

# A Donegal County Library Service Guide To Book Clubs



Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall  
Donegal County Council

welcome  
to your **library**

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## **HOW WE CAN HELP YOU AND YOUR BOOK CLUB**

Donegal County Library offers books to a variety of external book clubs within the county.

The general rule of thumb when enquiring at your local library about establishing your own book club is to nominate an individual who will order and be responsible for the books used by that particular group. A Block Loan card for the book club will be given to the representative only and must be returned together after the meeting.

The nominee will be provided with a copy of our Book Club Stock List. The group can select from this list at anytime, but as there are multiple book clubs in operation throughout the county it is advisable to nominate at least three titles.

We hope that your first choice will be available – but as is the nature of book clubs there may not be enough copies of the selected title; or it may be on loan to another group.

Choices must be communicated to library in good time to facilitate delivery. Currently we recommend at least two weeks' notice.

Your local library will contact you once your books have arrived and will be issued to your group for 3 months. You can return to your local library anytime before the due date.

## STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Whether you're starting with friends or relative strangers it's a good idea to ease yourselves into the group. Take time to make introductions—or if you're well acquainted already, tell each other a little about your reading habits or favourite authors. Chances are, you'll have chosen and distributed the very first book before the first meeting and everyone will have made a special effort to finish the first read. All you need to do is throw in a few questions to get the conversation flowing.

Icebreakers: Any one of the following should get the conversation started:

- Ask each reader to answer the question, "Did you like the book?" during introductions. Once introductions are over, you will have enough comments to get the discussion off to a good start.
- Ask each reader to choose one word that describes the book.
- Ask each reader if this is a book similar to what they usually read or not.

Some people don't mind interruptions while others find it a major turn off! Depending on the group dynamics, you may want to have these pointers to hand just in case.

**Interruptions** — there will always be someone who breaks in while another person is speaking. Most interrupting during discussion is due to enthusiasm rather than rudeness. Control the interruptions by saying, "Hold that thought, Sheryl. We'll want to hear it again once Angie has finished."

**Monopolizing Conversation** — Cut in on a longwinded group member with, "That's an interesting point you just made. Did anyone else get the same impression or a different one?" "You've made some interesting points, Frances. Let's hear from another reader. Theresa? What did you think?"

**Keeping the group on the topic of the book** — Try not to let readers wander and bring them back if they do. Comments such as, "Let's get back to the end of chapter 4. What did you think at this point?" "I have a question about the situation on page 125. What's really happening here?"

**Listen carefully to what is said by participants** — Rephrase a reader's comments or question to be sure you and others understand what was meant. This is an especially necessary technique when dealing with a verbose participant.

**Allow everyone the chance to contribute to the discussion** — engage silent readers by posing open-ended questions directly. But don't badger the participants who really don't want to participate. They may not have finished the book and don't want to admit it. Try asking, "What did you like/dislike about the book, David?"

## FACILITATOR GUIDELINES

As the facilitator, think of yourself as a literary umpire. It's your job to make sure everyone has the opportunity to respectfully share their opinions of the selection with the group. You do not have to

agree or disagree with every statement made by a reader. Turn issues back to the group by asking, "Does everyone agree with David's comment?"

### **10 questions which will help generate discussion:**

- How does the title reflect the book?
- Which character do you think is the voice of the author?
- Is the main character likeable? Why or why not?
- Did the author leave loose ends? What were they?
- What do you think the author wanted the reader to get out of the book?
- What makes a minor character memorable? Why is this character important to the story?
- What do you think happens to the characters next? (after the last page is turned)
- Would you recommend this book? Why or why not? If yes, what would you say about it?
- Why was this book selected for discussion?
- Would this book make a good movie? (cast the film)

### **Further questions for discussion**

- What makes the book distinctive?
- Is the period in which the book is set important to the theme? Why? Are the values presented dated? How?
- Is the setting of the book important to the theme? Why? How realistic is the setting?
- Does the theme of the book relate to the protagonist's gender? How?
- What did the author attempt to do in the book? Was it successful?
- What is the author's worldview?
- Were the plot and subplots believable? Were they interesting?
- Did the author leave loose ends? What were they?
- How understandable were the motivations of the characters? What motivated the behaviour of the characters?
- How is the book structured? Flashbacks? From one point of view? Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?
- How does the language of the book help convey the theme?
- Does the author rely heavily on imagery and symbolism?

### **Talking about a book no one liked**

Don't be alarmed if all your readers come to the discussion announcing how much they hated the book, the characters, the writing, the subject, EVERYTHING. Books no one liked often provide the best discussion. Ask the following questions to get people talking about what they didn't like about the book:

- At what point did you decide to give up on the book and why?
- What made you keep reading to the end?
- Which character did you dislike the most?
- Are any of the situations in this book realistic?
- Does the dialogue sound natural?
- What could the author have changed to make this a book you would have enjoyed?
- Would this book have been better in another format? (i.e. as an audiocassette or film)

## When you have to wing it as the facilitator

Life can be busy and even as facilitator, not everyone gets the time or the urge to complete every book selected. Perhaps you just found a title particularly dull or unappealing! Just because you facilitate doesn't necessarily mean you have to trudge through to the bitter end...

- Read at least two reviews. Read some author background. Keep discussion focused on the group's reactions and opinions. Ask the questions from our suggestions above or below.
- We think it's best to tell the group that you did not have the time to read or the interest to finish the book. This will prevent anyone asking you a specific question on the book that you may be unable to answer.

## TIPS FOR SELECTING BOOK CLUB BOOKS

### Don't read favourites

Reading a book someone "just loves" can lead to hurt feelings—like inviting people into your living room to critique your decor. Ouch! Best to stay on neutral territory.

### Do choose for good discussions

Some books don't offer a lot to chew on in the way of discussion. They may be great reads (mysteries, spy thrillers) but don't have much to talk about.

- Look for "literary fiction," works rich in characterization and ideas.
- Don't neglect nonfiction—works of historical or sociological significance provide fertile grounds for discussion.

### Don't get stuck in a rut

A steady diet of one thing can be dull, dull, dull—so mix styles and genres. Intersperse heavier reads and lighter ones; fiction (current and classic) with nonfiction and even poetry or drama. A good Local Studies book could also be considered from time to time.

### Don't let the same people choose

Make sure everyone gets a say in what books to select. If the members cannot, or will not, decide the facilitator should go ahead and choose the title for the next discussion.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER – FICTION

1. How did you experience the book? Were you immediately drawn into the story—or did it take a while? Did the book intrigue, amuse, disturb, alienate, irritate, or frighten you?
2. Do you find the characters convincing? Are they believable? Are they fully developed as complex human beings—or were they one-dimensional?
3. Which characters do you particularly admire or dislike? What are their primary characteristics?
4. What motivates different character's actions? Do you think those actions are justified or ethical?
5. Do any characters grow or change during the course of the novel? If so, in what way?
6. Who in the book would you like to meet? What would you ask, or say?
7. If you could insert yourself as a character in the book, what role would you play?
8. Is the plot well developed? Is it believable? Do you feel manipulated along the way, or do plot events unfold naturally, organically?
9. Is the story plot or character driven? Do events unfold quickly or is more time spent developing characters' inner lives? Does it make a difference to your enjoyment?
10. Consider the ending. Did you expect it or were you surprised? Was it manipulative or forced? Was it neatly wrapped up—maybe too neatly? Or was the story unresolved, ending on an ambiguous note?
11. Can you pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly profound or interesting?
12. Does the book remind you of your own life? An event? A person—like a friend, family member, boss, co-worker?
13. If you were to talk with the author, what would you want to know? (Many authors enjoy talking with book clubs. Contact the publisher to see if you can set up a phone or Skype chat.)
14. Have you read the author's other books? Can you discern a similarity—in theme, writing style—between them? Or are they completely different?

## **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER - NON-FICTION**

If your book is a cultural portrait of life in another country, or different region of your own country, start with these questions:

1. What does the author celebrate or criticize in the culture? I.e., family traditions, economic and political structures, the arts, food, or religion.

2. Does the author wish to preserve or reform the culture? If reform, what and how? Either way—by instigating change or by maintaining the status quo—what would be gained or what would be at risk?
3. How does the culture differ from yours? What was most surprising, intriguing, or hard to understand aspect of the book? Have you gained a new perspective—or did the book affirm your prior views?
4. Does the book offer a central idea or premise? What are the problems or issues raised? Are they personal, spiritual, societal, global, political, economic, medical, scientific?
5. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now, or sometime in the future?
6. What evidence does the author give to support the book's ideas? Does he/she use personal observations? Facts? Statistics? Opinions? Historical documents? Scientific research? Quotations from authorities?
7. Is the evidence convincing? Is it relevant? Does it come from authoritative sources? Is the evidence speculative...how speculative?
8. Some authors make assertions, only to walk away from them—without offering explanations. Does the author use such unsupported claims?
9. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it polemical, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
10. Does the author—or can you—draw implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? If so, are they positive or negative? Affirming or frightening?
11. Does the author—or can you—offer solutions to the issues raised in the book? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?
12. Does the author make a call to action to readers—individually or collectively? Is that call realistic? Idealistic? Achievable? Would readers be able to affect the desired outcome?
13. Are the book's issues controversial? How so? And who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?
14. Can you point to specific passages that struck you personally—as interesting, profound, silly or shallow, incomprehensible, illuminating?
15. Did you learn something new? Did it broaden your perspective about a personal or societal issue? Perhaps about another culture in another country or an ethnic/regional culture in your own country?

These questions can be adapted to any non-fiction title that your group chooses to read and discuss.

## RECOMMENDED REVIEWS AND AUTHOR INFORMATION WEBSITES

### **LitLovers**

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides>

### **Amazon**

<http://www.amazon.co.uk>

### **Good Reads**

<https://www.goodreads.com>

### **Reading Group Guides**

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

### **The Guardian**

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/series/bookclub>

**Major newspapers** carry specific book reviews:

### **New Yorker**

<http://www.newyorker.com/books>

### **Irish Times**

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/book-reviews>

More prolific authors will often have their own website. This can be checked through a quick Google search.