

Media may find the following helpful in creating articles about The Big Read

What is "The Big Read"?

"The Big Read" is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts whose purpose is to restore reading to the forefront of American culture. The program is designed to provide a community with the resources they need to engage with a meaningful piece of literature. We want to help our community find vicarious life experiences through literature and provide a venue where thoughts, themes, and issues about the human experience can be explored in a neutral, thoughtful fashion. Dr. Rex Ellis, last year's keynote speaker, said "I have seen bridges built with storytelling that invites listeners and tellers to unite in ways that are more potent than a town meeting and more healing than a therapy session. It's pretty hard to hate someone whose story you know." We hope that by exploring human experiences that differ from our own we can create and support lifelong learners, enlarge our community's perspective, foster a respectful, open dialogue between groups, and ultimately build a better community.

Why has the library decided to get involved in The Big Read?

The Orem Public Library believes in our responsibility to provide the community with the information citizens need to navigate their lives. While this responsibility is not limited to the humanities, fiction offers a unique venue for conversations regarding life's most meaningful activities. These conversations hold potential for meaningful personal reflection. These are the rich opportunities the Orem Library strives to create for our patrons. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* demands the reader confront social situations that remain deeply relevant and resonant today. Its pages contain truths about community, socioeconomic status, identity, and difference. While most consider *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to be a book for children, this heart-warming coming-of-age story deserves to be revisited later in life when its satire of public morality, education, the law, religion, medicine, economics, and community life strike a chord with more mature readers. The universal themes of friendship, freedom and forgiveness at the heart of Twain's classic are still meaningful today, and provide an invitation to ponder what it means to be a child in America then and now.

We welcome the privilege of giving such an opportunity to our community and promoting literacy of the most important kind to the Orem public.

Have you participated before?

Yes, 2007 year was our first year and we had a phenomenal community response. More than 5,800 people participated in the library events. In 2008 that number increased to more than 8400.

What books have you used in the past?

In 2007 we chose Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. This book's rich themes of immigration, pioneers settling a new country, connecting with the land, preserving heritage, and diverse peoples coming together to form a new community are ones that resound in Utah's history and people today. We wanted a book our community could relate to, both historically and in the present.

Last year's book was Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is a book with which nearly everyone is familiar. The story was accessible to a wide span of ages and appealed to readers from every walk of life. We have all known characters in our own lives that mirror those in Scout's neighborhood, we remember what it was like to be a child and see grown-up problems through a child's eyes. We remember kind, good, and courageous people who made a difference in our lives. Also, Orem is becoming an increasingly diverse community, which brings its own set of challenges and opportunities. Along with Scout, readers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* learn to empathize with someone who is different, to "Consider things from his point of view...climb into his skin and walk around in it." This empathy, and the courage and compassion shown by Atticus Finch, are essential qualities in our rapidly changing society. We hope that those who joined us in reading Harper Lee's novel found themselves more tolerant, kinder, and more appreciative of all their neighbors, as well as had the opportunity to pause and reflect on the good people, memories, and events that have shaped their lives.

What effect has the program had on the community?

Most of all, we have seen a unifying effect in the community. Residents from 3 to 103 were able to participate in The Big Read. Programs were taken out to schools, assisted living centers, and retirement homes. At the library, strangers who normally wouldn't converse with each other, stayed after the evening's event was concluded to discuss the ideas that were presented. Audiences had the opportunity to hear about lives that are very different from their own. Consider a walk-in book discussion that included sharing of ideas and insightful comments from a group of teen-age students and senior citizens. It happened on many occasions during the Big Read.

About 22% of participants filled out surveys last year. Over 95% reported having a positive experience, wanting to learn more about the topics presented, read more books, attend more library programs, and enjoyed the overall learning experiences. We had more than 8,400 patrons participating in the events and anticipate even more this year. Residents are gearing up and excited to explore Mark Twain and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Utah Valley University's Dr. Ron Hammond and his Senior Research students conducted a survey for us this past summer and found that those who attended Big Read events increased the time they spent reading literature, and that they attended more community cultural events as a whole.

What groups or individuals typically participate?

We plan programs that will engage families and individuals of all ages. Last year we had 71 events and nearly half of those were in the community, including several thousand students who participated from all public secondary schools in Orem and many elementary schools.

We had more than 80 neighborhood book groups read the book, as well as many community organizations including groups from the Orem Senior Friendship Center and UVU.

Why have you decided to read "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" this year?

With national issues and their accompanying stressors at the forefront of everyone's minds, we wanted to provide Orem residents a chance to sit back, relax and enjoy a novel about the universal themes of community, friendship, freedom and forgiveness. Set in the slower-paced, "unwired" Missouri of the 1800s, readers drift into a world rich with home-cooking, common sense, and adventure purchased with a lively imagination. *Tom Sawyer* has been called a "national hymn to American boyhood". Filled with hair-brained adventures on the river, great escapes, hideouts, pirates, murder, first love, great heroics, and tough decisions; readers of all ages will chuckle at the antics of young Tom and his pal Huck in this largely autobiographical novel by Mark Twain. Through its pages, Twain allows us to reflect upon the simple joys of life and recognize that as Americans we are all on this raft together.

How do you plan to use the grant funds?

First of all, we need to recognize our contributing partners, The Institute of Museum and Library Services, Arts Midwest and The National Endowment for the Arts for a \$12,000 grant, the largest we have received thus far; the Utah Humanities Council for a major grant of \$5,000, UVU, Walmart, Timpanogos Regional Hospital, and The City of Orem. It is their help and support that make Orem's Big Read possible. We are using our grant funds to help cover the costs of printing, postage, supplies, speaker/presenter honoraria and travel, the cost of the 3,800 books that we will be giving away, and bringing several of the programs to schools and nursing homes. The Orem Library is donating staff time to implement and carry out this project which last year involved over 2,200 staff hours.

What programs will be offered at the library? Why and how should people get involved?

We'll be hosting over 50 public events held at the library and at Orem Macey's Grocery Little Theatre. These include film screenings, lectures, puppet shows, book discussions, concerts, dramatic presentations, storytelling, cooking classes and other activities. We invite Orem businesses to encourage their employees to participate by reading the book as an organization, and individuals, families, and neighborhood book groups to read and discuss the novel as well. The fall library newsletter which was mailed to all Orem residents in late August, contains all Big Read events we are aware of at press time, and we will have brochures available at the library along with books and reader's guides after Labor Day. The website at www.orembigread.org will have the most up to date complete listing of events, presenters, displays, and other resources.

For more information, please contact Lori Stevens, at lstevens@orem.org or call the general reference desk at 229-7175.

There are many suitable images available for use in covering Orem's Big Read activities. Please contact Virginia at 801-229-7042 for assistance.