

TALKING ABOUT BOOKS A BOOK DISCUSSION PRIMER



Drawing by Joanne Smith

Compiled by Ann Harris and Karen Traynor
Mid-York Library System

The purpose of this guide is to provide basic information, resources, and ideas for new and experienced book discussion group leaders. Book groups come in all shapes and sizes and each one develops its own personality. If you are just starting a group, you may want to attend a few discussions to sample a few different styles. Discussion groups are as varied as the people who participate, and there is no one formula for success. As you become more experienced leading discussions, you will develop your own style and you will know what works best for you. Remember that the people are there because they enjoy reading as much as you do! So have fun and let everyone share your enthusiasm for books and reading.

Before you begin, you will need to think about a few basic questions:

1. When will the group meet?

First, you need to find out who wants to be in the book group. You may want to put up a sign in the library or an announcement in the local paper to see who is interested and what the best times are for those people. Then you can start to plan. Generally, people who work during the day prefer evening book groups. Retired people generally prefer meeting in the daytime. The most important thing is to pick a time and be consistent. Then people will include it in their regular schedule.

2. How often will the group meet?

Most groups meet monthly. Some take summers off, some meet through the summer. Keep your members informed and you will keep your members! Develop a mailing list, including names, addresses, phone numbers, etc. Put your local newspaper on the list. Someone may spot the announcement and have a special interest in that month's book. Send a monthly post card to all members, whether they come regularly or not. Make sure that the announcements are mailed with enough time for people to read the selection. List the book to be discussed, the time, the place, and a little discussion teaser. You may want to put the title and date of the next meeting on the same card for people who would like to read ahead.

3. How long should the discussions last?

Have a definite starting and ending time. People like to know what to expect. Most discussions last from 1-2 hours. Sometimes a discussion will run longer, but participants should know when they could expect to be able to leave. Others may elect to stay longer.

4. How many people should be in a group?

Two people can have a discussion, but of course you will want more than that. If you start a group, make sure to give the group time to grow. It will take time for the group to develop and the word to spread. You probably will not want more than 15 in the group. Having too many people makes it difficult for everyone to participate. If you have more than 15 people interested, consider starting more than one group.

5. Who will lead the discussion?

There are many types of book groups and many ways to hold a discussion. Some groups have the same discussion leader every time. Other groups rotate the responsibility among the members. Personally, we think it's best to rotate the responsibility. People then develop a sense of ownership in the group. Also, different people have different styles and some people relate to one style better than another. Most people like a little variety. At least consider rotating the responsibility among more than one person.

6. How do we decide what books to discuss?

There are many types of books from which to choose. Try starting with a variety. Begin with some fiction, non-fiction, biographies, older titles, newer titles, classics, award winners, etc. Then you will be able to see what titles "click" with your members. Research shows that the main reason people join book groups is that they want to read books that they would not have otherwise read. Remember that book group participants are already readers. They are familiar with what's popular. They want to be introduced to new books and new authors. Avoid books that are totally plot-driven. They are fun to read, but there really isn't much to talk about. You will find out through trial and error what works.

Some book groups plan a few discussions around a theme. We have used books that take place in a variety of settings and discussed how the setting influenced the book and its characters. You could examine how different authors explore family relationships. Still need more ideas? There are many online book discussion groups. Take a look at what they are reading. See the bibliography in this guide for print and online resources for book discussion groups.

Another thing to consider when selecting a book is if there are enough copies available for all the participants. Check your library catalog. If it is a very popular title, copies will not be available to borrow. If people want to purchase this title, and some will want to, make sure that it is in print. Try to choose a title that is available in a variety of formats, including large print and unabridged audio.

7. How do we discuss a book? What do we talk about?

Before you begin your discussions, especially in a new group, establish some ground rules. Here are some examples:

- 1. Everyone's opinion is important.**
- 2. Disagreement is ok.**
- 3. Everyone will be polite.**
- 4. Encourage everyone to participate.**
- 5. One person should not monopolize the discussion.**

A good book discussion may take on a life of its own with very little prompting from the discussion leader. Other times the participants need some ideas to get started. The discussion leader can begin with some background information about the author and/or some samples of reviews. It puts the book in perspective for the members when they know something about the author and what else he/she has written. This information is available from popular review sources, such as *The New York Times Book Review* or *Contemporary Authors*. The staff at your local public library will be eager to help you find all the information you need. Another idea to start the discussion is to look at "customer reviews" of titles from Internet sites like amazon.com. Read or distribute some of these and ask for members' reactions. The leader can make handouts of author information and copies of reviews for the participants to use and keep. Try to find opposing opinions to encourage discussion. Sometimes distributing a map is helpful to the discussion. You can print nice color maps from electronic encyclopedias.

When discussing books, consider how the characters have changed during the course of the book. You will be able to discuss how they changed, what caused them to change, how these changes affected other characters, and if the changes are positive or negative. What motivates the characters to behave the way they do?

Consider the style of writing and the point of view. Is the book a narrative or is it written from one of the character's points of view? How does the point of view influence the book? Is the book a contemporary book or written from a historical perspective? What is the author trying to say? Don't shy away from humor – consider satire and irony, and its effectiveness.

Many books now have reading group discussion questions in the book or on the Internet. The bibliography at the end of this guide has many suggestions for places to find discussion questions. DO NOT depend solely on these questions. Look them over ahead of time and think about what questions you will use and how you will word them. Be ready with more questions than you need. You may not use them all because the discussion may take off on its own, but it is always good to be prepared. Use the questions to keep the group focused on the book. It is easy to let a discussion wander off.

Here are some general suggestions that you can use for almost any book:

- 1. Have group members prepare one or two questions in advance. This forces members to think about what they think is important about the book.**
- 2. What are the themes in the book? What is the author trying to say? Does the book have a message?**
- 3. Bring food or music that ties in with the book. If music plays a part in the book, bring a recording that will bring this music to life for the participants.**
- 4. Have participants rate the book on a scale of 1 to 5. (1= How did this book get published? 5 = Highly recommended)**
- 5. Decide who you would choose to play the characters if you were casting the movie of the book. You will be surprised at the variety of opinions.**
- 6. Have people take turns reading portions of the book aloud. Listen to parts of the audio version of the book or watch part of the video of the book. If you're really lucky, you will find an audiocassette of the author reading from his/her own work.**
- 7. Take advantage of TV and radio interviews with authors. Have members read print interviews aloud or watch taped interviews.**

8. What if people don't agree with each other?

Controversial books often lead to wonderful discussions. Do not hesitate to use them. Remember when people disagree that they are disagreeing with your opinion. There are no right answers. Your comments are about the book, not the person. Some of the most spirited discussions are about books that most of the group disliked! Another common reaction occurs when a person who hated reading the book ends up liking it after the discussion because they have seen it from a different perspective.

9. Should we keep a list of what we have read?

Some groups decide to keep a record of the books the group has discussed. Group members come and go and it is sometimes helpful to be able to refer to your records. If you do keep records, be sure to annotate them. You may want to write a brief synopsis of the book. You can also write something about the discussion. Did this book generate a lot of discussion? If so, what did people want to talk about?

10. A word about FOOD AND DRINK

Most groups include food and a beverage as part of the meeting. Some groups have elaborate snacks; others have members take turns bringing cookies. Sometimes it is fun to use a food that appears in the book as the snack. Food is not always necessary, but it almost always enhances the discussion and the social interaction of the group. A glass of wine gets people talking! This is a great place to be creative!

11. What can we do to spark up our existing book group?

Some book groups enjoy occasionally planning special social activities. Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Dinner at a restaurant**
- 2. Meet at a member's home or camp**
- 3. Attend an author appearance**
- 4. Combine the meeting with another book group**
- 5. Attend the movie of a book you have read**
- 6. If you are discussing a book with a local setting, discuss the book near that location.**
- 7. Take a photo at each of your meetings. Consider making a reading group scrapbook with a page for each book discussed.**

MOST OF ALL, ENJOY THE BOOKS AND ENJOY THE DISCUSSIONS!

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Ann Harris, Mid-York Library System, Utica, NY 13502 (harris@midyork.lib.ny.us)
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Print Resources for Book Discussion Leaders

The Book Group Book: a Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group. c.1993.

This book is composed of essays written by and about book groups around the United States. It's interesting reading about the groups, and the entries give personal information about each group. This is not a how-to book. Many groups have submitted book lists, but almost all are not annotated. It's a very enjoyable book for skimming.

Fineman, Marcia. ***Talking About Books: a Step-by-Step Guide for Participating in a Book Discussion Group*** (1998)

This is a self-published very basic guide to beginning a book group. Includes sample questions to ask about plot, conflict, theme, setting, etc.

Reading Group Choices: Selections for Lively Book Discussions. There are two editions of this title. One is the 1997 edition; one is the 1999 edition. These publications were developed and produced by Paz & Associates through questionnaires sent to readers, booksellers and publishers and designed to assist members of reading discussion groups in the selection and discussion of books. These are great books to give book group leaders ideas for books to discuss. Discussion questions are included for each title.

Laskin, David and Holly Hughes ***The Reading Group Book.*** (1995) This is a gem of a book that provides basic information and good how-to tips and techniques for leading book discussions. It also includes a chapter on the history of book groups in America. Fascinating reading as well as useful. The book lists are well annotated

Book: the Magazine for the Reading Life This bi-monthly magazine includes book reviews and author interviews. Informative and fun to read! To subscribe, call 1-800-317-BOOK from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CST or log on to www.bookmagazine.com.

The Reading List. a Critical Guide to the Complete Works of 110 Authors (1998) This is an extensive list of contemporary fiction from which you can choose. The book includes short biographies of the authors, along with an annotated list of books each has written. What sets this book apart from others is its "Next on the Reading List" referrals. If you like a particular author, the book will give you ideas of others you may enjoy.

McMains, Victoria. ***The Readers' Choice: 200 Book Club Favorites,*** (2000) "A Treasury of top picks by more than 20 reading groups nationwide"

Miller, Laura (editor) ***The Salon.com Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors*** (2000)

Knight, Brenda and Vicki Leon ***Women Who Love Books Too Much: Bibliophiles, Bluestockings, and Prolific Pens from the Algonquin Hotel to the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*** (2000)

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR BOOK DISCUSSION LEADERS

Here are some resources you may want to use when planning your discussions:

Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

A Dictionary of Mythology

Dictionary of Symbols

www.imdb.com

This internet site provides information about movies, past, present, and upcoming.

INTERNET SITES FOR BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDES

Reading Group Choices: www.readinggroupguides.com

This is an extensive searchable database for finding reading group guides. It is part of a group of sites called *The Book Report*, which also includes bookreporter.com, authorsontheweb.com, teenreads.com, and kidsread.com

Books@Random Library: www.randomhouse.com/resources

This is the home of Vintage Groups Reading Group Center and Ballantine Reader's Circle. There is an extensive list of guides as well as books in the news.

Harper Collins Reader Resources: www.harpercollins.com

Search the reading guides and sign up to receive their newsletter.

Henry Holt Reading Group Guides: www.henryholt.com/readingguides.htm

Reading group guides by this publisher

Time Warner Books Reading Guides: www.twbookmark.com/books/reading_guides.html

This site includes a lot of reading guides, author links, appearances, and interview information.

SimonSays.com Reading Groups: www.simonsays.com

Select Reading Guides to find a list of available guides for discussion groups plus additional book group information and another offer to subscribe to a newsletter.

Morgan Grove Public Library: www.webrary.org/

This is an extensive guide to books that the library group has discussed. Find their questions in the Readers Advisory section of the web page.

Novelist

If you have access to *Novelist*, be sure to take a look at their book discussion guides. To find them, go to *Novelist*, check the "adult" check box, choose "continue", and then scroll down to "Book Discussion Guides". You will see an alphabetical list of available guides.



Online Book Discussion Groups



You may want to explore the world of online book groups. Here are a couple to get you started. For more choices, go to the Mid-York web page at www.midYork.org and choose the Book Groups page.

Subscribe to *Bookleaders*, an online discussion group for people who lead book groups. Members share information about discussions, book selection, and group dynamics. For subscription information, contact harris@midYork.lib.ny.us.

Subscribe to *Book-2-Book*, an online group that combines the discussions of a face-to-face group with an online group. For subscription information, contact traynor@midYork.lib.ny.us.

Subscribe to *BookiesToo*. This long-standing online group has an international membership and can be found on the Yahoo site. The members vote on selections and rotate the responsibility for the discussion.

There are many, many online book groups for all types of readers. If you are interested, go to www.yahoo.com and browse for more choices. But be careful, your to-be-read pile will explode as soon as you join an online group!

Note: Web addresses frequently change. If you notice an address that needs updating, please notify Ann Harris (harris@midYork.lib.ny.us). Thank you!

Prepared by *Ann Harris and Karen Traynor*
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