With Big Read NEA Grant, UArizona Presents a Tucson Community Read of Postcolonial Love Poem and We are Water Protectors this Winter

From January to March 2023, the University of Arizona, in partnership with several community groups, will present a series of public literary events focused on two award-winning books by Indigenous authors. At least 1,000 free copies of the books will be given out.

The programming is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, or NEA, who, in partnership with Arts Midwest, awarded the University of Arizona a Big Read grant for a community-wide reading program in Tucson.

Presented by the College of Education and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, "Big Read Tucson" will be centered around Postcolonial Love Poem by Natalie Diaz and the children's book We are Water Protectors, written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade.

NEA’s Big Read program is meant to spark a love of reading across the U.S., with members of a community all reading and discussing the same book. The Big Read program "broadens our understanding of our world, our neighbors, and ourselves through the power of a shared reading experience," the NEA Big Read website states.

Big Read Tucson is directed by Sandra Soto, associate professor in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, and Carol Brochin and Leah Durán, both associate professors in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies. Professor Kathy G. Short, director of the College of Education’s World of Words: Center for Global Literacies and Literatures, is also collaborating on the programming.

Exploring the theme of water

“We decided to center Big Read Tucson around water because of the importance of water to our region,” Soto said. "A primary reason that we selected Diaz’s book is because so many of the poems feature water, the scarcity of which Diaz feels in a spiritual, urgent and embodied way.”

Postcolonial Love Poems received a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2021. In it, Diaz – the Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Arizona State University – reflects on her heritage and her life as an Indigenous person growing up in the Southwest. Diaz is Mojave and a member of the Gila River Indian Tribe.

"Like Diaz’ work, We are Water Protectors addresses the importance of water within and beyond Indigenous communities,” Short said. “This book is at once gorgeously accessible and a compelling
pedagogical project educating young people about the necessity to protect water on behalf of animals, humans, plants and the earth.”

"Our hope to reach an expansive, intergenerational audience who will engage with both books," Soto said.

**Gathering as a community to discuss books**

“Over the span of three months, we will host many interactive events, all with the aim of generating first-hand experiences with the imaginative power of literature and the pleasure of collective discussion,” Durán said. “The focus on water also gives us a wonderful opportunity to host a number of water-based activities outdoors.”

On Jan. 14, Big Read Tucson will kick-off with an outdoor celebration, including readings, book giveaways and refreshments, at Mission Gardens, a living agricultural museum.

This event will be followed by multiple book discussions and presentations of *Postcolonial Love Poem* and *We are Water Protectors* at various locations, including high school classrooms and libraries. One discussion will feature Regents Professor of Linguistics Ofelia Zepeda, a poet and O’odham language preservationist who writes about water. A professional development session for K-12 teachers will focus on Indigenous youth literature and water justice.

The programming will also include six projects centered on the books, including a podcast series run by World of Words teen reading ambassadors, an art workshop, and a walking tour of the Santa Cruz Heritage Project. In addition, Goade will do an Imagination Friday virtual event for children in February.

The final events will be a featured appearance by Diaz at the Tucson Festival of Books on March 5 titled “Poetexts of Love: A Community Celebration,” as well as a poetry reading on an outdoor stage. Multiple panels on themes from Diaz’s poems will be highlighted across the entire festival as Big Read was selected as the central focus for this year’s festival, Short said.

Details on all Big Read Tucson events will be available on the program's website.

Community partners are essential to Big Read Tucson and include Make Way for Books, Indigenous Teacher Education Program, Tucson Water, American Indian Language Development Institute, Sunnyside Unified School District, Mission Gardens, Tucson Festival of Books, and Pima County Public Library.

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