
Book Group Therapy

*A Survey Reveals
Some Truths about
Why Some Book
Groups Work and
Others May Need
Some Time on the
Couch*

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Guest Columnist

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Book groups, whether library-sponsored or privately hosted, continue to grow in popularity. Perhaps the opportunity to connect to others face-to-face in what is an increasingly virtual world motivates people to come together to talk about their reading. Or perhaps it is the food. In any case, reader interest in book discussions offers libraries a lot of opportunities to interact with their reading community and is a chance for libraries to reinforce their value to the community, a useful thing in unsettled economic times.

In 2008, the RUSA CODES Readers' Advisory Committee surveyed book group participants across the country. Among the most interesting of the survey results was the discovery of a common set of problems that book groups seem to face no matter where they are or how long they have been meeting. Here, Megan McArdle explores these ongoing book group issues and offers suggestions that libraries can use when working with their local groups. These suggestions also will be useful for book group members seeking to improve the quality of their book group experience.

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At the far end of a dimly lit hallway, in a mostly unoccupied office building, there's a plain, unassuming door with the words "Book Group Therapist" hand-lettered on the glass. As you gingerly open the door and enter the office, a cool-eyed blond with an authoritarian air gestures to the enormous couch that stretches across the far wall of the room. "Ah! You must be my ten o'clock clients. Come in and have a seat." Your book group dutifully files into the office and jostles for position on the couch, while the therapist slowly looks you over. "In this room I require absolute honesty if we are to get at the root of your group's dysfunctional issues." She makes eye contact with each member, pausing over those members fussing with cell phones or furtively looking for the coffee. "Shall we begin? Let's start by talking about your childhood reading . . ."

Oh, if only this kind of therapy was a reality for a troubled book group! Whether brand new or long-established, book groups can run into problems. These can range from the benign (a book falls flat) to the group-killing (unpleasant meetings filled with bickering that leave members intimidated and afraid to return). Learning what some of the most commonly occurring problems are with book groups, what some of the

most successful books discussed in their groups are, and what members would most like to change about their groups are just some of the useful results that came out of a 2008 survey conducted by the RUSA CODES Readers' Advisory Committee. A review of the survey findings should help all those working with book groups to get ideas on how to provide some therapy, or at least some therapeutically good reads.

In late 2007, the Readers' Advisory Committee was planning for a program at the 2008 ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, called Book Group Therapy: How to Repair, Revamp, and Revitalize Your Book Group. This program was intended to help librarians who host library book groups or work with community book groups. The committee members had all experienced and heard from our peers that there were some common issues that book groups run into, and we wanted to provide some strategies to help solve these problems. As research for the program we decided to conduct a survey of book groups to try and find out more about what makes them tick. We put together some questions that we found interesting, let it loose on the Web (via the wonderful SurveyMonkey application), told people we thought would be interested (through posts to blogs, discussion lists, and newsletters), and slowly watched the responses come in. We were hoping to learn more about who is in book groups, how they function, and what works well—and not so well—in their book groups. Starting in January 2008, the committee collected data from the survey. We received more than 1,400 responses from book groups all over the country. What we discovered was that a successful book group is like a successful relationship. It requires compromise, humor, and compatibility. Any group of more than two people has the added complication of group dynamics: alliances can be formed, struggles for dominance occur, and sometimes members end up looking around them wondering “what am I doing in a musty library basement with people I don't know talking about books I don't even want to read.” To help prevent that moment of terror, let's look at some of the most commonly reported problems from the 750 respondents who answered the question, “If there was one thing that you would change about your book group, what would it be?”

1. I WISH WE WOULD DISCUSS THE BOOK!

People join a book discussion group to discuss books, don't they? More than 10 percent of the people who answered this question complained that their group spent too little time talking about the book and too much time on other things. The other things varied from group to group: maybe it was one member who wants to show home movies of her trip to Italy (even though your book was set in depression-era Kansas), or another who wanted to show off how her pet ferret learned how to use a computer, or maybe it was most of the group who wanted to move on to the chocolate portion of the evening before they got past chapter 1. The key to this problem is that a five-minute book discussion followed by fifty-five minutes of home movies, pet tricks, or face-stuffing does not have to be a bad thing. If everyone in the group is

BOOK GROUP FAVORITES

From the more than 900 people who answered this survey question, most gave multiple favorites, resulting in a list of more than 1,100 unique titles. However, some titles appeared again and again as people's favorites:

1. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
2. *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen
3. *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls
4. *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd
5. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See
6. *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult
7. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini
8. *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant
9. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon
10. *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver
11. *Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson
12. *Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger
13. *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel
14. *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett
15. *Memory Keeper's Daughter* by Kim Edwards
16. *Atonement* by Ian McEwan
17. *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden
18. *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson
19. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
20. *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides

happy with this arrangement, they will never end up on the book therapist's couch. It is when you have stumbled into a group where you thought you would be sharing insights into themes and characters and you end up talking about recipes and daycare issues that you might need to find a new group. The key to this issue is having a common goal. When starting a new group, consider having a frank discussion about what you all want to get out of the experience. And when joining a group that has been around for awhile, don't be afraid to bow out if it is not a good fit. If everyone else is looking for a retreat from their daily grind where they can gossip and share a cocktail, but you want an intellectually challenging Socratic debate about literature, they are not the problem—you are. Find a group that is more compatible with your own views of what a book group should be.

2. I WANT SOME RULES!

A related complaint that manifested itself in many different ways on the survey was that members wanted some established ground rules. We all know that there are people who prefer rules and procedures and get antsy when things are left too loose. It could be as simple a complaint as wanting to have a system for choosing titles or rotating the moderator duties. Or perhaps someone wants to have a rule to ensure

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that everyone speaks by going around in a circle. Do you need to set a limit to how long members have the floor? Does the moderator change every month? Is he or she responsible for choosing the next title? If not, does the group choose titles in advance? Do you use a nomination process? Do members vote? When groups are first formed, these are some of the crucial procedures to work out. Once ground rules are agreed upon, it also can be helpful to make sure everyone agrees on the format your discussion will take. Many survey respondents said that they wanted a more formal discussion: discussion of the author, themes, and written questions that members try to address. Luckily there are many tools to help facilitate this kind of discussion. Book group editions of popular titles often come with questions and background for those who want help with finding good discussion fodder. There also are many websites with resources for book groups, such as www.readinggroupchoices.com and www.readinggroupguides.com. Publisher websites are another great place to get author information and discussion ideas. Have the tools that can soothe the structure-loving soul. You can have a book group without using prepared questions, but these resources can lead readers to deeper levels of discussion than they might have gone to on their own. Only your group can decide how formal your discussion will be. Try to find a meeting format that meets the needs of all members.

3. I THINK EVERYONE IN THE GROUP SHOULD TALK (AND SOME PEOPLE SHOULD TALK A LOT LESS)!

Book groups that have a very formal structure, where each member shares in turn, may encounter this complaint less often, but no group is completely immune. Some people are naturally reticent about expressing their opinions, and it can take some coaxing to get new members to participate in the discussion. However, having all members speak is usually an important feature of a healthy book group. Readers bring their personal background and past reading experiences into every new book they read. This is precisely why people discuss books: to share insights and discover new perspectives. We all find that certain aspects of a book speak more strongly to us and consequently stick in our minds when other parts slide right off. The “what book were *you* reading?!” moment is cherished in many discussions, which is why it is important to have all viewpoints represented. Now the flip of this problem is, What do you do when you have some members, shall we say, *over*representing their viewpoints? One overbearing member has ruined many a book group. Sometimes this forceful personality tries to turn every book group meeting into their own personal therapy session, bringing irrelevant personal issues to every discussion. But even when this problem group member stays on topic, they can sweep a discussion away by the very force of their personality, stifling other opinions and reveling in the sound of their own voice. This can be a group killer, and it should be addressed tactfully but firmly or else resentments will grow and folks will qui-

etly drop out to find a more convivial group. As with most of these problems, your book group therapist would advise painful honesty. Rules about taking turns and yielding the floor can go a long way when you are trying to ensure a free sharing discussion. This does not mean consulting Robert's Rules of Order, but an agreement on the shape you would all like your discussions to take.

4. WE NEED NEW BLOOD!

A very common complaint from respondents was that they wished there were more voices in the discussion. In our survey, many said that they wanted more members, more ethnically diverse members, younger members, and there was a resounding call for more men. The last complaint does not come as a surprise, as out of the 1,200 plus people who completed the survey, 94 percent said that their book group was mostly female. The cry for younger members is also expected, as 83 percent said that their group member's average age was over 40 years old (40 percent over age 55). The expressed desire for more diversity in a group's makeup seems to be a desire for more points of view, which can lead to more interesting discussion. It may also be a simple cry for some new faces. If a discussion between group members leads to a consensus that new or more diverse membership is desired, it may take some advertising effort. Flyers at the library, local bookstore, church groups, and work break rooms are always a good idea for drumming up interest in a book group. But if you are looking to add diversity, you may need to step out of your usual environment. Think about who you are trying to attract and set out your lures appropriately. Looking for younger members? Try asking a local coffee shop or comic book store if you can put up a flyer. Wondering how to find men open to the idea of a book group? Try recruiting at your local gym. While there is something to be said for a comfortable circle of friends, groups made up of people without prior connections can allow for even broader pool of opinions, points of view, and reading tastes.

5. THE BOOKS WE READ ARE TERRIBLE!

Many folks simply feel that they are spending a lot of time and energy on books that they find no enjoyment in reading or discussing. Every book group has read a title that falls flat, but if month after month you are carving time out of your life (or extracurricular reading) to slog through books you hate, it is time to speak out. Your book group therapist would counsel that no good can come of being passive-aggressive when it comes to literature. A frank conversation with the group may reveal others who feel the same. Perhaps you can secede from your group and discuss books that are more your cup of tea. This is yet another time where being honest with each other about your goals for the group can be the key to a happy group. Often, it can be that the problem is that your group is in a rut. Many survey respondents complained about reading “too many depressing books.” With all due

respect to the woman who got so many people reading in book groups, this could be called the Oprah Book Effect. If you read books every month that share a common theme or tone, even if this is the kind of book you all might normally gravitate toward, it might be time to shake things up. Try a science fiction novel, a historical thriller, or an engaging work of narrative nonfiction. You might all decide you hated the book that brought you out of your comfort zone, but books that you hate can be the food for your greatest discussions as a group. This is why, in our survey, we asked not only for the favorite books that a group read, but also which books made for the best discussion. The answers, although sometimes similar, including some great revelations of discussions about hated books that went on for hours as people vented their collective spleen. And there is always the wonderful chance that reading in a new genre might open up new worlds of reading to members who never imagined they could enjoy reading something completely new. The key to a good book for discussion is not that it conforms to a particular style or genre, but that it is *discussable*. Another common complaint in the survey was that books were too light, or did not have enough meat on them for the group to have a lively discussion. This can be true of books that as a solitary reading experience might have been excellent. But if going around the table, the only thing you all can find to say about a book is that you liked it, that book was not a good pick for discussion. This also can make finding good genre books to discuss a challenge. If the only thing to discuss about a mystery is whodunit, then you will have a short evening. In every genre, there are books that can stimulate long and rich discussion, but you may have to look at them in a slightly different way before picking them for your group. Gary Niebuhr's *Read 'em Their Writes* (Libraries Unlimited, 2006) and Neil Hollands' forthcoming *Fellowship in a Ring* (Libraries Unlimited) both provide resources for selecting mystery and speculative fiction titles for book discussions.

The disappointing book choice may happen more often in groups that pick their books from reviews or bestseller lists. Requiring that someone in the group has previously read the book you are considering can at least give you someone to blame if the discussion falls flat! One of the most useful things that came out of the survey was a list of books that have been road tested and preapproved by book groups around the country. For those who have had a run of unsuccessful books, why not try one of the books in the sidebar, which other groups have said were their favorites? We also asked why these books were favorites, which brought out some useful comments. Some that were mentioned repeatedly were that groups liked books that made them think, kept them engaged, introduced them to a new culture, or gave them a new way to look at the world. Books with exotic settings of time or place were often successful picks, but groups also relished the familiar with books that had ties to their own community or experiences. Those who told us about their least favorite books also gave some interesting reasons, including bad writing, boring stories, unsympathetic characters, depressing

PROFILE OF THE TYPICAL BOOK GROUP MEMBER

- Female (94 percent of groups characterized their groups as mostly female)
- Baby Boomer (70 percent of respondents were between the ages of 40 and 65)
- Library user (over 50 percent visited a library more than once a week)
- Friendly (60 percent said their groups were made up of personal friends)
- Big reader (54 percent read three or more books per month)
- Loyal (45 percent had been in their book group five or more years)
- Committed (83 percent of respondents said that their members almost always finish the book)
- Hungry (60 percent of groups always serve food at their meetings)

plots, overly literary styles, disturbing subject matter, or just too long! Groups that have experienced a “dud” should talk about why a book didn't work for them as it may give you a better sense of books you want to avoid.

The common theme for all of these problems is a lack of communication. Any good therapist (book or otherwise) would probably argue that the root of most interpersonal problems could be solved with better communication. Book groups can be one of the most enriching and rewarding ways that we can engage with literature, but you need to find a group that suits you. Sometimes the healthiest thing you can do in any relationship is to walk away. This doesn't have to be a bad thing, parting cordially, with those famous words “let's still be friends!” But if you communicate with your fellow book group members and express your frustrations, you may find that they are easier to solve than you think. And although the book group therapist may not have an office in your town, this does not mean that there are not resources to help your group. Consider hiring an outside moderator for either a short period or on a continuing basis. Often public libraries are willing resources for book groups in need of assistance. A facilitator can bring a structure to your discussion that may be what you need, but also can do some of the legwork of preparing questions and getting background information that can help you have deeper, richer discussions. The facilitator also may be able to deal with complicated group dynamics, reining in those who overshare and drawing out your wallflowers.

Leaving the book therapists' office, your group hopefully has some better sense of the common problems book groups face and some thoughts about how to work through them. Those interested in the full results of the book group survey can visit www.readersadvisory.org.