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PRESS RELEASE

August Wilson Center Receives Grant to Participate in National Reading Program

**Pittsburgh region encouraged to read and celebrate
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

PITTSBURGH, PA—January 4, 2008—The August Wilson Center for African American Culture announces the receipt of a \$20,000 grant to host The Big Read, a nationally known program designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The Center received the maximum amount awarded for this prestigious program.

As the Pittsburgh region's hosts for The Big Read, the August Wilson Center and partners United Black Book Clubs of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Library Association (ACLA) will celebrate Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a full calendar of events happening between February and June 2008. The events are designed to motivate the entire region to read the novel. The announcement comes in honor of the highly acclaimed writer's birthday, which is January 7.

"As a cultural institution, it is important to us that we work diligently and collaboratively to promote literacy among the members of our communities," said Shay Wafer, Vice President of Programs for the Center. "This grant allows us to inspire people from every background to renew their commitment to reading."

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts and is presented in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

Pittsburgh is one of 127 communities nationwide participating in The Big Read. Grants awarded for the program ranged from \$2,500 to \$20,000. Since the program's national launch in 2006, the NEA has funded more than 300 Big Read programs in the nation's towns and cities.

Beth Mellor, Marketing and Member Services Coordinator for the ACLA, thinks The Big Read will shine a light on the importance of literacy and create lifelong readers.

"Reading a great book illuminates and inspires. We encourage residents of Allegheny County to read, discuss and enjoy this challenging novel," Mellor said.

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Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of 16 classic novels—all modern American classics—selected by the National Endowment for the Arts for promotion nationally in various communities through June.

"Participating in The Big Read by adopting this book is essential to the health and strength of our communities, as well as the happiness of citizens," said Diane Turner, Celebration of Reading Coordinator for the United Black Book Clubs of Pittsburgh. "This is an important opportunity to present to the Pittsburgh community a literary classic that will help us tell our stories, share our lives and design our future."

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is considered one of the pre-eminent writers of twentieth-century African American literature. Hurston was closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance and has influenced such writers as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Gail Jones, Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is arguably the best-known and perhaps the most controversial of Hurston's fiction works. It is about Janie Crawford, the fair and long-legged, independent and articulate woman who sets out to be her own person -- no mean feat for a black woman living in the black town of Eaton, Fla. in the 1930s. Janie's quest for identity takes her through three marriages and into a journey back to her roots.

For more information on The Big Read events and to learn how you can participate, please contact Bekezela Mguni, Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator for the August Wilson Center, at 412.258.2665. You also can view a full calendar of events for The Big Read in Pittsburgh at www.AugustWilsonCenter.org beginning January 21, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

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About the August Wilson Center for African American Culture

The August Wilson Center for African American Culture preserves, presents and interprets the art, culture and history of African Americans in western Pennsylvania and people of African descent throughout the world. The Center realizes its mission through an engaging schedule of visual and performing arts presentations as well as education and public programs.

The Center is involved in a \$35.9 million Capital Campaign to build a new facility located at Liberty Avenue, Tenth Street and William Penn Place in Pittsburgh's Downtown. More than a museum, the multidisciplinary arts center will be reflective of all aspects of African American culture. Opening in early 2009, the Center's striking, two-story, green building will house exhibition galleries, a 479-seat theater for performances in all disciplines, an education center, a café and gift shop, and multipurpose spaces for community programs and events.

More information is available on the Center's Web site at www.AugustWilsonCenter.org and by calling 412.258.2700.

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About the Allegheny County Library Association

"Advancing the Standard of Excellence"

The Allegheny County Library Association pursues, provides and promotes the highest quality public library service possible for all residents of Allegheny County through collaboration, cooperation and coordination. Composed of 44 member libraries, the ACLA seeks to provide the citizens of Allegheny County with the premier library system in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which includes support for the programs that promote a love of reading, civic discussion and personal growth.

About the United Black Book Clubs of Pittsburgh

UBBCP is an association of librarians, readers and book clubs in Pittsburgh. Through a united effort, UBBCP was formed to promote literary activities and events, to provide community outreach programs and to spread the love of reading throughout the community. Membership is open to any reader or book club in the greater Pittsburgh area. The UBBCP's motto is to encourage everyone to "ride the wind of reading."