When author and NCTE member Caroline Brewer realized she wanted to plan a publicized celebration of Black authors in Washington, DC, she wasn’t sure if she had time to pull it off. It was already January, less than one month until Black History Month celebrations commenced. But thanks to some quick networking, she was able to help facilitate the first Black Authors Breakfast, co-hosted by NCTE and Signal Financial Credit Union. “It was just like this lovely chain reaction where everybody I reached out to said yes, and that blew me away,” Brewer says.

The event, an early morning breakfast party to recognize and celebrate the writing of African American authors, took place on February 1 and also aired on C-SPAN2. And Brewer says that after this year’s overwhelmingly positive response, the celebration will continue in some form next year. While this event was highly visible, it was just one of hundreds of gatherings to celebrate the 2019 African American Read-In.
THE LEGACY OF DR. JERRIE COBB SCOTT

As the first and oldest event dedicated to diversity in literature, the African American Read-In was established in 1990 by NCTE’s Black Caucus, and Jerrie Cobb Scott is credited with the founding ideals. At first the Read-In was scheduled for a single Sunday afternoon in February—participants passed around enrollment material via a chain letter. The next year the gathering spanned a Sunday and the following Monday in order to facilitate involvement from schools and other organizations.

Fast-forward to 2019, and what began via snail mail and word of mouth is now celebrated during the entirety of February at schools, community centers, churches, and more. Jerrie Cobb Scott passed away in 2017, but her legacy lives on, Brewer reminded the audience at the breakfast: “So from the very beginning, the Read-In was her [Scott’s] invitation to people to gather anywhere . . . to celebrate Black authors. During the first five years, [it] went from 5,000 readers to a million readers. So that is quite an accomplishment, and a testament to her vision and how important it was.”

Read-In events continue to emerge in many different forms and venues, but they all have several things in common: texts by African American authors are shared, participants listen or provide the readings, and an official count is taken for attendance in order to measure the global reach of the program.

Beyond the commonalities, the range of possibilities for Read-In events is immense. Featured guests may be invited; musical acts are welcome; book drives and poetry slams are popular. Ongoing community outreach and events follow up initial readings. And on and on and on.

In 2019, more than 150,000 people participated in Read-Ins in thirty-seven states, Canada, and the US Virgin Island of St. Thomas, according to data collected by NCTE. While these numbers are impressive, they represent only those who reported participation—the reach is undoubtedly even more vast. And that reach is certainly achieving a number of objectives.

When Scott helped found the Read-In, she hoped to get young people—especially children of color—engaged in literacy and able to see representations of themselves in books. Given the success and continued reach of the project, there’s little doubt that goal is being achieved. In addition, Scott viewed the Read-In as a way to increase the market for books by African American authors. “We believe the Read-In increases the requests for books written by African Americans, so it’s helping fulfill that need. If people are asking for books, they buy more,” she said in a 2014 interview with NCTE.

But the legacy of the Read-In goes beyond literacy and marketing—it also acts as an important act of reclamation of overlooked Black history and culture, according to Indiana University’s Stephanie Power-Carter and New York University’s David Kirkland, both of whom met Scott more than a decade ago at NCTE Black Caucus meetings. “The gathering is more than a revolutionary act. It is one of restitution, of a nation taking an important step to reclaim its troubled past and learn about lives (real and fictive) that we, in this country, have rarely valued,” they write in a 2019 blog post for NCTE. (http://bit.ly/2JslFyz)
Highlights from African American Read-In Celebrations Nationwide

NEWBURG LIBRARY (LOUISVILLE, KY)

History, literature, and crackling cornbread—among other treats—took center stage at the Newburg branch of Louisville’s public library system, where more than forty people attended—from a six-year-old to a near centenarian—during its fifth annual Read-In event. Cosponsored by a local nonprofit started by teenager Madison Roy, the event highlighted student presentations on African American history and readings by four local authors.

Each year, students have played a big role in the event, according to organizer Patricia Beckham. And this year was no different: “They run the program, greet the guests, and compile lists of books” by African American authors.

While the crowd enjoyed the readings, the connections between Black History and food are always popular with the guests. “We want to bring back the flavor of Black history, going beyond the classroom,
even beyond the books and poems,” Beckham says, hoping that participants consider the following: What does Black history really mean to you? What should it mean to you?

Louisville Mayor Greg Fisher usually attends and supports the Read-In event, Beckham says, but as he was out of town, a representative from the mayor’s office was present, making sure to pick up some lemon pound cake for his boss. The recipe came from Abby Fisher, the first slave to have published a cookbook. At the end of the program, participating students received free books to continue learning about the rich history of African Americans.

WOODROW WILSON HIGH SCHOOL (PORTSMOUTH, VA)

English teachers Mary James and Kathryn McGehee facilitated hands-on activities in the school’s library, including poetry readings, a printed “menu” of activities, and an imaginative activity to help students appreciate the African American experience. “Students selected from a variety of known, iconic photographs” of African Americans throughout American history, district curriculum specialist Anna Cross says. “The students then recreated the photographs by posing and dressing identically to the images. They then stepped into the lives of the individuals in a personal, meaningful way to identify with their struggles and experiences.”

PENN STATE ALTOONA (ALTOONA, PA)

From a community dinner, to a fall undergraduate course during which students research and prepare presentations, to an open mic “marathon,” Penn State Altoona’s Read-In celebration encompasses a wide-ranging—and long-standing—celebration.

Thanks to institutional support, the Read-In event at Penn State Altoona has become an eagerly anticipated gathering since its 2001 inception. “It’s really a meaningful event not only for our students but for the community members who absolutely count on it. They put it on their calendar. There are people who have been attending it since the beginning,” says co-organizer Megan Simpson, who also credits her colleague Harriet Gaston with planning and executing the festivities.

The gathering took place over two days and kicked off with a community dinner program for more than 100 people on Sunday, when attendees shared short readings and fellowship. At the end of the dinner, everyone selected a book by an African American author to take home as a gift from the university. The next day an open mic “marathon event” highlighted undergraduate student presentations and speakers—the featured author for 2019 was Zetta Elliot and the keynote presenter was comic creator Jiba Molei Anderson.

Even though some of the themes are by nature difficult, given the troubled past and present African American experience in our country, says Simpson, “it’s a very joyful way” to celebrate the work of African American authors.

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Join the AARI in February! Find the AARI Toolkit, skim a list of events, and record your event at http://bit.ly/NCTE-AARI.