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## Starting a Reading Group

### Library Resources

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### Ordering books for your group

Please reserve your title at least 4 weeks in advance of the group reading it and ask library staff to check that we have a good chance of supplying the number of copies you require at the time you want them. As there are hundreds of reading groups registered with Libraries West, there can be a lot of pressure on popular titles; so please bring alternative titles. Some groups plan a programme of books in advance (6 or 12 months ahead). If we have enough advance warning (3+ months), we can consider buying additional copies.

### What kind of group do you want to be?

What time of day, lunchtime, evening, weekend?

How long will each session be?

Do you want a regular slot, or will you agree each date at the end of the meeting?

How often will you meet?

You will need enough time between sessions to read but not so much time that people lose interest.

### Publicity and Recruiting

People will not automatically know what a reading group is - you will need to signal clearly that the approach is relaxed – not like going back to school, and people won't be expected to talk like the Times Literary Supplement.

Word of mouth is the best publicity. Ask around among friends to see who may be interested. If an open group, you can ask to put up a poster in a library or bookshop.

Don't worry if you don't get large numbers to begin with – and if you get larger numbers than expected, you may need to split into two different groups. The optimum number for a group is generally 8 – 12 people.

## **Talking about reading**

The modern approach is reader centred – i.e. starts with the reader and the experience of reading rather than the writer and the book. People are not just looking to understand the book better, but to understand what the experience was like for other members of the group in order to illuminate their own experience. Our reactions to a particular book are shaped as much by who we are as by what the book is. Every reader will have a different experience of the same book depending on their personal history, prejudices, and what they had for breakfast!

A reader centred approach emphasises the quality of the reading experience rather than the quality of the book. So it's very common to have a poor quality reading experience with a so called 'great' book – it just means that the book and the reader weren't right for each other at that point. Conversely, it's possible to have a high quality reading experience with quite an ephemeral book which just happens to hit the right spot.

## **A reader centred approach has lots of advantages:**

- It allows people with different preferences in reading to talk to each other on common ground. It cuts across the boxes that people tend to put their reading into, for example, highbrow/lowbrow, poetry/fiction, this genre/not that genre, classic/contemporary.
- It makes no assumptions about what people have read about their knowledge of literary theory, or who said what in last Sunday's papers. Instead of the traditional hierarchy of an expert leading the group, or the plodding democracy of everyone getting their say in turn, a reader centred group is unexpected and dynamic.
- The atmosphere encourages honest exploration of responses instead of a pressure to perform
- It will accommodate varying levels of time commitment and reading appetite.

## **Deciding what to read**

It's a good idea to start by opening up discussion of people's reading habits, before choosing a specific title to read. This discussion will emphasise what people have in common – everyone shares a passion for reading, even when they read very different things – and help the group to gel. It will also get lots of anxieties out of the way; all those snobberies, guilts and shames which make up a reading personality can come out into the open in a light hearted and thought provoking way. The central value of respecting everyone's reading experience can be established without anyone giving a lecture.

Some groups plan a whole programme of reading, while others go where the fancy takes them. Members can take turns in proposing a book or everyone can bring suggestions from reviews in newspapers, magazines and book clubs.

## Ice breakers

Split into twos or threes to discuss e.g.:

### What

- What are your earliest reading memories?
- What books have been landmark books in your life?
- What kind of book do you tend to avoid?

### Who

- Whose next book are you eagerly awaiting?
- Who's the character in a book you first fell in love with?
- Who are the characters that you identify with?

### Where

- Where do you read?
- Can you think of a book that you can remember the place you first read it in?
- What's the most unusual place you have read?

### When

- Have you ever read a book to help you get through a crisis?
- Do you always read in bed before going to sleep?
- What's your good book for a long journey?

### How

- Do you always read to the end of a book, once you've started?
- How long do you give a book before giving up?
- Do you ever look at the end before you get there?

### Why

- What is most likely to irritate you in a read?
- Do you read to stretch your thinking? Give an example
- Why are you likely to give up on a book?

## **Making the group work**

The group will work if everyone gets out of it what they want to. It's easy to get hung up on making everything equal, but accommodating difference is actually more important. One person may have read 4 books by a particular author, while another has barely opened chapter one. Some people will expect a clear structure to the session, while others are just happy to chat.

## **Tips on leading a group**

- It may be helpful to split into pairs for a short time, (especially with larger groups), so that everyone gets the chance to contribute.
- Going around the group for everyone's response can result in people planning what they are going to say, rather than listening to other contributions.
- Avoid turning the spotlight on quiet people – let them decide how much they want to participate and when they want to speak.
- Encourage people to come, even if they haven't finished a book. Often they can enjoy the conversation for its own sake – and can join in where the discussion ranges around topics brought up in the book. Very often someone who has 'got stuck' is inspired to carry on and finish a book.
- Don't squash the over-dominant person too fiercely at the beginning. If you deny some people attention, their need for it will only increase. It is better to give them space early on, then someone can lightly remind them to let others have a turn
- Don't be frightened of conflicting opinions. There's no need for everyone to agree. As long as the ground rule for respect for everyone's reading experience is uppermost, then this will be interesting and stimulating, rather than upsetting and undermining.
- A reading group is organic: its nature will be changed by who joins and leaves. Think of this as a natural life-cycle. Don't waste energy trying to keep a flagging group going; much better to let it finish and start again at a different time or place or purpose.

## **Idea for a session**

### **Past Experience**

Bring a favourite book

A book you've got stuck on

A book you've reread

A book you didn't like or were disappointed in

### **How do you choose?**

Where do you get books from?

Do you choose on impulse?

Do you go for known favourites, or risk the new?

**Stressbusters** Bring a book you have found useful in a situation of stress – relationship breaking up, illness, too much pressure, bereavement. It might be a book that helped you deal with a problem or one that took your mind off it. Ask the group for more suggestions.

**Making links** It's worth making contact with staff in your local bookshop and library to keep in touch with what's going on. If an author is coming to visit, it may be that you can read a book of theirs in advance.

**This guide is based on the reader-centred approach developed by Opening the Book. We are grateful to Opening the Book for training, resources and permission to quote their material.**