



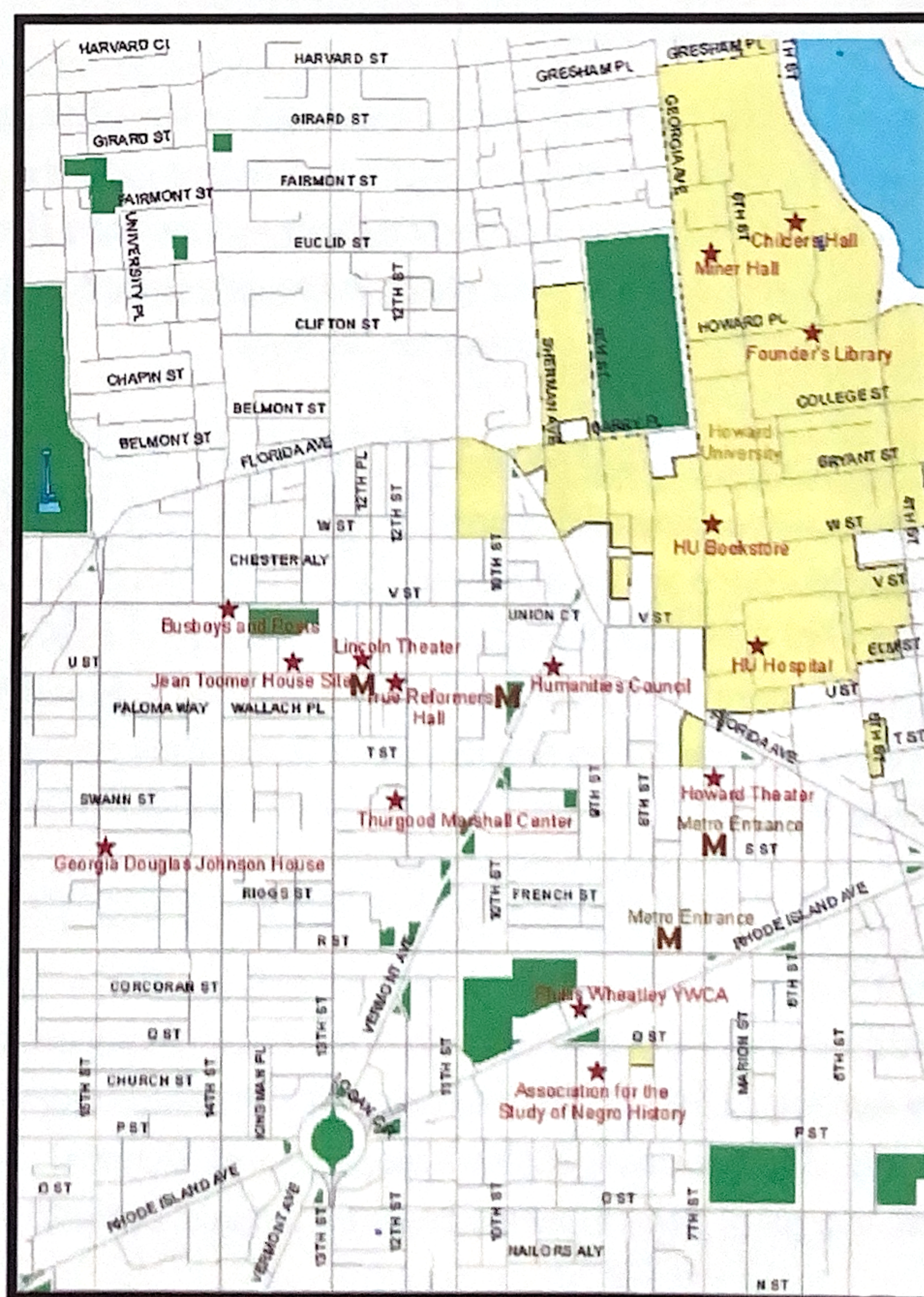
# D.C.'s BIG READ:

## Zora Neale Hurston's Washington

April 19 - May 19, 2007

This self-guided tour sweeps you back to an earlier time: a time of blues and jazz, and—amid the cruel oppression of segregation—a time of great aspirations. Join us as we re-imagine the streets of Washington, D.C. in the early 1920s. The literary and arts movement we now call the Harlem Renaissance was just starting, and, despite its name, it was starting here.

Our tour centers around two corridors: 7th Street and U Street. It takes approximately two hours, but can be broken into two sections. We begin, appropriately enough, on the campus of Howard University. From downtown, take the #70 Bus North (marked Silver Spring) and get out at Georgia Avenue and Howard Place NW, the main entrance to the campus.





Proceed up the hill to the large building with the tall clock tower, the **Founder's Library**. An exhibit on Zora Neale Hurston can be found in glass cases on the first floor. The exhibit features items from the world-renowned Moorland-Spingarn Collection, one of the world's largest research libraries of African American culture.



Like Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and so many other artists of the Harlem Renaissance period, Hurston began her career in D.C. Hurston attended Howard from 1919 through 1924. She earned an Associate's Degree, and was an active part of campus life. She joined a sorority, was a member of the campus theater group, and wrote for the campus literary journal, *The Stylus*, where her first short story was published.

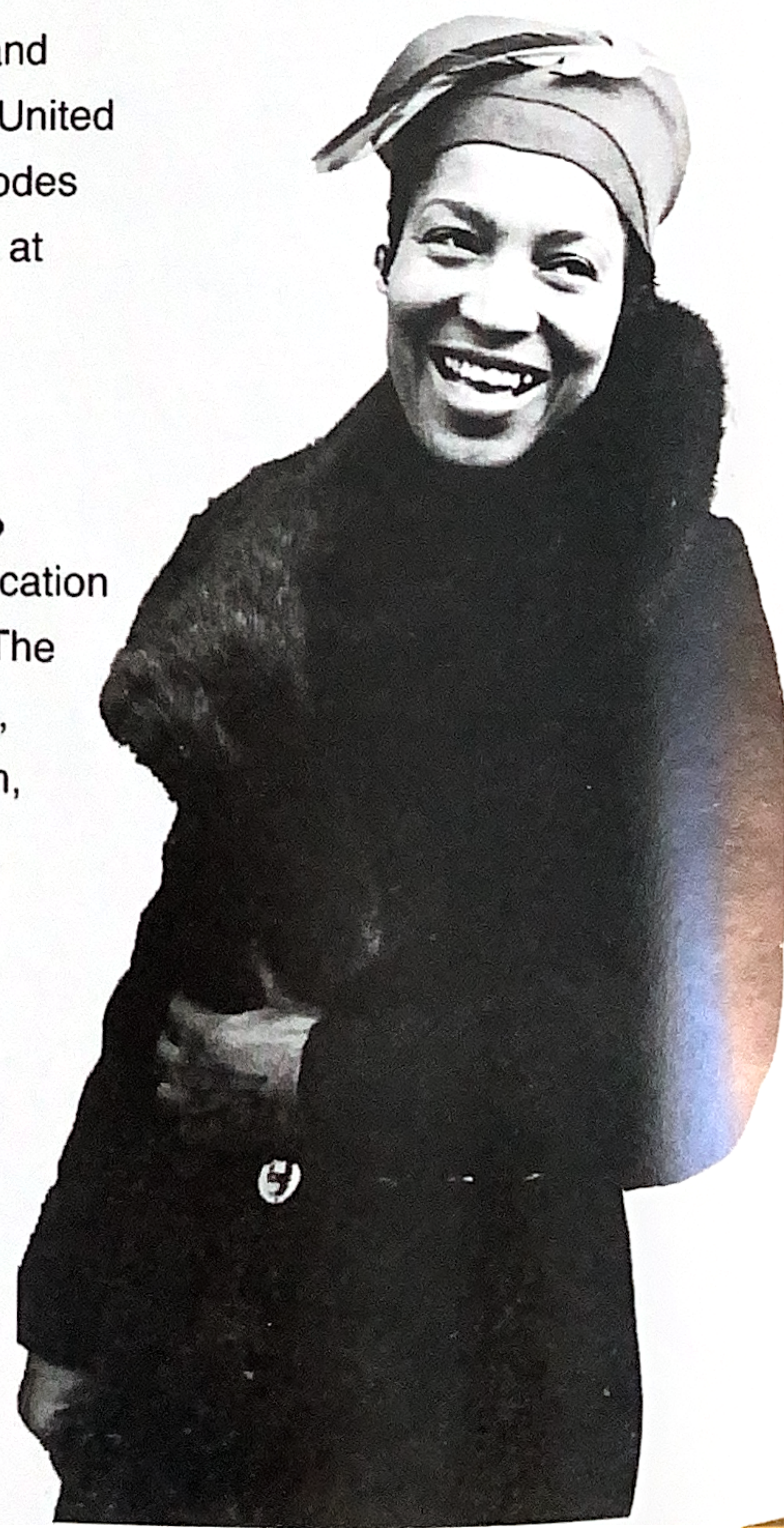
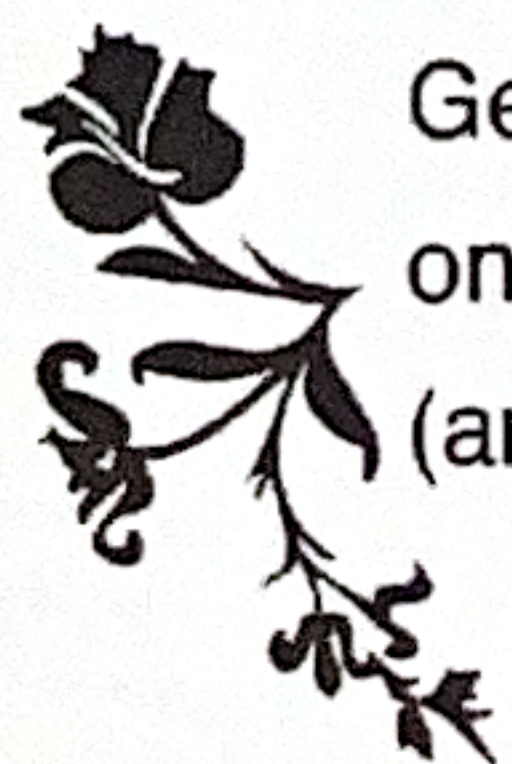
Go directly across the quadrangle to **Childers Hall**, home of the Howard Gallery of Art. The famous collection of African Art, exhibited in glass cases along the hallway to the right of the entrance, was started by one of Howard's most eminent professors, Alain Locke. Hurston was a student of Locke's, and remained in touch with him throughout her adult life. He included her in *The New Negro*, an anthology of poems, stories, plays, and essays that has been referred to as the definitive text, or Bible, of the Harlem Renaissance.

The idea of celebrating African heritage was new in the 1920s, and Locke was one of the first serious collectors of African art in the United States. A Harvard graduate and the first Black recipient of a Rhodes Scholarship, Locke was the Chair of the Philosophy Department at Howard, and also the faculty advisor for *The Stylus*.

Turn right outside Childers Hall and go to 6th Street. Turn left on 6th Street. The first building on your right is **Miner Hall**, the original teacher's school at Howard University. This is the location where Zeta Phi Beta, Hurston's sorority, was founded in 1920. The group has a history of eminent members. In addition to Hurston, other "sisters" include Melba Moore, Esther Rolle, Sarah Vaughn, and Dionne Warwick.

Hurston returned to Howard in 1943 to accept a Distinguished Alumni Award.

Go back down the hill, and head south (toward downtown) on Georgia Avenue. **Howard University Bookstore** is on your left. The bookstore carries several titles by Hurston (and also is a great place to take a break for a cup of coffee!).





Continue south on Georgia Avenue. Pass **Howard University Hospital** (once known as Freedman's Hospital, and the first hospital for African Americans in the city). In Hurston's day, the hospital was located around the corner on W Street, and this was the site of Griffith Stadium, one of the few integrated places of entertainment in D.C. The stadium was home to both the white baseball team, the Washington Senators, and the Negro League team, the Homestead Grays. Attendance was open to all.

Cross Florida Avenue and the street changes its name to **7th Street**. You are standing in the midst of a vibrant, historically Black neighborhood. In the 1920s, this area was filled with small restaurants, pool halls, barbershops, and juke joints. The unpretentious atmosphere of 7th Street was the inspiration for one of the earliest masterpieces of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane*, by D.C. native Jean Toomer. Published in 1923, it electrified young writers such as Hurston and Langston Hughes.



The **Howard Theater** can be seen on your left, at 620 T Street NW. This theater is the nation's first full-sized theater built for African American patrons, and it was a premiere showcase for such performers as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, "Moms" Mabley, Pearl Bailey, Sarah Vaughn, and Lena Horne. The popular "Amateur Nights" at the Howard started two decades before the Apollo Theater in New York adopted them. This historic stage was also the home of the Howard Players, the college drama club of Howard University, of which Hurston was a member. It is currently being restored.



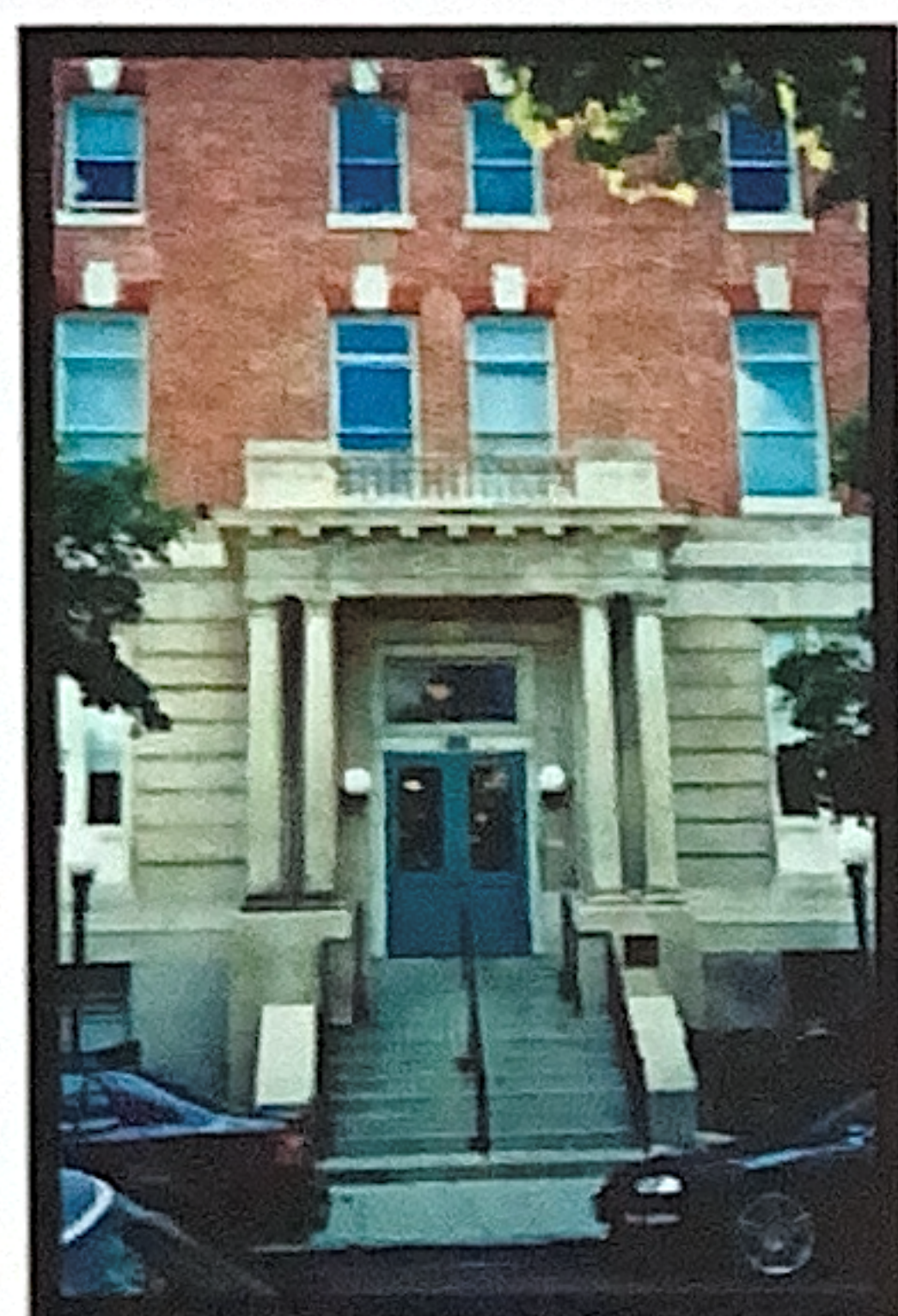
**T Street** was renowned in the 1920s as the site of numerous pool halls. Beginning around this intersection and heading west, T Street was home to such renowned establishments as the Silver Slipper, the Ideal, the Subway, and the Southern Aid Building Billiard Parlor.



Continue south on 7th Street. Many of the buildings you will pass would have been standing in the 1920s, when Hurston walked these streets. At Rhode Island Avenue, turn right and go two blocks to the **Phillis Wheatley YWCA**, 901 Rhode Island Avenue NW. Hurston rented rooms in three locations in the city, and this was her final Washington residence. This Y was named for the first published African American poet, Phillis Wheatley. It is now privately owned.



Go south on 9th Street a block and a half. **The Association for the Study of Negro History** (also known as the Carter G. Woodson House) is located at 1538 9th St. NW. A timely grant from the Association in 1927 allowed Hurston to continue her anthropological research into African American folk stories, music, and religious rituals in Florida, which led to the publication of her second book, *Mules and Men*, in 1935. Woodson, the man who inaugurated Negro History Week (now Black History Month), was a major figure in the collection and preservation of African American history. This house is now a National Historic Site.



✦ If you are breaking up this tour into two sections, head east to 7th Street now and catch the #70 Bus or the Metro at the Shaw/Howard University station on the Green and Yellow Lines. If you are continuing on to the second half, go north on 9th Street four blocks, then turn left on S Street NW. Go 3 blocks and turn right onto 12th Street. You are now in the U Street District.

**The Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage** is on your left, at 1816 12th St. NW. In the 1920s, this was known as the 12th Street Y, home to Langston Hughes. Go inside: the building has been lovingly restored to that era, with an exhibit on the building's history in the first floor reception room, and a re-created boarding room on the second floor (Hours: 9-6 M-F, 9-3 Sat). This was the first Black Y in the United States. Hurston met Hughes while he was living here in D.C. They would later become close friends and collaborators, traveling together throughout the south, critiquing one another's writing, and providing mutual encouragement and support.

Continue north on 12th Street two blocks to the handsome building on the corner of 12th and U Streets, the **True Reformers Hall**, 1200 U Street NW. Built in 1903 as a benevolent society by African American architect John A. Lankford, the building was purchased in 1917 by the Knights of Pythias for use as a temple. Washington's African American national guard unit used the basement as a drill hall and armory. A number of social clubs, schools, and businesses rented space here. The second-floor auditorium, with seating for over 2,000 people, was a popular dance hall. Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (who was raised in a house around the corner on T Street) performed his first paid, professional gig with his band "Duke's Serenader's" at the True Reformer's Hall. Ellington's subsequent band, the "Washingtonians," was one of the leading society bands in the city. Ellington moved to Harlem in 1923.







Langston Hughes



Duke Ellington



Jean Toomer



**U Street** was the second vibrant center of Black cultural life in Washington in the 1920's. While 7th Street was loud and bustling, filled with working class people, U Street was more refined. Dubbed the "Black Broadway" by singer Pearl Bailey, U Street was home to fancy nightclubs, theaters, and restaurants that catered to D.C.'s prosperous and proud African American middle class. Many of the original buildings from the 1920s still stand. The literary tradition of the street continues unabated. Several restaurants and bars along this corridor host poetry events, including Bar Nun (1326 U St. NW, open mic every Monday at 8pm), Jin Lounge (2017 14th St. NW, open mic every Tuesday at 8pm), Cada Vez (1438 U St. NW, with poetry slams on Wednesdays at 8pm), Bohemian Caverns (2003 11th St. NW, with featured readers Wednesdays at 8:30 pm), and Busboys and Poets (see last stop on the tour).

Continue west on U Street. **The Lincoln Theater**, at 1215 U Street NW (across the street), is the only remaining one of three major movie palaces on U Street. The Lincoln opened in 1922 under African American management, with 1,600 seats. If you went to the movies here, you dressed up! This was a classy, first-run movie theater, a place to see and be seen. It has been restored to its original glory and is now used as a concert and theater hall.

Continue west on U Street. The multi-story building across the street at 1301 U St. NW, named The Ellington (in honor of Duke Ellington), is the **Jean Toomer House Site**. Jean Toomer was such an important inspiration to Hurston that she actually traveled to his ancestral family home in Georgia with Langston Hughes in 1927. Hughes, inspired by Toomer's example, wrote a series of poems about life on 7th Street that became his second book of poems (with the unfortunate title of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*). Hurston met Toomer while living in D.C., and they were both members of a literary salon, The Saturday Nighters.





Take U Street to 14th Street and go south four blocks. Turn right on S Street and go one block. The **Georgia Douglas Johnson House**, at 1461 S Street NW (private residence), was the site of the Saturday Nighters, the social hub of the Harlem Renaissance in Washington in the 1920s and 30s. Johnson, the author of four books of poems Hurston described as "soulful," hosted weekly gatherings of all the literary luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance.



Turn right onto 15th Street and proceed north 4 blocks to U Street. Continue east on U Street one block, turn left at 14th Street, and go one block to the final stop on the tour. **Busboys and Poets**, at 14th and V Streets NW, is a new hub of activity in the neighborhood. Browse for African American literature at Busboys Bookstore, and enjoy a slice of Zora Chocolate Mousse Cake. Busboys and Poets hosts regular readings by writers, and Hurston's influence in Washington continues to resound (regular reading and performance series include "9 on the 9th," with featured performers on the 9th day of every month, beginning at 9pm; "Sunday Kind of Love," with local and visiting poets featured on the third Sunday of every month at 4 pm; and an open mic every Tuesday at 8:30 pm). A Big Read Kick-Off Party takes place here in the evening on April 19 and a final event, "The Big Read: Something To Talk About," takes place here on May 19. (See <http://www.wdchumanities.org> for more details.)



Written by Kim Roberts. Roberts is the author of two books of poems, *The Kimnama* and *The Wishbone Galaxy*, and editor of the on-line journal *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*. She has also produced tours on two other writers who lived in Washington, Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes.





## Further Reading On Zora Neale Hurston And Washington D.C.

### About Howard University:

May Miller met Hurston in Baltimore in 1918, and she convinced her to apply to Howard University, which Hurston called "the capstone of Negro education in the world." Miller told Hurston she was "Howard material." The daughter of a prominent professor and dean of the university, Miller grew up on the campus of Howard. May Miller would become the most widely-published African American woman playwright of the 1920s and 1930s. She later became one of the founders of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and a well-respected poet.



May Miller

### About Hurston's age:

Hurston was born in 1891, but she regularly gave her age as at least 10 years younger. It appears she started the practice while living in Baltimore, in order to be eligible for free public schooling, open to students aged 6 to 20. In 1917, when she first enrolled in high school, she was 26 years old. But as Phoeby says of Janie, the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "The worst thing Ah ever knowed her to do was taking a few years offa her age and dat ain't never harmed nobody."

### About Hurston's first publication:

Hurston's short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," was published in *The Stylus*, Howard University's literary journal, in May 1921. (In 1926 she reprinted the story in *Opportunity*, a magazine published by the National Urban League.) Written while living in D.C., this is the tale of a young man torn between his family's expectations and his own desire for autonomy, and the chance to "sail away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, and the wide world."

### About ambition:

In a letter to Annie Nathan Meyer dated January 1926, Hurston wrote: "Oh, if you knew my dreams! my vaulting ambition! How I constantly live in fancy in seven league boots, taking mighty strides across the world, but conscious all the time of being a mouse on a treadmill...The eagerness, the burning within, I wonder sparks do not fly so that they be seen by all men. Prometheus on his rock with his liver being continually consumed as fast as he grows another, is nothing to my dreams. I dream such wonderfully complete ones, so radiant in astral beauty. I have not the power yet to make them come true. They always die. But even as they fade, I have others."

### About 7th Street:

Populated largely by rural Southern transplants, 7th Street was a bustling center of working class African American culture. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes wrote: "Seventh Street is the long, old, dirty street, where the ordinary Negroes hang out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who draw no color line between mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who work hard for a living with their hands. On Seventh Street...they played the blues, ate watermelon, barbeque and fish sandwiches, shot pool, told tall tales, looked at the dome of the Capitol and laughed out loud."

In *Cane*, Jean Toomer wrote: "Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge...breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black-reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington...White and whitewash disappear in blood. Who set you flowing? Flowing down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets? Eddying on the corners? Swirling like a blood-red smoke up where the buzzards fly in heaven? God would not dare to suck black red blood...He would duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day. Who set you flowing?"



### About Hurston's anthropological research:

Hurston specialized in southern African American folk culture, a field that had, up to that point, been little studied. One of Hurston's most popular books, *Mules and Men*, is a result of that research. She wrote to Carl Sandburg: "I am an anthropologist and it is my job to see and to find and to present to the world my findings. I have seen extracts from *Mules and Men* printed in many languages, proving that I did a fairly good job. I have never expected to get rich, and if I have served this nation and the world by digging out a few of its hidden treasures and thus enriched our culture, I have gained a great deal. I have had some influence on my time."

### About Hurston's relationship with Langston Hughes:

In the second half of the 1920s, this friendship was one of the most important in Hurston's life. Hurston and Hughes collaborated on a New York literary journal called *Fire!!* with four other friends in 1926. They traveled through the south together in 1927, making stops in Georgia and Alabama, including trips to Jean Toomer's ancestral home, to hear a Bessie Smith concert, and to give guest lectures to students at Tuskegee Institute. In 1928, although strapped for cash herself, Hurston lent Hughes money, and gave readings of his poetry to help him sell books. But this fruitful and intense friendship was changed forever over a play, *Mule Bone*, which Hurston and Hughes wrote together in 1930. Hurston later disputed Hughes's rights to co-authorship, even consulting a lawyer. Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, calls this "the most notorious literary quarrel in African-American cultural history." Although they continued to correspond after this falling-out, their friendship would never be the same.

### About Duke Ellington:

One of the greatest of all American composers, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was born in D.C. in 1899. The house he was raised in, at 1212 T Street NW, is a short distance off the tour route for those who want to investigate further. The house is privately owned. Duke wrote, "There were a lot of great piano players in Washington...It was a very good climate for me to come up in, musically."

### About U Street:

The leading African American commercial district by day, U Street boasted the only bank in the city that would lend to Negro patrons (The Industrial Bank of Washington, 2000 11th St. NW), the first African American-owned Western Union office, Addison N. Scurlock's elite Photography Studio, and numerous social clubs and societies. By night, U Street transformed itself as its clubs came alive, including the famous Bohemian Caverns (2001 11th St. NW), Republic Gardens (1355 U St. NW), and the elegant Lincoln Theater (1215 U Street NW). Hurston, who owned only





one dress when she first arrived in D.C., appreciated this glimpse of elite, middle-class life. She enjoyed shopping on U Street, and her job as a manicurist soon allowed her to afford it. She wrote to Langston Hughes in 1931: "What do you think I was doing in Washington all that time if not getting cultured. I got my foot in society just as well as the rest."

#### **About The Saturday Nighters:**

Gathering weekly for cake, wine, and stimulating discussions, this literary salon in the home of Georgia Douglas Johnson brought together the Washington contingent of the Harlem Renaissance, giving the era's young, ambitious writers a chance to mingle with older mentors. Regular attendees included: Kelly Miller, dean of Howard University; his daughter, the playwright May Miller; critic and anthologist Alain Locke; historian Carter G. Woodson; Angelina Weld Grimké, the author of the first play by an African American to receive a fully-staged, professional production; writer and actor Richard Bruce Nugent; essayist and playwright Marita Bonner; poet and short story writer Alice Dunbar Nelson; Jean Toomer; Langston Hughes; and Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston's friendship with Johnson lasted the rest of her life. In 1950, she returned to Johnson's home for a month-long visit.





## Other sites of interest:

- Site of **George Robinson's Barber Shop**, 1410 G Street NW. Hurston worked here as a manicurist while a student at Howard University. Her hours were from 3:30 to 8:30 pm, so as not to interrupt her studies. This was an African American-owned business, but the clientele was strictly white. The original building no longer stands.

- **Library of Congress**, 101 Independence Ave. NE. Holdings include Hurston's plays, and recordings and manuscripts in the Archive of Folk Culture.

- **Boarding House location**, 217 L St. NW (no longer stands).

- **Boarding House location**, 3017 Sherman Avenue NW, Columbia Heights neighborhood (private residence).

- **Cosmos Club** site, Dolley Madison House, northeast corner of Lafayette Square, now occupied by the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, 717 Madison Place NW. Hurston worked here as a waitress. The Cosmos Club has since relocated to the Townsend Mansion, 2121 Massachusetts Ave. NW, in the Dupont Circle neighborhood. At the time of Hurston's employment, the Cosmos Club was a private club exclusively for white males, many of whom were noted scientists and intellectuals.

- **Zeta Phi Beta Headquarters**, 1734 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Dupont Circle. Hurston's sorority was founded in 1920 at Howard University. Chapters now operate internationally.



## A final word:

Hurston wrote her first ex-husband (by then a friend, and a successful physician living in Los Angeles) in 1953, toward the end of her life: "It is interesting to see how far we both have come since we did our dreaming together in Washington, D.C. We struggled so hard to make our big dreams come true, didn't we? The world has gotten some benefits from us, though we had a swell time too. We lived!"



Written by Kim Roberts. Roberts is the author of two books of poems, *The Kimnama* and *The Wishbone Galaxy*, and editor of the on-line journal *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*. She has also produced tours on two other writers who lived in Washington, Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes.





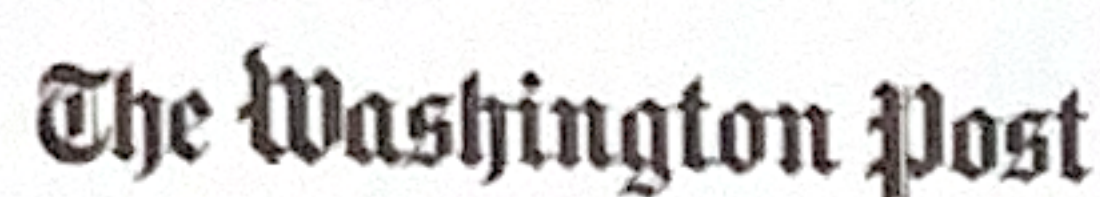
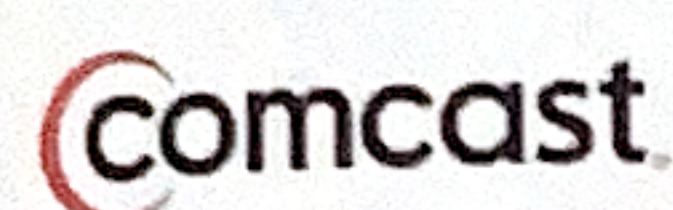
This event is part of The Big Read, an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest.

D.C.'s Big Read is presented by the Humanities Council of Washington, DC and the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

Additional support is provided by the Community Foundation of the National Capital Region, the Kellogg Foundation, Citibank, and the Anacostia Gallery & Boutique.



## D.C.'s Big Read Sponsors



Get to your next D.C.'s Big Read event in a Flex Car! Use promo code DCRead07. Promotion expires 5/31/07. [www.flexcar.com](http://www.flexcar.com), or call 202-580-7050 (Washington, DC Regional office)

## D.C.'s Big Read Community Partners

District of Columbia Public Library	DC WritersCorps	PEN/Faulkner Writers in Schools Program
District of Columbia Public Schools	Hip Hop Caucus Institute	Speakeasy DC
Bolling Air Force Base Library	The Howard Players	Step Afrika!
Borders Books & Music	Hurston/Wright Foundation	Teaching for Change
Busboys and Poets	JESS3 Design	The Word Works, Inc.
D.C. Commission for Women	Literary Friends of the Library	Chapters: A Literary Bookstore
D.C. LEARNs	Moorland-Spingarn Research Center	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

## Photography and Illustration credits

**Page 1:** Tour map by Brian Kraft

**Page 2:** *Founder's Library* image courtesy of The Humanities Council of Washington, DC

*Zora Laughing* by Carl Van Vechten (Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

**Page 3:** *Howard Theatre* image courtesy of The D.C. Office of Planning Historic Preservation Office

*Phillis Wheatley Y* image courtesy of Kim Roberts

**Page 4:** *Carter G. Woodson House* courtesy of Kim Roberts

*The Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage* image courtesy of Kim Roberts

*Zora Neale Hurston with Drum* image courtesy of the Library of Congress

**Page 5:** *Langston Hughes* image courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

*Duke Ellington Poster* image from the Henry P. Whitehead Collection

*Jean Toomer* image courtesy of Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

**Page 6:** *Georgia Douglass Johnson House* image courtesy of Kim Roberts

*Busboys and Poets Sign* image courtesy of Busboys and Poets

**Page 7:** *May Miller* image courtesy of Miller Newman

**Page 8:** *Jesse Fauset, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston* image courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

**Page 9:** *Zora in Crow Stand* Image courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

**Page 10:** *Zora with Briefcase* image courtesy of George A. Smathers Libraries (Department of Special Collections, University of Florida)

Graphic design by [amyhendrick.com](http://amyhendrick.com).