

This year's Big Read is for adults, too

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Contributing Writer

Every year on Dr. Scuss's birthday, children have a special day to celebrate reading, called Read Across America. This year, teenagers and adults have a whole month to celebrate reading, in an event named the Big Read.

The Big Read is actually a nationwide program created by the National Endowment for the Arts. The program was begun because survey results have shown that very few people read literature. That is the purpose of the Big Read: to encourage people to read and to once again make reading a bigger part of American culture.

Ann McCallum and Lucy Lee, co-chairs of the Roanoke Valley's Big Read, are hoping that every person in the Roanoke Valley, ninth grade and older, will have read the same book by March.

The novel is called "A Lesson Before Dying" by Ernest J. Gaines.

"It's a great book because it's a really powerful, gripping story," Lee said. "We're really hoping that it will appeal to everybody."

It is the book of choice for the Roanoke Valley's first Big Read.

The novel is about a young African American man in 1940s Louisiana who is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. The book, which was nominated for a Pulitzer prize and was on Oprah's Book Club list, examines how someone should live knowing he is about to

die. The novel also includes discussions of capital punishment and race.

"There are so many good issues in the book that we can talk about," Lee said. "It lends itself to great discussion and activities."

The board of the Friends of the Roanoke County Library are the ones in charge of the Big Read. Many organizations in the Valley are participating, including most of the area's school systems and colleges. Roanoke City, Botetourt County, and Salem schools plan to have students read the novel. North Cross and Community High School plan to participate, as well as Hollins University, Roanoke College, the Library at Jefferson College of Health Sciences, the Roanoke Higher Education Center, and Virginia Western Community College.

The Big Read is also being sponsored by a number of businesses. These include The Roanoke Times, The Roanoke Tribune, and Valley Business Front. Partners of the Big Read include both educational and cultural organizations. Cultural partners include the Grandin Theatre Foundation, the History Museum & Historical Society of Western VA, the Jefferson Center, WVTF/Public Radio, and the Taubman Museum of Art, as well as the Harrison Museum of African-American Culture, the Roanoke Branch of the NAACP, and the Roanoke Chapter of the Links Inc. Educational partners include the Virginia Association of Teachers of English and the Virginia State Reading Association.

The books will be available in a number of locations. The Botetourt County, Roanoke County, Roanoke City, and Salem libraries have over 100 copies of the book which can be checked out, as well as audio and movie versions. Copies are also available through most of the area's bookstores, often at a discount. These bookstores include both Barnes and Noble's, Ram's Head, Cantos Booksellers, Printer's Ink, Books-A-Million, and Too Many Books. Some bookstores have already sold out and ordered more.

"The goals of The Big Read Roanoke Valley are to encourage people to make reading a part of their daily lives and to foster a stronger sense of community," the Roanoke Valley Big Read's website said.

In 2009, the National Endowment for the Arts gave out 269 grants across the country, one of which went to the Virginia Foundation Center for the Book, based in Charlottesville, which selected the book and is helping areas across the state hold Big Reads. Other cities in the area, such as Martinsville, have held Big Reads in the past and continue to hold them.

The Big Read committee has events planned at the Jefferson Center and the Taubman Museum of Art to complement the book. On March 4, Bela Fleck and an ensemble of African musicians will perform at the Jefferson Center; Fleck will be followed on March 5 by hip-hop singer and poet Tony Blackman. At the Taubman Museum of Art, the film version of "A Lesson Before Dying" will be screened on March 13. On March 18, a discussion entitled "Wine and Wonder" will combine themes from the book with a series of paintings.

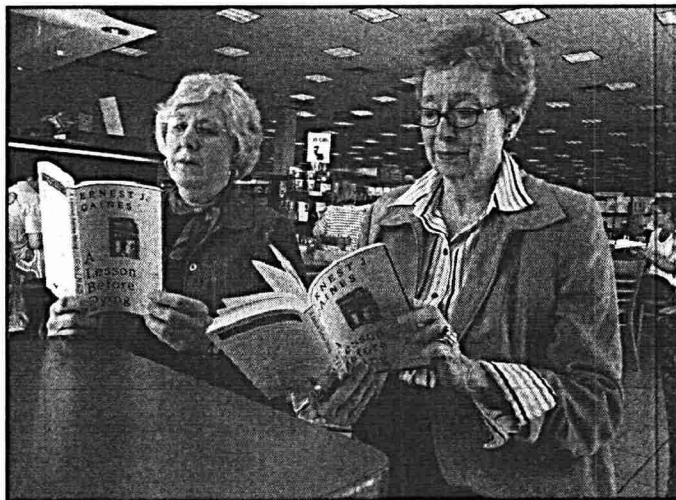
Local book clubs are encour-



aged to discuss the book at their monthly meetings. The Salem Public Library's book club plans its discussion for December. Roanoke Valley book clubs are being enticed to select the book by having the chance to win a kit, which includes books for all of the members, as well as read-

ing guides and a CD explaining the book. Participants can even send photos of themselves or someone else reading the book, to be posted on the "Caught Reading!" page of the website.

For more information, visit the Roanoke Valley Big Read's website, bigreadroanokevalley.org.



Lucy Lee, left, and Ann McCallum, co-chairs of the Big Read in the Roanoke Valley, read the book "A Lesson Before Dying." Lee and McCallum and others in charge of the program hope every person in the Roanoke Valley, ninth grade and older, will have read "A Lesson Before Dying" before March to participate in activities related to the book.

Photo by Meg Hibbert