
Good for What?

Non-appeal, Discussibility, and Book Groups (Part 2)

Joan Bessman Taylor,
Guest Columnist

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Since the publication of Joyce Saricks's *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (ALA, 1989, 1997, 2005), readers' advisors have used the concept of appeal as a way to connect readers with books. Looking at the elements of a piece of writing—character, language, mood, setting, and story—and what the reader preferred in each area helps the readers' advisor to make connections between works that the reader may not have considered and thus expands the possible choices for that reader. What has been less explored, however, is the concept of working with those elements of a book that the reader did not enjoy. In her two-part column, Joan Bessman Taylor explores the role of these nonappealing elements in the practice of readers' advisory. In part one (*RUSQ* 46, no. 4), Taylor examined how readers' advisors can best work with books that do not appeal to them personally. She suggested that understanding nonappeal can expand the possibilities for making thoughtful suggestions. Here, in part two, Taylor applies the concept of nonappeal to working with reading groups in selecting titles that will generate lively and thoughtful discussion.

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The notion of discussibility pervades popular guides for reading groups and the common discourse surrounding them as well as the published research on book group practices. Though it is "something intuitively appreciated by certain booksellers," it has not been explicitly defined beyond its being that quality that makes a book well-suited for fostering group discussion.¹ When I spoke with a representative from HarperCollins regarding how they made decisions about which books would be published with a reading group discussion guide included in them, I was told that the direct marketing manager would make recommendations to a publicity committee about those books deemed to have reading group appeal. When I asked her if she could explain this quality further, she admitted that the deliberations were vague and included much guesswork, but that books selected were usually ones addressing "life issues, emotions, relationship stuff and are ones that a reader can relate to one's own life."²

Though she does not use the term "discussibility" in her book *Circles of Sisterhood: A Book Discussion Guide for Women*

of *Color*, Pat Neblett, president of a book discussion group and a cultural enrichment travel group, approaches a definition of discussibility when she provides six points to consider when selecting books for discussion.³ These can be summarized as follows:

1. Best sellers are not always the best choices for discussion, so don't decide to select a book just because it is on the that list.
2. Each book selection will not appeal to every member. However, when it has to be read for discussion, some of the naysayers will become the best participants.
3. By mixing up selections, you are bound to make each member happy over the course of the year.
4. Books that weren't enjoyable often lead to the most stimulating discussion.
5. The value of being a part of a discussion group is best demonstrated when everyone respects opposing views and different interpretations.
6. Deciding when to assign a particular book can be tricky.

Beyond Neblett's statement to look further than the best-seller list for title suggestions, her recommendations do not relate directly to books but to the disposition of readers who interact with them. She says in several different ways that it is not important for every member to like the book in order to have an enjoyable conversation about it. She highlights the fact that readers may have opposing views on a book or topic, and acknowledges that the successfulness of a pick may be influenced by the timing of when it is selected. The ability of a book to enable varying perspectives or positions is an often-remarked-upon element contributing to the successfulness and enjoyment of a discussion.

In *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group*, several of the essays submitted by group members from book groups across the United States include comments that support Neblett's assertions.⁴ Barbara Berstein from Bowie, Maryland, states: "Good discussions tend to arise either when there is a difference in our perceptions of the book and characters or when the book touches on topics related to our own lives."⁵ Similarly, David Wellenbrock from Stockton, California, elaborates on this idea, writing, "In selecting a book, it is not necessary that everyone falls in love with it. Indeed, some of our best discussions have been about books with which everyone, or nearly everyone, had serious disagreements."⁶ Long's readers also made a similar statement when she asked them what makes a book discussible: "A member of Belles Lettres said, 'It's a book people can take different opinions on and find evidence in the text to support.'⁷

In *Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers*, Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens, doctoral students at the University of Denver who have established what they call "the country's first book group consulting company," suggest in their recommendations for

starting a book group that a group must decide what makes a good book group book.⁸ There is the most explicit attempt made thus far to describe the discussibility of a book, and it ventures away from the need to recommend titles that are good based entirely on literary merit or the other aspects that have traditionally been used to assess the quality of a written work. These authors cite seven points that constitute their "demands for a fantastic book group book":

1. An extraordinary book group book is both a fascinating, compelling read and a provocative source for energetic, animated discussion.
2. A truly interesting book should be about something interesting. It should feature interesting characters who are individuals, not types.
3. The books that belong to the very top tiers of the book group greats category are ones that feature a distinctive, commanding, and appealing writing style.
4. Complexity is a good thing. In real life you may prefer to skip surprises, but a great book group book should surprise you in some manner, inspiring different members to find very different ways of making sense of its contents.
5. The best book group books are ambiguous enough to encourage a variety of different interpretations, but not so ambiguous that they frustrate every attempt to make sense or meaning of what they describe.
6. Nothing spoils a good book like a rotten ending. A truly amazing book group book doesn't trip you up like this—instead, the last page is as good as the first, and perhaps even makes you sad only for the fact that you've come to the end of the book and can never read it again for the very first time.
7. A great book group book is neither too long for what it has to say, nor so short that you get teased but not satisfied.

These criteria for selection were written from the perspective of leaders of a company serving book groups by helping make their reading selections for them. Only two of the aspects described could really be ascertained before having read a book unless groups consider reviews or recommendations of people outside the group (enter the readers' advisor), or unless a member is required to have read a book before recommending it to the larger group. None of the groups in my study have such a requirement; in fact, they voice a preference for having no one read the book prior to reading it with the group.

It is perhaps possible to determine that a book "is about something interesting," as stated in point two above, by reading the blurb on the back of its cover, by descriptions of it on bookseller and publisher Web sites, or by other published reviews. Long illuminates this importance for a book to be interesting: "To be 'discussible' a book must be interesting as well as good; otherwise, reading and talking about it will fall into the category of the onerous and unpleasurable 'shoulds' that reading groups . . . are anxious to avoid because they bury members' own desires under the pressure of an

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obligation to legitimate culture.”⁹ Reviewing sources, as well as browsing excerpts of the book itself, may provide insights into the “writing style” described in point three above. However, determinations about whether a book’s ending or length is appropriate to one’s enjoyment of its content are decisions made by a reader after having experienced the work. While these aspects may serve to explain the emphasis groups place on word-of-mouth recommendations and the assistance they receive from librarians and booksellers, they do not assist the groups in independently selecting titles that will promote discussion for them.

As mentioned in my discussion of Neblett’s criteria for selection, it is important to reiterate that even though some groups base their choices on ideas of literary merit, it is not always the “best” books that promote the best discussions. Nor is it the best-liked books. Books that are agreed upon as being well-written often leave little to discuss:

As one member of the Traditional Women’s Group said, “It isn’t always the best books that give rise to the best discussions. Sometimes we just sit nodding at each other and saying ‘Isn’t this great?’ It’s like you don’t want to muddy the water by sticking your finger in.”¹⁰

In her twenty-five-question survey of 350 reading groups in the United Kingdom and America, Jenny Hartley asked readers to answer the following two questions: “Could you name one book which went well and explain why? Could you name one book which went badly and explain why?”¹¹ In many instances, readers reported times when a well-liked book fell flat in discussion. For example: “Strangely enough, *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* went badly. Those of us who’d finished it liked it so much that there was too much agreement,” and “We all enjoyed *Pride and Prejudice* so it didn’t provoke a lot of discussion.”¹² Hartley also quotes times when a disliked book provided much to discuss: “We had a good discussion on *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which we disliked with a passion,” and “The characters of Joanna Trollope’s *A Village Affair* were felt to be stereotypical, the story novelettish, and the background hackneyed. Interestingly, though, a vigorous discussion was provoked—most highly critical!”¹³ An interesting outcome of Hartley’s investigation is that “quite a few books, and most of the top ten, distinguished themselves as crossovers, i.e., going well in some groups and badly in others.”¹⁴ This leads one to conclude that discussibility may be more than just a feature of books, but a precipitate of the mixing of particular books and particular readers.

The responses from the readers represented in these studies regarding the elements that make for a satisfying book discussion echo the sentiments of the readers I have observed over time. The most explicit statement regarding the element of discussibility made by readers participating in my study arose during my conversation with the Normal Person’s Book Discussion Group when I asked for their input on book suggestions for the “One Book, One Campus” initiative taking place on the nearby university’s campus. We scaled down a

list of books suggested for the program and suggested others we would like to see added to it. The conversation articulated more clearly what book group members want from discussion and what they mean when they call a book “discussible”:

JF: I guess we’ve both [referring to his wife] read *Walk in the Woods*. *Walk in the Woods* is the strange kind . . . if he [Bill Bryson] came to speak, utterly fantastic. He’s a gifted, gifted humorist. Just in so far as what he can do. . . . The book is utterly fantastic. But it . . . I think . . . wasn’t it the old book club that had trouble discussing it?

KW: I’m not sure any of his books are discussible. They’re wonderful reads, and fun, but . . .

JF: It’s hilarious, it’s insightful. I think everyone should read it. But it might be hard to discuss just because it’s so . . . it’s good but it’s kind of complete. It’s . . .

JBT: So what makes a book discussible?

JF: I think somewhat, to be a little bit provocative you have to at least put out something that people can in a tiny way disagree with. Like if you’re too succinct and too funny and too clear about what you are trying to say and everyone will agree with it, you can’t quite get even, you know, somehow if everyone likes something it is almost a bit of a problem.¹⁵

This exchange represents a key point that has emerged from my observations over the years with the six reading groups in my sample. One of the main factors dictating the type of book discussion that occurs is not just whether or not a book is regarded as “good,” but also whether it is deemed “complete.”

Having attended more than 225 book discussion group meetings since I began my study, I can say with confidence that no matter what book was read, as long as at least two members had finished it a discussion about that book took place.¹⁶ In the very few instances where the book was not discussed, usually because members decided before even starting it that the book was uninteresting or the book was too difficult to acquire inexpensively, the conversation was instead focused on public affairs or recently released films based on books. Such meetings account for at most five of all the meetings I have attended. So the question when selecting books for a book group becomes not what book will elicit discussion, but what type of discussion a group prefers.

When a book is regarded as well-written, well-liked, or complete by group members, the conversation takes one form; when it is disliked or has gaps or flaws in its structure or content, or when readers disagree about such, another type of discussion results. (This is not to say that both types of discussion do not happen within the same meeting about a book because on occasion they do. Sometimes, for instance,

readers will have enjoyed a book despite its gaps, or they will disagree as to whether the book fully addressed all the issues it presented.) When readers are asked to give accounts of discussions that went well, they typically describe the latter type of discussion. This tendency indicates that it is the discussions of less-than-perfect books and those discussions that involve disagreement or a greater level of critique that readers prefer and seek when participating in the collective reading process. Readers, it seems, prefer to not necessarily discuss the book they read, but instead the book they wish they had read, or rather, the book the chosen selection could have been if presented differently. In this sense, book discussion becomes an act of creation, where readers exchange ideas as they verbally compile what I will refer to here as an ideal text. I will return to this idea below.

READING AS DISSECTION

As characterized above, when a group finds a book to be well-written, thorough, and unanimously well-liked by their members, the discussion following its reading is dominated by one form of talk; when it is disliked by some or has gaps or flaws in its structure or content, another type of discussion takes precedence. Though it is the minority of discussions (or shortest part of a discussion when both types occur) that falls into the dissection category, it is in these discussions that the physical book gets paid the most attention. When I refer here to “dissection,” I do so using the following meaning as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “The action of separating anything into elementary or minute parts for the purpose of critical examination; a ‘taking to pieces’, a minute examination; detailed analysis or criticism.”¹⁷

In recreational book group discussions, direct references to the physical work under discussion are the exception rather than the rule. Such references can be divided into two types: references to the cover, front matter (title page, frontispiece, copyright page, table of contents, acknowledgements) and back matter (references, about the author); and references to the narrative content of the book. Readers generally talk about the book they read from memory, or occasionally from notes, but only open and refer to the actual book itself in a few circumstances. These take place when there is confusion about the events or chronology of the story, when readers agree on having enjoyed the book and have little else to say about it than “isn’t this passage great?” and want to pick apart the devices used to achieve a certain result, and when such discussion is part of their standard repertoire of inquiry. In each of these cases, direct consultation with the physical book assists the readers in appreciating or trying to comprehend what the author has accomplished or in evaluating the attempts of cultural authorities, such as reviewers and publishers, to influence the perspectives or tastes of readers.

Though book group members spend some time on aspects of their appreciation of a work by addressing the physical aspects of a book and do, on occasion, quote directly from the work, these are not the activities that occupy the greatest

place in their discussions. As the quotes presented above indicate, readers derive the most satisfaction from discussions regarding books with which they disagreed, were dissatisfied, or about which members disagreed with each other. If the book is “too complete,” discussion becomes “a bit of a problem.” Rather than dissect and discuss the book as written, readers spend the bulk of their time in the creative process of discussing the ways the book could be different, what they would have preferred for it to include or have happen, and identifying gaps in the story. The science fiction group in my study has actually given this tendency a name. Borrowing from Jasper Fforde’s novel *Lost in a Good Book*, they call the process identifying “bloopholes,” which, according to the novel, is a “term used to describe a narrative hole by the author that renders his/her work seemingly impossible.”¹⁸

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Through the process of filling in where the author did not or making suggestions for features that would make a book better, readers share ideas about how to bring the work read closer to their ideal, usually advocating for fuller character development and more closure on the major issues or conflicts presented. This difference between types of works—those that are complete and those benefiting from elaboration—may be partially explained using Roland Barthes’ distinction between a “readerly text” and a “writerly text.” The former is one “wherein the reader need not ‘write’ or ‘produce’ his or her own meanings but one where one can find, by passive means, meaning ‘ready-made.’”¹⁹ Though there is always room for interpretation in reading (as is demonstrated by those times when readers mention deliberations they made in sorting out possible meanings), readers sometimes find little space to fill in and engage with the work, and instead spend their energy uncovering what is already there. “Writerly texts,” on the other hand, make “the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text.”²⁰ It is this act of production or creation that determines the discussible work. Though Barthes articulates the difference in texts in such a way that it seemingly resides in the texts themselves, it is important to note that his definitions rely on the reader taking a stance to find meaning, passively or more productively.

A work must have (or lack) certain features to be discussible, but it cannot be discussible on its own accord. As Hartley found in her survey of groups, the same book may be discussible for some groups of readers and not others. There are books that have worked well for a number of groups in that they prompted much critical discussion. However, because the background that readers bring to a work differs, and so too does the shared history of a group from that of other groups, a book’s discussibility is not static. It is both the interaction between the work and the reader and the interaction between readers that account for discussibility.

Though discussibility remains somewhat elusive, I have recognized a range of responses that figure into the verbal creation of a reading group’s ideal text and, most notably,

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three that I have witnessed with the greatest degree of frequency. The first of these is the perceived expectation on the part of the author for prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Readers are confronted with concepts or ideas that are not explained, but that they feel they are assumed to know in order to engage with a work. This requirement for prior knowledge includes facts and social situations, but also knowledge of other written works. Readers invoke their prior reading experiences to help them supplement the work under discussion. Their familiarity with other works by the same author or other works by different authors provides them with ideas about the boundaries of what could have been possible for the work at hand. Each discussion represents an accumulation of experience.

A second recurring aspect of creative discussion is the critique of physical aspects, such as the length of a book, and suggestions for tools that would assist the reader in the interpretation process. Just as readers will discuss a book's physical aspects as part of what I have called the dissection type of discussion described above, when talking about the version of the book they wish they had read in the place of the one they did read, physical aspects also may be mentioned. In this case, however, these include recommendations for changes in a work's physical dimensions or a request for features that are not already present. Sometimes these are expressions of disappointment with the book's length, that it was either too short or too long, which is ultimately a dissatisfaction with characterization, plot development, or the inclusion of unnecessary details that burden the reader's experience of the work. Other times the evaluation readers make about physical features of the book involves the desire for the inclusion of attributes in the text that were not found in the book (such as glossaries, genealogical trees, timelines, and so on).

A third and most prominent category of recurring aspects of discussion resulting in the creation of the ideal text is, as mentioned above, the identifying of gaps or "bloopholes" in a work. For discussible works, this activity comprises the majority of time spent in group meetings. When reading for pleasure, readers may find gaps in a narrative distracting or disruptive, but these same gaps become seeds for negotiating options, improvising, and creating flights of fancy within the group context. When endings are left open-ended, or the lives of characters not fully explained, readers create their own explanations for what could happen. These are taken from clues in the text that determine the parameters, but also from readers' experiences with other works, sometimes by the same author, sometimes not. At times the suggestions involve fundamental restructurings of the plot. For example, when discussing *This Immortal* by Roger Zelazny, one reader remarked, "If it had been about the Diaspora, that is, if it had not been about aliens but about humans that might have made it a better book." Another thought the book "tied up too easily," and suggested that "he could have fixed the end by putting in more in the body of the novel about what the Vegans were trying to do." A third reader agreed, saying that, "If he hadn't ended the book so quickly, if he had gone on longer it would

have been good." Another wondered about the possibility of bringing other cultures in: "Would mutants in Mexico reflect Mexican culture?" CB called attention to an overplayed device saying, "I thought there was a little too much *deus ex machina* with the dog being dead for many years and then showing up" and "the black beast—they talk about how it hasn't shown up and hasn't shown up and then Bam! There he is."²¹ After working through each of these critiques in their discussion, another work altogether seemed to emerge. In this way, book group discussion becomes more than just talking about what was read, but also an act of creation that relies on association with other readers.

CONCLUSION

The reading practices of book groups introduce aspects of appeal that may not already be a part of a reader advisor's regular repertoire. Groups often derive more satisfaction from discussing the reading experience when that experience was different from what they expected, when a book would have made more sense or been more enjoyable if presented differently, or when members of that group have different views on either the topic or on its rendering. The success of discussion is less about whether everyone in the group liked the book, and more about whether the book invited them as readers to fill in its spaces or consider more deeply the implications of the situations it described. Many times readers will say outright at the beginning of a discussion meeting that they disliked the book chosen and maybe the characters in it, too. At the end of the discussion, the same readers will remark that they are glad to have read the book. On some occasions this represents a change in opinion, in that the discussion made them decide they liked the book after all because they are now able to see aspects they had missed when reading on their own. More often, however, it is not that the person's disposition toward the book has changed—they may still vehemently dislike the book—but they appreciate the negotiations with other readers that the book encouraged. They learned more about the possible directions a work could take and why different readers might enjoy those varied directions. They learned something about books, about other people, and perhaps about themselves. So the next time someone asks you for a good book to read, explore the many ways you might address their request by first asking yourself the question, "Good for what?"

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