

Tips for Book Discussions: Reading Critically

from Writers and Books

Novels that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style like Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River*. Often these books present the author's view of an important truth and send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” or “How does this relate to previous elements of the plot?” Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don't know the answers yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about themselves and wants you to learn about life from their perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

As you read *Peace Like a River*, consider the questions and topics raised in the “Discussion Points.” Why does Enger reveal what he does? Why does he let other information be revealed over time?

How do the characters in *Peace Like a River* relate to one another and their own secrets? What timeless topics does Enger raise? How are some of these issues addressed in the novel? How do these issues relate to your own life? These are the kinds of questions that lead to in-depth conversations with your work group and make the book meaningful and of lasting value.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author start with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, “what if...” questions. In *Peace Like a River*, one of the author's “what if” questions is, “What if Rueben only imagined the ‘miracles’ he saw his father perform?”

Another might be, “What if Davy had contacted his family?” Think about which “what ifs” prompted the story.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author’s style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are the chapters prefaced by quotes or titles? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of event unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Often, themes run through an author’s works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author’s work with another’s can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience. They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between the reader and the writer. Searching for, identifying and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work’s value and the discussion potential for your group.

The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open –ended questions. Questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You’ll often find that the questions you’ve prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don’t be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the “It just didn’t appeal to me” statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were

better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/dislike? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing and world view. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It is often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences.

Some Suggestions for Participants

A good discussion depends partly on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions (based on the New York Public Library's book discussion program):

SPEAK UP! Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

LISTEN! Try to understand the other person's point of view; see what experience and thinking it developed from. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.

BE BRIEF! Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible—it's more effective in a group discussion. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.

SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE! Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comment of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

COME UP WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND! As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.