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Starting your own book club

You don't need to be Oprah to start a book club

BY JENNIFER DOUGLAS, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES JANUARY 26, 2012

Finding Members

1. Check for a list of potential members at public libraries, bookstores or community centres.
2. Post a notice to solicit members on a community bulletin board.
3. Ask (beg) to join an existing club.
4. Form your own club by inviting a few neighbours, friends or colleagues.
5. A club of eight to 12 members seems to be a good number. Adding new members to an already existing club should be done by consensus.

Club Organization

1. A meeting location must be selected. A central location such as a library meeting room or restaurant works well as does rotating through members homes.
2. Decide on how much time will be allotted to socializing and how much time to discussion. This obviously should remain relatively flexible.
3. Will refreshments be served? Food can be a lovely addition to a club meeting.
4. Printing out a list of club members with respective addresses and contact info, as well as the book club schedule for several months in advance, is very useful.

Selecting Books to Read

1. It's a great idea to start with a book about "Book Clubs" such as The Reading Group Handbook by Rachael Jacobsohn or Build a Better Book Club by Harry Heft and Peter O'Brien. This activity is also recommended when interest in an existing club is languishing.
2. Book selections should reflect the scope of the club- fiction, non-

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fiction, poetry, biography, books by women authors, Canadiana, special themes or a mixture. From my experience, the greater the variation in titles and genres, the more intoxicating and inspirational the discussions. Allow all club members to have input at some point in the selection process.

3. Some reading groups suggest that the person recommending a title has already read it. This may help alleviate, though not prevent, nasty little literary surprises.
4. If possible, select titles at least four to six months in advance to ensure availability.
5. Avoid current titles not yet available in paperback, and out-of-print titles which are next to impossible to locate.
6. Make use of the myriad book reviews available through newspapers, literary magazines, TV and radio shows and the Internet to aid in selection. And remember, nothing beats a personal recommendation from your friendly public librarian.
7. Be aware that reading group guides are available for many titles if this is important to your club discussions.

Running a Meeting

1. Eat and socialize. These activities are an integral part of most reading clubs and help set the stage for a relaxing, productive discussion.
2. Many book clubs select a discussion leader for each meeting and rotate the responsibility on a monthly basis. This role might fall to the host or hostess. The leader's responsibility will vary depending on the degree of structure chosen by club members but may include:
 - a. providing background research on an author (biographical information, interviews, photos);
 - b. keeping the discussion on track ;
 - c. ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to speak (or as one author on the topic so aptly put it: "Engaging the shy types and reining in the discussion hogs");
 - d. posing questions from a discussion guide if one is being used.
3. I would recommend beginning the discussion portion of each meeting with a brief one to two minute "round the table-first impression" sharing of ideas. This serves as a good icebreaker and allows the less chatty members of the group to make a contribution early on. More general discussion will follow-character development, themes and writing style, symbolism, imagery, etc.
4. Make an effort to observe book club etiquette:
 - a. Each member should attempt to complete the book for the appointed date, regardless of the book's appeal to that member personally;
 - b. No one person should dominate the discussion for the duration of the meeting. Every member should have a voice;

c. All opinions should be politely respected. Book clubs are invigorating because of healthy debate but debate should never regress into bickering.

Tie-Ins - "Bringing the Book to Life"

1. Food - Refreshments may be planned around the cuisine of the book's setting.

2. Music - Play background music appropriate to the book.

3. Author Interviews - There are a number of author interviews available on video, or even better, invite the real live author!

4. Field Trips - Theatre dramatizations, joint meetings with another book club and sleepovers can all add to the book club experience.

5. Movies - Movie tie-ins have always been a nice way to enhance a great book, but read the book first for goodness sake!

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