The African American Read-In Marks 25 Years by Looking Forward

The African American Read-In (AARI), established by the Black Caucus of NCTE, is built on an ambitious yet confident premise: that a school and community reading event can be an effective way to promote diversity in children’s literature, encourage young people to read, and shine a spotlight on African American authors. As we celebrate the 25th year since the event was created, it appears that it’s not only made progress toward these goals, but will continue to be an inspiration to schools and communities for some time to come.

“The Black Caucus wanted to do something that would help it sustain itself over time,” says the event’s founder, Dr. Jerrie Cobb Scott, recently retired professor of Urban Literacy and Director of the Reading Center at the University of Memphis, and an active member of NCTE and the NCTE Black Caucus.

In a recent interview, she told NCTE Communications and Alliance Strategist Jenna Fournel, “I thought ‘what if we just make the reading of books by African Americans something that could sustain itself?’ And as it turns out, the AARI is one of the longest-running literacy-promotion programs in the US.

“To get [young people] engaged, one of the things they need is to see themselves in books,” says Scott. “They need to know some of the characters are African Americans just like some of them are. It is important for all of us to see ourselves in books, because that encourages us to read in a different way and encourages us to write more.”

Scott always envisioned the event as part of Black History Month, though its format has evolved. Originally it was in the form of a chain letter; participants would forward the enrollment material to other participants, who would also pass them on. The first event was scheduled for a single Sunday afternoon in February.

The following year the next Monday was added so that schools and other institutions could participate. Participants filled out a “report card” after the event and sent it to NCTE staff so they could track the number of participants.

“We wanted to have a sense of who was reading, what they were reading, and also of their maintenance of the program over time,” says Scott. “We have identified some groups who have participated for 15 years.”

AARI groups from 47 states, the West Indies, Ghana, Germany, and Australia have participated at one time or another, with the average participation count in recent years topping 200,000.

Eventually, conflicts with Super Bowl Sunday led Scott to expand the event to encompass all of February. Now the Read-In has more of a social media feel, with events taking place all month and celebrating books by African Americans that students are being introduced to regularly and reading all year long.

At the same time, Scott says she’d like to know teachers were considering the AARI “as a natural part of what they do for Black History Month,” says Scott. “That’s what we want to begin strengthening.”

Another potential objective for the AARI is to not only increase diversity of available books, but also to create more of a market for books by African American authors.

“That’s been one of our major goals—to fulfill the need for diverse books,” says Scott. “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. And many bookstores do the Read-In. That’s another way to help get the books out there.”

And, although the evidence is anecdotal, says NCTE Deputy Executive Director Dr. Mila Thomas Fuller, the AARI has encouraged both schools and bookstores to request the recommended reading list that AARI circulates. Superintendents have asked for copies of the book list so they can order books for their schools, Fuller reports. The AARI has received similar requests from bookstores, including Barnes and Noble.

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Even once books by African Americans are published, it is often difficult for them to gain the attention of the reading world. Scott talks of an African American author who had written a “wonderful book” on Michelle Obama that she felt was not getting much attention.

“So one thing that continues to intrigue me is no one has picked up on that book, and how can we help promote [authors]?” says Scott.

In addition, it may be that students are reading diverse authors but not realizing it. Scott cites as an example a conversation with her own grandson, who didn’t realize that Sharon Draper was African American.

However, Scott remains optimistic that the AARI often helps increase awareness about individual authors.

“When I talk to authors who regularly participate in AARI, because people invite them to be readers . . . . They do feel like the AARI has made a difference for them,” says Scott.

Creating Partnerships

The first 25 years were spent trying to get the word out and encouraging participants to do the Read-In every year. The next 25 years, says Scott, will focus on creating partnerships.

“We thought that would be another way to extend the focus,” says Scott. “So this year we’re really focusing on partnerships at the NCTE Convention for our session.”

The Convention will feature two panels related to the AARI. The first, B.47, African American Read-In, A Landscape for Creating Partnerships, will include presentations by Mila Thomas Fuller, Ezra Hyland, Keith Gilyard, Gloria Solden Snowden, and David Kirkland. A second session, J.43, We Need Diverse Books, will highlight professional books written by Black Caucus members.

Among the existing partnerships Scott highlights is one established by Ezra Hyland at the University of Minnesota. That program, which grew out of AARI, runs all year, includes a book club called Black Men Reading, and does outreach to community groups and schools. The group members plan their own activities, including what they’re going to read.

Black Men Reading also includes an African American Read-In chess club, which includes members of all ages. In addition, the NAACP has partnered with NCTE on the Read-In for the last 20 years, and Scott notes that NCTE is hoping to create a collaborative relationship with Barnes and Noble.

“If we could get more national organizations and affiliates to adopt and endorse the Read-In as something for their members, then that’s an automatic expansion,” says Scott. “We see that as one way to increase the diverse books that are available.”

These partnerships show the possibilities for networking beyond the NCTE community, she adds—possibilities that may offer even more promise for AARI’s future, and for the widening appreciation for literature by African American authors.

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