



CALIFORNIA STORIES™

The California Council for the Humanities

Organizing and Managing a Book Discussion Group

This guide was adapted for CCH's April California Stories Uncovered campaign from a book discussion guide developed by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library, made possible through a grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The Washington Center for the Book is one of eight member organizations of the Audiences for Literature Network, a national network of literary centers made possible by the Fund. The original can be found at the Seattle Public Library's website: http://www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=collection_discussiongroup

Why participate in a book discussion group?

Book discussion groups enrich our enjoyment of reading literature by providing an opportunity to articulate and share our impressions and hear other peoples' opinions. They also strengthen the role of cultural institutions and help build community by providing forums for individuals to discuss ideas and interests, and to share experiences. Further, they provide a means for participants to strengthen ties with friends and neighbors as well as form new connections – and for everyone to feel part of a community of interests.

Getting Started

- Figure out the logistics.
CCH recommends that you have at least three meetings to discuss the anthology. How long should the meetings be? We find that the best discussions last between 45 and 90 minutes. How many people will be involved? The size of a successful group will probably vary between 5 and 20 members. If your group is not already an established or affiliated with a library or bookstore, you will need to select a place to meet. Private homes, coffeehouses or community centers are all good venues. You may also wish to recruit members by posting a notice at a library, bookstore or community gathering spot. Publicity materials for publicizing your discussion group are available on the California Council for the Humanities' website at www.californiastories.org.

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- Decide how the discussion will be run.
Will you have a leader? Will the same person be in charge for each meeting or will you rotate leaders? Some groups bring in an outside expert (who may need to be paid). Do you want the leader(s) to give a brief biography of the author and/or provide a selection of reviews of the stories to be discussed? The anthology has a built-in discussion guide to make the task of managing the book discussions easier for leaders. You can use that or adapt the suggestions provided below.
- Clarify the expectations of participants
Careful reading, active participation in selecting and discussing books, and having fun are key elements for successful book discussions. You may want to discuss ground rules or copy and distribute the "tips for participants" provided below to everyone in the group.

Some tips for discussion leaders

The discussion leader needs to keep the discussion focused, keep people participating, encourage people to express their perspectives while being respectful of the opinion of others, and help maintain a friendly and enjoyable atmosphere for the group. Here are some basic guidelines to keep in mind:

- Come prepared with some open-ended questions. Remember, questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion quickly. Tips are provided, below, and a set of questions is included in our discussion guide.
- 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 selection, but try to get the group to go beyond the "I just didn't like it" statement. What was it about the selection that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of something else you have read that you liked or disliked? Remember that many of the best book discussions center on books that many group members dislike.
- Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the reading itself. Of course, every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his or her background, upbringing, experiences and view of the world. A story about a senseless murder will naturally strike a chord in a reader whose mother was killed. 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

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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.

Discussion questions

Discussions can focus on the stories, their themes, the authors, the readers' responses to the individual pieces, comparisons between selected pieces, or to the anthology as a whole. CCH has prepared a thematically organized discussion guide to use with *California Uncovered*, which can be found at the back of the book and online at www.californiastories.org. You can use it as a basis for your discussions, or you can create your own list of questions from the following list of suggestions.

- What makes the story distinctive?
- Is the period in which the story is set important to the theme? Why? Are the values presented dated? How?
- Is the setting of the story important to the theme? Why? How realistic is the setting?
- Does the theme of the story relate to the protagonist's gender? How?
- What did the author attempt to do in the piece? Was it successful?
- Would it make a good movie? Why?
- 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 behavior of the characters?
- How is the story 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 piece help convey the theme?
- Does the author rely heavily on imagery and symbolism?

The authors' lives and experiences can provide additional topics for discussion. Brief biographical notes about the authors are included in the anthology. You can find out more about them by using resources such as *Current Biography*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Something About the Author*. Find book reviews in *Book Review Digest and Book Review Index*. The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* gives biographical and critical material. These resources are probably available at your local library. The Internet is often another good source for reviews of the book and biographical information about the author.

Some tips for participants

Ultimately, the success of a book group depends on the participants. Here are a few suggestions to make your discussions more enjoyable, productive and meaningful:

- Speak up! Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comments of agreement or disagreement.

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- Share your viewpoint and experience! When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way.
- Listen thoughtfully to others! Try to understand the other person's point of view. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question. Be respectful, but also be critical: Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis.
- Be brief! Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as a few words as possible. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion includes everyone in the conversation.
- This is a discussion, not a class or a debate! Each speaker should respond to what the person before him/her said. Don't prepare speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions.
- Come with your own questions in mind! As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members. If the questions asked don't address your concerns, raise your own!

Suggestions for reading critically

The very best stories are those that connect to 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 deepen the reader's appreciation of the story.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in 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.

- Make notes and mark pages as you go.
Reading for a book discussion – whether you are the leader or simply a participant – differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down 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 saves you the time of searching out important passages later.
- Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.
Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the readings more meaningful.
- Pay attention to the authors' messages.
As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the authors are revealing about themselves and what they want you to learn about life from their perspectives.

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- Analyze themes.
Try to analyze the important themes of a story and to consider the premises the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, "what if ... " questions.
- Get to know the characters.
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? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.
- Notice the structure of the stories as well as the organization of the entire book.
Sometimes the structure of the book illustrates an important concept or helps to create a mood. Notice how the editor structured the book. How do the stories relate to each other? How are the individual stories and selections structured? Who are the narrators? How do the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the sequence of actions make sense to you?
- Make comparisons to other stories and works.
Compare the book and the stories to others that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work to another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.
- Think about what the author doesn't say as well as what they do say. During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said – all those white spaces on the printed page. (Incidentally, this "everything that the author hasn't said" idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)

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