

Why to Avoid Dead Girls Talking From Heaven and Other Book Club Advice

by Cheryl McKeon, *Third Place Books*

Book clubs and independents are an obvious perfect match, but taking it one step further is extremely successful for stores that host readers at their in-store book clubs.

We began our Third Place Book Club shortly after our store opened eight years ago, and the first cancellation was during last November's snowstorm. Our success isn't unique – other Seattle indies boast clubs of all sorts, from a club for grown-ups reading kids' books to knit & read groups.

Over the 19 years Park Place Books' "Reading Circle" has gathered monthly. Rebecca Willow has seen it as "a good starter book club for those that have never been in a club or have schedules that make it difficult to commit to regular monthly attendance."

Determining Size & Style

Both Park Place and Third Place groups have a core of regulars— 10 to 15 readers at each monthly meeting. At each store, attendance varies, sometimes reaching 25 people. Patti McCall of Queen Anne Books says about 75 percent of her groups are regulars." Some folks come once, just to see what a book club is all about, and some are attracted to a title. At Third Place, *Jarhead* brought out readers who, I'd guess, have never gone to a book club before or since, and their contributions were unique.

Queen Anne Books enjoyed such a positive turnout that, about four years ago, Patti moved to two consecutive nights of discussing the same book to

avoid a group too large for an engaging discussion. "A gathering of more than 20 is too big," she says, but the self-selecting process doesn't always result in even-sized groups, either.

All For Kids' clubs are unique. Rene Kirkpatrick hosts a club for grown-ups who want to read kids' books, as well as "Knit One, Page Too," a club for knitters who make garments for charitable causes while discussing that month's title.

What Makes it to the Reading List?

"A staff facilitator is crucial to any meeting," Rebecca says, and the others agree. Picking the title is a "dictatorship," as Patti and I say. We entertain suggestions from regular members, but in the end only the facilitator can maintain a list, balancing literary fiction, current events, memoirs, and, at Park Place, the occasional outstanding sci fi or mystery." (*Snow Crash* was a pick.)

Favorites at the stores have been *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, *Bel Canto*, *Broken For You*, *The Glass Castle*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Set This House in Order*.

We avoid extremely lengthy or edgy works, but Queen Anne's second book club embraces edginess. Their "Saturday Night Book Mixer" draws a younger crowd to the 8 pm meeting, and participants can move on to a nearby pub or coffeehouse. *Shalimar the Clown* and *Persepolis* were two of their books.

Nick DeMartino of University Bookstore usually picks brand new titles, often in hardcover, while most club

leaders stick to paperbacks. Nick also branches out, encouraging readers on his mailing list to join him for pre-discussion dinners at local eateries. Nick's picks are often more daring than most; he scheduled *What Is the What* as soon as it was published. He also hosts an afternoon book club at the University of Washington.

At Ravenna Third Place, Julie Larios looks for "smaller books that get plenty of buzz from bookstore people but that the general reader might miss, books that bring something complicated to the table" and avoids titles being "over-marketed as book club books," ones Julie calls "Dead-Girls-Talking-From-Heaven" titles.

An annual Third Place success is our January Best American Short Stories review. Most admit these are the only story collections they read all year, and now, after six years, we are savvy enough to compare editors' styles.

Most stores discount the month's picks to all customers, which adds to the appeal of the clubs. Hospitality and setting offer another welcoming edge to in-store clubs. Park Place meets in the fireplace corner and Queen Anne holds summer meetings on the patio. Most stores offer cookies and coffee, with occasional "theme" food. Soda bread was a big hit at our March Paddy Clark discussion.

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