Tips for Book Discussions

from Washington Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library

Reading Critically

Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. These books usually present the author's view of an important truth and not infrequently 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?" 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 answer 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 himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, "what if ... " questions.

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 chapters prefaced by quotes? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events 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. 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 reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself into 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/disliked? 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's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences ... if that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that it's not a book discussion.

Reading Group Guide

(from W. W. Norton & Company, publisher)

From the Author

Although the action of The Air We Breathe is confined to a tuberculosis sanatorium, the novel is also very much concerned with American attitudes toward the war raging across the ocean. Andrea Barrett's characteristic fascination with the history of science and technology–in this case, early twentieth-century developments in chemical and biological weapons, changing theories of atomic structure, and the use of X-ray images as diagnostic tools–helps connect aspects of that war to the patients' isolated situation. Through their Wednesday discussion groups we can share their growing knowledge, but we also know things they can't know–what, for instance, resulted from "the war to end all war." The appearance of places and families familiar from Barrett's earlier work further helps expand the novel's resonance, as we fit our knowledge of some of the characters' relatives into what we learn about them here.

"I've written about the northern Adirondack Mountains before," Barrett says, "especially in a story from 'Servants of the Map' called 'The Cure,' which is about two women–Eudora's aunt and one of her grandmothers–running private boarding cottages for people with tuberculosis in the late nineteenth century. Working on that, I grew curious about the large public institutions caring for patients, often immigrants, who had neither money nor family. And I started wondering what it would have been like to be confined inside one of these big, prison-like buildings that once dotted not only the Adirondacks but also the rest of upstate New York and northern New England.

"At first I imagined a kind of low-rent, democratic version of Thomas Mann's 'The Magic Mountain.' As the setting was transposed to America, so the rich patients would be transposed to impoverished immigrants in a public sanatorium. As 'The Magic Mountain' takes place just before the outbreak of World War I in Europe, so I thought this might be set in analogous time, 1916 and 1917, just before the American entry into the war. But the initial conception changed a great deal, even before I started writing.

"First, the intertwined family of characters I've been working with for some time barged their way in. 'The Air We Breathe' was particularly altered by connections to characters who first came to life in the stories of 'Ship Fever:' the sisters Rose and Bianca Marburg, and siblings Ned and Nora Kynd, who emigrated from Ireland during the height of the great famine. Together they've generated a dense web of connections and relations that continues to influence what I write now. 'The Families,' a version of the family tree I've been keeping over the past decade, is meant to help interested readers follow these relationships.

"The novel changed even more during the year I spent in New York. As it happened, my first day at the New York Public Library, where I'd been lucky enough to get a fellowship meant to help me research the background of some of my characters, was on September 10, 2001. The experiences of the following days and months made me think differently about the meaning and subject matter of the novel, even though the characters and the setting remained the same. Suddenly I was thinking less about the medical aspects of the situation and more about the war taking place offstage. About the way both communicable diseases and the threat of outside attack tend to make us clump together and blame 'outsiders' for whatever's wrong; and the way wars induce prejudice against immigrants; and the way, during the course of a war, it's easy to toss certain liberties overboard. About the way, in a climate like that, it becomes easy for us to betray one another."

Discussion Questions

1. Who betrays whom over the course of the novel? How do those betrayals and underlying conflicts mirror what's going on in the larger world? Can you connect those betrayals to the novel's unusual narrative voice?

2. The two opening chapters explicitly contrast conditions at the public sanatorium of Tamarack State, inhabited largely by impoverished immigrants, and the cure cottages of Tamarack Lake, inhabited by wealthy patients. Discuss the role class differences play in the novel.

3. The novel's plot turns, in part, on a triangle of misplaced attractions: Miles is drawn to Naomi, who's drawn to Leo, who in turn is drawn to Eudora. What do you think keeps each of these characters from perceiving the reality of the situation? Why, for instance, is Naomi so attracted to Leo, and why might she believe so deeply that the attraction is reciprocal?

4. What analogies do you see between the characters' misconceptions of one another and the way the patients as a whole are perceived by their families and by politicians? Between the way the healthy perceive the patients and the way they perceive immigrants?

5. Leo Marburg, who enters Tamarack State as the novel opens, catalyzes much of the action. How do you account for his effect on others? Do you view him as a romantic figure? And what role does his love for chemistry play? Elsewhere in Barrett's work, he appears as the elderly grandfather of Rose and Bianca Marburg, both of whom learn to love science because of him. Does that knowledge affect your understanding of Leo here, as a young man?

6. Dr. Petrie's attitude toward both his patients and his coworkers, especially Irene, seems quite sane and balanced; he's also responsive, at first, to Miles Fairchild. How do you view the conflict that ultimately develops between them? What role does Dr. Petrie play in the group's reaction to Leo after the fire?

7. Irene, who listens sympathetically to the patients while she takes "roentgenograms" of their chests, hides from them the wounds caused by her experiments with the X-rays. Dr. Petrie at first conceals, and then reveals, some of the effects of the first uses of gas warfare in France. Discuss how they and other characters are affected by the explosion of new technologies, and their relative degrees of knowledge about them. Do some seem to profit from the American entry into the war?

8. In an essay about working on this novel ("The Sea of Information," Best American Essays, 2005) Barrett wrote: "The more I learned about the First World War, the more I saw how much it had in common with what was known at the time as the 'War Against Tuberculosis.' Those wars overlap exactly in time—but also, more importantly, in their uses of propaganda and corrupted public language. The militaristic, and yet at the same time euphemistic, language of the 'War Against Tuberculosis' is very like that found in the documents used to whip up American support for entry into the war. The sound of that language interests me a good deal—it's a sound that's becoming familiar again." How do various forms of propaganda affect characters in this novel? How would you compare the language used then to language you see now in print and television journalism?

9. Tuberculosis, nearly eradicated at one point, has become a serious problem again with the advent of an extensively drug-resistant strain (XDR-TB). For the first time in decades, public health officials have quarantined patients positive for this. What would you do if you, or someone you loved, developed XDR-TB? How would you want to be treated?

10. What associations does the title have for you? How do you interpret the two epigraphs, drawing from sources written more than a century apart?

Also by Andrea Barrett

* Lucid Stars, 1988
* Secret Harmonies, 1990
* The Middle Kingdom, 1992
* The Forms of Water, 1994
* Ship Fever, paper, 1997
* The Voyage of the Narwhal, 1999
* Servants of the Map, 2003

Find reviews, interviews, and other information about the author at **oneread.dbrl.org**.