

# Book clubs in your library

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## **Book clubs**

By Colette Oster, Public Services Assistant, Northern Lights Library System.

Book clubs have been around for a long time and their popularity keeps growing. Why do people want to join a book club? Why and how can the library get involved with this public service? Where can you, as a librarian, find information on how to start and run a successful book club? The following will provide answers to these questions, with weblisting and a booklist to get you started.

## **Why start a book club?**

Since Oprah Winfrey jumped on the book discussion bandwagon, many people have also started book clubs – but why do they stay with it and keep going as time goes by?

Many people have found that by joining a book club they take the time to read and think about a novel that they may not have first chosen for themselves. Getting together in an informal group setting allows individuals to share their IDEAS, learn from others, think critically and develop discussion skills - all in a supportive environment. In addition to this, there is always the social aspect of it. There is an interesting article that can be accessed through Novelist called “Reading Group Therapy” by David Carr. He states: “When we read and interpret, we are often discovering and expressing lives we have not lived and experiences we have not experienced, except in the stories of others.”<sup>1</sup>

“It is not about the book... It is always about the feelings we have while reading it: wounding, exhilarating, transporting, bewildering, infuriating feelings.”<sup>2</sup> He calls it therapy, because there is “always something more, something deeper, going on when we read ...Over the interim, the task of each reader is to determine how each chosen work fulfills or disappoints, surprises or engages in comparison to the anticipated – the chosen, the hoped-for experience”<sup>3</sup>. He goes on to say that “The more different these moments are for us, the more we are confounded and troubled by them, the more we may develop cognition of a wider scope. The more we can speak fluently about them with others, the more likely we are to be aware of the mindful social world”<sup>4</sup>. Isn’t this a wonderful element to bring into your library?

If your library is like most, the most common question asked of you in this day and age, is probably “Do you have public access Internet?” But what of that warmth, that human connection that book clubs can provide? As Susan E. Boring (yes – that’s her real name!) writes, book clubs “give members a sense of community with a human touch”<sup>5</sup>. This is what keeps people coming back to your library. Perhaps the most persuasive argument is that libraries enjoy increased circulation and issue more library cards after starting a book discussion group (info taken from Library Journal April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 v127, p16.). Nancy Pearl, Executive Director of the Washington Center of the Book (and ever immortalized as an action-figure) has stated that attendance at book discussions implemented in Seattle has grown continually and “Qualitatively, what we’ve seen is that more people come to library programs”<sup>6</sup> overall. The goal is to make members of the public feel comfortable in your library. Once that is done, they may be patrons for life. Sherry Evans has written an article about strategies for a successful public library book club. She says “Members enjoy librarian-led discussions because we keep the conversation on target, ask prepared questions, read reviews, and author biographies, and provide a neutral location. In this controlled environment. Participants are free to relax and enjoy themselves and each other”<sup>7</sup>.

So you’ve decided to go for it – your library is going to start a book group – but where to begin?

### **Starting a book club in your library**

There are many, many sources of information out there for starting a book club:

[ballantine reader's circle](http://www.randomhouse.com/BB/read/tips.html) <http://www.randomhouse.com/BB/read/tips.html>

[Canadian Book Clubs](http://www.canadianbookclubs.com/) <http://www.canadianbookclubs.com/>

[Reading Group Choices](http://www.readinggroupchoices.com/) <http://www.readinggroupchoices.com/>

[Vintage Reading Group Center](http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/) <http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/>

[Book Browse](http://www.bookbrowse.com/) <http://www.bookbrowse.com/>

[Bibliomania](http://www.bibliomania.com/) <http://www.bibliomania.com/>

[Simon and Schuster book club advice](http://www.simonsays.com) <http://www.simonsays.com>

### **Making the book club affordable for the participants**

Many people like to attend book discussion groups at libraries because it can offer a more affordable alternative to a private book club. There are a few different ways to make the book club more affordable and therefore more inclusive, to everyone:

- If the group does want to buy their own books, consider only discussing titles that are available in paperback.
- Attendees could consider sharing a book with another member of the group.
- Some libraries ask their Friends group to provide members with books.
- Other libraries have gotten support from local businesses and foundations for their book clubs (ex – foundations for literacy) that can help fund books for reading clubs. Once the process is completed, the leftover books can be sent out to donors as a thank-you, or sold at Friends sales to raise money for the next discussion books.
- Libraries also have a “book group block” sharing system, where different book clubs in different towns each buy one block of books to discuss, and then circulate the blocks between the different book groups. This would require a few leaders to organize and administrate.
- Members could download fiction titles for free, using sources such as Bibliomania.
- Some clubs have had members read different books that had the same topic or theme, using the local libraries collection. When the group gets together, members could discuss the commonality and differences of their chosen books.
- Last, but not least: Interlibrary loans could be the primary means of obtaining books for the book club members. Some guidelines when borrowing multiple copies: the books should be at least six months old, the books should not be current bestsellers, they should not be on reserve at other libraries, and the group should not keep them for more than two loan periods.

### **Quick tips for leading a book discussion group**

The challenge for any book club leader is to provide a setting where every participant feels that level of comfort – the library is a neutral location that can make everyone feel at ease. Also remember that while the commitment of members matters more than the quantity, do ensure there will be enough people for a good discussion in the event of a few absentees or non-finishers. Because it is a neutral location, a library setting is also a perfect setting for drawing people from different backgrounds into a book discussion group. These varied backgrounds lead to the best discussions, as everyone comes to

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the table with a variety of opinions, perspectives, and life experiences. The author of Book clubs, Elizabeth Long, had described the activity of reading groups as “exploration and self- definition mediated by literature”<sup>8</sup>. People bring not only their “personal worlds to the table... but their participation in a broader collective life”<sup>9</sup>. Remember – everyone has a right to his or her thoughts about a book, you can disagree, but be sure to respect other people’s opinions. It is also important for a discussion leader to try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions to what’s happening in the book.

Building a discussion group that is diverse in ethnicity, age and gender requires that the reading list be reflective of that same diversity.

### **So how does a group go about choosing an appropriate book?**

- Often, word of mouth is the best recommendation. Some groups have rules that those discussion participants proposing a book have not only read it, but can “testify it’s worthiness to the group”<sup>10</sup>.
- Books with intense or controversial contents can produce meaningful and memorable discussion.
- Often book clubs look at Canadian prizewinner lists such as Governor General’s award- winners or Giller Prize recipients, Pulitzer Prize winners or the British Booker Prize.
- It is also important to throw in a light reading title once in awhile (especially in the summer months).
- Most of the Internet sites listed previously have suggested titles, as does the reading group booklist at the end of this paper.
- Bookmuse.com is a particularly good site for choosing books for parent and child discussion groups.

**Books that aren’t good for discussion groups** (Information taken from Verso, Public Libraries, Nov/Dec 2003):

- Books that are too lengthy. People will lose interest, and may not have the time to devote to a really long novel.
- Titles that are too new or very popular, as it may be hard to obtain copies.
- Books that have too many plot lines. If the story is too “convoluted, clubbers may become discouraged and not finish it. If they finish it, they may forget much of it”<sup>11</sup>.
- Too much profanity. This can distract readers’ from the story, and some people may find it offensive.
- Books with “happy endings” aren’t always great books to choose because they elicit the same emotions from everyone. The best discussions are generated when participants disagree. Characters must do things that not everyone will agree with.
- Along this same line, “action or plot oriented novels don’t seem to evoke much discussion”<sup>12</sup>.

**Once you have a suitable book picked out, then you can start to discuss it.** This doesn’t have to be a daunting task. It is a good idea for the discussion leader to do a little research to supplement the reading. There are discussion guides available for many books, author interviews, reviews, critiques, and more out there – you just have to find it. Most of the web sources previously listed have guides for many novels, as well as good discussion questions. Novelist, available through NLLS’ online databases, has access to a number of book discussion guides. These guides may be printed and distributed (it is always important to remember that sometimes materials reprinted from other sources may not be reproduced without permission from the copyright holder). Vintage Reading Group Center is a good source of discussion resources for Nonfiction and poetry.

Readinggroupguides.com has a useful section on what to do when there is no guide available for you

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chosen book. Book reviews can also be valuable to discussion groups. Go to the Gale database and click on the Contemporary Authors online link to access the book reviews. Ebsco Host also has book reviews. To find out background information on the author, you can always visit the Author's webpage.

Remember too, that you must always tailor the questions to your group, as each discussion group will be unique in its own way. The "comments made can indicate which issues are of the most interest to the readers"13. The discussion leader is not a presenter - let the group decide where the conversation goes, within the limits that are clearly defined from the onset. It is a good idea to keep the questions fairly broad and simple, so there is a lot of room to answer. If the conversation starts to stall, "ask members to cast the movie. It's always interesting to see how readers view a character in their minds"14. If there is a movie version, perhaps during one session the group can watch it and compare it to the book. As well, sometimes something as simple as a handout can be handy to the group, for instance – a map of a country, a historical picture, etc. The goals are that each participant has learned something at the end (that each person has taken a 'journey of enlightenment' in some way), and of course that they feel comfortable coming to the library again and again!

### **Good reads for starting and running a successful book discussion group:**

100 one-night reads: a book lover's guide by David C. Major and John S. Major

Help for the group facilitator – Benet's reader's encyclopedia

The Bloomsbury guide to women's literature ed. Claire Buck

Books of the century: a hundred years of authors, ideas and literature from the New York Times Who's who in the Bible

Magazines' that are helpful include: *Book Review Digest*, *Canadian Book Review Annual*, *Magill's Literary Annual*, *Contemporary literary Criticism (Gale)*, *Current Biography yearbook*

Guide books: The New York Public Library Guide to reading groups By Rollene Saal 1995 011.73 SAA

The Mother Daughter book club 1997 Shireen Dodson 028.8 DOD

The book group book: a thoughtful guide to forming and enjoying a stimulating discussion group 1995- Ellen Slezak, ed 374.22 BOO

The reading group handbook: everything you need to know, from choosing members to leading discussions 1994- Rachel W. Jacobsohn 374.22 JAC

Ideas for book club titles: What to read: the essential guide for reading groups members and other book lovers 1994- Mickey Pearlman 011.73 PER

Bloomsbury good reading guide 1994- Kenneth McLeish 016.80883 MCL

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Read a book a week and be well read in a year 1994 Kenneth McLeish 016.80883 MCL Read all your

life: a subject guide to fiction 1989- Barbara Kerr Davis 016.8093 DAV

About the joys of reading:

Biblioholism: the literary addiction 1991-Tom Raabe, 002.74 RAA A voice from the attic by Robertson

Davis 1960, 1997 028 DAV History of reading 1996- Alberto Manguel 028.09 MAN

Everybody's favorites: Canadians talk about books that changed their lives 1996- Arlene Perly Rae  
28.55 EVE

Read for your life 1990- Joseph Gold 028.8 GOL Better than life 1994- Daniel Pennac 028.9 PEN

Ruined by reading: a life in books 1996- Lynn Sharon Schwartz 028.9 SCH

Lost in a book: the psychology of reading for pleasure 1988- Victor Nell 028.9019 NEL The power of

reading: insights from the research 1993- Stephen Krashen 428.4 KRA

Bookworms: great writers and readers celebrate reading 1997- Laura Furman 820.80357 BOO

Great books: my adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf and other indestructible writers of the western world 1996- David Denby 909.09812 DEN

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### Footnotes:

1. "Reading Group Therapy" by David Carr, Talk given at Cameron Village Library, September 6, 2003, pg.1
2. "Reading Group Therapy" by David Carr, Talk given at Cameron Village Library, September 6, 2003, pg.1
3. "Reading Group Therapy" by David Carr, Talk given at Cameron Village Library, September 6, 2003, pg.2
4. "Reading Group Therapy" by David Carr, Talk given at Cameron Village Library, September 6, 2003, pg.4
5. "Starting a book club in a mid-sized public library: a practical guide" by Susan E. Boring, MLA Forum Volume 1, Issue 1, February 20, 2002.
6. "Libraries offer chapter and verse on citywide book clubs; in Seattle, Chicago, Syracuse, and even some States, the concepts and tactics vary, but collective reading grows" by Michael Rogers, Library Journal, Volume 127, April 1, 2002, pg.16.
7. "But I only want to read books with happy endings: strategies for a successful adult book discussion group" by Sherry Evans, Verso Public Libraries, November/December 2003, pg.347.
8. Book clubs: women and the uses of reading in everyday life by Elizabeth Long. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003
9. Book clubs: women and the uses of reading in everyday life by Elizabeth Long. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003
10. Readinggroupguides.com
11. "But I only want to read books with happy endings: strategies for a successful adult book discussion group" by Sherry Evans, Verso Public Libraries, November/December 2003, pg.347.
12. "Books to avoid", U.S. News and World Report, Volume 115 n.24, December 20, 1993, pg.73.
13. "Libraries and Book clubs" by Donna Davis, Mississippi Library Association Publications, September 2000.
14. "Libraries and Book clubs" by Donna Davis, Mississippi Library Association Publications, September 2000.

Some of the suggested reading titles taken from "Especially for you: the book club member" brochure produced by Edmonton Public Library.

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