

THE BOOK CLUB EXPERIENCE

Innovative approaches and a leadership style that's right for your community can make your book clubs a success

By Barbara Hoffert

Libraries have long served as a natural place for hosting book clubs, connecting people to and through books with benefits that accrue not just to club members but to libraries themselves. As book clubs enhance empathy and social cohesion, facilitating a shared diversity of opinion and sense of belonging, they also help “strengthen the role libraries play in individual lives and the community,” says Jackie Parker, lead librarian for readers’ services, Sno-Isle Libraries, WA. Not only do staff members learn more about their community by hosting a club, they also forge closer bonds with current users while reaching out to those who have yet to set foot in the library.

What’s more, librarians run book clubs well. Comments publisher Davina Morgan-Witts, whose BookBrowse recently released the report *The Inner Lives of Book Clubs*, “[I’m] impressed by how well matched the typical library-run book club is to both what people in book clubs want and what people interested in [joining] book clubs want, such as keeping the focus on book discussion with socializing secondary [and including] a diverse group of people.” The BookBrowse report shows that of the 26 percent of clubs in this country that are public, about two-thirds meet in libraries, making the library-run club an important feature of the book discussion landscape.

WHO LEADS

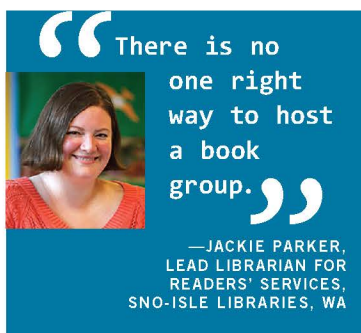
Still, there’s always room for improvement, and librarians should heed Parker’s admonition that “there is no one right

way to host a book group.” Whether simply to connect and enjoy, to address community-specific concerns, or to polish the perception of the library, “the reason you choose to offer a book group will help you determine how and what you offer,” says Parker. Different leadership models and innovative ways to conduct clubs can help librarians looking to start a club or bolster one they already host.

Parker points out that book club hosting tends to fall under three models—self-led, paraprofessional-led, or librarian-led—with the library’s resources a main factor as “staff are your most valuable but most expensive resource.” Giving a book club the run of a library room, with good attendance assured by members’ enthusiasm in launching the club, makes things easy. But as Parker warns, “The pitfall is that groups tend to flounder without experienced leadership or become territorial, insular, or unwelcoming to new members, not something we want in the public library.”

When clubs are not self-led, paraprofessionals can leap in, but Parker clarifies that “while everyone who works in a library should be able to have a conversation about books, a librarian may be better prepared to [link] book groups with additional resources and community connections.”

Emphasizing the value of librarian guidance, Brian Kenney, director, White Plains Public Library, NY, notes, “When you have a librarian-led book group, the members look to us for authority. We forget that people need help discovering books because we do it all day long.” For his borrow-a-book-group-leader initiative, Kenney even sits



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in on groups at private homes, invigorating members by providing book lists (readers love suggestions), recommending new approaches (why not try nonfiction or short stories?), and modeling best book club behavior while also promoting the library (yes, we carry ebooks).

WHO SELECTS

Leadership styles vary, with the first point of business being who selects the books. Self-led groups generally arrive at the next read by ballot or consensus, while librarian-facilitated clubs tend to lean on their leader. As Kenney says, “We take the pressure off of them in the decision-making process.”

But some groups mix it up. Says Cynthia Berk, who founded the Short Attention Span group for curated article reading at Patagonia Public Library, AZ, and ran it until she retired, “You can choose or delegate to group members, but something in the middle was best for me. I was open to ideas for future reading though I made most of the choices myself.” At the Detroit Public Library’s (DPL) Bowen Branch, manager and adult librarian Enriqueta Kozakowski, whose vanguard book group focuses on social justice issues primarily in nonfiction, confides that “the book club members pick the books they want to read. I facilitate the discussion because they prefer me to, and I enjoy it very much.”


To make better selections, Jo Ann Willis, branch manager, Chicago Public Library, recommends attending closely to member response year-round: “What excites them, what leads to the most intense conversations, what made them laugh, and, conversely, what were the titles that led to conversations that were difficult to maintain?” For her Soulful Perspectives book club, facilitated by four librarians in turn and focusing on African American issues and authors, a well-reviewed book by personal finance columnist Michelle Singletary proved unsuccessful because members hesitated to discuss personal money matters.

By contrast, Charles M. Blow’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, an intensely written memoir addressing the issues of race, class, and sexuality that interest the group, inspired “wonderful, vigorous conversation,” says Willis, precisely because “some members strongly hated it and some strongly loved it.” Still, Willis listened when a member whose longtime attendance carried some weight suggested that maybe they were reading too many memoirs.

FACILITATORS FIRST

Most librarians involved with book clubs insist that the leader should be a facilitator, focusing less on participating themselves than providing background on the book and author, keeping the conversation on track, and formulating questions in advance (especially helpful when the conversation stalls). Marianne Paterniti and Pat Sheary, the Book Group Team at the Darien Public Library, CT, require a strong moderator when they host one-time, invite-the-town book groups on a

“You are there to facilitate, not educate.”



— PAT SHEARY, PROGRAMMING LIBRARIAN, & MARIANNE PATERNITI, BOOK GROUP COORDINATOR, DARIEN PUBLIC LIBRARY, CT

sky-rocketing title. But they agree that clubs meeting regularly need a more neutral, stepped-back presence. “If you express a strong point of view,” says Paterniti, “very often everyone in the group will side with you”—not conducive to a free-flowing exchange of ideas.

Sheary adds that although imparting background information is valuable, you shouldn’t provide a college-level lecture: “You are there to facilitate, not educate.” How much preparation should the leader do? “Opinion is split

on whether one must have read a book to facilitate conversation,” notes Parker, adding that “it may depend on the particular staff, your purpose in hosting the group, and the moderation style chosen.” In addition, library administration may face labor-law issues in requiring staff, particularly hourly staff, to read on their own time.

Smart librarians know how to keep any book conversation going and can always turn to the question-loaded reading group guides that publishers provide and that abound on the web. Still, some situations demand a thorough read. If the setting is local or the subject has particular ramifications for the community, librarian leaders will want to craft their own questions and responses.

BOOK CLUB TRENDS

NONFICTION Nudging aside fiction, with a new focus on social issues.



BRING YOUR OWN BOOK For people who just want to share their favorite reads.

GOING SHORT Articles, essays, and stories for those not wanting to go full length.

SINGLE-INTEREST Mystery, SF, Classics, Poetry, African American, Men’s Groups, and more.

READ ALOUD Helping everyone from English as a second language readers to busy professionals engage with books.



ONLINE From PBS’s *The Great American Read* to the library blog, going where one’s customers are.



MULTIGENERATIONAL Adults and children reading and talking together.

ONE-TIME BOOK GROUP Inviting the whole town to discuss a hot new book.

Kathleen Longacre, adult services librarian, Naperville Library, IL, who facilitates a Read Aloud book club attended primarily by English as a second language (ESL) readers, looks carefully not just for linguistic complexity but for possible embarrassments such as “salty language and graphic scenes.” Holly Turner, youth services, Lucius Beebe Memorial Library, Wakefield, MA, makes three or four passes as she decides whether—and how—a book will work for her Multigenerational Book Club. Echoing other leaders, Berk explains, “I read each article two times, made an outline, took notes, and highlighted personal points.”

But not Kenney. He used to do plenty of reading to pick the books for his mystery club, but after being out one summer for health reasons, he found himself with only four days to devise the upcoming list and sought out reviews. “It turned out to be the best list in years. I wasn’t putting together a list of books that appealed to me, even though I always *thought* I wasn’t doing that. Relying on multiple reviews has created much better choices.” Now, the choices are based on expert reviews in sources ranging from *LJ* and *PW* to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, and Kenney approaches each read freshly, at the same time as other group members.

In the end, leaders should have both passion and expertise. “If a staff member doesn’t want to run a book group, it is going to be difficult to convince attendees that they are welcome,” warns Parker. To assure expertise in certain areas where staff are light on experience or time, says Ted Kavich, administrative services division director, Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL), VA, you could find a volunteer or even hire a facilitator. “We have one, a teacher, for two book groups, classic books and award winners, and she brings enthusiasm and a lot of knowledge,” he says, adding, “the groups love her. It’s money well spent.” To lead discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, Darien’s Book Group Team Skyped in an African American history teacher who was married and a father and could identify closely with Coates’s ideas. That, says Paterniti, “lent an air of authenticity that Pat or I couldn’t offer.”

NEW FORMATS

Book clubs keep evolving, having moved over the years from single-title chats to embrace read-alikes, read-arounds, related movie attendance, and more. The most striking new development is nonfiction’s rising popularity. Traditionally, fiction titles have jammed three-quarters of book club reading lists. But many clubs now include nonfiction in their reading, and nonfiction-only groups are becoming more popular, with social justice issues fueling much of this interest.

Kozakowski’s DPL-based group offers a prime example of reading done in urgent response to today’s world. As Kozakowski explains, the group’s members are committed

to investigating social issues past or present, local, national, or international, having told her that “bigotry in America and the world keep them motivated to engage in cross-cultural understanding.” The reading also affords them “a feeling of belonging to a community, especially during this time of division”—which highlights Kozakowski’s insistence that to run a book club well, “librarians must know and understand the era they are living in.”

Of course, not all book club nonfiction is politically focused, and some clubs intentionally avoid the subject. Of a nonfiction group she hosted, *LJ* reviewer Lisa Rohrbaugh, formerly with Leetonia Community Public Library, OH, says, “We shied away from religion and politics as discussions would get a bit too heated!” According to the BookBrowse report, 13 percent of American book club members avoid books on politics, religion, and sex, with politics getting the biggest thumbs down. (Only three percent of respondents outside of America felt similarly constrained.)

As Rohrbaugh explains, she launched her group at the request of a man she hadn’t seen in the library, and nonfiction clubs may have the advantage of attracting new users. That’s true especially of men, historically not big participants in book clubs, though library-held clubs reportedly do much better than their private counterparts in this regard.

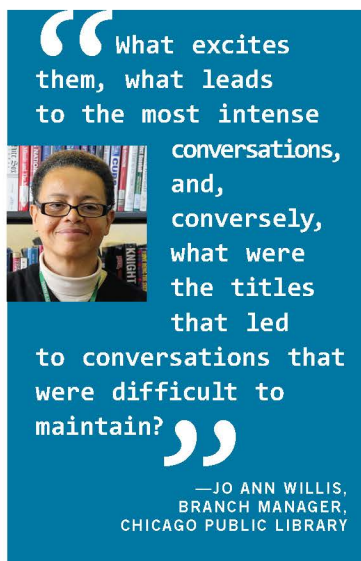
Other innovations include Bring Your Own Book clubs, for people short on time or the patience to read titles proposed by others but eager to share favorite reads; single-interest groups dedicated to mystery, poetry, or the classics; and online book clubs, great for those who can’t attend meetings in person but still want to connect. From Goodreads to PBS’s *The Great American Read*, the online environment offers opportunities librarians can exploit, and as Parker says, “It’s good to have a presence in the space your customers already inhabit.” Still, what works globally might not work at home, and she urges librarians to craft their own cybertools. For instance, through the readers’ services blog, the Sno-Isle Libraries issue a reading challenge called Beyond Bestsellers, which encourages

customers to try something new and to share comments and lists related to each month’s theme.

GOING SHORT

Short-form book clubs are increasingly popular, as much because of taste as time. Tasked with creating a new club, Patagonia’s Berk thought, “I want to read something I choose rather than something I might have to struggle through, and I also want to check out some of the amazing articles [in the library’s periodicals] and get informed.” Thus was born her Short Attention Span group for reading magazine articles, which often had Berk plowing through five pieces to find one that was just right.

To be picked, an article “had to have some meat to it; that is, it had to have controversy, or positions to take, alternative perspectives and points of view for deliberation,”



she explains, and she craftily paired two pieces, e.g., one on head transplants and one on the mind-body dichotomy, for a session's worth of good discussion. In time, Berk mixed in essays and short stories, a trend popular elsewhere. Notes Kenney, "The advent of short story discussion groups really meets a need for folks a little intimidated by reading a 350-page novel."

Longacre's Naperville Read Aloud book club also relies on the short story. As Longacre explains, her colleague Lisa Johnson was hoping to tap into the popularity of audio and the pleasure of being read to as a child with a club facilitating bit-by-bit out-loud readings of the classics. But as Longacre observes, "The intended audience isn't always the receptive audience," and participants turned out to be mostly nonnative English speakers looking for community, connection, and the chance to read and discuss something in a single sitting. To meet that need, Longacre turned to the *Oxford Bookworms Collection*, where works by favorites such as Ray Bradbury and Maeve Binchy, plus accompanying questions, have helped members parse meaning and practice pronunciation.

CONNECTING ACROSS THE AGES

Still, reading aloud classics or other big tomes might be just the ticket for busy professionals and/or parents eager to share a literary moment but unable to carve out regular reading time on their own. At St. Hilda's & St. Hugh's, a private school in Manhattan, a group of parents met weekly in the library for several years to proclaim the greats, continuing even after their children graduated and working their way through James Joyce's *Ulysses* and much of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. One advantage: as with Longacre's group, there was no homework.

As Turner's Multigenerational Book Club attests, discussing a book can effectively connect parents with children, even if it's not by Proust. The club brings together about 15 children, each accompanied by a parent, grandparent, or other adult, and uses thematically rich works (e.g., Katherine Applegate's *The One and Only Ivan*) to "help children and their adults look at books in a different way than just plot," says Turner. Child and adult can read separately or together, and Turner says the subsequent discussion can bring them closer, allowing youngsters to test their reflections with someone mature and oldsters to impart key memories. The discussion wraps up with activities, snacks, and a chance to scrawl further ideas on big sheets of paper posted around the room. One thought that emerged after reading Jewel Parker Rhodes's *Towers Falling*, initially a controversial choice: history is still alive.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Format and selection challenges notwithstanding, many facilitators cite

obstreperous members as their biggest concern. Veterans recommend setting clear guidelines stating that all viewpoints are valid and civility should prevail. Difficult mem-

bers often fall into recognizable archetypes such as those Paterniti and Sheary dub, for instance, the personal storyteller and the negative one. When these types emerge, the Darien team know how to use them to advantage—the storyteller can create an air of intimacy, the self-styled expert often conveys useful information, and the off-topic member expands the conversation by raising an overarching issue.

Still, such types can make the conversation stray, and facilitators must be prepared to jump in and redirect gently but firmly. Bullies can take more force. Says Kenney, "I am comfortable at this point saying to someone dominating the conversation, 'I appreciate

your feedback, but let's take a moment to hear from some other people.'" And the negative one? Say the group would like to hear first from those who liked the book, or ask that person to recommend the next read.

MEASURING UP

As Fairfax County's Kavich points out, a good facilitator contributes significantly to the book club's success. But how does a library measure that success? Attendance is one obvious answer—it's great to attract a crowd, especially when the crowd includes new faces. But as Kavich asserts, "Success doesn't always look the same. Suppose you have three people who come pretty much every month, and they love the group. *That's* a success, and it could grow."

In the end, you know you have a good book club when you have "energized attendees...who visit the desk...email with comments, and ask for suggestions," says Kavich. These members will likely be repeaters, and when they step up to help facilitate or nurture the group in other ways, perhaps even suggesting a book club spin-off, you've hit gold.

When a book club is flailing, Kavich suggests shaking things up with a new setting or approach—something he understands in a big way after helping establish FC-PL's book club conference (see "Book Clubs on the Same Page," *Programs That Pop*, *LJ* 12/18, p. 14ff.). Launched in 2013 because programming around All Fairfax Reads

wasn't doing as well as anticipated, this biennial event attracts club members from both the branches and the community with a keynote author, nuts-and-bolts workshops, and substantive networking time. The event helps eager readers connect and gives them a sense of belonging—and that the library really cares. It's kind of a giant book club itself, and it shows what librarians can do when they're determined to get people to talk about books. ■

“One measure of success is energized attendees who visit the desk, email with comments, and ask for suggestions.”



—TED KAVICH,
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES
DIVISION DIRECTOR
FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC
LIBRARY, VA

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