
Reviving Literary Discussion

Book Club to Go Kits

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Guest Columnists

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Over the past decade, participation in book discussion groups has blossomed. Libraries have experienced a similar growth in expectations from book club members about the services and resources that can be supplied. Working with book groups gives the library the opportunity to engage a large community of active and passionate readers. But there are challenges to providing these services. One of the great challenges faced in supporting book discussion groups is supplying enough copies of the book being discussed for each group member. In addition to the books, groups often are seeking author information, book reviews, discussion questions, and ancillary material to enhance their encounter with the book. The development of Johnson County's Book Club to Go Kits are part of a strategic direction to offer support to local reading groups and to build the community of readers. Here, members of the Johnson County (Kans.) Library discuss their response to readers' needs for book club titles and discussion resources. Virginia Hermes, who retired in 2007, served as readers' advisory specialist at Johnson County's Central Resource Library. Mary Anne Hile serves as collection development manager for the Johnson County Library, and earned her MLS at the University of Missouri–Columbia. Johnetta L. Frisbie is Johnson County Library's fiction development librarian, and holds an MLS from Emporia (Kans.) State University.—*Editor*

The woman consulting her list of Book Club to Go Kits (BCTGK) has been here before. She stands in front of the shelves of bags, reviewing the titles her book club wants to read next and skipping over the ones already marked off. Planning ahead is easy because of the library's check-out period of two months with one renewal. Plenty of time! She can choose from among many types of books—biographies, chick lit, ethnic, literary, mystery, non-fiction, classic, young adult crossover, and men's interests. All readers can be accommodated. The large print copy required by one of her club's members is not a concern. Most of the kits have corresponding large print and audio formats for each title available in the library's collections.

Will the kits provide good fodder for discussion? This also is a guarantee. All of the titles chosen for kits not only contain themes and issues that lend themselves to good discussion but also have discussion guides included either in the book itself or available on the library's website.

Actually, she learned how to conduct a book club in this very library. The library offers sessions on how to facilitate a book club, in addition to the How to Start a Book Club link on its website and book discussion groups, led by library

staff, to join and from which to learn modeling. Is this book club heaven, or what?

WHY BOOK CLUB KITS? WHY NOW?

Oprah Winfrey re-energized interest in literature and book clubs when she started her book club in 1996. As a result, public libraries all over America have needed to respond to renewed popular demand for books appropriate for book club discussion and for how-to information about forming and conducting book clubs. In this context, the Johnson County Library staff reviewed its reader services for meeting the goals of its own strategic plan and addressing the Reading at Risk report from the National Endowment for the Arts (www.nea.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf). The library's strategic plan charges staff with providing convenient and personalized materials for patrons and had already itemized book club discussion kits as an objective.

From this review emanated a literary plan, *Cultivating Readers and Writers: Building a Literary Tradition*. This plan has several tangible goals including more—and more innovative—literary programming, developing a Find a Good Book page on the library's website, and promoting book clubs. The BCTGK collection is one product of this plan.

How does one start? The outcomes identified in the plan were for abstract ideas such as “Creation of a richer literary culture in Johnson County” and “Literature is a means to discussing more serious issues facing our community and our culture.”¹ Implementing the project has been rooted in practicality. Looking at the situation from the patron's point of view, staff found that belonging to a book club has a variety of potential challenges:

- A person's ability to purchase each book that the club discusses sometimes means the difference between belonging and opting out, especially for older residents on fixed incomes.
- Alternatively, when all members attempt to borrow books for the club from the public library, there often are not enough copies for everyone. Both library patrons and library staff find hunting for enough copies to be a real hassle.
- Those who are fortunate enough to obtain library copies often find that the books come due before the club meets.
- And even if all the books are available, there is the challenge of conducting an effective book discussion.

UNIQUE AMONG SPECIALTY KITS

Beginning in 2004, Reader Services Specialist Virginia Hermes and Collection Development Manager Mary Anne Hile worked with the staff Readers' Advisory Group to assemble a selection of discussable books, piloting the Book Club to Go Kits project with twenty kits. From that point, Fiction

Development Librarian Johnetta Frisbie, Hermes, and Hile, co-authors of this article, worked as a team to select the titles, with suggestions from others. Currently, 149 kits are available, with plans to add more.

The project utilizes books, audiobooks, print handouts, and a website not only to support the selection of materials but also to promote the book club process. Each BCTGK includes ten paperback copies of each title, many of which contain discussion questions in the backs of the books, and a bag for containing all the pieces.

Hermes and Hile believe that the kits' uniqueness is in

1. their packaging in an easily handled tote bag, with resources available on the library website to guide a book club's use of the books; and
2. the availability of alternative formats for the kit titles, even though they are not included in the kit itself.

Emphasis on alternative formats to accommodate senior citizens and those with visual disabilities is influenced by the mention of these target audiences in the library's strategic plan. In addition, the staff is aware that many of the library's patrons, because of their busy lifestyles, prefer listening to audiobooks while doing other activities, instead of reading books.

When the original parameters for patron use of the kits were set, the loan period was for two months with three renewals, holds were not allowed, and kits were not available for interlibrary loan. Because no holds were allowed, the kits were kept in one location so that browsers could easily determine availability and make a choice. Since the BCTGK collection has grown significantly, staff proposed new parameters, which were implemented in 2007. Under the new parameters, patrons are able to place holds on a kit and also request that it be sent to another location for pickup. Renewals were reduced from three to one to prevent possible long holds queues. After they see the effects of these changes, staff will decide whether to disperse the kits to branches.

CRITERIA AND METHODOLOGY

Years of face-to-face experience with patrons went into the development of parameters and criteria for describing the project. The library's Readers' Advisory Group performed a task force analysis with recommendations to implement BCTGKs, and their set of criteria has been used throughout the project. As a group, they selected the first twenty titles. Team members had long experience with patron needs and included staff from both the Central Resource Library and neighborhood libraries.

Aside from the requirement that there be ten copies of each title available for the kit, criteria also included the following:

- Kit titles had to be also available in the library in audio and large print formats, even though only regular print is included in the bags.

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- Kit titles must have discussion questions available, either in the book or on a website.
- Kit titles must be compatible with JCL's collection and programming in appealing to target audiences.
- Kit titles must be available in paperback format.

The availability of discussion questions is key to enabling book clubs to operate successfully and also differentiates the kits from “a bag of books.” Discussion questions can come from the publisher, *NoveList*, *Reading Group Guides*, or other credible sources, but they are too labor intensive to produce in-house.

What books are chosen? The kits include both fiction and nonfiction titles, and cover classic and contemporary titles, biographies, and young adult crossover. Some titles were chosen especially to appeal to men, although most of the titles are intended to appeal to both genders and all ages. Many titles explore foreign cultures or ethnic and economic diversity in the United States. By request, more selections of Jewish literature are being added.

In addition to these criteria, specific titles were chosen based on librarians' experience with readers and book clubs and on patron feedback. Nominees for the kits also come from discussions on the Fiction-L discussion list (www.webrary.org/rs/flmenu.html) and lists of popular books at various websites, including Rainy Day Books' (a successful local store that reflects metro area interest), Reading Group Guides (www.readinggroupguides.com), and other sources.

Precisely because Johnson County is so homogenous, a conscious effort is made to select titles reflecting other cultures. In 1990, the country was 98 percent Caucasian; in 2000, it was 92 percent Caucasian. Hile says, “We continually try to have books about other cultures outside our suburban context that is not very diverse.”

“Our community is no longer insular,” adds Frisbie, “because it's part of the metropolitan area and is cosmopolitan in the way that information is transferred. Everyone knows about everything immediately. This community comprises interested, educated people, and our collection reflects that. Even school reading lists are widely diverse, culturally.”

Because of the success of the first BCTGKs, the format is expanding in 2008 to serve different age groups and purposes. To support the library's Business Book Club, a partnership with the Kauffman Foundation FastTrac program, up to twelve business titles will be added each year. All parameters for those kits will be the same as for other adult BCTGKs.

The BCTGK concept is easily scalable, and kits are being added this year that are geared for young adults and children in grades 4–8 in response to teachers who wanted multiple copies of titles, longer borrowing periods, and help gathering enough copies to use for book discussions. Although marketed mostly to teachers, these kits are available to anyone and are housed with the regular adult BCTGKs.

In addition, ten large print BCTGKs have been introduced

by Outreach Services and are available only through reservation with that office.

Hile, Hermes, and Frisbie agree that this has been one of their all-time favorite projects. Hile says that the kits are satisfying for her because they are ongoing and involve a creativity that managerial duties do not offer. Frisbie says, “This is why librarians are librarians—we love books and want others to read them, and the kits create a format to share the books we love.” Hermes, the only one of the three in public service, takes special pleasure in “hand-selling” the kits to patrons enthusiastic about literature.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Not everything falls into place every time. Staff keep long lists of wonderful and suitable books for which criteria can be only partially filled because of lack of available audio format, large print edition, or published discussion questions. Periodically, they check this list to see when a book might become eligible for inclusion in the kits.

One example is Wilkie Collins' gothic novel *The Woman in White*. Despite diligent searching, a large print copy of that title could not be found. Yet, spurred by a reference to it in Nora Ephron's *I Feel Bad about My Neck*, they decided to create a kit for it and to continue to try to find a large print copy—an exception to the rule. Hile and Frisbie have even chased large print editions to an out-of-print dealer in Great Britain. If necessary, they purchase used copies. Once these rare formats are found and purchased, Hile has them stamped PERMANENT RETENTION to prevent losing them to weeding.

The lack of large print editions for some of these titles correlates to their main audiences. Some subject matter is not as appealing to senior citizens, for whom large print editions are mainly targeted. This reality prevents library staff from acquiring books in some categories for the kits. For instance, Gordon Parks's *The Learning Tree* is a Kansas Reads one-book/one-community title in 2007, but it is not published in large print, thereby preventing it from being selected for the kits. In general, the librarians find that certain ethnic books, including those by and about African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics are not as available in large print. The BCTGKs' booklist reflects this problem.

With these factors in mind, the decision was made to include some titles, even when a large print or audio edition is not available. In this way, many excellent titles that did not meet some criteria—particularly classics and newer titles—could be included. Availability of discussion questions remains a solid requirement, however, because creating them in-house is too labor intensive.

ACCESSING THE KITS

Library patrons access information about the kits through the library website and online library catalog, also available on the website (www.jocolibrary.org). They check out the items using the library's automated system. The restriction on on-

line requests was important initially due to the small number of kits, but patrons now are able to put kits on hold.

COST OF THE KITS

Cost of materials: \$100 for ten paperbacks and the tote bag. Creation and maintenance of the BCTGK webpage on the library's website involves .05 FTE Web content staff, plus general website support from Library Information Technology staff.

PROMOTING THE KITS

Considering the small amount of promotion done, the kits have fared well. In the week of their launch, a small article and photo appeared in the Sunday magazine of the *Kansas City Star*, evoking immediate public response. In addition, a bookmark and in-library display drew public attention. In 2006, a second article appeared in local newspapers announcing an award from the National Association of Counties to the library for creating the kits.

The one constant point of promotion is the library website, both on the main webpage and the Find a Good Book page, which contains an annotated listing of kits and other information about starting book clubs.

EVALUATING THE KITS: ENTHUSIASTIC PUBLIC RESPONSE

On the first day they were available, the BCTGKs experienced overwhelming success—fourteen of the first twenty kits were checked out immediately! Hile and Hermes attribute that largely to the article in the *Star* magazine on the preceding day. Since then, the library has made several large additions to the collection and plans more. Currently, there are 149 BCTGKs.

Exactly how are the kits being used? As hoped, some existing book clubs do rely on these kits, using one kit per month. Specifically, patrons tell staff that they love the kits for the convenience and the savings of time and money. One club has a stated policy to use only BCTGKs for exactly those reasons. Some members of other clubs have said that they like having the book club leader choose the titles to read from among the kits and bring the bags to the meeting to distribute copies. Some patrons choose titles from the kits for *multiple* book clubs to which they belong.

New book clubs have been started by patrons, using library resources. Still other patrons mention that they use the kits as a suggestion list for their own personal reading, even though they don't belong to a club. In fact, the handouts listing the kits fly off the shelf, no matter how many are put out. This enthusiastic public response validates the kits' utility and appropriateness. The kits also represent other positive things to the community:

- A popular, cost-effective use of library tax support for a broad cultural benefit.

- A new and innovative service to county residents that meets the goals of removing barriers to participation in community book clubs and promoting reading and discussion of literature. The kits are a unique packaging of library resources that go beyond making available books alone by providing access to other resources that help make book clubs possible.
- Area citizens' enhanced participation in the public library's services.
- People-powered vehicles—book clubs—that are important in strengthening neighborhood networking and building social capital.

An unexpected result is the perception of the kits as a community resource in a broader sense. One very small rural library in the region relies on them. The director comes to the Johnson County Library to check out kits for her library-sponsored book group. In addition, church groups and nursing home/assisted living activity directors have used the kits with their members and residents.

The staff evaluates their selection of titles by checking individual kit statistics to see which are more popular than others and by listening to comments from the community. Two examples are the addition of Jewish and men's interest categories in response to specific requests.

THE KITS IN CONTEXT: THE BROADER VIEW

Can a public library proactively affect a community's literary reading? One of the most discussed factors in reacting to the *Reading at Risk* report was what is meant by the "literature" mentioned in the report.² In responses to the report, the *New York Times*' Andrew Solomon cited engagement with experiences, viewpoints, and issues, and Joseph Epstein of the *Weekly Standard* cited the need to read about "the complexity and the contradictoriness of real experience."³

The parallel between reading and civic participation was noted in the *Reading at Risk* report, and Solomon says that "literary reading is an entry into dialogue," as opposed to spending the same time in company with electronic media. Later in his essay, he says,

The struggle is not to make people read more, but to make them want to read more. . . . We need to make reading, which is in its essence a solitary endeavor, a social one as well, to encourage that great thrill of finding kinship in shared experience of books. We must weave reading back into the very fabric of the culture, and make it a mainstay of community.⁴

Those ideas are exactly in line with this library's philosophy. Using literature as a tool for encouraging broader dialogue is precisely what the library intends. Empowering itself with community-building as an overarching goal, the Johnson County Library has embraced literature as one of several means to that goal. As mentioned above, outcomes

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of its literary plan include

- “Creation of a richer literary culture in Johnson County”; and
- “Literature is a means to discussing more serious issues facing our community and our culture.”⁵

Therefore, “literary” in the context of the BCTGK project, means, to quote Hermes, “[books] that have issues that lend themselves to a good discussion.” To reiterate, only titles fitting that description and that have available accompanying discussion guides (and meet the other criteria) are eligible for BCTGKs.

The kits’ popularity correlates to other observations in the *Reading at Risk* survey—specifically, that having higher income is an element that encourages reading, and that, according to Krashen, “the research overwhelmingly says that access to reading materials is the number one variable.”⁶ The BCTGKs address both of those elements by removing the monetary obstacle from participating in book clubs and providing convenience.

The BCTGK collection is just one project in the library’s efforts to build a richer literary community. Other offerings include eleven library-sponsored monthly book discussion groups, one movie-book discussion group, two meet-the-author programs, numerous outreach literature programs, a new creative writing class for adults, and a poetry presentation by the Kansas City Writers Place. Occasionally, the library holds special online literature discussion programs via Online Programming for All Libraries. Teen poetry readings and teen

creative writing classes produce *elementia*, the library’s teen literary magazine.

The Narrative Non-Fiction Book Discussion Club was introduced in 2006 as the library’s eleventh book discussion club, acknowledging the high popularity of this genre. Truth and beauty, those critical criteria applied to literature in general, shine in quality works of nonfiction storytelling. Note that the library’s book club *followed* the inclusion of narrative nonfiction in BCTGKs.

Literacy is essential, literature is vital, and reading of any kind is encouraged, but substance and engagement are the ultimate ends. At least, that is the perspective of this library. Through a combination of literacy and literary efforts, of which BCTGK is one, the library hopes to enrich, engage, and revitalize its community.

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