

**Showtime! Putting the Reader Center Stage**  
Diana Loevy, author *The Book Club Companion*  
[dloevy@gmail.com](mailto:dloevy@gmail.com)  
website: Dianaloevy.com

### **General Comments: Book Clubs Are Here to Stay**

- People are joining more than one book club
- Book clubs are becoming important social institutions
- Expectations for clubs are higher than ever
- For library book clubs, 12-18 people is ideal
- Home book clubs, 12 people is ideal
- Discussion time should range from 50-90 minutes, allow for overtime

### **The Role of Discussion Leaders**

- Organize, research and present the material in a lively and compelling manner
- Facilitate the patron's experience
- Problem solve
- Personality traits of discussion leaders: open to varied opinion, focused, disciplined, playful, curious

### **Attendance Figures Do Not Lie**

- Are you personally engaged with the material?
- Are you engaged with the group?
- Are your current clubs right for the community and the demo?
- Are the books varied, challenging, delightful and well written?
- Is the club held at the right time of day or evening?
- Is the discussion leader right for the club?
- Are you employing best practices?
- If attendance is not steady or growing, honestly assess

### **The Key Components of a Book Club Rarely Vary**

- Book clubs are wildly successful because of their ingenious components:
  - news and notes (community building)
  - introduction to the book in context
  - bio of the author
  - the discussion itself
  - conclusions, next book preview

## Discussion Preparation – Your Special Treat

- A great discussion begins here
- View reading and research as your special treat
- Active reading and note taking a must, come up with your own system that works
- Find patterns in the text, mark passages to read aloud
- Always return to the text
- Think of open-ended questions, not generic questions:
  - What is it really like to be a geisha?
  - What is this book really about?
  - Is this character really Laura Bush?
  - Why does the chapter end the way it does?
  - Which characters make things happen?

## The Author in the Docket

- Consider why the author chose the narrative structure, the setting, the use of certain objects as symbolism and the other literary devices in his/her toolbox
- Mercilessly judge the characters
  - Do they come alive and do you care about their fates?
  - Do they convince you about their thoughts and actions? How?
  - Is the dialogue for each character distinctive?
  - Are the characters anachronistic?

## Discussion Basics: Proven Techniques

- Active listening and engagement
- Quote from a review or blurb and solicit response; look for bold statements
- Encourage reading of *short* passages
- Set the bar high
- Keep the conversation on track but allow for serendipity and surprise
- Encourage readers to bring in references from other books, movies, TV, plays, poetry and news
- Remember: It is the readers' opportunity to shine and be heard

## Troubleshooting Basics

- The Invasive Species  
Take action: "Did anyone else find this to be the case?" "Hold that thought."
- The Shrinking Violets  
Take action: Draw them out, but don't push it if they are shy
- The Know-it-Alls  
Take action: "Let's return to that point." "I think we are going to have to agree to disagree."

## Choosing the Next Books

- Establish a system that works for the club and the library; plan ahead
- Be aware of the group's hits and misses
- Keep it contemporary and this might mean *Little Dorrit*, recent prize winners, news makers, and especially word of mouth
- Variety and surprise
- Ideally, the book leader will be passionate about the selection

## Additional Research and Extras

- Establish best practices for research and your time so you are not overwhelmed with material
- Gale , The New Yorker, The New York Times Book Review, The Atlantic, recent obituaries of literary figures, publishers' web sites, readinggroupguides
- Introductions to classic editions especially Everyman's Library
- Never, ever discount the home-made treat

## Recent Background Sources

John Updike, a Lyrical Writer of the Middle Class Man, Dies at 76

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/books/28updike.html?scp=4&sq=John%20Updike&st=cse>

The Background Hum: Ian McEwan's Art of Unease – The New Yorker

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/02/23/090223fa\\_fact\\_zalewski?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/02/23/090223fa_fact_zalewski?currentPage=all)

Newsletter:

<http://www.newyorker.com/>

Powells.com – Review a Day Newsletter

<https://www.powells.com/review>

The Atlantic Monthly

<http://www.theatlantic.com/>

Authors who visit the library

[http://www.westportlibrary.org/events/malloy\\_lecture\\_in\\_the\\_arts/](http://www.westportlibrary.org/events/malloy_lecture_in_the_arts/)

## **Book Club Leadership Do's and Don'ts**

### **Do**

Review the book and notes right before the club to keep it fresh

Make everyone feel welcome

Come up with a reliable system of reading and research that works for you

Allow for serendipity and surprise

Develop a set of open ended, generous discussion questions to which you really want to know the answers

Follow up with readers' comments noted during the session

Make it a goal to keep attendance numbers up with the idea that every club counts

Be available to members "after class"

Keep the patrons center stage and that includes knowing when to step in

Always "sell" the next book at the end of the session

### **Don't**

Cede the floor to one or two people

Allow over-sharing or abundant personal reminiscence to swamp the discussion

Rely completely on the publishers' discussion questions, though they can be helpful

Go crazy with a lot of research, stick to a few basics that work