



PRESS RELEASE

Mechanics' Hall Awarded Prestigious NEA Big Read Grant for 2025–2026 Programming

One of Only 65 Honorees Nationwide, Mechanics' Hall to Lead a Powerful Literary Exploration of Nature, Identity, and Belonging

Portland, Maine — September 3, 2025: Mechanics' Hall is proud to announce it has been awarded a 2025–2026 NEA Big Read grant — one of only 65 grants awarded nationwide by the National Endowment for the Arts, in partnership with Arts Midwest.

The \$20,000 matching grant will support a yearlong series of public programs centered on the theme "**Our Nature**," inspired by *North Woods*, the acclaimed novel by Daniel Mason.

In partnership with **Trust for Public Land**, **Momentum Conservation**, and **Friends of Katahdin Woods and Waters**, Mechanics' Hall will present a wide range of programming celebrating Maine's deep legacy of conservation and exploring the ways our relationship with land shapes identity, community, and resilience. Events will include author talks, writing workshops, guided nature walks, and a special sound installation titled *Echoes of Nature* by sound artist Thomas Rex Beverly.

A highlight of the series is a collaborative panel discussion, **Reclaiming Land, Reclaiming Identity**, which will explore the return of ancestral lands to the Penobscot people and the healing power of restoration.

The series will launch on **October 3rd, 2025** with a public book giveaway during First Friday at Congress Square Park and throughout the month at the Mechanics' Hall Library. Public programming will begin on **Thursday, November 13**, with a special conversation between Monica Wood and Richard Blanco. Drawing on themes from *North Woods*, the event will explore the intersections of nature, identity, and the human experience.

The series will culminate in Spring 2026 with outdoor book clubs hosted by Momentum Conservation, as well as a writing workshop in collaboration with Friends of Katahdin Woods & Waters, held in Northern Maine.

Congresswoman Chellie Pingree shared:

“I’m thrilled that Mechanics’ Hall has been selected for this year’s NEA Big Read — one of only 65 grants awarded nationwide. This \$20,000 award will support an extraordinary yearlong series exploring our relationship to land, identity, and community through conversations, workshops, and performances. From guided nature walks and discussions with Maine authors to a panel on returning ancestral lands to the Penobscot people, this programming will bring our state’s deep legacy of conservation and creativity to life. As exciting as this news is, we can’t lose sight of the fact that the Trump Administration is actively working to undermine the importance of arts and culture—and eliminate the NEA altogether. As Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that oversees the NEA, I will continue fighting to ensure the NEA endures and Maine organizations like Mechanics’ Hall can keep inspiring us all.”

This NEA Big Read cycle also coincides with the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. To mark the occasion, Mechanics’ Hall will host a commemorative event exploring the evolving American relationship to land and liberty.

“We’re honored to bring North Woods to life through conversations, creativity, and collaboration across the state,” said Annie Leahy, Executive Director of Mechanics’ Hall. *“This project celebrates our shared history and asks how nature can guide us toward belonging, resilience, and transformation.”*

Learn more about NEA Big Read at arts.gov/initiatives/nea-big-read.

About Mechanics’ Hall:

Mechanics’ Hall is a member-supported historic cultural hub and library in Portland, Maine that brings together bold ideas, diverse voices, and vibrant community through the arts and humanities. We connect exceptional thinkers and artists - spanning writers, performers, and curious minds of all ages - to enrich intellectual life, celebrate creativity, and spark meaningful connection. By inspiring curiosity and empowering both emerging and established talent, we work to shape a more imaginative, inclusive, and connected future.

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