

New Books for New Readers
A Program of the
Kentucky Humanities Council, Inc.

The Project

New Books for New Readers began as a program for Kentucky adults who read at a third to fifth-grade level. The 64-page books are written by Kentucky scholars with the help of literacy students and their tutors, and cover topics in Kentucky history, literature, and folklore. Some of the books are equally appealing to fourth-grade students as well as their teachers. New Books contribute both to KERA and the Valued Outcomes set forth by the education reform effort.

Why KHC Developed New Books

An estimated 400,000 Kentuckians are functionally illiterate – reading below the fifth grade level. An increasing number of non-reading Kentucky adults are enrolling in literacy programs, many with the ultimate dream of passing their GED.

There are plenty of obstacles along the way. For a literacy student, there can be many reasons not to enroll in a reading program. Once enrolled, there are equally difficult obstacles to becoming a *confirmed* reader, especially the lack of books interesting to adults.

As receiving welfare becomes increasingly restricted, enrollment in Kentucky's many school-to-work programs is expanding just as the challenges are increasing. In 1997, Kentucky's Department for Adult Education and Literacy published its Kentucky Adult Literacy Survey based on the National Adult Literacy Survey. Three dimensions of literacy were measured: prose literacy, involving the knowledge and skill to understand and use information that is contained in prose format; document literacy, the knowledge and skill to find and use information in documents; and quantitative literacy. Fourteen percent of Kentucky adults under age 65 have prose literacy proficiency level 1, the lowest of five levels. Another 26 percent read prose at level 2. For document literacy, 13 percent of Kentucky adults are at level 1, and 29 percent at level 2. These numbers mean that these adult Kentuckians lack the minimal skills needed to function effectively in the marketplace, the workplace, the home, and the community.

Literacy affects more than the economic well being and welfare dependency of Kentuckians. Literacy also affects social involvement, the way people obtain information, and family relationships. These adults with very low literacy proficiencies never read to their children. They do not vote or serve on juries. They rely on television as their source for information. They are at the lowest end of the employment market where they are uninformed about their benefits and rights. They never speak up in public.

The Council develops and distributes these books because they promote literacy, teach history, and promote reading as a pleasure, not just a survival skill.

Other Important Readers

* English as a Second Language students. Kentucky's immigrant population is increasingly rapidly. In particular, Spanish speaking residents are enrolling in adult basic education in increasing numbers. They want to learn to read English.

* Deaf students. For the deaf and hard of hearing, English is a second language. The Kentucky School for the Deaf looks for books that are written in simple language.

* Middle School students. School teachers here in Kentucky tell us that that these books are particularly useful in the classroom. In the words of one teacher, "I think it [new book *Kentuckians Before Boone*] would be perfect to use in teaching reading, social studies, and history at the same time." *Kentuckians Before Boone* is also notable because there is no other text about Kentucky's original people available to teachers who must address the topic in the fourth grade. While there is a wealth of textbooks on the Constitution and Bill of Rights, none are written in the simple and understandable language of *Fight for Rights*.

The Books

Observing that literacy students are novices at reading but not in life experience, the Kentucky Humanities Council launched a program in 1989 to create and distribute New Books for New Readers. The New Books are written with simplicity of sentence and language but with complexity of vision. Experienced readers find the topics so interesting that they do not notice that the text is fourth-grade level. The subjects are Kentucky folklore, famous Kentucky women, mysteries in Kentucky history, a history of work, a book of short stories based on life experiences in eastern Kentucky, an anthology of southern literature, a volume of three stories based on tragic events in Kentucky history, a volume about Kentucky's native Americans, a collection of family ghost stories, a look at race relations in small-town Kentucky, a multi-generational story of a family and their connection to the land, a review of the guarantees contained in the Bill of Rights, and a history of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

All of the books in the series are written by notable Kentucky authors – the same authors whose works are read widely by life-long readers: *Kentucky Folklore* by University of Kentucky folklorist Gerald Alvey; *History Mysteries* by States Historian and Director of the Kentucky Historical Society James Klotter; *Women Who Made a Difference* by Western Kentucky University historian Carol Crowe-Carraco; *Choices* by Kentucky writer George Ella Lyon; *Why Work?* by historian Judy Jennings; *Three Kentucky Tragedies* by English professor and author Richard Taylor; *Kentucky Ghosts* by Western Kentucky University folklorist Lynwood Montell; *Kentuckians Before Boone* by archaeologist A. Gwynn Henderson; *Heartwood* by poet and author Nikky Finney; *Kentucky Home Place* by retired Kentucky Wesleyan University history professor and

author Lee A. Dew; *Fight for Rights* by University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law professor Ronald W. Eades; and *Into the Wilderness: The Lewis and Clark Expedition* Filson Historical Club curator of special collections James J. Holmberg. The anthology *Home Voices*, is edited by Mark Lucas, Professor of English at Centre College, and includes works by nationally known southern writers, some of whom have close ties to Kentucky: Jesse Stuart, William Faulkner, James Still, James Weldon Johnson, Olive Ann Burns, and Flannery O'Connor.

Work Plan

What really guarantees that these new books will be used and enjoyed by literacy students, however, is that the students help in the book's creation. The authors meet with students working with their tutors throughout the writing process, or in the case of the anthology, in choosing works to be included. The authors of *Kentuckians Before Boone* and *Into the Wilderness* also consulted with teachers and a fourth grade student.

The Kentucky Humanities Council will choose a scholar based on his or her ability to work with the books' editor, Dr. Phylis MacAdam, a writing specialist, a selected group of literacy students, and their willingness to follow the guidelines for a New Book for New Readers. Manuscript preparation takes six months. The manuscript is then further tested for reading level appropriateness and sent for review to scholars in the field of the book's topic.

The manuscript is then delivered to the University Press of Kentucky, the Humanities Council's partner in the New Book project, for publication. The development of a new book takes about a year.

KHC distributes 1,000 of each new book to literacy students and their tutors through a network established by local literacy councils, family learning centers, and libraries, and another 550 books are placed in county libraries through the cooperation of the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives. These partnerships are long standing and have existed since the inception of New Books for New Readers. School librarians also acquire copies of the books through their standard acquisition processes. The Rotary Clubs of Kentucky also help by sponsoring multiple copies of selected books for classrooms in their districts.

The Humanities Council then makes available book discussion programs on the new book. These programs are publicized in Council mailings and through a brochure. The Council also provides to sponsors of book discussion programs copies of the book for the readers as well as the services of a discussion leader. Book discussions are funded through the Council's regular program budget.

The Cost

The Kentucky Humanities Council began the project with a \$53,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a \$7,500 grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation for the first six books. The project now depends entirely on private funds raised by the KHC. Publication of the subsequent books has been made possible by the Scripps Howard Foundation, the Financial Women International, the Kentucky Heritage Council, the Schmidt Moninger Fund, the *Kentucky Post*, the American Bar Association, and many individual donors. Each book costs about \$8,000 to produce and provide free copies to literacy students across the state. More than 79,000 copies are in print.

Outcome

For many Kentucky literacy students, New Books for New Readers are the first books they have ever owned. According to Clark County literacy coordinator Peggy Greenwald, "Several students said these are the first *books* they had ever read. One student became very interested in mysteries since reading [*History Mysteries*]. I'm always looking for good mysteries he will enjoy. One woman especially enjoyed reading the life of Cora Wilson Stewart in *Women Who Made a Difference*. Tutors also enjoyed the books for their own reading."

The project has gained national attention and could serve as a model for literacy programs across the country. *Newsweek* (Dec. 3, 1990) called the "level-headed and honest and nothing a young person couldn't stand to know." In December 1995, the Kentucky School Media Association awarded the project its prestigious Jesse Stuart Award, and in 1996, New Books were recognized by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities' Coming Up Taller Awards.

Price

Each book retails for \$5.95 and quantity and library discounts are available. Books can be purchased by contacting the University Press of Kentucky, www.kentuckypress.com, or 1-800-839-6855.

For further information about the Kentucky Humanities Council or any of its programs, contact the Council at 206 East Maxwell Street, Lexington, Kentucky 40508, 859/257-5932 or at www.kyhumanities.org.