



Tips for Hosting a Book Discussion Program

Adapted from a Let's Talk About It workshop presentation given by Michele Payne, Boise State University, 2000.

Who chose these books anyway?

The Let's Talk About It books were selected by a team of humanities scholars and librarians to help develop specific themes, to spark discussion, and to expand our reading experiences. They were selected with these guidelines in mind:

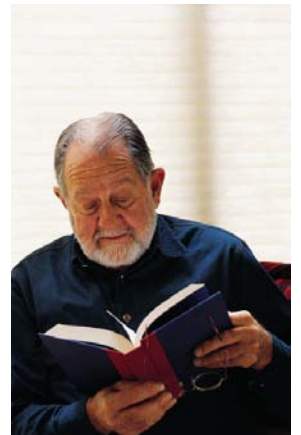
- a variety of writing styles
- books that “talk to each other” about the theme, offering different perspectives
- literary quality
- appeal to both men and women and various ages of adult readers

What can we say when our participants don't like a particular book?

How might the community respond to texts that have sexually explicit scenes, vulgar language, violence, social critiques? You primarily want to be prepared for negative responses (see suggestions below).

- **Read the book first** or have staff or volunteers whom you trust read the book to identify potential controversial or explicit aspects of the book.
- **Prepare participants for the book:** Consider what you can do to help them through it: What might they look for or pay attention to? At what point will the novel become difficult?

You can suggest using post-it notes to mark difficult passages or aspects of the book they want to remember for the discussion. If they might be offended by the language, prepare them for this and ask that they consider how the language may/may not support the book's overall purpose. If the book might take them into painful or rather dark aspects of the human experience, let them know.



- **Encourage your readers to not to stop reading** when they come across something difficult, but to mark it and move on. The discussions will help the confusing parts become clearer.
- **Encourage participants to come to the discussion** even if they don't like a book. They may find out something new about the book that helps them understand difficult parts or find out that others found the book interesting or engaging.

How can we plan a program that makes for a good discussion?

- **Discuss expectations:** If possible, discuss with participants what they expect of the group: what do they hope to gain in reading and discussing the books? Having them talk about expectations can help you deal with potential conflicts or dissatisfactions



before they arise, and the participants will feel they have some control over how the meetings will run. If they feel they only show up and take whatever is given, they may feel less investment in finishing a book or even coming.

- **Introduce everyone:** If the individuals in the group don't already know each other, have them introduce themselves at the beginning of each meeting. You might also have them share what they most want to discuss about the book—something that gets everyone offering a response or sharing why they are interested in the program generally.
- **Use ground rules** that create a safe and welcoming environment, like:
 - ✓ we learn from each other
 - ✓ everyone gets a chance to speak and no one dominates
 - ✓ we respect each other's opinions and disagree with grace and tact
 - ✓ we stick to the topic
- **Review what's been discussed in previous sessions** about the theme: It can help keep infrequent participants involved if the leader summarizes previous books and discussions. This overview doesn't have to be elaborate (no need to take notes during discussions), but it could focus on issues that arise while discussing the program theme.