning or planning for collaborative performances across the country. Cox was optimistic about working, again, with another grantee, and still believed that "cross-pollination" between Big Read sites was worth any challenges, but also expresses concerns about the joint or split fund-raising.

For their next Big Read they chose *Bless Me, Ultima*. They would like to create a play based on the book, and were in discussion with Anaya. They hope to be able to work with the NEA and the author on any issues involving copyright laws and rights.

During the call, Cox mentioned an article in the *LA Times* about the "big waste" of The Big Read.¹³ He is confident that as the word of successful Big Reads, in LA and all around the country spreads, naysayers such as the article's author would be convinced of its value.

¹³ See <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/feb/25/opinion/oe-henley25>.

Postscript

Will & Company was awarded a second Big Read grant to present, with partner Loyola Marymount University, a series of events featuring Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Their Big Read will again culminate with a cross-generational performance of staged readings by students from local schools and senior citizens.

“A Mockingbird Lives in Fulton County,” Spoon River College, Canton, Illinois
To Kill a Mockingbird

Region: Midwest/East North Central	Number of K-12 Schools: 8
Total Days: 38	Number of Teachers: 18
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 57
Population: 37,378 (County)	Number of Attendees: 27,026
Number of Partner Organizations: 13	Adults, 19,867; Children, 7,159
Number of Libraries: 2	Number of Book Club Meetings: 17
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 366
Number of Volunteers: 34	Adults, 360; Children, 6

When a small town does a Big Read, much of the town is involved in one way or another. In Canton, Illinois, libraries, schools, churches, prisons, restaurants, law firms, insurance agencies, retiree groups, the YWCA— all took part in The Big Read. The mayor issued a proclamation, ministers delivered sermons for a month of Sundays, students read to shut-ins, inmates designed a six-foot high replica of the book, and a farmer tuned in from the cab of his tractor to listen to the daily radio reading of To Kill a Mockingbird. It wasn't just a small-town affinity that drew Canton to Harper Lee's novel. Key themes—racial injustice, intolerance, domestic violence—struck chords as well. Discussing them as a community brought a “cohesiveness and a common vision” to this Illinois town, says the project coordinator, and showed that “there are more readers out there than many people would believe.”

Background

Spoon River College, which co-sponsored this Big Read with the Parlin-Ingersoll Public Library, takes its name from the river that cuts a scenic path through west-central Illinois before it joins the Illinois River. The river gained literary fame with the 1915 publication of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, a collection of 244 poetic epitaphs in which the citizens of the fictional town of Spoon River tell their stories from the grave. The cast includes clergymen, artists, librarians, lawyers, men and women of good and not so good repute. Some are loners, some gossipers, some happy with their lives, some unhappy. The themes that run through the *Spoon River Anthology* are not unlike those in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: small-town life isn't always idyllic, humankind can disappoint and justice systems falter—but a clear-eyed hope can see a community through hard times. That wisdom seemed to inspire and inhabit this Big Read, aptly and elusively titled “A Mockingbird Lives in Fulton County.”

Fulton County has had its share of hard times. Located in that midsection of the country known as tornado alley, the area has, over the years, been hit by several destructive storms. The most devastating storm in recent memory was in 1975, when a category F-3 twister leveled much of Canton. The area is also known by other regional monikers linked to good times and bad. Part of the corn belt, nation's breadbasket, Canton was once home to International Harvester, formerly Parlin &

Orendorff, supplier of plows, reapers, thrashers, and other equipment to farmers worldwide. After a century of operation, the industry that helped build the town began to decline. In 1979, International Harvester was crippled by a six-month, company-wide strike—the longest running strike in UAW history. In 1983, after reporting a \$165 million loss, International Harvester closed the sprawling 30-acre plant, which lay vacant until 1997, when it was destroyed by fire. The former industrial heart of the city was not only a smoldering ruin, but also created an EPA nightmare.¹⁴

According to Carol Davis, Big Read Coordinator and Spoon River College’s Dean of Community and Workforce Education, Canton and Fulton County never really recovered from these blows. The area has high unemployment rates, declining school enrollments, and an aging population. This was a town, says Davis, “that needed something to pull it together,” and “The Big Read could not have come at a better time.”

The Big Read was a good fit for Spoon River College as well as an opportune initiative for the town. Part of the college’s mission is to help the community grow and weather economic hardship by providing “a learning environment that offers a broad range of educational programs, cultural activities, and economic development opportunities which empower individuals and enhance the quality of life.”¹⁵ Davis said that in designing Big Read activities, the goal was to involve and energize the whole community—youths, seniors, city leaders, business men and women, at-risk populations, prison inmates, victims of domestic violence, and shut-ins—and they seem to have succeeded.

Partnerships

The Parlin-Ingersoll Library, Spoon River College’s primary Big Read partner, had long-standing ties to the community and the community college. Built in 1892 with a bequest from the plow-factory Parlin family, the library still receives support from a trust fund created by family heirs. According to Library Director Randy Wilson, the library and Spoon River College had partnered on numerous initiatives, including literary projects. As part of “One Book, One Play, One City,” for example, Spoon River College drama and honors classes presented scenes and discussions of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. The Big Read, said Wilson, only strengthened the partnership and their joint focus on reading and literacy.

Other partners, 23 of whom came forward within a week of the announcement of The Big Read grant, represented the town’s major institutions and the program’s targeted audiences. Canton’s active retirement groups, Generations Connect and Retirees Leading Retirees, participated in events and provided much of the volunteer support. Three local churches held book discussions and film screenings, and devoted Sunday sermons to themes from the book. Media partners included WBYS,

¹⁴ “History of Canton,” from the Canton, Illinois website. <http://www.cantonillinois.org>

¹⁵ Spoon River College “Mission, Vision and Values,” see <http://www.sponrivercollege.net>.

the local radio station, and the *Canton Daily Leger* and *Fulton County Democrat*. Local restaurants and other businesses underwrote events, and city and county officials offered support. Education partners included Canton Senior High School, where 9th graders read the book and other students engaged in a cross-generational email exchange with adult volunteers. Also included were the McCall Alternative School, where a retired travel agent and teacher paired up to talk about the book with at-risk students, and a reading class at the Illinois River Correctional Center. Working with Davis and Wilson as part-time grant coordinators were sisters Carol Blackfelner and Jenny Beal, both former teachers who brought energy to the project and valuable connections to the local school system.

Promotion

A desire to engage the whole community also drove promotion, which began in September 2007 in connection with Canton's annual Friendship Festival. Over the three-day celebration, Big Read organizers distributed Audio CDs and Reader's Guides at a festival booth, sponsored a parade float, and handed out bookmarks along the parade route. The well-attended Kick-off dinner featured period music, Southern food, and the NEA's Director of Literature, David Kipen.

Davis said they promoted The Big Read as a "family project." Restaurants created placemats and table tents that listed sponsors, advertised upcoming events and noontime radio reading, and kept children occupied with word searches until their food arrived. When a letter to HarperCollins asking for rights to duplicate cover art went unanswered, sisters Beal and Blackfelner simply used a childhood photograph of their mother, who, with her Buster Brown hair cut, showed a striking resemblance to the Scout Finch pictured on the cover of the Harper Perennial Modern Classics paperback (see following page). The idea was so well-received that they used other family photos, with the same 1930s feel and sepia tones, to picture Jem and Dill on placemats that changed each week and became part of promotion used by Meals on Wheels and the YWCA's Lunch with Friends. When restaurants ran out, customers asked for more.

Partners also provided their own promotion before and during The Big Read month. *The Daily Ledger* ran a series of articles about *To Kill a Mockingbird* that the editor said drew more comments than anything he had ever written, except perhaps for school awards. The school newspaper, *The CHS Pennant*, also carried articles about The Big Read and the freshman class's activities. Even a promo for the class's Boo Radley House at "Halloween High School" invited readers to ponder the book's theme of intolerance: "If you're lucky, you might catch a glimpse of the misunderstood Boo Radley. And if you do, how will you treat him?"¹⁶

¹⁶ *CHS Pennant*, Vo. 108, No. 1, Oct. 2007.

The BIG READ is an initiative designed to revitalize the role of literature in American society. Created by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest, this program aims to bring the informative power of reading into the lives of Americans. The Big Read is working with Spoon River College and Parlin-Ingersoll Library to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment.

Meet the Character:

Scout (Jean Louise Finch) is a young girl forced to grow up during times of racial and social exclusion. She is constantly questioning Jem, her older brother, and any adult around about her curiosities. She doesn't fully understand the reasons for the different levels of society. She always thought her fist was a solution to her problems, but as she matures in the novel she finds some reasonable explanations for her questions.



Scout Finch

"Fine folks are people who did the best they could with the sense they had."

"Nuthin's real scary except in books."

"Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?"

A Mockingbird Lives in Fulton County



During the month of October Fulton County will be reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Word Search

F S A Y D D L R P U E Y S L
 Z H T P E B W M L V E C V F
 S P T X J K O W S Q L E D C
 M B I J K D F A E H R P B I
 A O C Y H R D L O R E D P S
 Y O U E C I F A R E P A U A
 C R S V N B J B G M R E T I
 O A F K I C P A E W A R V N
 M D I M F N D M N J H G P R
 B L N V T I J A J X I I O U
 A E C L U K P B U L O B L P
 I Y H O O C T B R P A E W L
 V E W U C O I R S G B H H A
 C K Y S S M Y O E A D T R C

Alabama	Atticus Finch	Boo Radley
Maycomb	Mockingbird	Negroes
Calpurnia	Scout Finch	Harper Lee
The Big Read		



NATIONAL
 ENDOWMENT
 FOR THE ARTS



THE BIG READ Calendar of Events
 Week of October 1-7, 2007

All events listed are open to the public

12:30-1pm, Mon-Fri: WBYS radio read

To Kill a Mockingbird

Time in your radio to AM1560

Daily: Thematic "Mockingbird" Art Exhibit
 Spoon River College, Centers Bldg.

Daily: Frank Sadorus Family Farm
 Photography Exhibit
 Dickson Mounds Museum

10/2, 10-11:30am: Mockingbird Book Discussion
 Canton Park District Senior Center

10/3, 6am-3pm: Boo Radley Walk for Tolerance
 Each Wednesday in October
 Canton Family YMCA

10/3, 6pm: Fulton/Mason Crisis Service
 Candlelight Vigil to End Domestic Violence
 Congregational Church

Placemat Sponsors:

American Grille	Monical's Pizza
Canton Country Club	Pizza Hut
Joe's Place	Red Oak Estates

Listen to *To Kill a Mockingbird* every weekday in October at 12:30 p.m.
 on your local radio station, WBYS AM1560.

Read by local readers!

The focal point of the promotion was a 4 x 6 foot model of the book, designed and built by inmates in a vocational construction class at the Illinois River Correctional Center. The cover art, also the work of an inmate, was based on the original dust jacket and 40th anniversary re-issue, with a mockingbird silhouetted on a red background. Constructed of firm but lightweight foam board, the book was portable enough to transfer from event to event—and to feature in the Friendship Festival parade on the bed of an antique truck. The book had polystyrene pages for signatures of Big Read participants. A smaller version stood alongside the Bible on the communion table in one of the local churches as ministers delivered weekly sermons on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Programming

According to Davis, in devising programming ideas organizers tried to fit Big Read events “in with something they were already doing.” The Dickson Mounds Museum, which had already scheduled the Frank Sadorus Family Farm Photo Exhibit portraying early twentieth-century farm life in Illinois, also showed the classic Gregory Peck film. The Big Read coincided with the YMCA-sponsored Week without Violence, which included a series of events for all ages that promoted tolerance, compassion, non-violence, and acceptance of differences. For the Boo Radley Walk for Tolerance, held weekly during The Big Read, participants recorded miles and later received prizes. The YMCA presented a play on tolerance to over a thousand middle-school students, a day care helped children create paperplate masks to promote diversity, and active older adults discussed the book during a wiener roast on the YWCA tennis courts. At a local church, the Fulton-Mason Crisis Services held a “Candlelight Vigil to End Domestic Violence.”

In addition to Sunday sermons, Canton-area churches showed the film of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in one church as part of an intergenerational discussion. A minister who delivered sermons on “Bird Songs of Sins and Justice” and “Growing Up with Boo” said that the *To Kill a Mockingbird* activities and were very popular with congregations. Church figures showed that over half the congregation read the book during the month—one elderly congregant, three times.

Among the other Big Read activities were WBYS’s noontime Radio Reader, featuring local celebrities reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Spoon River College offered an online course on the book, free to the public, and a local attorney spoke on “Atticus Finch, Civil Rights and Fulton County Law.” During the month, retired teachers read to handicapped students in a residential home, and students read to shut-ins. Informal book groups formed at unconventional venues, including basketball games and a style salon. Based on Canton’s final report, over 25,000 people, or almost three-fourths of the county population, took part in The Big Read. Pleased with their outreach and attendance, Davis said “there are more readers out there than many people would believe,” adding, “one would be hard pressed to find a part of the community that *wasn’t* touched by The Big Read.”

To Kill a Mockingbird and the month-long program touched some of those readers in very personal ways. During an interview, Dave Bishop, Correctional Center teacher, described the deep, honest

discussions among the 25 inmates enrolled in his six-week college-level class: Talking about Jim Crow laws, issues of inequality and injustice, and the book's portrayal of African Americans, one inmate urged fellow readers to keep the historical period in mind and not be "offended by anything in this book." Bishop said that some inmates compared themselves to the harmless mockingbird, adding that if luck had blessed them with a lawyer like Atticus Finch, their lives could have been different. Bishop also noted these men were "hungry for this kind of thing," and that all 25 would do it again.

In an interview after the program, a soft-spoken high school senior, an artist and songwriter, described her own encounter with the novel. She had read *To Kill a Mockingbird* first as a sophomore, but wasn't "particularly moved." In the course of email exchanges with other readers in the community, she not only connected with the book, but also with community members, who she found were not as "close-minded" and "fearful of change" as she had assumed this small town's older citizens would be. The experience moved her to organize a fundraising dinner at a local café, where she performed original songs inspired by the book's themes. Over 130 people attended, and, at her request, proceeds went to the Fulton-Mason Crisis Services. In a poignant moment during the conversation, this student explained that she was abused as a child. There was clearly some identification with Mayella Ewell, but she also said she sometimes felt "like a mockingbird: I didn't do anything to hurt people, but I was hurt."

Impact

Canton's closing event had a name—"A Mockingbird Flies Away"—but, three months later, The Big Read excitement was still in the air. In the follow-up interview, Davis said people in the grocery store were still asking her when they were going to do another Big Read. Like prison instructor Dave Bishop, she said "people are hungry for good books to read, good books to talk about."

And the town had continued to respond to those needs. WBYS continued mid-day readings, for the "vision-impaired and time-challenged."¹⁷ Retirees and other community members volunteered their time to read, taking turns with *A Christmas Carol*, *Wind in the Willows*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The book club at the alternative school continued, with *Fahrenheit 451*, and with the help of the retirees, who still brought cookies. The school even arranged for students to receive an hour of credit. Library Director Wilson said that although they had not seen an increase in circulation, they had had "a very stable circulation," which was notable given that, when gas prices started going up, circulation from outside the county started going down in proportion to distance from Canton. Based in part on Big Read participation levels, the library had enhanced its outreach to middle-school students, adding more graphic novels, game days, pizza, books to attract boys and men, and films involving fantasy and science fiction.

¹⁷ From *The Fulton Democrat*.

Postscript

Fulton County won a second Big Read grant, and organizers planned to use many of the same organizational and promotional strategies: Carol Blackfelner and Jenny Beal were again employed part-time for the month to coordinate the efforts—something that Davis “strongly recommends.” Conversations with the ministerial association indicated that churches would continue, along with sermons. The Big Read, said Davis, also strengthened relationship between the college and the prison. Invitations to school administrative meetings were a good sign that school partnerships would likely expand, and The Big Read planners hoped to involve elementary schools the second time around, possibly with a classic comic book version of The Big Read book. They hoped to build a stronger partnership with the park district, and with other government and municipal units. “Proclamations are all well and good,” said Davis, but “mandated employee reading would be better.” They were still exploring ways to reach men and boys, and curious to see whether attendance for events organized around their next choice skews to one gender or age group or another.

And the book? *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a title with a natural appeal to men and boys, and an obvious choice for a town not far from the Mississippi, a town that had already successfully engaged residents in an extended conversation about discrimination, injustice, childhood pranks, and the ways by which communities guide children to adulthood.

PHASE 2, CYCLE 1

National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, California

Fahrenheit 451

Region: West	Number of K-12 Schools: 13
Total Days: 37	Number of Teachers: 30
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 17
Population: 425,102	Number of Attendees: 1,378
Number of Partner Organizations: 11	Adults, 919; Children, 459
Number of Libraries: 15	Number of Book Club Meetings: 20
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 364
Number of Volunteers: 54	Adults, 208; Children, 156

The National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California held its second Big Read in March 2008. Its previous book choice, The Grapes of Wrath, had been obvious. For their second Big Read, organizers chose Fahrenheit 451—the first time the center had conducted a major public program around a work penned by anyone other than their namesake. For Fahrenheit 451, the National Steinbeck Center replicated partnerships and events that proved successful for The Grapes of Wrath, but also added new ones. The combined success of two Big Reads has had a substantial and lasting impact on the center, expanding its role in community even beyond the legacy left by John Steinbeck.

Background

The National Steinbeck Center selected Fahrenheit 451 because it addresses the importance of books and the perils of censorship, a choice made all the more appropriate by past and recent events in Salinas' history. The Grapes of Wrath had been burned in Salinas when it was first published in 1939. Almost 70 years later, statutes and public sentiments about what constitutes objectionable reading material have changed, but other realities pose a different kind of threat: 2004 budget cuts, for example, led to library closings in Salinas that limited free public access to books. The Big Read gave readers other ways to read and discuss books, and helped the National Steinbeck Center "create an identity...as a center for books and for literacy," an identity it plans to continue to strengthen by promoting other classic and contemporary literary works.¹⁸

Partnerships Old and New

Many of the same organizations that had partnered with the National Steinbeck Center on the first Big Read returned to contribute to the second one. As Garland Thompson, The Big Read 2008 coordinator, wrote in his Grantee Survey, "For us there really was no difficulty in forming or sustaining partnerships. All groups we approached again welcomed us with open arms, and were very excited by what we proposed to do." The experience of the first Big Read, said Thompson, changed the way he thought about partnerships, and he saw what could be achieved when

¹⁸ From the National Steinbeck Center's final report narrative.

organizations work together. He also saw how much more easily partnerships are formed when “you’re communicating with people not just as organizations, but as individuals.” These personal connections were, he says, key to successful partnerships.

Among the organizations coming on board for a second time was the Western Stage theatre company, which performed “Bradbury Alive!,” an original dramatization of scenes from the book. California State University at Monterey Bay (CSUMB) and Monterey Peninsula College, which hosted panel discussions for the previous Big Read, sponsored similar activities for *Fahrenheit 451*. Students from CSUMB also created mixed-media pieces inspired by the book, which were displayed at the National Steinbeck Center. The Mayor’s Office, which had worked with the National Steinbeck Center for the first time for *The Grapes of Wrath*, again joined the efforts.

New Big Read partners included the Salinas Fire Department, which hosted book discussions, competed in a chili cook-off against the National Steinbeck Center’s caterer, and participated in a panel called “Fire chiefs confess: What books they would save and why.”

Participation by Children, Teens, and Young Adults

The National Steinbeck Center invited youth of all ages to take part in the program, and often combined the youngest and oldest audiences. The Mayor used the *Fahrenheit 451* Big Read as a kickoff for a new initiative to get a library card in the hands of every first grade student. The Sally Griffin Active Living Center, which had been active in the previous Big Read, sponsored a well-attended intergenerational Day of Discovery with hands-on activities, a dramatic reading, and opportunities to read out loud or share reflections about the novel. Privately, several people thanked Big Read coordinator Thompson for having young people at the event. In a post-Big Read interview, he expressed interest in doing more intergenerational events in the future, noting that, in generations past, elders and young people would often get together but no longer do so nearly as often.

Publicity from the first Big Read and the announcement of the grant in the fall of 2007 helped the National Steinbeck Center get the Monterey County teachers on board and plan spring 2008 activities. Thirteen schools and 30 teachers in all participated. John Wood, a teacher from a Salinas high school, was one of the most enthusiastic. He had gotten involved in the center’s literary activities shortly after moving to Salinas a year earlier. Wood says that whenever he moves to a new city, he likes to get a library card and join a book club, and he had joined such a club at the National Steinbeck Center. As part of the 2007 Big Read, Wood had asked students to write about their journeys to California, mirroring a larger effort by the center to document travels to the area. He had also taken school groups to a special exhibit at the center that focused on teenagers and immigration. For the 2008 Big Read, Wood planned another trip to the National Steinbeck Center, but was met with resistance from his department head because of the potential cost of the trip and questions about its necessity in light of concerns over student test scores. Wood received approval after assuring the department that he would take care of all the arrangements and that the National Steinbeck Center would fund the trip.

Wood was supported in his efforts by his assistant principal, whose mother was an active volunteer at the center. The assistant principal even offered to lead a student discussion group on the novel. Students described this session as “we would ask him questions about the book and he would answer them.” Students received clarification on sections of the book that they didn’t understand while interacting with an administrator in a way that they normally wouldn’t. His sophomore English students studied the book in class and attended Big Read events for extra credit. His senior English students had the option of reading *Fahrenheit 451* for extra credit, but the book was not taught in class. The sophomores visited the National Steinbeck Center to see the *Fahrenheit 451* art exhibit; many of those same students also attended a panel discussion at Monterey Peninsula College on technology in modern life.

During a focus group with the sophomore group, students spoke very favorably about the novel and felt that it was a good choice for them. Comments included “It wasn’t boring” and “it made you think”—high praise for a generation for whom “boring” is harsh criticism. Students identified with some of the events and images in the novel, such as the idea of memorizing passages from books. Students sometimes had to commit things they read to memory themselves, so scenes where the book’s characters were doing the same thing resonated with them. Students also spoke about the technology featured in the novel, from the seashells that resembled iPod earbuds to the robots that they would like to have in their own homes.

Big Read activities also received accolades. One student thought the technology panel at Monterey Peninsula College was going to be boring, but was pleasantly surprised when she enjoyed the experience. Another student took her family to an event in a nearby town and ended up talking with her father about the novel. Students praised the art exhibit at the National Steinbeck Center because it helped them to get further in to the novel. They talked about getting “a better understanding of the book” by having the opportunity to visualize events and characters.

Impact

The National Steinbeck Center Big Read produced some immediate, short-term impacts and set the stage for longer-term outcomes. In the short term, Thompson noted, “All our partner libraries showed an increase in traffic through their doors, and in circulation. Borders Books showed an increase in demand for the book during The Big Read.” The program also garnered positive public recognition and demand for similar activities, such as, according to Thompson, “letters to the editor and to the National Steinbeck Center that encouraged us to continue with more literary programming like The Big Read. Many people wanted to know when we were going to do it again.”

Thompson also felt that the programming had “irrevocably changed the way teenagers think about books.” Judging from the book discussions he had observed, teenagers expressed interest in reading more because they understood that “books make you smarter.” Visiting the National Steinbeck Center was another way to expand perspectives, which Thompson predicted would have an impact on the students in the future.

The focus groups with the high school students reinforced Thompson's observations. Students acknowledged that they would like to read more than they do. Classes, work, and sports all compete for the time they could spend reading, but, for some, The Big Read changed their reading habits or how they thought about reading literature for fun. One student noted that the National Steinbeck Center exhibit was so visual that she could "picture it even more." Another explained, "now I get more into a book" because of her engagement with The Big Read. Reading *Fahrenheit 451* made some students appreciate reading more after seeing the passion with which Montag read. One student's lasting memory of The Big Read reflects the sentiment of many students: "Cherish what you have before it gets taken away."

Postscript

The National Steinbeck Center is already engaged its third Big Read, having been one of three organizations selected to pilot a poetry Big Read on the work of Robinson Jeffers. Based on past Big Read programming, it can be expected that the Jeffers Big Read will continue to expand the community of readers in the Monterey County area.

East Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles, California

Bless Me, Ultima

Region: West	Number of K-12 Schools: 15
Total Days: 26	Number of Teachers: 39
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 38
Population: 98,897	Number of Attendees: 1,465
Number of Partner Organizations: 3	Adults, 810; Children, 655
Number of Libraries: 2	Number of Book Club Meetings: 11
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 668
Number of Volunteers: 8	Adults, 388; Children, 280

The East Los Angeles Public Library created a variety of activities spread across five area libraries to engage readers, especially youth, in the themes and cultural context of Bless Me, Ultima. High school and college students read the book, attended talks to learn more about the author, and took part in art contests, dream interpretation workshops, and dramatic readings. The book inspired interests that extended well beyond the discussions: teens talked to family members about the book's characters and traditions, college-level students asked for more book discussions, and colleges and public libraries planned future partnerships to serve community needs.

Background

The East LA Big Read was not the first Big Read for Los Angeles libraries. Two other area libraries had sponsored previous programs. This program, however, differed in important ways. It was the first community-wide reading program in East Los Angeles, a predominately Hispanic area of the city, with families of mostly Mexican descent, where factories, shops, and single-family residences sit side-by-side along primary and secondary thoroughfares.¹⁹ And, unlike previous LA Big Reads, which involved a single library, this one included programs at five libraries. People could attend dream interpretation workshops at one library, attend a dramatic reading of *Bless Me, Ultima* at another, or join in multiple book discussions at all five. While distributing activities across multiple sites, the East Los Angeles Public Library's Big Read tied all programming to the cultural context of the book, thereby encouraging reading, celebrating cultural heritage, and promoting community engagement.

Partnerships and Programming

Some of the most successful Big Read partnerships were with local universities and community colleges. The Big Read coordinator, who had recently come from the Cal State University system to work for the East Los Angeles Public Library, helped facilitate a partnership with Cal State University Los Angeles (CSULA), which sponsored a dramatic reading of the book combined with artwork commissioned for the project by George Yepes. Dr. Roberto Cantu, a distinguished Professor of English and Chicano Studies and a personal friend of Rudolfo Anaya, directed the

¹⁹ US Gazetteer files: 2000 and 19 00. US Census Bureau.

reading. Thanks to this affiliation, the East LA Big Read has exclusive interviews and pictures of Anaya wearing a Big Read East Los Angeles t-shirt.

CSULA wasn't able to make The Big Read as much of a campus-wide event as librarians would have liked because many activities took place during spring break. They nevertheless remain committed to idea of a community reading program. The provost has requested that the campus conduct its own One Book, One Campus read at a time that will better engage the faculty and students.

Other outreach to young adults included a program at the East Los Angeles Community College (ELACC) which sponsored book giveaways and discussions led by a Chicano Studies professor. The discussions were so successful that faculty and students have requested that this become a regular campus event. The librarian who organized ELACC's activities is now a part of the East LA Public Library and can facilitate further collaborations between the library and the community college.

Individual libraries coordinated their own activities related to the book. The City Terrace Library sponsored workshops on dream interpretation and genealogy, which attracted adults and teenagers alike. Members of the East Los Angeles Library Teen Advisory Board read and discussed the novel. Librarians also established partnerships with neighborhood workplaces. The East Los Angeles Community Library Manager, for example, worked with local health centers, courts, and district offices to provide books and Big Read materials to over 200 staff members. Partnerships with schools were mixed and depended greatly on individual teachers' ability to integrate the novel into their already-established curricula.

Participation by and Responses from Teens and Young Adults

Partnerships with the five participating libraries, area colleges and universities, schools, and neighborhood workplaces helped draw youth audiences and families to the programs, and in most venues there was evidence that the programs had a positive impact. On the opening night of the CSULA dramatic reading, there was a lengthy post-performance discussion that ended only when some of the child performers had to leave because it was past their bedtime. During that discussion, many people said that the book was a very good choice for their community because other family members (particularly women) had read it and passed it on to younger generations. At least one young adult said that she tried to read the book as a teenager but didn't get into it. Now that she had seen the performance, and knowing how much her family valued the book, she wanted to tackle it again.

Big Read organizers also sponsored a teen art contest that attracted entrants from all five participating libraries. The second-place winner was stunned at his award, saying that he had never won anything before. He explained that he had spent a great deal of time thinking about how to incorporate the themes from the novel into his artwork; there was so much material, he knows he could have done more.

One of the most unique youth programs involved a month-long series of book discussions at the Juvenile Hall Library. Teachers read the book to their students and distributed Reader's Guides. The book resonated with the students, as evidenced by this observation from the final grant report: "Particularly at Juvenile Hall where many of the young people are at the crossroad of their life, Antonio's pull between identities—his family situation, the choice of American vs. Non-American life, the blending of cultures or between a gang or a non-gang existence were themes many experienced themselves."

In a focus group of junior and senior high school students (a group comprised of some East Los Angeles Library Teen Advisory Board members and some nonmembers), teens acknowledged that this was not the kind of book that they would normally read on their own. They get many reading assignments from their teachers plus required reading over the summer, so a lot of their free time is already taken up. When they have a chance to read for pleasure, many students preferred nonfiction works including biographies and autobiographies, or older classics by Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Nevertheless, students said they found they could relate to *Bless Me, Ultima* once they began reading. Most of the students came from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes, and observed that a book available in Spanish that has this particular cultural focus was more appealing than other books. Some said that they had family members who believed in *curanderas* and at least one had talked to her mother about the portrayal of healers in the novel. All students had used the Reader's Guides and appreciated the background information on the author. A few students had gone to Big Read lectures to learn more about the author and the religious context of the novel. As students reflected on their experiences with the Big Read, they agreed that it had been a good opportunity to get together to explore a book and that they would want to do another community read again.

In addition to the events for older teenagers, the Big Read libraries conducted some outreach to middle and early high school students (5th through 9th grades). Reactions to the novel were mixed. Discussions with a group of 5th and 6th grade students worked well, with at least one student having a "surprisingly strong grasp on the book's themes," as noted in the final grant report. On the other hand, ninth graders interviewed in a focus group had difficulty identifying with the characters in the book and would have preferred to read about contemporary issues such as those featured in the book *Always Running* (a memoir about life in a Los Angeles gang). Comments from the focus group mirror those of some of the audience for the dramatic reading who felt that they were able to appreciate *Bless Me, Ultima* more as an adult.

Impact

Short-term impacts included continued partnerships between the East LA Library and local universities. As a result of The Big Read, the library was invited to participate in a meeting with 90 community and CSU leaders on dynamic partnerships and service learning. They are planning additional service learning projects to address the needs of the university students, most of whom live within ten miles of the university and are the first in their family to go to college. Without the

connections made during The Big Read, the East LA library would not have had the opportunity to join this community initiative at the ground level.

Comments from the dramatic reading at CSULA suggest that the performance may have motivated some people to read *Bless Me, Ultima*, as did the widespread distribution of books and the Reader's and Audio Guides. Circulation of the book has been increasing across the LA County library system for months, which may be due to the presence of consecutive Big Reads rather than the impact of any particular programming. These consecutive LA Big Reads also seem to have encouraged an open exchange of ideas for activities. The West Hollywood area region, for example, held its own Big Read on *Bless Me, Ultima* in Fall 2008, and planned to request some of the same speakers who had been involved in East LA's programming. Collaborations such as these suggest that shorter-term impacts may lead to longer-term ones as well.

The longer-term impact on youth audiences may be more difficult to predict. When one focus group of teenagers was asked if The Big Read had changed how they think about reading for pleasure, the answer was strained silence. College and high school students alike explained that they had multiple demands on their time and very few free moments to spend reading. Many of the CSULA students had young children of their own and were balancing school, family, and often an outside job. They tended to spend their free time watching TV or socializing with friends. Students did, however, agree that they enjoyed the Big Read activities they had attended, and the book giveaways proved very successful. It may be that these positive experiences, combined with more campus and community literary events, will lead these students to reading as a leisure-time activity.

Peninsula Players Theatre Foundation, Inc., Fish Creek, Wisconsin

The Grapes of Wrath

Region: 3	Number of K-12 Schools: 4
Total Days: 38	Number of Teachers: 14
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 27
Population: 29,720	Number of Attendees: 1,410
Number of Partner Organizations: 16	Adults, 1,047; Children 363
Number of Libraries: 8	Number of Book Club Meetings: 10
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 98
Number of Volunteers: 64	Adults, 97; Children, 1

The Big Read gave Wisconsin's Peninsula Players an opportunity to collaborate with other area arts organizations to engage the community in The Grapes of Wrath. Composers, librettists, performers, artists—all combined their talents for Big Read events, convincing director Alan Kopischke that the arts are “the best tool for engaging people in history and literature.” The experience inspired him to continue incorporating novels into the work of the Peninsula Players and The Big Read into the Theatre’s year-round programming.

Background

Begun in 1935 with “two planks and a passion,” the Peninsula Players Theatre in Wisconsin’s scenic Door County is America’s oldest summer residential theatre. The theatre’s first production, Noel Coward’s “Hay Fever,” played to an audience gathered behind a motel in Fish Creek.²⁰ Two years later, the thespians bought a 22-acre camp along the Green Bay shoreline, a beautiful setting for their summer open-air productions. Today, this residential company includes over 40 members—actors, interns, directors, designers, technicians, stage managers, and administrators—who live and work together each summer theatre season. The recently completed new theatre has a lot more than two planks, but the Peninsula Players still have the passion.

Kopischke saw The Big Read and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, as a way to draw a wider audience to explore literature through history and the arts. Door County is a vacation destination, but also home to year-round residents. It is also a largely rural community “where migrant workers still labor,” explained Kopischke in their proposal, “but the fading agricultural industry is displacing workers and the tourism industry uses Eastern European immigrants as seasonal help.” Even though immigration is an issue all around the country, says Kopischke, a lot of specific elements in Steinbeck’s novel “really resonated with our community.”

Kopischke also had a personal connection to the novel. In 2007, he had worked on productions of *The Grapes of Wrath* by both the Minnesota and Utah Operas. With the book in his head as an operatic performance, approaching the novel through music, art, and drama shaped his Big Read

²⁰Information about the Peninsula Players Theatre downloaded from <http://www.peninsulaplayers.com/thetheatre.html>

plans from the start, and one of his first ideas was to bring in the director, composer, and librettist of the opera to “talk to contemporary audiences about what *The Grapes of Wrath* means to them.” He also saw a multiple arts approach as a way to appeal to “different kinds of learners and interests.” As Kopischke had hoped, interest in one art form led to another: “...we had people come for the music of Woody Guthrie and then say, ‘Oh wow, this music is inspired by the same conditions Steinbeck was writing about and directly influenced the book? OK, now I have to read the book.’”

Promotion and Resources

With a January 2008 implementation, the Peninsula Players had little time to create or personalize promotional materials, so ready-made publicity tools such as The Big Read posters worked well. Kopischke said they “would stick them up and attach a one-pager about events below.” Still, says Kopischke, “it would be nice to be able to do local branding and have our logo and the library’s logo and maybe the logo of the venue and some nice printable lettering on there.” Kopischke echoed other grantees when he described the dual challenge of introducing audiences to the national program and publicizing local events. The materials, he felt, seemed to be most appropriate for the former: “That first press release got ignored by more people because it was so full of what the NEA is doing nationally,” explained Kopischke. “I would much rather lead with this is what’s going on in our community because that’s what people are interested in....” After the initial press release, Kopischke said they crafted their own each week, leading with the information about local events and closing with the description of the national program and Big Read partners.

Suggesting that the national orientation of the PSAs also made them less effective locally, Kopischke said, “When people see a lot about a national program, they think, what does it have to do with me?” He recommended “personalizing those more” with a “local hook up front and again at the end.” Another factor that limited use of the PSAs was the distance of Door County from their closest local network station in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Kopischke was pleased with the Audio Guide—“many people who picked it up from the library loved it—and saw it a resource that could have boosted radio coverage, had they been able to convince radio stations to play excerpts more often.” In hindsight, Kopischke thought that a file of short clips might have gotten more play.

The Reader’s Guides and Teacher’s Guides were “excellent,” Kopischke said, adding that “I know there are people who have kept them on their bookshelf as something to keep going back to; it gave background before they read, a reference as they read, and inspired them to check out other events.” Kopischke called the bookmarks “a great promotional tool” and said he had seen “people walking around with books with their Big Read bookmarks in them” and heard “people talking about how they are keeping them and checking off the books they are reading on them.”

Partnerships and Programming

In their first foray into a community reading program, Kopischke found the library to be a key partner. “They really picked up every piece that we needed from them,” he said, “handling the distribution of materials and running the book discussions” and overseeing other activities that he, as the theatre’s only winter resident employee, couldn’t handle alone. Other partnerships helped Kopischke realize his vision of integrating the arts into The Big Read. The fit and the timing were right for the Fairfield Center of Contemporary Art, and their public relations director, who worked with the media for The Big Read, was successful in securing additional funding “so they could really do the exhibit the way they wanted to”—as a feature exhibit displayed in their largest space.

For Kopischke, the partnerships among arts organizations sparked by The Big Read were the highlight of the program. Kopischke said that the idea of getting community organizations together to collaborate had “bounced around for a long time,” but not very successfully. The collaborations led not only to long-lasting bonds, but also some exciting programming. More than a dozen book discussions evoked a positive response from the community, each one drawing in about 20 people who, according to Kopischke, “joined in passionate discussions.”

“The most successful event,” he noted, “was not the best attended.” A winter storm meant many people missed an event featuring *The Grapes of Wrath* opera director, librettist, and composer, who brought the music of the original operatic compositions to Fish Creek on his laptop. Kopischke described as “utterly amazing” the energy of the music and the way it immersed the audience in the opera and brought the story to life. Three months later, Kopischke said he still had “people stopping me on the street thanking me for bringing them in.”

Kopischke reported that positive responses came from both individual members of the community and arts organizations leaders. “I do think that people have discovered a new and more fulfilling way to explore a book or a period of history in a sort of multi-source, multi-arts way,” he said. “Before this was even over, I had people really just accosting me and saying, ‘We have to do this again;’ When can we do this again?’”

Participation by School-Age Audiences and Young Adults

According to Kopischke, the Peninsula Players were not as successful in their efforts to get schools involved in The Big Read. Like other grantees, he said the timing and the lack of existing contacts in the schools made forming a new partnership challenging. When they put the proposal together in July, his school liaison was excited and optimistic, but she underestimated “how busy teachers are and how far ahead comprehensive types of things need to be planned.”

Even though schools participated in only a minimal way, Kopischke says he and the schools “learned a lot.” He reported, a few months later, that school contacts, too, were asking “‘Are you doing this again?’” Kopischke noted that the new Big Read timeframe will better support school participation and help them attract audiences other than the county’s senior citizens, a larger-than-average proportion of the area’s demographics due to Fish Creek’s popularity as a retirement destination. More advanced planning time will also help them look at events, determine which

events most successfully attracted younger audiences, and be more proactive in marketing events to particular audiences. “The more academic in nature the event, the ‘greyer’ it was,” said Kopschke. An evening of music and the art exhibits attracted more young people, as did a bowl-making ceramic night at the arts school at which attendees talked about the book as they made bowls to sell to feed the hungry.”

Impact

Although they did not attract as diverse an audience as they had hoped, Kopschke is very excited about several successful aspects of their Big Read. First is “the sheer enthusiasm of people at the events, coming out of the events, and in the month since the events talking about them.” With a touch of humor, Kopschke said the Big Read earned him a new title: “I still get introduced to people as The Big Read guy.” Then, with a more serious affect, he explained that The Big Read is “a touchstone for people in the community. This series of events—it’s almost a common language. If you say The Big Read, everybody knows what that was.” In fact, many refer to the Peninsula Players’ Big Read as “the Great Read.” “I think unintentionally, they’re remembering it wrong,” said Kopschke, “but it’s interesting to me, that they’re calling it Great, not Big.”

Second is the collaboration—which Kopschke is confident will continue—between arts organizations and the promise a multi-arts approach holds for introducing residents to novels and other works of art. Kopschke, as the theatre’s only winter resident, is also excited by the challenge of sustaining an arts presence in the community year-round. The Big Read “gave this community a focus in the middle of a difficult winter,” said Kopschke. “That was really energizing...something we want to become an annual event. ...In the off-season we are exposing them to literature, on-season doing a play.”

Postscript

The Peninsula Players Theatre Foundation will have an opportunity to expand the program, their partners, and The Big Read’s reach through their 2008-2009 grant. Kopschke said he applied for \$20,000 grant—above the recommended level of funding for a community the size of Door County—because “we have big ambitions.”

They will lead their community in reading and using the arts to explore *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Explaining their choice, Kopschke explained that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is “an attractive book for the schools to be involved in...an easy one for them to grab on to,” “I also love the book!” he added, “What a great celebration of boyhood and just family affection and small town values and for me as a theatre guy, a very nice play adaptation.” Kopschke has talked with the middle school about adopting *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as their school play next year and to the high schools about doing *Big River* (an adaptation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). Kopschke is also interested in sustaining the participation of a play reading group that grew out of *The Grapes of Wrath* by having that group perform a stage reading of *Is He Dead?*, a recently discovered and adapted play by Mark Twain.

Kopischke recommends that the collaboration with arts agencies be given more emphasis in the Big Read program. “I can’t stress enough how important we found it to be to use the arts as a way to engage people, a way to amplify the message, to gain different perspectives, and to really inspire people.” Kopischke suggested that communities writing a Big Read grant should be encouraged to integrate the arts, what he sees as “the best tool we have...for engaging people in history and literature and in making it lively and relevant and interesting to those who may be more reluctant.” In fact, Kopischke said he would recommend that The Big Read consider requiring applicants to have “a partnership with an arts organization or the arts department of an educational institution.” “Any community doing it without the arts,” he adds, “is missing the best opportunity.”

UMass Memorial Health Care, Inc., Worcester, Massachusetts

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

Region: Northeast	Number of K-12 Schools: 4
Total Days: Not available	Number of Teachers: 11
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 15
Population: 172,648	Number of Attendees: 438
Number of Partner Organizations: 8	Adults, 167; Children, 271
Number of Libraries: 1	Number of Book Club Meetings: 14
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 149
Number of Volunteers: 7	Adults, 53; Children, 96

*A health care group may seem an unlikely sponsor for a community reading program—in fact, UMass Memorial Health Care is the only hospital system with Big Read funding—but “Literacy,” says their literacy coordinator and Big Read project director Sharon Lindgren, “is as important as nutrition or immunization.” Lindgren found that the teens she works with in youth development and community literacy programs were drawn to the misfits and dreamers in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. She also found that including teens in book selection and programming activities was key to their participation and to the overall success of the program.*

Background

With a population of close to 175,000, Worcester, Massachusetts is the state’s second largest city. It has high levels of poverty and low levels of educational success. UMass Memorial Health Care, central New England’s major medical center, is committed to addressing both. Their literacy coordinator, Sharon Lindgren, can cite statistics that show a direct correlation between illiteracy and poor health, along with successful community outreach and youth development programs, such as “Reach Out and Read,” that seem to be making a difference. As part of these programs, Lindgren goes into homes, encouraging teen dropouts, teen parents, immigrant populations, and other reluctant or emergent readers to get involved in literacy activities. The Big Read seemed a natural fit.

Once the decision was made to apply for a Big Read grant, Lindgren asked the at-risk youths she works with to help select the book. She showed teens the blurbs for each book and let them discuss all the possibilities. Although it was not her first choice, Lindgren was not altogether surprised that the characters in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*—a disillusioned African-American doctor, a young dreamer holding fast to musical aspirations, and the other down-on-their-luck, dysfunctional characters—were the ones whose stories resonated with these teens.

Partnerships and Promotion

The health care center’s key partner in The Big Read was another prominent area institution, the Worcester Public Library. Founded in 1859, the library now serves a population of close to 200,000 adults and children, circulating close to 700,000 items each year. Educational institutions

taking part in the program included four Worcester Public Schools—including at South and Burncoat Public High Schools’ teen parents groups—and Quinsigamond College.

To enlist other partners, Lindgren turned to those whom she had worked with in the past and who shared her goals of improving literacy and community well-being. Among these were Abby’s House, a temporary housing facility for victims of domestic violence, the YWCA Young Parent Program, The Worcester Senior Center, and the Worcester Youth Center. Lindgren also formed new partnerships with the Youth Correctional Institute, a local veterans shelter, and low-income housing communities, including the Lakeside Housing Project, and the Plumley Village Housing Complex.

Lindgren says that promotion was initially a challenge because the idea of a community reading program was new to Worcester and they did not have the core volunteer base to help market the program. The promotional and support materials provided by the NEA, she says, were extremely helpful—one of the main reasons, in fact, that she was so motivated to pursue the grant in the first place. According to Lindgren, more formal efforts such as the promotion by local radio stations and in local papers and magazines were, as the project moved forward, also successful. Radio stations used the PSA, and newspapers added their own text to The Big Read logo. UMass, which has 12,000 employees on their network, also advertised in their hospital newsletter and on the city’s website. As word spread, the program began to market itself, and word-of-mouth promotion proved to be an important part of the dissemination process. Information shared with schools and local businesses was, in turn, shared with family members, employees, and customers. The success of early events also stimulated continued participation in later programs.

Programming and Participation by Teens and Underserved Audiences

Two young city residents who heard about the program were sisters Labeeb and Irma Servatius, who volunteered to play their violins for the kickoff, channeling Mick, the character in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* who dreams of playing violin. Their performance was such a success that they were invited back for the finale, which drew an even larger audience (even though it competed with the Super Bowl).

In creating the programming in between the kick-off and finale, Lindgren relied on two strategies to ensure that events appealed to reluctant readers and underserved audiences. First, she capitalized on what had worked in the past to boost literacy. Past programmatic successes included “Formula for Success,” a home-based literacy program, and “Stories in the Park,” a summer reading program and tie-in with the community’s larger “Worcester—A City that Reads” literacy program.

The second strategy was, again, to get input on proposed activities from the young people they were intended to attract. Lindgren gave various youth groups copies of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and the Reader’s Guide, then showed them a list of activities designed to help teens “connect with the book.” Among those most popular with teens were the music activities—a local band singing songs from the 30s, harmonica lessons, instrument-making workshops, and classical concerts—again invoking Mick’s love of music. Events designed for a broader audience also

appealed to teens: the poetry-writing contest was open to all members of the community, but most entries were from teens and youth and the winner of the contest was a teen. A talk by an African-American doctor about the differences minorities face today in pursuing a career in medicine, compared to those they encountered in the 30's, engaged teen audiences, and discussions afterward gave them a chance to voice their feelings not just about civil rights and racial tensions but also about their own dreams, yearnings, and challenges. In an interview after the conclusion of The Big Read, Lindgren attributed the center's success in engaging teens to the active role they gave them:

Success depends on involving youth in decisions. It makes them feel like they're involved and you're not just being another teacher. Even in the discussion about what book to choose or what activities to do. Get a group together and say: "OK, what activities would you like to do around the book?" It has to come from them.

Impact

The Big Read, says Lindgren, helped Worcester to establish a reputation as "a city that reads," and was "a wonderful way to get the whole community involved in a literacy project." She has gotten calls from groups asking to get on board for future initiatives and has been asked to facilitate a new book club. Worcester's new Spanish Radio station wants her to help them promote a Spanish-speaking book club. Several teachers who were not able to participate had expressed interest in teaching *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in upcoming semesters.

Lindgren also thinks she succeeded in furthering one of her own personal goals, which was to get the community to read more classics. People, she says, are "actually talking about classic books. From my previous experience, most want to go to best sellers. This is different." She hopes to build on that momentum, reminding readers of all ages that "classic books are good reads." That, she says, is why the book worked for students: they didn't "click on the fact that *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a classic; for them, it was simply good book."

In addition to the many adults who have commented on their positive experiences in reading *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, library partners tell Lindgren they have seen an increased number of youth asking for other works by McCullers and other classic works. Although they don't have evidence of increases in library attendance or use among youth and underserved audiences and low-literacy groups, Lindgren is confident that The Big Read and other ongoing efforts are making the library a welcoming place for members of the immigrant population who may not routinely go there or realize that it is free, and for teens and reluctant readers who may not feel comfortable in an academic setting. Lindgren also reported that although she gave teens the option of using the Audio Guide rather than reading the book, most opted to try to read the book on their own.

Postscript

UMass Memorial Health Care was awarded a second Big Read grant, for Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which the Worcester community will read in April 2009. Lindgren

feels that an annual rather than six-month cycle will make implementation easier and encourage school participation. Lindgren will again seek input from younger audiences, and, again hopes that activities linking readers to the characters, themes, and settings bring the story to life for a contemporary audience. The Big Read events will feature book discussions in schools and various community organizations; speakers on living in the 1800s; a "picket fence" poster contests for students; movies; medical lectures; a presentation on Worcester's Blackstone Canal history; musical entertainment; field trips; and information on our court system, focusing on overall citizenship responsibilities.²¹

²¹ Information obtained from http://www.neabigread.org/communities/?community_id=1098

Aspen Writers' Foundation, Aspen, Colorado

Bless Me, Ultima

Region: 8	Number of K-12 Schools: 11
Total Days: 33	Number of Teachers: 125
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 48
Population: 40,000	Number of Attendees: 3,850
Number of Partner Organizations: 11	Adults, 1,219; Children, 2,631
Number of Libraries: 4	Number of Book Club Meetings: 42
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 547
Number of Volunteers: 90	Adults, 429; Children, 118

The Aspen Writers' Foundation's Big Read brought people together to celebrate local culture and the culture and history evoked by Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima. Banned by a local school superintendent just three years earlier, Bless Me, Ultima was embraced by schools, churches, and other community groups throughout the Roaring Fork Valley. In festive events that bridged cultural, socio-economic, generational, and geographic divides, participants sampled food from local Mexican restaurants, enjoyed the puppetry and story-telling talents of Valley artists, danced with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklorico, sang with Perla Batalla, and wrote their favorite lines from the book on the Bless Me, Ultima Quote Quilt.

Background

The Aspen Writers' Foundation, Colorado's oldest nonprofit literary center, has brought together readers and writers of all ages for over three decades. Year-round opportunities that encourage "writers in their craft and readers in their appreciation of literature" include Aspen Summer Words, a writing retreat and literary festival; Scribes and Scribblers, creative writing camps for children and teens; Lyrically Speaking, an interview and concert series; AWF Reads, a televised book club; Writers in the Schools, an educational outreach program; weekly reading and writing groups; and an annual international literary expedition.²²

The AWF believes that "reading and writing are essential, and that great literature enriches our lives and creates understanding of ourselves and others."²³ A Big Read grant gave them an opportunity to realize especially the last part of this mission—in an area that is a study in socioeconomic contrasts. The Roaring Fork Valley, which lies between the peaks of the high Elk Mountains and Mount Sopris, includes Pitkin, Eagle, and Garfield counties. Though these counties are connected by a 50-mile stretch of Highway 82, which curves alongside the Roaring Fork River from Aspen to Glenwood Springs, they are separated by some striking economic, social, and cultural differences. Pitkin County, where Aspen is located, is the wealthiest county in Colorado, with a per-capita income of \$86,122, the third highest in the U.S.²⁴ The per-capita

²² The Aspen Writers' Foundation website, Our Mission, downloaded from <http://www.aspenwriters.org/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ T. Hooper, "Pitkin the state's wealthiest county." *Aspen Daily News*, Saturday, April 26, 2008, p. 1.

income in Garfield County, at the lower end of the valley, is \$21,341. The tourism industry, generated in large part by the Aspen/Snowmass ski resorts, drives the economy, and brings wealthy visitors and second-home owners to the valley, whose residents also include an ever-growing Latino population.

The AWF saw Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* as a good fit for the Valley's diverse cultural demographic, and as a way to promote "cross-cultural dialogue and understanding."²⁵ They also hoped that The Big Read would "create a broader network of readers and writers" for the Foundation's future programs and events.

Partnerships and Participation

The Pitkin County Library was the AWF's lead partner for The Big Read, the first formal partnership the two agencies have shared. Three other Valley libraries—in Basalt, Carbondale, and Glenwood Springs—were also closely involved in program planning and implementation. AWF also invited leaders of 35 community agencies to "roll out The Big Read" with their own constituents. Arts organization participants included the Aspen Community Theatre, the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and the Carbondale Council on Arts & Humanities. Other partners in the effort included local, state, and national officials, more than a hundred classrooms, thirty or more book groups, a dozen nonprofit organizations and religious institutions, and bookstores and other businesses. This collaboration, which the AWF called "one of the most extensive community collaborations in the history of the Roaring Fork Valley," meant joint ownership of the effort, and a potential audience "virtually every resident from Aspen to Glenwood Springs."²⁶

The AWF has only three full-time staff members, so used a portion of their Big Read grant to hire a consultant to coordinate the program, a decision they saw was critical to implementing a Valley-wide Big Read. The Big Read, they say, also brought volunteers "out of the woodwork" to help with activities that ranged from delivering books and materials all over the valley to creating an original puppet show adapted from Anaya's children's book *Roadrunner's Dance*. Valley businesses, bookstores, libraries, and religious groups participating extended the program's reach with a series of book discussions. Priests and ministers encouraged parishioners to read the novel and featured the book in their weekly messages. Readers inspired by the book spread the word as well—a powerful form of marketing and promotion for this particular book, which some reports indicate has sold more than 300,000 copies by word of mouth alone.

Promotion, Media, and Materials

The AWF wrote in their final report that they were told on numerous occasions that "The Big Read is everywhere!"—the result of participation by a large number of community leaders and the "multiple voices" getting the information out into the community. The Latina students we spoke with at Colorado Mountain College had seen flyers in the Mexican grocery store; a woman attending a library book discussion group had come after her priest had encouraged those attending the Spanish mass to attend. Boosting the promotional efforts were the efforts to get

²⁵ Aspen Writer's Foundation, The Big Read, <http://www.aspenwriters.org/bigread.html>

²⁶ *ibid.*

books into people's hands. The AWF launched a very successful distribution effort, with the help of libraries, the Rubey Park Transportation Center, Colorado Mountain College, and the Carbondale Council on Arts & Humanities, and an anonymous donor's contribution of 4,000 copies of the book. To make the books readily accessible to Latino audiences, the AWF, deciding that "everyone goes to the bank," kept every Valley-location of the Alpine Bank stocked with free books. Each library also received Spanish and English copies of *Bless Me, Ultima*, which were also available for purchase at a half-dozen locally-owned bookstores. AWF also created Spanish inserts for the Reader's Guides and distributed them via banks, bookstores, and libraries. The Spanish Reader's Guides, they reported, disappeared within two weeks. In general, the AWF was pleased with The Big Read materials, but emphasized the need for bilingual (Spanish-English) materials and for resources to be more easily manipulated to include local branding and information.

Every newspaper and radio and television station in the Valley promoted The Big Read, along with local magazines. AWF Reads, a televised book club, discussed *Bless Me, Ultima*, which aired on Grass Roots TV during The Big Read.

Programming and Participation by Children, Teens, and Young Adults

Five schools in the Aspen and Roaring Fork School Districts taught *Bless Me, Ultima*, and five others incorporated the novel or Big Read events in other ways. Colorado Mountain College distributed free books, and the CMC Glenwood Learning Lab used the novel in an adult reading class. Featuring Anaya's children's books, *The First Tortilla* and *Roadrunner's Dance*, The Big Read the Valley's first ever Little Read engaged over 650 children in 38 preschool classrooms in a one-day story-hour event organized by the local Raising a Reader program. Each classroom received copies of *Roadrunner's Dance*, and each teacher, a copy of *Bless Me, Ultima*. Two educational agencies, Reach Out + Read and Spellbinders, also got involved, expanding The Big Read to after-school and informal educational programming.

Two Kick-off events officially launched The Big Read, both attended by state and local officials and both featuring Chicano author, Luis Alberto Urrea. A family-focused event in Carbondale included a performance by the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklorico, a reading of Anaya's children's stories by the Valley's Spellbinders storytellers, a talk about Anaya's life and work by Urrea, and an authentic Mexican buffet. Aspen's Kick-off, held on the Gondola Plaza, featured talks by Urrea, elected officials, and the NEA's David Kipen. The audience was treated to free copies of *Bless Me, Ultima* and Southwestern refreshments, including the "Ultimatini."

While in the Valley for The Big Read, Urrea visited Roaring Fork High School, where half the student population is Latino. As the AWF wrote in their final narrative, Urrea engaged the students and their parents "in a way that the AWF has never been able to do." Before Urrea left, the Hispanic staff at the Aspen Alps Condominiums honored Urrea and his family with a homemade Mexican lunch, and joined Urrea in a Spanish discussion about *Bless Me, Ultima* that Urrea described to the AWF as "was one of the most touching events" he had ever done.

Urrea's visit was followed by a visit from Anaya scholar and author Denise Chavez and the Grammy-nominated vocalist Perla Batalla. At each event, audiences were invited to experience Anaya's writing through their senses—hearing the story read aloud in Spanish; listening to the songs that Anthony's mother or Ultima might have sung; seeing the colors in the dance, art, and puppetry; tasting the horchata; stitching together pieces of a quote quilt on which participants wrote their favorite lines from the book; and, for younger participants, feeling the clay in their small hands as they shaped roadrunners during a story hour.

According to some students we talked with at the Glenwood Learning Lab, the choice of the novel attracted them to *The Big Read*. The title, front cover illustration, and Anaya's name also caught the attention of several of the women. "Me as a Hispanic, I wanted to learn a little more about the author because I heard he was Hispanic also," said one. Several in the group agreed with a female student who explained, "when I started reading it, I thought he [Antonio] was experiencing some of the same things I have been experiencing." A classmate added, "Like my religion, I'm Catholic, and my family looks like his [Antonio's] family. My dad is more like a 'vaquero.'" The students in the reading class—and a few others who had picked up a free copy of the book on campus—said that because they were so engrossed in the novel, they read more each day than they typically do and were interested in reading a similar book. They also noted that they don't often get a free book, and don't often hear people talking about the book—both of which inspired them to read *Bless Me, Ultima*. Some said that schedules or lack of transportation kept them from participating in more Big Read events.

At an after-hours book discussion at the Basalt Regional Library, the front checkout counter was transformed into a buffet table, with tortilla chips, salsa, guacamole, quesadillas, and a cooler with bottles of Orangina. About a dozen participants joined the discussion. One woman, originally from New Mexico, said she knew *The Big Read* was about "getting people to read again," and that in her case it worked: when she came in to get her copy of *Bless Me, Ultima* she also picked up three other books to read. Another woman ran in, from services at the nearby Roman Catholic Church, a Spanish edition of the book in hand. The group also included two high school sophomores, who had "heard other students discussing it." In addition to library and AWF staff, the group also included a self-proclaimed "non-fiction guy," who had come with his wife and two-year old son. Welcoming everyone to the event, the interim director of the library said that in "20 years, this is the first time we've done anything like this." Two hours later, she was organizing a follow-up discussion to be held in Spanish, asking the woman from the church to facilitate the discussion.

A few teens attended this and other events. The two students at the library book discussion—their first visit to the Basalt library—said their teacher required them to either attend an event and write a summary, or write a longer paper on *Bless Me, Ultima*. They had opted for the former. At the Tardeada, an event at Carbondale's La Isla Nueva restaurant that featured readings and a talk about Anaya by Denise Chavez, we spoke to a high school student who had come with his parents and middle-school-aged sister. He said he'd mentioned the book to his family when they began

reading it in class, and they were eager to attend the event with him. Inspired by the stories and Chavez's reading of the novel, all three said they intended to read the book.

At two participating high schools, we talked with three different groups of students: those reading the book in classes and getting credit for attending a Big Read event; those whose classes were reading the book but not formally participating in the greater Big Read; and those who were not reading the book. We found that only students who received credit for events had attended them, and that those experiences gave them new perspectives on the book and an interest in extending the dialogue beyond the classroom. Many who had been to a Kick-off event, book discussion, or an event with special guests said that they thought the Big Read was "great" and that it was "cool that their Valley was doing it." Encouraging students to attend events had other benefits—they shared their awareness of Big Read events with friends and their family members.

Keeping teachers well informed, and approaching them early enough to change their reading lists or syllabus to incorporate The Big Read is important. One of the high school English teachers said he was happy to put *Bless Me, Ultima* in the place of other contemporary novels (e.g., *The Kite Runner* or *Snow Falling on Cedars*) on the Freshman and Sophomore Honors English reading list. He explained that when the AWF approached him about being involved in The Big Read, he said it was "...a bit different that I can get both classes to be reading the same book. *Bless Me, Ultima* is something I try working into the curriculum, and I saw this was the perfect opportunity for freshmen and sophomores to be introduced to Rudolfo Anaya."

Promoting the program among younger audiences and keeping teachers informed also appears to increase participation by teens: when the Aspen Chapel planned a discussion of *Bless Me, Ultima* for high school students hoping a dozen would attend, they were happily caught off-guard when nearly 100 came. Informal book discussions such as these were held all over the Valley by participating community organizations—tapping existing book groups as well as initiating new ones. "Book club leaders who have been trying—unsuccessfully—for years to tempt Latinos into attending their events all of the sudden saw members of this ethnic group attend for the first time," wrote the AWF in their final report. "Several Latinos are now considering beginning their own book club—a first!"

Impact

The AWF concluded that their concerted efforts to reach every resident the Roaring Fork Valley with The Big Read was successful, and gratifyingly so. As they wrote in their final narrative,

People shared stories of seeing bus riders reading the novel, a homeless man sitting on a bench in Wagner Park, two-thirds of the way through the book and deeply engrossed in the story. Parents praised the program and people who were reluctant to bite off a classic novel such as this were very glad that they did.

Many Big Read participants felt that the most successful part of the project was the ability of an entire Valley to come together and read the same book, regardless of race, ethnicity, or social class. They applauded the program because it attempted to bring people together

instead of dividing them, and they felt that a sincere effort was made to tailor the project to our unique community and to make it an inclusive, Valley-wide gathering. Others commented that Aspen is, often times, viewed as a place without a soul. To them, The Big Read showcased our Valley in a warm and beautiful light—and in a way that would have made Rudolfo Anaya proud.

It wasn't surprising that coming-of-age novel about a seven year-old Chicano boy trying to understand life, religion, and cultural traditions resonated across cultures, generations, and economic strata. What was surprising was how personal and profound the conversations were and what different participants brought to the discussion. Immigrants whose language and culture often position them as learners in the U.S. became teachers in book discussion groups, providing insights about the setting and characters, sharing their own experiences, and translating the language and beliefs and practices to a wider audience. The AWF says that Roaring Fork Valley residents are begging to participate in another Big Read.

Acadiana Big Read, Lafayette, Louisiana

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Region: South	Number of K-12 Schools: 3
Total Days: 60	Number of Teachers: 43
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 34
Population: 424,844	Number of Attendees: 3,850
Number of Partner Organizations: 6	Adults, 3,146; Children 704
Number of Libraries: 6	Number of Book Club Meetings: 12
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 157
Number of Volunteers: 20	Adults, 75; Children, 82

Theatre, fashion, music, lectures—The Big Read: Acadiana used all these to draw people into Their Eyes Were Watching God and the world in which its author lived. The result was a heightened awareness of the book and a desire to read it. The Big Read also facilitated interactions among community members, from University of Louisiana students talking with high school students, to artists sharing music with children, to Juvenile Detention Center staff discussing a book with youth. The arts became the conduit for promoting literacy and building community.

Background

The Performing Arts Society of Acadiana (PASA), formed in 1989, grew quickly from a small, volunteer-based organization into one of the state's leading arts institutions.²⁷ In its almost 20-year history, PASA has hosted internationally known performers like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the Wynton Marsalis Septet, Dawn Upshaw, Philip Glass, and Bill Cosby. PASA has also fostered local artists and been an active supporter of education in the arts, developing new initiatives on behalf of the local arts council and the Louisiana Division of the Arts, and offering numerous daytime performances for schools and students.²⁸ Zora Neale Hurston and her connection to the Harlem Renaissance made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a natural choice for PASA's Big Read and a natural fit for an organization that, through its cultural and educational work in the community, explores the cultural connections between literature and the visual and performing arts.

Partnerships and Promotion

A variety of Big Read events were possible thanks to the wide range of participating organizations. PASA coordinated The Big Read and collaborated with arts groups, parish libraries, schools and colleges, and media outlets. Some of these partners were long-time associates of PASA who generated new programming in conjunction with The Big Read. The Acadiana Arts Council, for example, created a Musical Compositions program for its artists-in-residence school outreach. Other partners were relatively new, such as a parish library far from PASA's typical outreach zone. Apiyo Obala, PASA's Community Relations Director, felt that

²⁷ PASA, Big Read proposal.

²⁸ See <http://www.pasa-online.org/index.cfm>.

The Big Read had encouraged her to be more creative with partnerships and helped her make connections with many more organizations that she could contact for future programming.

Media outlets were also very supportive of The Big Read. Ms. Obala already had prior relationships with the media because of her position in PASA, and she was able to leverage those associations to publicize The Big Read. The local weekly newspaper, the *Times of Acadiana*, was so enthusiastic that it decided to make *Their Eyes Were Watching God* its Book of the Month as part of its own literacy initiative. A total of three television stations, six radio stations, and seven newspapers covered The Big Read during its seven-week run. Organizing and publicizing The Big Read took considerable time, however, and Ms. Obala wished that she had an Assistant Project Director to devote full time to the project.

Teen and Young Adult Audiences

The partnering organizations in The Big Read: Acadiana specialized their cultural activities programming to attract targeted young audiences. The activities were as diverse as the groups that sponsored them. The University of Louisiana, for instance, integrated the book into a number of departments and classes. Many English and history professors teach the book and supplemented their materials with The Big Read CDs and Reader's Guides. Dr. Hector Lasala at the University's Architecture and Design College had his students put on a fashion show based on the book. Students read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and selected passages to create a series of small projects leading up to a piece of wearable art made with nontraditional materials (e.g., tires, broken mirrors, crawfish nets). The project culminated with a sold-out community fashion show at the Acadiana Center for the Arts. Students heard many audience members expressing interest in reading the book after seeing the students' work.

Several of the participating Design students showed their fashions to local high school students, who visited the University of Louisiana as part of their experience reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students received a tour of campus, then saw some of the pieces from Dr. Lasala's class and participated in book discussions led by University of Louisiana faculty and students. A local teen librarian working with the Lafayette Parish Juvenile Detention Center also integrated *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into her programming. Teens read the book independently and/or listened to a recording. The Center's instructors observed that some of the teens who were better readers helped those who had difficulty, even moving their peers' fingers across each page of text so they could follow along with the recording. The teens also received a visit from Dr. Reggie Young, a professor of African American literature at the University of Louisiana, who talked about African American storytelling and led students in a discussion of the book. During the talk, many of the instructors and staff members were also engaged in the conversation, asking questions of Dr. Young and each other, and sharing their own opinions about the plot. Their participation added an intergenerational element to the activity and showed the youth how even adults have questions about the material.

High school students repeatedly observed that hearing the book out loud was critical for their engagement and comprehension. Many students had listened to the Big Read CD to get a feel for

the dialect that dominates the book's early chapters. Others read the book out loud or with friends. Without those experiences, students felt that they would have had difficulty starting the book, let alone exploring its themes.

Once they were used to the dialogue, students became involved in the story. They could relate to the community depicted in the book and its porch conversations and gossiping. They discussed the relationship between Janie and Joe Sparks with boyfriends, and identified with taking orders from a mother or grandmother. The high school students in particular appreciated being part of a community-wide reading program and resoundingly wanted to talk about the book with family and friends. Students could relate to the main character Janie and to themes of personal pride, identity, and finding a voice. For these teens, the book facilitated conversations and connected them to their community.

While many of the Acadiana Big Read activities were targeted to high school and college-aged youth, there was also programming for all ages. The Acadiana Arts Council integrated *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into its school-based artist-in-residence program. Elementary school children did arts projects related to the historical background of the book, such as making pictures of jazz instruments and learning about the Harlem Renaissance. Adults were treated to a new play by a local playwright inspired by Zora Neal Hurston's life. The play was performed during the Festival International de Louisiane, the largest outdoor free Francophone event in the United States. Lucy Ann Hurston, the niece of Zora Neale Hurston, visited Acadiana and gave several lectures and book signings. All of these activities were intended to draw potential readers to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by acquainting them to the author and the times in which she lived.

Impact

There was an increase in subscriptions and memberships to PASA following The Big Read. Some of the increase could be attributable to The Big Read, but it was more likely the result of a major membership drive that was taking place during the 2007-2008 season. Several months after The Big Read, Ms. Obala was still hearing from partnering organizations about how much they enjoyed the Big Read and hoped to continue their reading-related programming. She noted that The Big Read materials are another lasting impact of the grant. Parish libraries and high schools purchased books for the project. Those books, plus the reader, audio and teachers' guides, are resources that will be used long after the Big Read has faded into memory.

The long-term impact—especially on high school and college-aged readers—remains to be seen. Students repeatedly said that they don't have the time to read for pleasure because of all of the other demands on their time. Some said that they preferred to do something mindless with their spare time instead of picking up a complex book, while others preferred socializing with friends to solo activities. Many students felt that community events (e.g., music, plays, festivals) might encourage them to read more, especially if those activities were interactive and designed by and for youth. They also emphasized the importance of reading at a young age and thought that Big Reads should have activities that brought children and parents together.

Waukee Public Library, Waukee, Iowa
The Shawl

Region: Midwest	Number of K-12 Schools: 3
Total Days:	Number of Teachers: 12
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 22
Population: 11,000	Number of Attendees: 2208
Number of Partner Organizations: 1	Adults, 543; Children, 1665
Number of Libraries: 4	Number of Book Club Meetings: 11
Number of Museums: 0	Number of Book Club Attendees: 81
Number of Volunteers: 30	Adults, 70; Children, 11

Cynthia Ozick's The Shawl helped the Waukee Public Library bring together longtime residents, newcomers to this fast-growing community, and school-age audiences. It also helped introduce community members to the often untapped resources of nearby Jewish cultural and historical centers and the National Czech and Slovak Museum. As one student said, "there were people I didn't know and they were all connected through this book." Students also made another new acquaintance—Ozick herself, who talked to students about her book and their essays during an online teleconference.

Background

The Waukee Public Library, housed in a new 14,000 square foot building, is located in Dallas County, just outside Des Moines, Iowa. Waukee's population has recently undergone rapid growth—increasing 113% between 2000 and 2006—and a primary goal of the Waukee Big Read was to introduce longtime residents to the area's newer, more diverse population. The library also hoped to reintroduce well-educated, relatively well-off newcomers who may have "realigned their priorities in today's busy world and not found time to read" to the pleasures of literature. The library chose Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* not only because it was short enough to accommodate busy schedules but also because it gave the library the opportunity to involve a large and active Jewish community and tap the area's rich cultural resources.

Partnerships and Promotion

Among these cultural and arts organizations were Caspe Terrace, the Waukee community's Jewish cultural, social, and sports center, the National Czech and Slovak Museum, the Iowa Gold Star Museum, the Greater Des Moines Jewish Federation, Iowa Jewish Historical Society, and the Waukee Area Arts Council. Waukee Parks and Recreation also joined in the effort, along with the Waukee Community School system, marking the first formal collaboration between the library, the schools, and the Arts Council.

To draw the broader community into the effort, Big Read planners displayed promotional posters throughout the community, on the front of City Hall, at businesses and other public spaces around town, and at 49 public libraries throughout the greater Des Moines metro area. Planners mailed an informational letter to all listed addresses in Waukee, as well as to local churches and community

organizations, many of which had book clubs that met regularly, and sent press releases to local television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines also received press releases. They also undertook extensive efforts to promote The Big Read to, and within, local schools.

The Waukeee Public Library noted that the professionally produced materials provided by the NEA were a real boost to their promotional efforts. As Waukeee wrote in their final report narrative, “local businesses welcomed the opportunity to distribute these materials for us. The banners were used, noticed, and commented upon.” Just being a part of a national program, they added, helped generate enthusiasm that spread through formal outlets and by word-of-mouth: “The support of a national program helped to give credence to this local reading initiative, and generated a great deal of local publicity—indeed, more than the library or arts council has ever enjoyed.”

Programming and Participation by Teens and Young Adults

The Waukeee Big Read programming included book discussions, theatrical performances, educational lectures and exhibits, a panel discussion with Holocaust survivors, film screenings, musical presentations, knitting/crochet classes, and activities for children. A unique element of both the promotional campaign and programming activities was the varied and active involvement of young people. The library invited high school graphic arts classes to assist in the design and production of brochures and other promotional materials and resources. To help make the book accessible to people with vision impairments, students read segments of the book that the local cable station aired twice each day. Middle and high-school-aged students took part in dramatic presentations designed to stimulate interest among younger audiences. Students were also invited to lead and participate in discussion groups within their schools and in the community at-large.

Twelve teachers in three high schools taught *The Shawl*, and 8th and 9th grade students could select it as a free reading option. Many did so after seeing *Life in a Jar*, a play about Irena Sendler, a Catholic social worker who helped to rescue 2,500 children from the Warsaw ghetto between 1942 and 1943. Sendler convinced Jewish families to put children in her care, then arranged for their adoption or hid them in convents and orphanages. She put lists of the children's real names in jars she then buried in a garden, so that she could someday dig up them up and find the children to tell them of their real identity.

The story of the play intrigued students almost as much as Sendler's story: in 1999, a group of Kansas high school students wrote *Life in a Jar* for their National History Day project. As they began to research Sendler's life, the students discovered she was still alive and living in Warsaw, her story buried, even in her own country, by 45 years of oppression. Students performed their play not only for National History Day, but all over North America and in Europe (250 presentations as of November 2008), adding new performers to the original cast, and, at each

performance, collecting funds in a jar to send to Poland for the care of Irena and other rescuers. The students also exchanged letters with Irena Sendler, until her death in 2008.²⁹

Another exchange was the highlight of The Big Read for a group of Waukee High School students whose teacher submitted student essays about *The Shawl* to Cynthia Ozick. The teacher, Anne Hannigan, said she wasn't sure whether Ozick would respond.

I have this perception that authors are very much above us and very busy people, and while they don't mind a letter or two, they're not interested in having a relationship with their readers. She [Ozick] had shown an interest in the sophomores and what they thought about their book. So I sent her the essays hoping I wasn't encroaching on her time.

Not only did Ozick respond via email with comments on their essays, but she also talked with students in an online teleconference moderated by Molly Thomas-Hicks, literary specialist for the NEA.

Three months after The Big Read, we had a chance to speak by phone with Hannigan and four of her students, who were still excited about the program and their interaction with Ozick. A student who had taken part in dramatic readings of *The Shawl* said the experience helped bring the book to life: "it was cool to feel the emotions—the way we performed it, we got to the core of the piece and really understood it." Students were touched and honored by the fact that Ozick seemed as excited about talking with them as they with her:

She was so thrilled to have people read her book. She was so excited that someone would care enough to read it. Her writing was so poetic even in her letter. It was really cool, it was an honor just to hear from her.

Hannigan later said, "She was so lovely about what she said to them. For some, I think this is going to change their life."

Impact

Hannigan is confident that talking to Cynthia Ozick clearly left a lasting impression on these students, and also hopeful that The Big Read experience and introduction to new titles inspired some changes in the reading habits and preferences of students she thinks are generally reading far less than their predecessors: "I've been a teacher for 20 years," she said. "I used to see students come to my class with an extra reading book. I don't see that anymore."

Students' comments seem to suggest some changes:

²⁹ <http://www.irenasendler.org/thestory.asp>

I like reading classics as well as contemporary young adult literature, but I had never heard of Ozick either and it was nice to read something current, rather than something we usually read in class that's been written a long time ago.

I usually go for more fantasy and this book really opened my eyes to things, historical events especially, and how real it was and gaining a connection to a historical event. I think I would check out more books about historical events.

Other evidence suggests that The Big Read also made an impact on reading habits and cultural awareness among the larger community. Waukee Public Library organizers said they frequently heard comments such as, "I don't have time to read, but I have time to read this." The partnerships proved to be so successful that before The Big Read was over, plans were already in place to partner again. The library was particularly excited that "our little community participated in something so big!" The importance of it being part of a national program and the involvement of the NEA were echoed by Hannigan, "I don't know if we've ever done anything connected on the national level. It meant a lot to the community that Molly came. It gave a lot of credibility to our program. The more that the NEA can become involved, the more that really puts this up as special, which makes people really interested in it."

Postscript

The Greater Des Moines Jewish Federation was so pleased with the educational programming offered during The Big Read that they surprised the Waukee Public Library with a copy of The Holocaust Chronicle, and announced a grant to send two Waukee Community School teachers to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Cumberland County Public Library, Fayetteville, North Carolina

Fahrenheit 451

Region: Southeast	Number of K-12 Schools: 23
Total Days: 34	Number of Teachers: 38
Military Base: Yes (2)	Number of Events: 62
Population: 302,963	Number of Attendees: 2,682
Number of Partner Organizations: 9	Adults, 1,569; Children, 1,113
Number of Libraries: 12	Number of Book Club Meetings: 19
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 192
Number of Volunteers: 15	Adults, 148; Children, 44

The Cumberland County Library's second Big Read, like the first, mixed thought-provoking discussions with the arts and literary activities. A well-coordinated marketing effort kept Fahrenheit 451 in front of community members for a month and put books and materials in their hands. Schools, a community college, and universities brought the program to a wide range of teen and young adult audiences, and administrators and librarians were pleased with the collective effort to let citizens know that "We are a reading community" whose "mantra is reading."

Background

On the Fourth Friday of every month, Fayetteville, North Carolina residents enjoy a gallery crawl along Hay Street, the centerpiece of the city's recent renovation of the historic downtown area, which includes not just art galleries but also bistros, shops, bookstores, an outdoor plaza, and the Cumberland County Public Library. On the Fourth Friday of April 2008, the library invited residents to join them in kicking off their second Big Read, featuring Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Helping residents "get fired up" was Big Daddy Rhythm and the Heavyweights, playing soul, country, and beach music, a distinctly Carolina sound that blends rhythm and blues, jazz, doo-wop, rockabilly, and old-time rock and roll.

Big Daddy not only played but also read from Bradbury. This combination of good fun and serious pursuits has characterized both of Cumberland County's Big Reads and their efforts to entertain and instruct. When they celebrated Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the first Big Read, events included a "hatitude" display for children, poetry slams for teens, jazz fests for all, and scholar Valerie Boyd discussing the African-American storytelling tradition and "the power of the porch." Following suit, *Fahrenheit 451* displays and activities included a replica of the book's mechanical dog, science fiction writing workshops for teens, quilting, a visit from *The Bradbury Chronicles* author, Sam Weller, and a forum on censorship in times of war.

Partnerships

According to Big Read coordinator Sally Shutt, support from two local partners, the Arts Council and the Cumberland Community Foundation, allowed the library to bring in scholars and speakers—Sam Weller and others—and promote the program widely, with free books and extensive advertising. Participation by the academic libraries at Fayetteville State University,

Methodist University, and Fayetteville Technical Community College, which hosted discussion groups, promoted the project to faculty, staff, and students. Bookstore partners included Barnes and Noble, which hosted book discussions, and Books A Million, which distributed 750 Reader's Guides during the month-long program.

The library had partnered with Fort Bragg, the local army base and largest military installation in the world, on the first Big Read, but deployments and the challenges of working through the chain of command limited public access and participation. In 2008, says Shutt, "Throckmorton Library at Fort Bragg really reached out to the community." The library hosted two successful programs and coordinated with a local junior high school. The post's Public Affairs Office was a "crucial link" in setting up the visit by Col. Roger King, the Public Affairs officer from Forces Command in Atlanta, who appeared on the panel for "Censorship in Times of War."

Promotion

Media partners supported the project with in-kind advertising spots and earned coverage. Two radio companies sponsored live, on-air interviews and aired additional spots—popular with listeners—at no charge. The daily newspaper, *The Fayetteville Observer*, provided ongoing coverage, with "a big spread just as the program launched" to continued stories throughout the project. The paper donated over \$2,500 in ad space, and offered guest columns on why the community should read the book, including a spotlight on the library director and The Big Read. *Up & Coming Weekly*, distributed free of charge, also ran ads. Radio stations with very different audiences—the urban contemporary KISS 107.7 FM, FOXY 99, and WFSS, Fayetteville State University's public radio station—ran PSAs and provided airtime. The Big Read coincided with the public radio station's pledge week, and the station included a discussion about free thought that, according to Shutt, provided "a beautiful tie in." The 30-second PSA was posted on the library Web site, aired during March and April on the library's *Information Place* television show on the community channel, and aired on Bragg TV. The library also purchased 498 spots on cable television.

Shutt reported that the Organizer's Guide was very useful to their promotional efforts and that The Big Read resources were a key part of their promotion. The library and Big Read partners, she said, "tried to put the Reader's Guides into as many hands as possible," displaying and distributing them at circulation and reference desks, bookstores, museums, the Soldier Support Center at Fort Bragg, and various events. The two radio companies also distributed guides during remote broadcasts and at their stations. The library hung Big Read banners at all seven public library branches and at partner locations. This year the library paid to add dates, the web site URL, and library and sponsor logos to the banners. The library's community relations department printed 9,000 copies of the schedule of events, along with signs, fliers, and event posters.

Promotional materials designed to catch the eye of library patrons included "Get Fired Up" buttons, bookmarks with a Bradbury quote and a list of all The Big Read titles, and a fire-red brochure with "Warning! The Contents of this Library May Have Ideas that Offend You" on the

outside, and, on the inside, a Q & A on intellectual freedom and censorship from the American Library Association.³⁰

Programming

The Big Read events reflected the library's goal of providing something for all ages, instructing and entertaining, and ramping up the level of public conversation. There were readathons, film screenings, and book discussions in both English and Spanish. In a project entitled "Fabric, art, imagination, and literature," local quilters created wall hangings around themes from Fahrenheit 451. Looking at ancient and contemporary resources for developing science fiction and fantasy, the Fayetteville Writer's Group discussed building an alien culture.

Sam Weller, author of the Bradbury Chronicles, engaged school audiences in lively discussions of Bradbury's book and life. Gerhard Weinberg, Kenan Professor Emeritus of History at UNC Chapel Hill and an authority on WWII, spoke on "Book Burning in Nazi Germany." A public forum on "Censorship in the Time of War" included a Forces Command Public Affairs Officer, the Legal Director for the North Carolina ACLU, and the daily newspaper publisher. Dr. David Carr, another UNC professor, spoke on "Fahrenheit 451 and the Mind of the Censor," sharing his own work on "cultural institutions as public forums in democracy."³¹ Other programs drawing on university faculty and resources included programs on book preservation and repair, led by Preservations Librarian of the North Carolina State University Libraries.

Events for children included puppet shows, story times, and programs on fire safety. Students from Terry Sanford High School Drama and Speech Department presented a dramatic reading at Throckmorton Library at Fort Bragg. Teens and young adults could also take part in a science fiction writing workshop, discussions, and essay contests. Librarians Mitzi Townes and Tracey Pearson at Methodist University shared their winning essays, in which students explained which book they would save from fire: first-place honors went to a student who would save literary critic Harold Bloom's *How to Read and Why*, because Bloom inspires in others the passion he feels for books. For similar reasons but with a very different text, the second-place winner picked Homer's *Iliad*, because it has inspired countless readers, writers, and thinkers, from Xenophon to Maimonides, Shakespeare, Goethe, and...Scooby-Do.

Participation by Schools, Universities, Teens, and Young Adults

Eleven middle and high school teachers participated in Cumberland County's first Big Read. For the second, those numbers more than tripled, to 38 teachers in 23 schools, who engaged over 1,800 students. Efforts to engage more teachers and students began not long after the first Big Read, when Shutt made presentations to teachers and began working with the school system's secondary language arts curriculum specialist and media coordinator, who oversaw the processing of more than 850 copies of the book for school media centers. University libraries gave the library

³⁰ See

<http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=basics&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=60610>.

³¹ See http://sils.unc.edu/news/releases/2005/09_carr.htm.

95 copies of Fahrenheit 451 to English Department heads. Teachers who requested classroom sets of books also received Teacher's, Reader's and Audio Guides. Two high school drama departments purchased copies of the Fahrenheit 451 scripts with grant money, one for a public performance; the other, for a performance to school English classes.

In focus groups and interviews we conducted with teachers, administrators, and librarians, all emphasized the way in which The Big Read fits into this community and their school or campus emphasis on literacy and reading for enjoyment. Assistant Principal Melody Chalmers and teacher Jason Edwards described E.E. Smith's robust literacy program, which includes a 25 Books campaign, for which students read a minimum of 25 grade-level appropriate books per year, and participation in other national reading initiatives such as America's Choice and Writers' Workshop.³² Chalmers and Edwards say that these programs are designed to build foundational skills, confidence, and self-esteem, but that they also want to teach students "how to enjoy reading," and welcome The Big Read and the library's efforts to help them show students that "We are a reading community."

Teen and young adult librarians see their role as helping students enjoy reading—but say that they don't see as many students as they used to coming to the library to read for fun. They often try to get students interested by stocking and promoting books written specifically for teens. They get many calls for graphic novels, and sometimes literary adaptations, or converted classical stories, which they know are not on school reading lists but see as "a transition to other things, especially for males, and for reluctant readers," what one teen librarian called "a gateway drug." These librarians also see The Big Read, and activities and book clubs designed for teens, as a way to interest teens in reading.

University Librarians at Methodist University also see a decline in reading for enjoyment, and the numbers of students checking fiction out of the campus library. To reverse that trend, they are planning book clubs, student writers' groups, and a reading café, which they hope will draw more students to the library in their free time. Their mantra, they say, is reading.

No matter what the age group, book clubs seems to be an effective way to engage teen and young adult audiences in leisure-time reading. We talked to two high school book clubs, one in which students order pizza for a library lunch and talk about books, and another in which a school librarian reads regularly with a small group of boys not always engaged in assigned reading. The first group's reading preferences reflect their love of books and interest in both contemporary and classic titles: Tuesdays with Morrie, Into the Wild, Ender's Game, The Scarlet Letter, Brave New World, To Kill a Mockingbird, Moby Dick. Some in this group had read and enjoyed Fahrenheit 451, and a handful had attended events, including the public forums on censorship—a topic all found highly interesting.

³² See <http://www.americaschoice.org/rampupliteracy>; <http://www.americaschoice.org/>.

The second group did not have a long list of favorite titles, but they did have some very clear interests: one student thinks that “slightly controversial books are more fun,” likes “books that make you think,” and believes teachers and students should “take a chance with more books.” A favorite school read was *The Crucible*. (This student is interested in business law, and thinks he should probably read more.) Another student thought Bradbury was “a genius for predicting all this,” and was in awe of the prescient depiction of the “the tools of today,” such as ATM machines, earbuds, and big screen TV.

During other school focus groups, students expressed similar opinions of Bradbury’s eerily prophetic novel, and a similar wide range of reading interests. Interestingly, all the students we spoke with said they would like to talk about books with students from other schools. Several also said they would enjoy a book debate team. The community college students, 52 of whom showed up for a focus group in response to an open call, explained why going to school and, in many cases, also taking care of a family and holding a job, limited free time. But, most also said they would like to read more. Some preferred non-fiction related to work or interests that ranged from politics to religious writing to health issues; others enjoy the escape of romance fiction. Almost all named a classic novel they enjoyed in high school, and said, time permitting, they would like to read more. Approximately half of the group was reading *Fahrenheit 451*. Some didn’t care for science fiction or found it hard to get into, but those who persevered were, like younger students, intrigued by Bradbury’s world, and engaged in the idea of preserving books. One older student who had learned to read just five years ago said that Bradbury “made you stop and take a look at what’s going on around you.”

We conducted a final focus group (on a school bus) with the group of students who had given a dramatic reading of scenes from *Fahrenheit 451* at Ft. Bragg. These students were excited about having performed on the base, and were eager for more exchanges, conversations between schools, and Big Read events. These students had also heard and enjoyed Sam Weller, who had spoken at their school. According to one student, he “blew me away.” Attuned to the language, and having worked with their teacher to select key scenes and bring those to life, these students, made some of the most insightful comments about *Fahrenheit 451*, which they agreed “opened their eyes.” The student who played Beatty tried to trace the logic (and contradictions) in Beatty’s monologue about why the firemen came to start burning books and his later statements about the complex ideas in books.

Impact

The Big Read clearly had a lasting impact on these students, and *Fahrenheit 451* seemed to have left several students in Fayetteville thinking about books, and about their iPods. Sally Shutt says that The Big Read was more “visible in several areas of the community” the second time around—in the numbers of participating schools, in the attendance at public discussions, and especially in the level of conversation, particularly at the “Censorship in Times of War” panel discussion.

Shutt also said that, as a result of events such as these, people were talking about The Big Read, and, in one case, relating Fahrenheit 451 to a current community event. As Shutt reported in her final narrative,

When a local private Christian school administrator was fired, an early newspaper story noted that she had assigned her senior students to read The Kite Runner, a decision that did not sit well with her school board. The day the story appeared in the newspaper, several library staff heard comments by community members that it was ironic this incident happened during The Big Read. The irony was also mentioned by a guest columnist in the newspaper a few days later.

In a library survey of staff members, who themselves had enjoyed reading or re-reading Bradbury's novel, several commented on the success of the public discussions, especially of book banning, noting that "everyone who read, and or participated seemed to find something." Some staff members suggested that they had perhaps hosted too many events, and should focus on those that most successfully attracted audiences, and on attracting more teen audiences to community events. Shutt noted that their events for Hispanic readers were not well-attended. The librarians and professors involved in these sessions, one of whom is active in Reforma, an ALA-affiliated association that promotes libraries and information services to Latinos³³ has some ideas how to work with the Latino community, offering family events and simultaneous activities for adults and children, to "turn a need into a demand."

Survey comments show that many people are looking forward to future Big Reads. They soon will: The Cumberland County Public Library kicks off its third Big Read in February 2009, with programs celebrating *The Maltese Falcon*.

³³ See <http://www.reforma.org/>.

Libraries of Eastern Oregon, Fossil, Oregon

The Joy Luck Club

Region: Northwest

Military Base: No

Population: 145,311

Other data not available.

*The Libraries of Eastern Oregon consortium was the hub of a regional effort that brought together nine independent libraries.³⁴ The consortium organized events, distributed books and materials, and provided publicity, helping regional and local libraries introduce *The Big Read* and *The Joy Luck Club* to rural and inner-city areas. The collective effort raised awareness of consortium and library resources, galvanized support for libraries, set a precedent for regional collaboration, and shared the rich, untold story of Chinese immigrants in eastern Oregon.*

Background

Libraries of Eastern Oregon (LEO) is the largest library consortium in the continental U.S., offering services to 47 public libraries in a rural area “larger than several New England states combined.” Funded through contributions and grants, the nonprofit LEO has, since 2000, helped deliver public library services in Eastern Oregon through “partnerships, community programs, infrastructure, collections, professional development, and advocacy.” LEO’s wide range of programs includes rotating exhibits from the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, a pilot program of folk art exhibits and programs funded by the Oregon Art Commission, Smithsonian Arts programs delivered via videoconference, and a STARS program (Science, Technology and Rural Students) that was incorporated into official NASA education policy in 2006.³⁵

Absent from this impressive array was a community reading program. According to LEO’s Lyn Craig, *The Big Read* was a first for the consortium and for the nine participating libraries. The choice of *The Joy Luck Club*, says Craig, was relatively easy, because it gave LEO the opportunity to share the “untold story” of Chinese immigrants in eastern Oregon. It also gave them the chance to introduce residents across the area to what Craig described as rural eastern Oregon’s “best kept secret,” the Kam Wah Chung Museum, the only remaining original Chinatown structure in the American West.

Promotion and Media

As a former newspaper editor, Craig has longstanding relationships with the media, and believes that they responded to *The Big Read* “even more favorably than usual,” providing “plenty of coverage.” Weekly newspapers covered events extensively, some with front-page stories, as did local radio stations and listservs. Craig wrote releases for newspapers and radio for each

³⁴ This case is based on interviews with the grantee and directors of 4 of the 9 participating independent regional libraries.

³⁵ See <http://www.librariesofeasternoregon.org/>, and http://www.librariesofeasternoregon.org/index_files/samplings.htm.

community, but also stressed the importance of the NEA publicity materials for libraries and communities without existing media partnerships or experience. Participating communities also promoted local events with “colorful posters” made by LEO to add to the NEA-produced posters. Each library also circulated fliers listing all The Big Read programs, and promoted The Big Read through displays of books and related artifacts in both the children’s area and adults’ areas. In La Grande, there were so many programs that the librarian “printed them on address labels, and cut them into strips so people could take those and stick them on their calendars.”

In getting the word out and designing programming, “the strategy,” said Craig, “was to target everybody. We really wanted to hit the community at large and tell the untold story of the Chinese immigrants.” To that end, distributing free copies of the book was an important effort. LEO purchased and distributed 1785 copies of *The Joy Luck Club*. As communities ran out, books were reallocated from those who found themselves with extras. The two greatest challenges, said Craig were the “geographic distances and diverse character of each community.” Craig described the overwhelming panic that set in as they face the reality of making The Big Read happen across Eastern Oregon. “What were we thinking—how are we going to get these books out? Do all these programs?” She remembered asking her Board, “Why did we do this in nine communities?” Describing the effort to reach “far and wide,” Craig said, “We actually borrowed a pickup truck and did a whirlwind tour in one long day distributing books and materials.” They also gave out materials at LEO Board meetings, and libraries in turn distributed them in their areas. According to Craig, in each community a volunteer committee was formed to bring the materials to “post offices, banks, doctor’s offices, senior centers, libraries, high schools, Chambers of Commerce, businesses, civic organizations, book club groups.

Partnerships and Programming

LEO’s centralized model, which helped defray costs for participating libraries, worked for partnerships and programming as well as promotion. LEO relied on existing partnerships, such as those with larger entities like Oregon State Parks and the Kam Wah Chung Museum, and smaller groups such as the civic organizations in each community. In developing programming, LEO also forged new partnerships: the university library at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, for example, helped distribute books and guides, and EOU professors gave presentations on the history of the Chinese in La Grande and other participating communities. Participating regional libraries also formed new partnerships with local civic organizations such as the Rotary, Altrusa, and Kiwanis. In Baker, the library partnered with the local writer’s guild, businesses, the local museum, and bookstores. These partnerships effectively ensured the participation of several local book clubs, the financial donation of the Grand Hotel to offset costs for Big Read presenters, a venue for Chinese artifact exhibit and event, and venues for book discussions and publicity.

LEO also organized the key Big Read events, which traveled to the participating Big Read communities. These included the Kam Wah Chung event, talks by a scholar and author about the massacre of Chinese miners in the area, and two presentations by the Oregon National Guard, one of which told the story of the War in the Pacific during WWII, which engaged the 42nd Division, an army battalion from Eastern Oregon, “one of the only army battalions to fly.”

Participating communities provided their own mayoral proclamations, kick-off events, special library displays of Amy Tan's books, and book club discussions, and held events that focused on their own social and cultural history. In Hermiston, for example, several veterans came to the National Guard's event about the 42nd Division. In Baker, the Kam Wah Chung event featured historians who study Chinatown history, the murders of Chinese miners in 1887, and the Chinese merchants' experiences of Chinese exclusion. Baker also hosted a film series on Chinese-related action films and foreign films that were especially popular with young people.

Like other participating regional libraries, Hermiston built local stories and experiences into Big Read programming. "Hermiston is not a literary town," said library director Marie Baldo. A young community, incorporated in 1906, Hermiston is, she said, a "quiet farming town," the "watermelon capital of the area." Because citizens "needed more than a professor coming in to attract people," Baldo said she purchased copies of *China Doctor of John Day, Oregon* by Jeffrey Barlow and Christine Richardson (1979), a book about Ing Hay, the "China Doctor" of Kam Wah Chung & Co. Ing Hay was a traditional Chinese physician who, with his herbal medicines, became "the most famous frontier physician in the John Day country of Eastern Oregon, serving patients from the late 19th century to 1948."³⁶

Participation by Children, Teens, and Young Adults

Lyn Craig of LEO said that library programming for children wasn't a planned component of The Big Read, but libraries found that children's programming brought in families. Libraries offered day-long Chinese crafts for young children; storytimes about Chinese American history, legends, and crafts; and special displays and a bibliography of related books for children. Some gave children fortune cookies as *The Joy Luck Club* was passed out to their parents. Libraries also chose companion books—Amy Tan's *Sagwa* for young readers, *Dragon Wings* by Lawrence Yep for teens, and, for young adults Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel that was a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People.

Although all their programs were publicized as community events, "the sub-strategy" of their outreach plan, said Craig, "was to reach the teenagers." Based on her observations, if "there were 30 people" at an event, "four were teens." Craig added that was "the first time we've ever had any teens at our programs." In Hermiston, Baldo said the Big Read attracted "older teens," including members of their teen advisory council. Their "Crouching Dragons, Leaping Teens" movie event also brought out older teens "who wanted to get the book."

The Big Read was the first time LEO had worked directly with the high schools. Their approach was to make contacts with English Language Arts teachers, visiting classes to present The Big Read. In the high schools they worked with directly, *The Joy Luck Club* was an optional read. Some students read the book outside of class, but gave presentations about the book and what it meant to them. According to Craig, "That lead to studying about the Japanese internment camps, tied in not just to Language Arts, but to Social Studies," bringing to life a "relatively untold part of

³⁶ Downloaded from <http://www.amazon.com/China-Doctor-John-Day-Oregon/dp/0832303461>.

Oregon's history." Seven high schools held book discussions during school hours; the public attended some of these, or other discussions held after school hours to allow more community members to attend. In general, Craig said, teachers welcomed the book, but she thought students' response was sometimes stronger. She and library colleagues attributed the lukewarm response to scheduling issues, over-scheduled teachers and students, and a title that is "peripheral to the curriculum." While the response from high schools was not what they had hoped, Craig said those who did get involved were now asking, "'What else do you do?' and 'What else can we be involved in?'"

Craig was also encouraged by student participation that extended beyond the schools. High school students helped distribute the books, which increased teens' attendance at Big Read events, even among boys initially hesitant to read a "chick book." Craig said that encouraging signs such as these have prompted talk of

...starting teen book clubs in some libraries that haven't had them before. One library invites teens to go out to pizza and a bookstore in a larger city in a van. They write down what books they'd like to have at the library. That encourages them to read because they're reading what they would have picked out. That's the model we're talking about bringing to other communities.

Impact

Craig happily reported that LEO's Big Read reached people from "all walks of life" in a rural, largely economically-distressed area. There were "ranchers, seniors, business owners, Native Americans, and students," many of them "new patrons," or people "who had never been to a library- or literary-related event before." Bob Jones at the Milton-Freewater Public Library, agreed: "I saw quite a few new faces. I'd estimate that 50% of the free books were distributed to people unfamiliar to the library." Describing the many new patrons, Craig said, "They've got library cards now; they will keep coming back."

"Everybody loved the book," said Craig, and "the conflict between the different generations and different ethnicities." Craig also said that the book inspired people to actively investigate the history of their community by visiting the Kam Wah Chung Museum and by taking a raft trip down the river to see a site where Chinese laborers were massacred. Oregon State Parks, which offered free admission, said that attendance at the Kam Wah Chung Museum had increased as a result of this project. As far as making an impact on reading, Craig said, "Amy Tan's other books going off the shelves like hotcakes."

Craig and colleagues expressed some disappointment in the small numbers who attended book discussion groups, and those interviewed consistently said it was a challenge to get men to read the book. In Hermiston, Baldo challenged her local Toast Masters (a group of primarily businessmen) to participate and passed it out to the members of the city council and the city manager. All had also hoped for greater participation from teachers and schools, but still believe

that The Big Read strengthened their relationships with middle and high schools, and see working with the schools as a long-term effort. Stokes said Baker County libraries plan to make “kits for the high schools to work into English courses.” Craig also reported that the partnerships with the schools “strengthened the role of the library and LEO throughout the region.”

All interviewees alluded to the “transformation” that The Big Read had brought about. The initiative enhanced the quantity and quality of library programming and encouraged libraries to pool resources, both of which increased LEO’s and individual libraries’ visibility. “It’s not like we are ‘newbies,’” Craig said, “we have done programs and brought out pretty good partners, but this was different—I think because it engaged the entire community.” She added that “I’d like to think that our region is reflective of other extremely remote areas where The Big Read should be going on: rural Alaska, western Wyoming, the corner of Nebraska.”

Craig also said that The Big Read raised awareness of the arts and the work of the NEA and Big Read partners. “Quite frankly, I don’t think the NEA had a presence in this region before. That was great—to talk about it and what it does and the importance of the arts.”

More frequent and prominent programming also led people in various towns to ask, “When is the next Big Read?” Craig says that they’re not only interested, but that “there’s another population in Eastern Oregon with an untold story, the Basque sheepherders.” LEO has contacted a natural resources officer with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Service who lived and worked with Basque herders in Oregon for over a year “to do library programs for us this summer: An End of an Era: The Basques in Eastern Oregon.” LEO was awarded an IMLS “Sense of Place” grant to support their efforts.

Hartford Public Library, Hartford, Connecticut
The Maltese Falcon

Region: Northeast	
Total Days: 60	Number of Teachers: 28
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 256
Population: 124,600	Number of Attendees: 3,916
Number of Partner Organizations: 39	Adults 1,839; Children 2,077
Number of Libraries: 21	Number of Book Club Meetings: 50
Number of Museums: 2	Number of Book Club Attendees: 295
Number of Volunteers: 0	Adults, 267; Children, 28
Number of K-12 Schools: 17	

The Hartford Public Library serves a highly diverse population, and one of the goals of their second Big Read was to reach as many segments of that population as possible. To “democratically showcase” the library’s resources, they reached out, says Deputy Chief Librarian Jenny Benedict, to regular patrons, school-aged audiences, immigrant groups, and shelter residents, among them avid, lapsed, reluctant, and non-readers. The library and its partners offered a wide array of events, but it was through book discussions, including those held over a four-week period with men from surrounding homeless shelters, that they made a personal connection with the community.

Background

The Hartford Public Library, founded in 1774 and recently renovated and expanded, is one of the state’s “most frequently visited and used resources, with some 650,000 visitors passing through the doors each year to use over 500,000 holdings.”³⁷ The library is the hub of literary activity in a city rich in literary heritage. Noah Webster, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Wallace Stevens—the city can lay claim to some of the country’s best-known, most-loved writers. Rich in ethnic and cultural diversity and economic as well as arts and literary activity, Hartford is also one of the poorest cities in the nation: close to thirty percent of the population lives below the poverty line, including 41 percent of those under 18, and 25 percent of those 65 or over.³⁸

For Hartford’s second Big Read, Deputy Chief Librarian Jenny Benedict hoped to reach “across the board—to younger audiences, new arrivals to the area, lapsed readers, adult learners, readers revisiting a title at a different stage in their lives.” The library chose *The Maltese Falcon* to add a new genre, mysteries and detective fiction, to their programming, an addition they hoped would expand their traditionally female audience to more males, interest area youth, and “democratically showcase” library resources and programming.

Hartford’s Big Reads build on a well-established community reading program. For six years the library has sponsored “One Book for Greater Hartford,” featuring books by contemporary authors. Benedict sees “a nice synergy” between this “little” read, which takes place in the Fall, and what is

³⁷ From The Big Read proposal.
³⁸ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs>

becoming a regular springtime Big Read. Combined with their summer reading programs for youth, these activities allow the library to offer Hartford a community reading program year-round.

Partnerships and Promotion

In addition to their 10 neighborhood branches, and their Library on Wheels program, the Hartford Public Library included 15 other municipal libraries in their second Big Read—in an effort, says Benedict, to “share the wealth.” They also sent program materials to an additional 33 regional libraries and affiliates in the capital region.

Having a well-established community reading program meant several partners were already on board. Some of the most productive partnerships, says Benedict, were with financial partners, who sponsored events and supported efforts to reach a wider audience. School partners included magnet schools and elementary, middle and high schools, and Manchester Community College. To include younger audiences, the Hartford Public Library also enlisted the help of the City of Hartford Early Learning Center. Other new partners included the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, the nation’s oldest public art museum, and Real Art Ways, a new, alternative arts venue offering performance spaces, films, concerts, readings, and other events to the community.

To reach a diverse audience, including non- or reluctant readers, and households “where literacy is a challenge,” the Hartford Public Library marketed Big Read events in multiple ways. They promoted actively to book clubs, and gave away 200 books, 150 in English and 50 in Spanish. Media partners included Connecticut Public Broadcasting and public access TV. The 20 radio stations in the area, according to Benedict, proved to be very successful promotional outlets. Other promotions included direct mail, announcements on the web site, PSAs—some run in local movie houses—and other non-print media.

Programming

Programming also reflected the library’s desire to engage Hartford’s diverse population. In all, the Hartford Public Library held 123 youth programs and 44 programs for adults; partner organizations held 89 additional programs. Coming up with program ideas involved, according to Benedict, “brainstorming with those who work with different populations.” The library wove The Big Read into their regular library programming, such as their Baby Grand Jazz series, and added new programs and activities over the two-month (March-April 2008) Big Read to celebrate Hammett’s 1930 classic detective novel: jazz performances, dance classes, a series of film noir movies, a hunt for the Maltese Falcon, and a mystery trivia challenge—held in a popular pub—in which readers tested their knowledge of famous detectives and characters.

A number of community events held were targeted specifically to younger audiences: at the Yo-Yo Show, for example, 200 students learned about yo-yos, invented in 1929. Other programs included a Clue Tournament at a branch library, followed by a film screening of the 1941 John Huston film of *The Maltese Falcon*, starring Humphrey Bogart. A “Partners in Time: Sam Spade and the Hardy

Boys” program looked at famous literary detectives; programming also featured the Hardy Boys’ female counterpart, Nancy Drew.

Although the library held multiple events for multiple audiences, the real focus, says Benedict, was book discussions, and during the two months, Hartford planned a total of 50 discussions in 42 locations, which involved some 17 book clubs. The goal, says Benedict, was “to get people talking about the book.” This focus on discussions in some ways sets Hartford’s program apart from other Big Reads. Many other Big Read communities considered public events to be more successful than book clubs, especially in drawing reluctant readers and a broad spectrum of the community, but Hartford succeeded in making the more intimate book discussions work for those who don’t typically belong to book clubs, including a group of men from surrounding shelters who spend “many hours in the library.” Over a four-week period, they read and discussed the book, listened to readings, and completed language worksheet activities developed by staff.

Participation by Teens and Young Adults

School book clubs—at Weaver High Schools and the Noah Webster Magnet School—also took part in Hartford’s Big Read, as part of the library’s efforts to offer teachers and school-aged audiences a variety of ways to be involved. Five Hartford middle and high schools and Manchester Community College taught *The Maltese Falcon*. At the suggestion of school librarians and Hartford Public Library Teen Services Coordinator, Kathy Gregory, students could choose to read *The Maltese Falcon* or a companion title by Rita Williams-Garcia. Companion titles from the 1920’s, including *Millions of Cats* and *The Little Engine that Could*, introduced the youngest readers to the period.

The library had contacts in schools through other community programs and outreach, but also, according to Gregory, tried to develop new “cheerleaders.” The Big Read was not a hard sell: Gregory says they were “eager to participate,” and the high-quality Teacher’s, Reader’s, and Audio Guides that each school received provided “a good starting point.” Gregory also said that students were receptive audiences, especially to their efforts to draw them into discussions of landscapes, or a sense of place—like the landscape of San Francisco in the twenties created by Hammett. Gregory said she and the teachers and school librarians also encouraged students to think about “the voice of a writer,” a conversation some schools extended through a Poetry Slam project. In this way, said Gregory, “you can insert literary themes and topics, like the anti-hero or authentic voice.” She says it’s always interesting to see, even with some fairly sophisticated literary topics, that “kids have a lot to say. They can connect to ideas.”

During a focus group with the Weaver high school book club, students expressed some of the insights Gregory referred to. Three students had read *The Maltese Falcon*, and five others, Williams-Garcia’s *Every Time a Rainbow Dies*. These students knew about The Big Read, though they had not attended out-of-school events. A student from Jamaica said she liked how “the book plays with your expectations about people,” and “plays hero and anti-hero against each other.” Others saw Hammett’s novel as a classic boy-saves-girl story, but were also surprised when “the boy doesn’t care—you expected happily ever after!”

Because they belong to a book club, it was not surprising that these students were readers. (One student came to the U.S. from Puerto Rico when she was 11, and taught herself English by reading book after book for four months at the New York Public Library. Another had challenged her younger sister to a year-long reading contest, and both read 52 books; this student is also writing her own novel.) What was surprising was the range in students' favorite books. Boys listed Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and *Harry Potter*, adding that because it's not "cool" to read, many of their male peers won't admit that they're also big Harry Potter fans. The girls preferred women writers—the Brontës, Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, Julia Alvarez, and urban fiction author, Zane, a favorite of younger female book club members. They also liked books set in their native countries—*Children of the River* was a favorite of two Cambodian students; *Sisters on the Home Front*, set in San Juan, appealed to students with Puerto Rican heritage. Two female students belong to an online book club, in which they talk to other readers around the world.

The high school media specialists differ on what students should be reading: One said she encourages students to read the classics; the other said her philosophy is "to help them read anything and everything...it doesn't matter, as long as they are reading."

We also talked to middle schoolers gathered after school at the downtown library. These students had not read *The Maltese Falcon* or attended events, but were aware of—and seemed to feel a part of—The Big Read because they had seen posters and information on the library website. They were proud of Joseph, the young library volunteer's drawings of scenes from *The Maltese Falcon*, on display in the young adult section. As in all our focus groups around the country, there were both avid and reluctant readers in the group, those who like "Everything...fantasy like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, thrillers, drama, autobiography, biography, love stories, graphic novels," and those who have lost interest in reading. A few young women read only urban fiction—some because the inner-city stories and characters are relevant to their lives; others, because these stories offer escape. Both girls and boys enjoy graphic novels, including Japanese manga.

Students said most assigned reading was boring, then described what they did enjoy, adding, in turn: love stories, romantic intrigue, drama, action, violence, and characters closer to their own age—and concluding that two of their favorite school texts were *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. Students liked these because teachers had let them read out loud, role-play, and view films, giving them a way into the text.

Older students at Manchester Community College had not read *The Maltese Falcon*, though three attended an event as one of the options for a Communications class. These students, and others who took part in an ad hoc focus group, varied in age, career plans, and reading preferences. Only two regularly read novels, or classics, but all read online news, sports and music reviews, and magazines that ranged from *Forbes* to *Adbusters*, the publication of an anti-consumerist group dedicated to social and political causes. One student, diagnosed early with dyslexia, still enjoys the children's books and reading to children. These older students, too, enjoy graphic novels, but prefer more traditional ones—Seligman was mentioned—and "not anime."

Interestingly, all said they would like to read more: if they had time, if they could afford books, if books were shorter. Some were very knowledgeable about digitization; one was following the progress of Project Gutenberg with interest. They think tools such as Amazon's Kindle are promising, but too expensive—and most still prefer to tuck a paperback book into a backpack. They liked the idea of The Big Read, and a community reading program, but pointed out that community is something difficult to establish at a commuter community college.

Impact and Directions for the Future

Describing their goals for the program, Jenny Benedict and colleague Debra Perry said they wanted to “get people talking about the book.” They wanted it “on the nightstand.” They wanted the “water cooler conversations to be about the book rather than the weather.” Book club participation and attendance suggests that they succeeded with Hammett's book, but they also see this as an ongoing, long-term effort, almost one-in-the-same as the library's mission.

Benedict and Gregory report that two Big Reads have created more participation by schools and more awareness of events. Gregory says that in future Big Reads they plan to continue to create options for students—in school, out of school—and hope to enlist a “teen leader” to advise them and help promote the program. Reading options and multiple ways to participate are, according to Gregory, the best ways to engage avid readers, like the high school girls who read widely and enjoy talking with other readers from different backgrounds with different perspectives, and to break down the barriers to reading. For most reluctant readers, she says, those are time, transportation, and ability; some students, especially high school students, devote most out-of-school time to homework or work; younger students don't often venture out of their neighborhoods; and some students can't read well enough to read for pleasure.

The Hartford Public Library also plans to continue to give away books as part of The Big Read. This, says the magnet school librarian, is critical. “When people are around books,” she says, “they're more likely to read.” She also sees library budgets dwindling and “less and less time for just reading: teachers bring kids to the library for an assignment...they get one book for a project, one for pleasure.” With little time for reading and “not a lot to choose from on the shelves,” the library, she says, “is not the place it used to be.”

Benedict, Perry, and Gregory believe that engaging all segments of the community in a larger, ongoing conversation, showing them that “everyone is doing it,” makes a difference. Joseph's pictures, they say, made an impression on young and old. Book discussions with the men's shelter group “altered their preferences” and gave them a “literary experience.” Perry believes that the more young children hear names and see titles, the more they see the community reading, the more likely they will become readers. Gregory agrees that beginning early to draw their attention to landscapes, voice, and other literary ideas helps students gradually engage more sophisticated titles. Perry says young readers begin to build a “core knowledge” that, a “moment down the line,” will allow them to take part in the conversation when “it's valuable to know who F. Scott Fitzgerald is or when *Reading Lolita in Teheran* comes up.”

The Hartford Public Library was awarded a third Big Read grant, to bring their diverse community together to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Muncie Public Library, Muncie, Indiana
The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Region: Midwest	Number of Volunteers: 2
Total Days: 33	Number of K-12 Schools: 5
Military Base: No	Number of Teachers: 9
Population: 66,000	Number of Events: 31
Big Read Population: 66,000	Number of Attendees: 874
Number of Partner Organizations: 7	Adults, 526; Children, 348
Number of Libraries: 1	Number of Book Club Meetings: 22
Number of Museums: 1	Number of Book Club Attendees: 276
	Adults, 195; Children, 81

Excitement about an international exchange and a fortuitous connection to schools in Russia led the Muncie Public Library to choose Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* for their second Big Read. A university partnership, creative use of technology, and a visit from Tolstoy's great-great grandson boosted audiences and made up for lower-than-expected participation by local schools. *Ivan Ilyich* was not a title Muncie librarians would necessarily have picked to introduce readers to world literature, nor was it an easy read, especially for younger audiences. But they were pleasantly surprised: high school and college students attended public events and engaged in some heady conversations about the book that broadened their literary horizons and perhaps even their plans for the future.

Background

A comment made by NEA Director of Literature David Kipen at the first Big Read Orientation in December 2006 intrigued Donna Brown, who was there on behalf of the Muncie Public Library. Kipen said that, as The Big Read grew, it might include a title from world literature and an international exchange. The idea stayed with Brown, and when *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* appeared on The Big Read list a year later, she urged colleagues to select the novel for Muncie's second Big Read. It would give the library the chance to introduce the community to "an important world author," and students the chance "to interact with people on the other side of the world." Moreover, a library colleague knew the Russian teacher at the nearby Indiana Academy, who had an upcoming visit to her hometown of Petrozadovsk in the Republic of Karelia, Russia. It was an opportunity too good to pass up.

Muncie, Indiana, has often been portrayed as the quintessential middle-American town. It's where the UFO lands in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It's the brunt of jokes about middle America, including some friendly jabs from Indiana native Dave Letterman. It's where a husband-and-wife team of sociologists moved in the 1920s to study how the nation's transition from a farm society to an industrial economy affected how people live. Studies that grew out of

their work have associated Muncie with Middletown America for over 50 years, most recently in a 2000 PBS Documentary entitled "Middletown IV: The First Measured Century."³⁹

Immortalizing a town on the screen or in a scholarly study doesn't spare it from everyday reality, and Muncie faces the very real problems confronting much of middle America, where economic downturns have eroded a once-strong manufacturing base and created high unemployment, high poverty rates, and a dismal outlook on the future that results in high drop-out rates. With little to look forward to, says Brown, students may not only lose interest in school, but also "take a bad path." *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* may not top any list of suitable reading for bewildered or disillusioned youth, but Muncie librarians were willing to take a chance on a book about how decisions made early in life can set a regrettable course and haunt you to your deathbed. "If young people are encouraged to think about what they really want to do and how their decisions affect the rest of their lives, this would be a good outcome!" reasoned Muncie librarians. It was a difficult topic, a difficult book, but librarians and teachers found that "students responded to that theme of hypocrisy"—for much the same reason that they identify with Holden Caulfield—and to the idea that "now is the time to start making decisions that affect your life."

Partnerships and Promotion

When the Muncie Public Library applied for its second Big Read grant, it was optimistic about expanding school-age audiences and furthering the "cooperative educational and literary programming" with the Muncie Community Schools that had begun with the first Big Read. Unfortunately, internal restructuring at the Muncie Community Schools and the departure of a key administrative contact led to a breakdown in communication and the effort lost momentum. Other potential partnerships that would help ensure youth participation—with the Boys & Girls Club and Big Brothers/Big Sisters—also started well, but then faltered. The Muncie librarians think perhaps the book choice dampened partners' enthusiasm.

Two Muncie schools eventually decided to participate, including Southside High School, the district high school with the largest at-risk population. The library also looked outside the school district to build audiences, which resulted in the participation of the nearby Yorktown Schools and the Burriss School, a lab school at Ball State University. Participation by an eleventh-grade Russian class at the Indiana Academy of Math and Science, a private residential school for gifted students, brought the total to five schools and nine teachers. A voluntary book club made up of honors students from Ball State University and the East Central Indiana Homeschoolers Association, which covers two counties, joined as well. To include elementary students in Big Read activities, librarians used Russian folk tales as "read-alike" books.

³⁹*Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, the first report by Robert and Helen Lynd, was published in 1929; a second book, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, came out in 1937. NSF funded a third major study, by Theodore Caplow, that resulted in two books, *Middletown Families* (1982) and *All Faithful People* (1983). Caplow returned in 1998 to begin Middletown IV, the basis of the PBS program. Additional information available at <http://www.bsui.edu/middletown/middletownidea>.

A very important school partnership that did not fall short was the March 2008 exchange with Secondary School No. 17 and the Children's Youth Library in Petrozadovsk in Karelia, Russia. The teleconference that paired American and Russian students, a first-time-ever distance learning connection for both communities, was made possible by the library's technology partner, Ball State University. The university partnership also proved to be very successful, linking students across oceans and narrowing divides between town and gown. Ball State also sponsored a public radio interview, carried by Voice of America radio, and "Let's Talk Tolstoy," two one-hour television shows featuring Indiana University Russian and East European faculty and the writer's great-great grandson Vladimir Tolstoy. Partnering on the television program was the local PBS affiliate WIPB-TV, which provided staff and facilities and later broadcast the program to a potential audience of 400,000. The station also ran the NEA-created PSA twelve times.

Programming

The international exchange between students was one highlight of Muncie's Big Read. The other, referred to in the library's final report as their "intellectual and emotional highlight," was the visit from Vladimir Tolstoy, great-great grandson of Leo Tolstoy and director of the Tolstoy State Museum-Estate at Yasnaya Polyana, and Glaina Alekseeva, the museum's director of academic research. Their itinerary included the Muncie television and radio broadcasts and discussions with a standing-room only crowd, all of which included many high school and college students. Another successful cultural event was "Russia Revealed," during which students and other community members learned more about Tolstoy and Russian cuisine, music, dance, arts, and crafts.

Though very successful, these events were not without challenges. Because of prohibitions on sending US funds out of the country, the library had to pay for the Russian University's fee for the teleconference rather than use Big Read funds. Instead of investing in the required kick-off event, the library would have preferred to reserve Big Read funds for the Tolstoy visit and cultural events focused on youth.

Participation and Responses from Teens and Young Adults

During visits to Muncie after The Big Read, we talked to library staff, teachers, students, and parents about participation by student audiences. The library staff shared both their frustration with the lack of participation by local schools, and their satisfaction with what did materialize. They were especially pleased with the ways in which technology resources had supported student participation: in addition to holding the international teleconference, they had also used new technology equipment from another grant to film and edit a video of literary commentary by the Indiana Academy students, featured on the library's web site. Technology, they believe, has a natural appeal for younger audiences and can be used to engage students in reading activities. Feedback from librarians, and teachers and students participating in these events suggests that students enjoyed the book, the technology, and the exchanges. Librarians said that students like

the idea of “cultural immersion,” and they like “discussions in which they’re actively involved,” in face-to-face discussions or via interactive technologies. Librarians and teachers were also impressed by the questions students asked during the Tolstoy visit and by the level of discussion.

Librarians and teachers also believed that students had grasped the meaning of a challenging book. As one librarian noted, “people rarely present themselves as themselves, or interact a fundamental true level. They are always wearing some kind of mask or have some ulterior motive. The reason that Holden Caulfield and idea of phoniness works with teen audiences is why this book worked.” Another librarian said that her 17-year old daughter, intrigued by the community activities, read the book on her own, talked about his philosophy, and asked what else Tolstoy wrote. Maria Staton, the Indiana Academy Russian teacher, showed students two translations of the novel, asking students to look at the differences in an older translation that used words like “thou” and “doth” and a newer one. She assumed that students would opt for the more accessible new translation, but in fact they preferred the older translation because they felt it “lent a solemnity at the time of his death.” One student, she reported, was surprised to learn that the book was written in 1886. “She thought it was written 20 years ago.”

The numbers of students participating at this level were limited, but positive reactions suggest that well planned events and assignment of classic titles from world literature can effectively attract student audiences. Staton believes that well-chosen events are key: she saw the teleconference as a “once in a lifetime opportunity, worth the sacrifice of a few Russian grammar lessons.” She also took students to “Russia Revealed” and the Tolstoy event, in large part because they gave students an opportunity to engage in community discussions where they could “share their views.” “Without those community events,” said Staton, “it would be much more difficult to get them interested in the book. I could interest them in the book from a literary or academic point of view, but not the social aspect...the connection that happens when you discuss a book.”

We also talked to teachers, students, and parents about students’ reading habits and preferences. As in other sites we visited, we met both avid and reluctant readers and a range in reading tastes. Like their peers, Muncie students read science fiction, fantasy, romance, mysteries, and suspense. In this particular group, more students expressed an interest in non-fiction, especially history. Both university and homeschooled students said they enjoy plays. Teens taking part in our focus group at the Loft, a teen room at the library, said that they’re more likely to be playing *Guitar Hero*, math games, or the Japanese manga-inspired card game, Yu-Gi-Oh! Not surprisingly, when they do read, these teens pick science fiction or fantasy. The avid readers in the various groups seemed to agree that their reading habits were formed young, and often through sustained reading of novels in series, such as *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Brian Jacques’ *Redwall* series.

Staton, along with other teachers and parents we talked to, believes that students would read more for pleasure if they had more time. The internet, she says, is a “big, big rival,” but homework, too,

keeps students from reading. One parent who had opted for homeschooling did so because “school competes with reading.”

Impact

Muncie’s program planners were, in the end, pleased with the outcomes of their second Big Read and their ad hoc participation. When partnerships fell through they built new ones, including some within the library: the children’s librarian, reflecting on her somewhat unexpected role in the planning events, was happy to report that the experience led her “out of my comfort zone in the classroom and into the adult reader world.” Although the local print media outlets were “a little sluggish,” television and radio outlets exceeded expectations and constituted a “wonderful” and “prestigious” addition to their press coverage. They were confident that a successful partnership with Ball State University, which helped them “celebrate our program!” would lead to further collaborations. Especially pleased with their use of technology, library staff members hope to continue to use it “as a bait” to build student participation in reading activities.

Librarians took pride in the fact that they introduced community members to a title they wouldn’t have otherwise read. They distributed more books to the community than in their previous Big Read, and given how many people kept books with “Take it and leave it” stickers,” librarians concluded that “if you build it they will come. If you make it available, they will use it.”

As hoped, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and the opportunity to interact with Russian students helped local students understand how culture defines them and how exposure to other cultures broadens them. Encouraging students to think about their lives, and ask themselves “What makes a good life?” was a challenge and a risk, but these librarians were confident that they successfully broke down resistance to a book about death and dying by calling it a book about living.

Postscript

When we talked to Muncie librarians in May 2008, they said community members were still asking, “What book are you going to select next?” They also reported that the worsening economy and local tax restructuring had forced library budget cuts. These realities, combined with the time commitment and one-to-one match required by The Big Read, left them doubtful that they would apply for a third grant in the next round. According to January 2009 newspaper report, two Muncie library branches are slated to close in June.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See http://www.theheraldbulletin.com/local/local_story_021132554.html.

Together We Read, Asheville, North Carolina

My Ántonia

Region: South	Number of K-12 Schools: 9
Total Days: NA	Number of Teachers: 13
Military Base: No	Number of Events: 33
Population: 1,200,000	Number of Attendees: 2134
Number of Partner Organizations: 18	Adults 1805; Children 329
Number of Libraries: 31	Number of Book Club Meetings: 16
Number of Museums: 9	Number of Book Club Attendees: 167
Number of Volunteers: 67	Adults 167; Children 0

For five years, Together We Read (TWR) has brought readers all across Western North Carolina together to celebrate native writers and a rich oral tradition. The Big Read helped them add new titles, new events, and new audiences. TWR chose My Ántonia because these new audiences include a growing immigrant population. Cather's novel and the immigrant experiences shared by visiting authors and dignitaries like Pulitzer-Prize winner Junot Díaz and U.S. Advisor for the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees Esther Olavarria helped TWR celebrate not only reading but also diversity.

Background

Together We Read is a coalition of over 100 organizations in western North Carolina, founded in 2003 to foster “a love of reading and heritage through the shared experience of well-chosen books.” Members include libraries, museums, public schools, colleges and universities, newspapers, bookstores, public television stations, and arts, literary, and civic groups—a roster that looks very much like that of groups nationwide receiving Big Read grants. TWR devotes half of the year to its own reading program, *TWR Homegrown*, and, since 2007, has devoted the other half to The Big Read.

The 21-county area served by TWR is as diverse as its membership. It includes rural communities in the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains, along the front range of the Appalachians, and the more urban and suburban communities in and around Asheville. The combined population of over 1.2 million includes long-time, year-round residents; “summer people” and second-home owners; and retirees, many of them North Carolina natives who, despite favorite literary son Thomas Wolfe’s observation that you can’t go home again, have come back to the mountains. The area is rich in folk arts and Southern Appalachian culture, and also the site of the opulent Biltmore Estate, American’s largest privately owned home. It is where, at Black Mountain College, artists and thinkers like John Cage and Buckminster Fuller experimented in arts, design, and progressive education from the 1930s to the 1950s. And, where, since 1890, high school and college students have engaged in farm work, academics, and service at the Asheville Farm School and Warren Wilson College, currently one of the TWR partners.⁴¹

⁴¹ See http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/black_mountain_college.html and <http://www.warren-wilson.edu>.

Western North Carolina is also fast becoming more ethnically diverse. It has a growing Hispanic population and other immigrant communities, which is why TWR chose *My Antonia* for its second Big Read. The goal was to engage audiences in timely discussions of immigration issues, and at the same time broaden TWR's oral history and story circle activities with immigrant perspectives.

Partnerships and Promotion

To support 21 counties and a potential audience of over a million, TWR holds a six-month rather than one-month Big Read, devoting half a year to celebrating classics, and half to celebrating North Carolina authors in *TWR Homegrown*. During the six months devoted to *My Antonia*, TWR relied on existing partnerships and media outlets for county-by-county programming and promotion. Over 20 media outlets and local newspapers in individual participating communities carried publicity and feature articles, and the local network affiliate, WLOS-TV, aired the NEA-produced public service announcements and broadcast segments of *My Antonia*, read by local teens. TWR Director Rob Neufeld is the book page and local history feature writer for the region-wide *Asheville Citizen Times*, which ran various pieces on The Big Read, including a feature article on immigration issues. TWR arts and university members included *My Antonia* and The Big Read in their own newsletters, electronic outreach, and other promotional activities. TWR also has a listserv of 130 site coordinators who promoted the book and programs. TWR's recent web-based sharing resource, *The Read on WNC*, provided online access to and participation in the oral histories and storytelling that have become a key part of TWR.

TWR also formed new partnerships for The Big Read, with, for example, the Asheville Art Museum, and RiverLink, a non-profit organization promoting the economic and environmental revitalization of Asheville's riverfront district. To target specific audiences, TWR enlisted the Literacy Council of Buncombe County and regional Latino groups, and worked diversity offices within existing partner institutions. These included the Global Education Initiative and Center for Diversity at Asheville-Buncombe Technical College, and the Friends of the Library and Political Science Department at UNC-Asheville, which together brought in Esther Olivarria, U.S. Advisor for the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees, to speak on immigration.

Programming

One of TWR's goals, through The Big Read and its other programming, is to find a good way to join forces with each partner university. Actress Barbara Bates Smith introduced the Olavarria talk at UNC-A with "*My Antonia* in Sign, Spoken Word, and Theatre." In partnership with Warren Wilson College, TWR invited the Pulitzer-Prize winning Dominican-American author Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, to talk about the immigrant experience. At Western Carolina University in Sylva, Nicholas Basbanes, author of *Every Book Its Reader: The Power of the Printed Word to Stir the World*, gave a talk entitled "Willa Cather among Other Writers."

Other county-by-county programming reflected the variety in partner organizations and the distributed nature of TWR's implementation. In several counties, TWR continued its oral history tradition with a new kind of book discussion that combined immigrant experiences with the age-old local tradition of telling stories. These personalized book discussions and Spanish editions of *My*

Ántonia helped Latino participants share their own stories. The Polk County Pubic Library in Tryon held a gala featuring actress-scholar Betty Jean Steinshouer performing “The Making of *My Ántonia*.”

Participation by Teens and Young Adults

TWR’s goal of building an interest in cultural heritage through books authored by local writers has inspired some successful events for area youth as part of *TWR Homegrown*. Author Lee Smith’s work on real stories and pride of place with middle-school students in Ashe County resulted in a professionally produced 18-minute video that TWR now makes available to school-age audiences across western North Carolina.

TWR leaders hope that this kind of successful distribution will be a model for future Big Read activities and encourage more cross-county activities and participation by school-age audiences. Although TWR made *My Ántonia* available to schools, recreation centers, bookstores, and other vendors, and held very successful Big Read events in some counties, they had hoped for higher and more sustained levels of school participation. Part of the challenge is that the wide reach and diverse membership that make TWR successful as a regional network make it less successful as a school program. The long distances between sites and the perils of mountain roads discourage students from attending public events. The six-month period gives student audiences more opportunities and TWR members more flexibility, but a protracted time frame disperses the excitement of a month-long Big Read that might otherwise attract teachers’ and students’ attention and inspire them to make transportation and scheduling arrangements.

During a site visit, we met with four groups of students who were taking part in The Big Read, in a variety of ways. In Mitchell County, about 40 miles northeast of Asheville, atop a mountain ridge, students in a creative dramatics class recited scenes from *My Ántonia*—outings when Jim and Ántonia are young, Mr. Shimerda’s funeral, Jim’s reunion with Ántonia—which they prepared with children’s author Gloria Houston. Working with partners, students had chosen favorite scenes for a public reading. About half of the students had read the entire book; others had read just the performed scenes. None were familiar with the names or branding for TWR or The Big Read, but were excited to learn that they were part of region-wide and national initiatives.

Posters on the classroom walls suggested wide-ranging theatrical interests, including Jim Morrison, *Wicked*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and readings from T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” There were students in the class who enjoy theatre more than reading, and those somewhat indifferent to both, but there were also eager readers, whose favorite writers ranged from Ayn Rand to Anne Rice, Margaret Mitchell to Maya Angelou, and R.L. Stine to Edgar Allan Poe. Students read sports magazines, fan fiction, and indie music reviews, and most spend time on social networking sites, though they don’t consider it reading.

Students were generally in agreement about what makes reading enjoyable, and their suggestions may hold some lessons for designing teen events for The Big Read. Students in an AP literature class enjoyed keeping logs and sharing their responses to *Of Mice and Men* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Other students, less eager readers, enjoyed creating and “inhabiting” their own island utopian communities, for *Lord of the Flies*; choosing a sin that would make them outcasts, for *The Scarlet Letter*; playing a

school-wide clue game, for *A Pocketful of Rye*; naming five people they would want to meet in heaven; and spending a day in the park sharing favorite children's books with children. Students also reported that they had enjoyed a disco version of *The Merchant of Venice* and a redneck version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

We also talked to a small group of middle-school girls in a voluntary book club at Osundu Booksellers, an independent bookstore in Waynesville, North Carolina, a small town forty miles southeast of Asheville, where original downtown buildings sit alongside boutiques and gift shops that cater to an upscale demographic. Owner and TWR board member Margaret Osundu has created or partnered on local Big Read events, including a *My Ántonia* trivia contest. Osundu also "encourages kids to hang out at the bookstore," and welcomes browsers and teen book groups with beverages, popcorn, and a warm, book-lovers environment.

The girls in the book club described themselves as "big readers," always with "another book on the side" to read along with assigned books. Not just a bookish group, they enjoy sports, like to write as well as read, and belong to online reading groups and write blogs about "family, life, politics." All were reading Cather's book, which one young reader found "beautifully written." Another who loved "the last sentence of each chapter," had copied some in her journal. They were drawn to the friendship between Ántonia and Jim.

Enduring classics appeal to these young teens—*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are among their favorites—but they are also open to all kinds of books: they're fans of *Harry Potter* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, and enjoy young adult classics like *The Giver* and *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. They may occasionally pick up one of Robert Ludlum's Bourne thrillers, and one student was reading *Germes, Guns, and Steel*. These young women say they also like to read books that are "out of their comfort zone," and are pleased when their teacher "exposes them to a different genre." They knew about The Big Read, but had not taken part in or considered attending events outside of Waynesville.

The group had some interesting observations about why their peers are less excited about reading. They don't think non-readers have enough choices to develop habits and tastes: teachers or required reading lists may not give them choices, or, unlike these young women, they don't frequent bookstores or libraries often enough "to see what's out there and discover books that they would enjoy." These students also believe that some efforts to encourage reading, like the competitive reading programs many schools support, actually dull students' natural interests. These programs, they say, mean students are neither reading because they want to, nor seeking out books that appeal to them. A parent who joined the group, also a teacher, added that the easy availability of Cliff or Spark notes may mean that students rarely have to read a book assigned for school, or ever develop the desire to choose a book for leisure reading.

We also conducted a focus group with eight students at UNC-Asheville, who had not read *My Ántonia* and were not familiar with TWR or The Big Read, but who were, at a professor's suggestion, attending the Olivarría Big Read event. (All received free copies of *My Ántonia*.) Again, favorite authors varied—among those mentioned were C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Updike, Neal Stephenson, and David McCullough. One young man said he liked "to see a little of

myself” in a novel. All said they would like to read more. One student, describing “Facebook zombies,” worried that complacency among students, the easy access to technology and social networking sites, and the need to be entertained and sense that reading is a chore could create a “perfect storm” that could drown any interest in reading. Though they were just learning about the bigger initiative, all liked the idea of a community reading program that linked speakers like Olivarria to a classic novel and brought town and gown together.

Because students were out for spring break, we were not able to talk to students at Warren Wilson College who had attended the Junot Diaz event, or to Asheville High School students who had participated in The Big Read as a class.

Impact

In a follow-up interview, Big Read and TWR director Rob Neufeld reported that their second Big Read helped them reach “important new audiences” and furthered their goal of creating a “reading and discussing society.” He also said that the events created around *My Antonia* “put a “human face” on immigration. He and partners were pleased at the response from Hispanic audiences, especially to book discussions that, in the TWR tradition, combined personal narratives with conversations about *My Antonia*. They were also pleased about a report from a Haywood County Latino activist who called The Big Read efforts “the most consistent set of programs I had even received from an outside agency.”

The Big Read has value for an organization like TWR, helping promote reading and draw community members to literary events, and adding visibility and a national profile to a local organization. To facilitate their ongoing, year-round efforts, TWR suggested that organizations like theirs that need to plan ahead and coordinate the two cycles be granted a continuing organization status that would not only lengthen the selection period but also streamline the proposal and reporting process.

It is difficult to assess the overall impact of The Big Read on school-aged audiences. Certainly individual activities were very successful, and time and replication with TWR’s distributed model may help them overcome the challenges posed by mountains and distances and bring student groups together across county boundaries. The students we spoke with were positive about their *My Antonia* experiences and open to the notion of a shared experience with other teens and young adults and community audiences.

These students also shared positive reading experiences and assignments that suggest what activities might engage them in books and community-wide efforts. The ideas are relatively simple: they like reading out loud, storytelling, and activities that bring books to life. They like titles with a local connection, but they enjoy discussing and acting out novels that portray a different world—another time, another culture, a fictional future or a utopian/dystopian world. They like sharing with younger children and older teens, but also with adults. They enjoy discussions or events that link pressing issues like immigration to their lives and communities. Many respond positively when teachers assign books that draw them out of their comfort zone, and when bookstores allow them “to sit and read.”

APPENDIX

Big Read School Administrator Interview Protocol

Big Read program grantee/community: _____

Big Read Book: _____

—
Name: _____

Position: _____

—
School/University: _____

—
Phone: _____ Email: _____

—

Introductions/purpose: 1) to see schools are involved in *The Big Read* and what role administrators play in participation and partnerships; 2) to learn more about what, from their perspectives, students are doing, in school and out, and what factors affect teachers' and students' *BR* participation; 3) to get administrators' views on students' reading habits and interests, including what things encourage or discourage reading; and 4) to discuss the impact of *BR* participation, on students, teachers, schools, and the community.

Background information about library demographics, locale, teen/young adult activities etc.

Awareness and Appeal

1. How did you learn about *The Big Read*?
 - a. From posters, banners, announcements on local TV or radio stations, the newspaper, word-of-mouth?
 - b. From colleagues, other administrators? Teachers? Students? Parents?
 - c. Did someone (community leader, other school administrator, teacher) contact you directly?
 - d. Had you or your school participated before? In what way (as a community member, community partner, etc.)?
2. Why did you decide to participate?
 - a. Previous successful *BR* participation/partnership?
 - b. Other schools/faculty members involved?
 - c. Interest in community initiative?
 - d. Interest in *reading* initiative?
 - e. Were there specific features of *The BR* or upcoming events that attracted you, or convinced you to get involved? If so, how did you think they would benefit your school or students?

Implementation/School Participation & Partnership

3. Tell me a little about your role in *The BR*. Did you, e.g.:
 - a. Serve on planning committee/work with for community organizers?
 - b. Advocate for program/recruit schools/faculty/teachers?
 - c. Organize/host/participate in events?
 - d. Help promote *The BR* in the community?
 - e. Other (describe)
4. How did your school/district participate in *The BR*?
 - a. Organize/host/participate in events?
 - b. Help promote *The BR* in the community?
 - c. Incorporate the book into curriculum/reading/discussions?
 - d. Add the *BR* novel to the curriculum?
 - e. Other (describe)
5. Have you previously collaborated with civic or cultural groups in the community?
6. If so, how is/was this partnership similar or different?
 - a. What factors strengthened the partnership?
 - b. Did you encounter challenges as a school partner? If so, what were they? Were they resolved?
7. Have you attended *BR* events yourself?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. Did you see students there—did students' or teachers' *Big Read* participation extend beyond the classroom?

Teens' and Young Adults' Responses to Book [may vary, depending on level of participation/role]

8. From your perspective, what events or promotion, if any, really hooked students?
9. Have you gotten any feedback from students, teachers, or parents about the community events?
 - a. What kinds of events seem to appeal to students? Or what doesn't seem to interest/attract them?
 - b. Do students typically go to events such as these? Is this something they like to do? Is this something that you, as an administrator, have an opportunity to encourage?
 - c. Are there other kinds of events that might be more appealing?
10. Did students from your school or university take an active part in events—public readings, theatrical readings/ productions, art exhibits, essay contests, etc.? If so, please describe. How did that affect their experience with the book?
11. Any memorable moments, or student/teacher comments or experiences?
12. Do you think the fact that *The BR* involves the larger community, or offers different kinds of experiences, affects how teachers teach the book, or how students respond to it?

Larger Impact

13. How would you describe the impact of *The BR* on the school/district/university?
14. Would you partner on an effort like this again?
 - a. Anything you'd do differently?
 - b. Would you anticipate more involvement on the part of teachers and students? If so, what might increase participation?
15. We're also interested in learning more about youth/teen/young adults' reading habits and interests—and whether *The Big Read* has an impact on those. First of all, from your perspective, how would you describe the reading habits, or interests among this age group?
 - a. Do you think they read enough?
 - b. What kinds of things do they like to read?
 - c. How likely is it that your students opt to spend their free time reading?
 - d. What other options are competing for students' leisure time? What would they rather do?
 - e. If they had more leisure time, would they spend it reading? If so, what? Would they read more literature?
16. What are some of the barriers to reading?
 - a. What factors influence the amount of literature reading they do (e.g., time, preferences, knowledge of authors and books, etc.)?]
17. Do you think students' interest in reading, or reading habits, have changed over the years you've worked with students?
18. Again, from your perspective, what kinds of activities would keep kids reading?

19. Do you think reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* has changed teens'/young adults' reading habits? Why or why not? What experiences or evidence tells you that?
20. Has reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* changed how they think about reading literature for pleasure? Why or why not? What experiences or evidence tells you that?

Big Read Librarian Interview Protocol

***Big Read* program grantee/community:** _____

***Big Read* Book:** _____

—

Name: _____

Position: _____

—

School/University: _____

—

Phone: _____ **Email:** _____

—

Introductions/purpose: 1) to see how librarians are involved in *The Big Read* and what role they play in school/university participation; 2) to learn more about what, from their perspectives, students are doing, in school and out, and what factors affect students' *BR* participation; 3) to get librarians' views on students' reading habits and interests, including what things encourage or discourage reading; and 4) to discuss the impact of *BR* participation.

Background information about library demographics, locale, teen/young adult activities etc.

Awareness and Appeal

1. How did you learn about *The Big Read*?
 - e. From posters, banners, announcements on local TV or radio stations, the newspaper, word-of-mouth?
 - f. From colleagues? City officials? Students? Parents?
 - g. Did someone (grantee, department chair, teacher) contact you directly?
 - h. Had you participated before? In what way (as a community member, community partner, as part of a school team)?
3. Why did you decide to participate this time?
 - a. Previous successful participation
 - b. Were other library personnel, teachers/faculty members involved?
 - c. Were there specific features of the program or upcoming events that attracted you, or convinced you to get involved?

Implementation/School-wide Participation

7. Tell me a little about how you participated, did you, e.g., did you:
 - a. Serve as a school contact for community organizers
 - b. Coordinate book giveaways
 - c. Pull resources for teachers or faculty
 - d. Organize/host library events
 - e. Promote the project around school, town, or on campus
 - f. Other (describe)
5. Are other librarians/teachers/faculty members involved in *The Big Read*? If so, how, to what extent?
6. What do you hear from them? Have you coordinated activities?
7. Have you attended BR events yourself?
 - c. If so, which ones?
 - d. How would you characterize the various audiences?

Teens' and Young Adults' Responses to Book [may vary, depending on level of participation/role]

9. To what extent did you interact with students during *The BR*?
10. From your perspective, how did students like the book? Did the book, or the BR activities, appeal to certain students more than others?
11. Did students from your school or university take an active part in events—public readings, theatrical readings/ productions, art exhibits, essay contests, etc.? If so, please describe.
 - a. If students attended or took part in events, did that make a difference in their reading experience?
12. What do you hear from students about the community events?
 - d. What kinds of events seem to appeal to students? Or what doesn't seem to interest/attract them?

- e. Do students typically go to events such as these? Is this something they like to do?
 - f. Do they comment on the quality of the events, speakers, actors, etc., or the length or audience make-up?
 - g. Does their interest or involvement vary by age, gender, interest in reading?
 - h. Are there other kinds of events that might be more appealing?
13. Any memorable moments, or student comments or experiences?
14. Do you think the fact that *The BR* involves the larger community, or offers different kinds of experiences, affects how students respond to the book?

Larger Impact

14. We're also interested in learning more about youth/teen/young adults' reading habits and interests—and whether *The Big Read* has an impact on those. First of all, in general, how would you describe the reading habits, or interests among the age groups you work with?
- a. Do you think they read enough?
 - b. What kinds of things do they like to read?
 - i. Do you think habits and interest vary by age or gender? If yes, how so?
 - c. How percentage, or what kinds of students opt to spend their free time reading?
 - d. What other options are competing for students' leisure time? What would they rather do?
 - e. If they had more leisure time, would they spend it reading? If so, what? Would they read more literature?
15. What are some of the barriers to reading? What keeps teens/young adults from reading?
- a. What factors influence the amount of literature reading they do (e.g., time, preferences, knowledge of authors and books, etc.)?]
16. What kinds of youth/teen/young adult activities do you offer to keep kids reading?
17. Do you think students' interest in reading, or reading habits, have changed over the years you've been a librarian?
18. Do you think reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* has changed young adults' reading habits? Why or why not? What experiences or evidence tells you that?
19. Has reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* changed how they think about reading literature for pleasure? Why or why not? What experiences or evidence tells you that?
20. How would you describe the impact of *The BR* on the school/university?
21. Would you do this again?
- a. Anything you'd do differently?
 - b. Do you think you would be more involved, less so, or about the same?
 - c. What might get teachers and students more involved?

Big Read Teacher Interview Protocol

Big Read program grantee/community: _____

Big Read Book: _____

—

Name: _____

Position: _____

—

School/University: _____

—

Phone: _____ **Email:** _____

—

Introductions/purpose: 1) to see how teachers are participating and incorporating *Big Read* books and events; 2) to learn more about what students are doing, in school and out, what factors affect their *BR* participation, and what teachers hear from students about events; 3) to get teachers' views on students' reading habits and interests, including what things encourage or discourage reading; and 4) to discuss the impact of *BR* participation.

Background/descriptive information about school demographics, local enrollment, etc.

Awareness and Appeal

1. How did you learn about *The Big Read*?
 - i. From posters, banners, announcements on local TV or radio stations, the newspaper, word-of-mouth?
 - j. From colleagues? Students?
 - k. Did someone (grantee, department chair, librarian, administrator) contact you directly?
 - l. Had you participated before?
4. Why did you decide to participate?
 - a. Were other teachers/faculty members involved?
 - b. Was the *Big Read* book already part of your curriculum? Or on an optional list?
 - c. Were there specific features of the program or upcoming events that attracted you, or convinced you to participate?
8. Did you serve on a planning committee/work with for community organizers?
 - Advocate for program/recruit faculty/teachers?

Implementation

9. Tell me a little about the course(s)/class(es) in which you used/are using *The Big Read*, e.g.,
 - a. Grade level, course title, AP
 - b. Number of students in the class
 - c. In general, how interested are these students in reading? Are they eager readers? Somewhat reluctant readers? English majors? How do they usually respond to assigned texts? [For subjects other than English: do students enjoy reading a novel as part of a history, art lesson or activity, or dramatic readings?]
 - d. Why this class/course?
10. Have you taught this book before/do you usually include this book in this class/course? [Adapt questions for history, art, theatre, etc.]
 - a. How did students respond to it? How accessible is the theme, language, etc.?
 - b. If [] is not a book you typically teach/use in this course, would you consider adding it to your curriculum?
11. Now let's talk a little about how you're using the book and *The BR* :
 - a. How did/does *The BR* fit with your planned activities—with your syllabus, assignments, overall goals for the class?
 - b. How much time did you devote to the book [art competition, etc.]?
 - i. Was this a complete unit, or supplementary? Extra-credit or extra-curricular? Part of a thematic,

- interdisciplinary unit? An option for a dramatic reading assignment?
- ii. Was this more/same/less time than you typically spend with one book?
7. Did you, or how did you incorporate the community *BR* events?
- a. Was attendance mandatory, voluntary, for extra credit?
 - b. Did your students take an active part in events—in public readings, theatrical readings or productions, art exhibits, essay contests, etc.? If so, please describe.
 - c. Did you attend *BR* events? With students/on your own? To what degree did that affect what you did with *The BR* in the classroom?
 - d. What do you hear from students about the community events?
 - i. What kinds of events seem to appeal to students? What attracts them? Or what doesn't seem to interest/attract them?
 - ii. Do students typically go to events such as these? Is this something they like to do?
 - iii. Did they comment on the quality of the events, speakers, actors, etc., or the length or audience make-up?
 - iv. Does their interest or involvement vary by age, gender, interest in reading?
 - v. Are there other kinds of events that might be more appealing?

Students' Responses to Book

7. How did students like the book?
- a. Did the book, and the *BR* activities, appeal to certain students more than others?
 - b. Any memorable moments, or student comments or experiences?
8. If they attended or took part in events, did that make a difference in their reading experience?
- a. Did the events contribute anything new to how you teach the book, what students gain from it? If so, what?
 - b. Did certain kinds of events give them an entree into the book, or a new perspective?
8. Do you think the fact that *The BR* involves the larger community, or offers different kinds of experiences, affects how students respond to the book?
- a. Do students notice this, or comment on it?
 - a. Do students, e.g., talk more about the book, its themes, etc.?

School-wide Participation

9. Are other teachers/faculty members using the book or involved in *The Big Read*? If so, how, to what extent?
10. What do you hear from them? Have you coordinated activities?
22. How would you describe the impact of *The BR* on the school/university?
23. Would you do this again?
- a. Anything you'd do differently?

- b. Do you think you would be more involved, less so, or about the same?
- c. What might get teachers and students more involved?

Larger Impact

24. We're also interested in learning about *The Big Read's* impact, or potential impact, on students' reading habits and interests. First of all, in general, how would you describe their reading habits, or interests in reading?
- a. Do you think they read enough?
 - b. What kinds of things do they like to read?
 - c. How many, or what kinds of students opt to spend their free time reading?
 - d. What other options are competing for students' leisure time? What would they rather do?
 - e. If they had more leisure time, would they spend it reading? If so, what? Would they read more literature?
 - f. What are some of the barriers to reading? What keeps them from reading?
 - g. What factors influence the amount of literature reading they do (e.g., time, preferences, knowledge of authors and books, etc.)?]
25. Do you think students' interest in reading, or reading habits, have changed over the years you've been teaching?
26. Do you think reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* has changed your students' reading habits?
27. Has reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* changed how they think about reading literature for pleasure?

QuickTime™ and a
PDF (Acrobat) Reader
are needed to see this picture.

Big Read Student Focus Group Protocol: Participant & Non-Participant

Big Read program grantee/community: _____

Big Read Book: _____

Site of Focus Group: _____

General Make up of Group: _____

Number of Focus Group Participants: _____ M: _____ F: _____

<i>BR Participation</i>	<i>BR Event Participation</i>		<i>Read/is reading BR book</i>	
	<i>#Yes</i>	<i>#No</i>	<i>#Yes</i>	<i>#No</i>
<i># Required Reading</i>				
<i>#Reading not required/Voluntary</i>				
<i>#Other:</i>				

Other details of participation (info regarding grade, class, reasons for participating—i.e., partner, planned & conducted event—etc.)

Introduction: (about 10 minutes)

- Welcome participants as they enter.
- Introduce self and goals, & briefly explain purpose and ground rules (e.g., everyone gets a chance to speak,

both positive and negative comments useful,
confidentiality of ideas, etc.)

Discussion: (about 30-45 minutes)

1. Awareness and Appeal

- How did you first hear about *The Big Read*?
 - From teachers, friends, around the school?
 - Parents or other relatives?
 - Have you seen or heard any announcements in newspapers, on the radio or TV, seen posters in bookstores, etc.?
- What was your first response to *The Big Read*?
 - Did the book interest you? Did attending an event interest you? Did reading the book seem like something you'd like to do? Why or why not? Did attending an event seem like something you'd like to do? Why or why not?
 - Did anything in particular about ads or events catch your eye? If so, what?
- Why are you participating in *The Big Read*? Why did you read the book? For those who have not read/are not reading the book, why not?

2. Class Participation [*If focus group is made up mostly of students participating as a class*]

- Describe some of the things you've done in class around [insert title].
 - What kinds of things did you do before you started reading the book?
 - While you were reading the book?
 - After you finished?
- Did you use the Reader's Guides? Listen to the Audio Guide? Visit the *Big Read* website?
- Is this a book that you would typically read? If not, what genres/authors do you tend to like?

3. Event/Community Participation

- How many of you have been to a *Big Read* event? (count)
 - For how many of you was this a class activity or assignment? (count)
 - Was it required? Extra credit? Voluntary?
 - What about the rest of you—why did you decide to go? What attracted you to the event?
 - For those who did not attend a *Big Read* event, why not?
- Did you go with someone? Who?
- What did you attend? *Let's go around the room, and those of you who've attended events tell me a little about why you went to particular events.*
- What were your general reactions to the event(s)-
 - interest in/enjoyment of the activity

- o connection to the book
- o quality of speaker/information/performance
- o organization of event (timing, length, location, structure, publicity)
- o appeal/accessibility of event (i.e., was it something the whole family could do, was it accessible to people with different amounts of knowledge of the book)
- Was this something new for you? (new place, activity, etc.)
- Tell me a little about who else attended (make-up of audience—mostly students, adults, families/mixed)? Were there others your age there?
- Did the event(s) appeal to or attract [students/teens/young adults]?
- If not, what might make an event like this more appealing? What kind of programming or publicity might draw those your age?
- Would you do something like this again? (count) Why or why not?

4. Responses to Book

Now let's talk a little about the book itself.

- What did you know about the book, if anything?
 - o Had you read [*Big Read* title] before? When?
 - o Had you read anything else by the author?
- Have you ever seen a dramatic presentation of this book (e.g., movie, play)? When?
- In connection with *The Big Read*, have you talked with others about the book? Who have you talked to?
 - o Do you typically discuss the book(s) you are reading with others? What made this the same/different?
- Are there particular aspects of the book that you/people your age can relate to?

5. Impact on reading attitudes or behaviors. I want to conclude our discussion by asking you a few questions about reading—this book and other things—as well as talk about what keeps you from reading more.

I'm going to hand out a checklist. [Distribute attached checklist.] Please take a few minutes to answer the questions.

Now, let's go around the room: looking at your list,

- What kinds of things do you read?

Question 2 asks whether you think you read enough. If you indicated you wanted to read more:

- Would you read more literature?
- Would you like to read more books like this? Why or why not?

Question 3 asks about how you like to spend your free time.

- How does reading compare? What is it competing with?
- Why do you prefer reading, or the activities you enjoy more than reading?

The 4th question asks about what kinds of things would encourage you to read more.

- What keeps you from reading? What factors influence the amount of literature reading you do (e.g., time, preferences, knowledge of authors and books, etc.)?]

Finally, we're interested in the impact of *The Big Read*.

- Has reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* changed your reading habits?
- Has reading [book] or taking part in *The Big Read* changed how you think about reading literature for pleasure?
- Did the *Big Read* events and activities change your experience of the book or your relationship with the story? If so, how? Was there anything about your *Big Read* experience that was unique or memorable for you as a reader?

Is there anything more you'd like to say about your *Big Read* experience?

Thank you very much for your time. I'll collect your surveys; you can insert the checklist sheet into the survey.