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# Giving Voice to Stories From the Printed Page

By JAN ELLEN SPIEGEL

In an era in which book reading is in decline, it is at once curious and logical that an alliance of New Haven arts groups is tapping the written word in a new venture.

Called Listen Here, the project offers [free weekly short story readings](#) in New Haven coffeehouses by actors from the [New Haven Theater Company](#).

“It’s first and foremost a community endeavor; it’s not, per se, a literary endeavor,” said Bennett Lovett-Graff, publisher of the literary journal [The New Haven Review](#). “It’s really more based on listening.” Mr. Lovett-Graff created the series with David Brensilver, spokesman for the [Arts Council of Greater New Haven](#).

The two men reasoned that most people were read to as children. They modeled Listen Here on [“Selected Shorts,”](#) the radio program produced by [Symphony Space](#) and WNYC in which actors read short stories, but Mr. Lovett-Graff had certain criteria in mind. “It had to be low maintenance,” he said. “It had to be short fiction, no poetry. We wanted material to be already published because in essence it had already been vetted for its quality.”

They chose to stage the readings in coffeehouses in an effort to incorporate the slightly bohemian aura — hissing espresso machines and all. “It feels like the right spirit of the thing rather than sitting in a tiny black box with one actor with a spotlight over his or her head,” said T. Paul Lowry, the creative director and producer of the New Haven Theater Company, whose actors are donating their time.

“My definition of theater is storytelling with tools,” he said. “Short stories for me are really a good way for an audience to be part of a narrative without investing hours and hours in a theater or a movie or days and days in reading a narrative.”

Since the readings began in September, Mr. Lovett-Graff said he has discovered that it takes more time to choose stories than anticipated. Some of the selections, while benefiting from an actor’s intonation and body language, have raised issues of whether to read them with accents or in dialect. He said he has also learned that while some stories may be classics, they do not necessarily work when read aloud.

“Short stories that are too cerebral really don’t work,” he said. “It has to have a certain amount of dramatic content, and it has to have entertainment value.”

Readings usually include two stories of roughly equal length that together run no more than an hour. Noted writers like [J. D. Salinger](#), [John Updike](#), [John Cheever](#) and [Philip Roth](#) have been mixed in with lesser names.

Mr. Lovett-Graff also tries to be thematic, with [Halloween](#) as this week's choice. The program, called "Something Wicked This Way Comes," will consist of Lynne Tillman's story "A Dead Summer," read by Rachel Shapiro Alderman, and Nancy Holder's "We Have Always Lived in the Forest," read by Rebecka Jones. The reading is at Manjares Fine Pastries in New Haven's Westville neighborhood. The presenters are considering costumes for the actors because of the holiday theme.

In the end, Mr. Brensilver said, "It's more about let's just sort of unplug, take your iPod ear buds out, shut down the laptop and let's just appreciate some great writing. Pretty simple."

*Listen Here, Thursdays, 7 to 8 p.m., through Nov. 19, on a rotating basis at Blue State Coffee, Koffee on Audubon, Lulu: A European Coffeehouse and Manjares Fine Pastries, all in New Haven. Full schedule is available at [newhavenarts.org](http://newhavenarts.org).*

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