

ARRT Quarterly Literary Book Discussion and Leadership Training Notes

01.14.15

Life After Life, by Kate Atkinson

Nuts and Bolts Discussion

Because Life After Life is about 500 pages, we talked about what is an acceptable length of a book for a book club.

- As a rule, most people try to keep discussion books to 300 pages. However, some of us feel free to break that rule on occasion, maybe once a year. Especially if the book is a fast read once you get into the story.
- Some book clubs would take one look at a 500 page book and refuse to open it. They would be turned off by the size, and never give it a chance.
- Some book clubs have never complained about the size of the book. They seem willing to trust their leaders and follow them anywhere.

How do you get a group who seems to want to treat you as a lecturer to start participating more actively in discussion?

- When you hand out the next title for discussion, hand out a bookmark on which they should write one point or question that they want to make sure the group discusses or addresses.
 - Basically get them actively involved in creating the discussion questions. Then use those questions first.
 - After one leader did this for a number of discussions, she was able to quit using the bookmarks. They started coming prepared with their own questions.
- Ask one question, then get one response. Then don't ask another question. Instead, ask "Do you all agree" or "Does someone have a comment about that response".
 - Get discussion to center around talking about their responses to the questions you have asked. Try to get cross talk!
 - Make sure they understand you are not a teacher calling on one person for a correct answer. There is no "correct" answer. There are no wrong answers. There are no wrong opinions.
 - Be sure that you don't let members of the group make each other feel like there are wrong opinions either!
 - Wait for radically different responses.
 - For example, were you detached, observing, or identifying with Ursula.
 - Remember *Silence is your friend!* Don't jump in, but wait for people to talk. One leader has to count to three slowly in her head to keep herself from talking during the silent parts.
 - Watch for nonverbal cues. Who is nodding in agreement. Who looks like they might be disagreeing. Call on them by name. (Learn people's

names – or use name tents/tags – especially if they look like they disagree. *Some of the best book discussions are when people disagree about a book.*

A lot of the questions on websites or in reader's guides aren't that good, they are too serious. Do other people agree?

- Yes! The questions are often like essay questions for tests.
- Use them to make you think of questions. Reframe them. Make them more general.

How do you pick books for your book clubs?

- It's hard to lead a discussion on a book you really don't like at all.
 - This can happen if you let the group pick the books entirely. One leader does let the group pick the books, and this has happened.
 - This group goes around the table and each member of the group picks a book to discuss.
 - Let the person who loved the book do most of the talking. Just hold the reins and keep the discussion on track.
 - Hold the idea of "who would be the perfect reader for this book" in your mind.
- Don't pick your favorite book either. It can be really hard to hear people talk about how they disliked your favorite book.
- For some clubs the leader picks all the books
 - NPL is starting a new book club for Crime Fiction. The leader follows a rough formula for any book club:
 - 1 classic (**The Big Sleep**)
 - 1 book that stretches them outside the normal (**The Last Policeman**)
 - 1 nonfiction (Doing 2 nonfiction, since it's a new club and wanted to draw in lots of different people. Will re-evaluate after have an established group.)
 - Half newer titles, half older titles
 - Nothing that isn't out in paperback – in case they want to buy it.
 - Can find the list of titles here: <http://tinyurl.com/p6fjroz>
- One leader picks 20 books and lets them vote on 12 books. Other groups do similar, but with slightly different numbers.
- One group votes on a genre each month. The leader then picks 6 titles within that genre. The group then picks the title from those 6 they want to read.
- Remember, some of the best discussions occur when the group is split – when some of the people disliked the book and others liked (or loved) the book.
- For some groups, it is important that any selection be available in Large Type and/or audio formats. For some groups, it may also need to be available as an eBook.

If you have a really big group (15-22 people) how do you do crowd control?

- Split them in half (not possible for this library)

- Be sure to give them coffee/chitchat time at the beginning (already doing)
- Be politely firm about letting everyone talk
 - Demonstration included “traffic cop” type hand signals
 - Try hard to learn their names – again, use name tents if necessary.
 - “Ok, John, that’s a great point. Now let’s hear what Mary’s has to say.”

How do you save a group that is dying? Or when do you know you should you kill it? (In this case, it was a Mystery Book Club with just 2 members.)

- If possible, poll the members who left and see why they left
- Talk to the remaining two members and see if they know what happened
 - Explain that if the membership doesn’t increase, you might have to stop the group – see if they have ideas to increase participation
- Is it just Mysteries? If so, broaden to other types of crime.
- Try a different day of the week and time
- Since Crime Fiction is still popular at the library
 - Start “hand-selling” the discussion group to anyone who places a hold on a crime book or asks for help finding a crime book
 - Put up a crime display, and promote the book club – independent of prompting the other book clubs the library has
- Maybe try hosting a different type of program that has a mystery or crime tie-in and promoting the book club there.
- The general consensus was that holding a book club for just 2 people wasn’t effective, or an effective use of library resources. If you can’t increase membership, it’s probably time to kill the group.

How do different libraries handle book discussion kits or collections?

- Everyone agreed patrons tend to love these types of collections.
 - Even if they aren’t using the titles for a book club, the titles have been “vetted”. Patrons feel confident that they are getting “a good book” if they get a title that is “good for book clubs”.
- Some libraries have book discussion kits where you check out a certain number of copies of a book, questions, and other materials all under one barcode to one patron.
- Some libraries have book discussion collections where each copy of a book has a barcode. Patrons can then check out how every many copies they want of a title.
 - Some libraries create their book club collections out of the multiple copies purchased for library lead book discussions.
 - Some libraries purchase copies specifically for their book discussion collection.
- At least one library has a hybrid collection.
 - They have a book discussion collection containing multiple copies of each book.
 - Book Clubs work with a single point of contact to place a reservation on a “kit” for a specific title.

- When that reservation is coming up, the staff member makes sure the required number of are pulled from the book discussion collection.
- The copies pulled and made available as one kit for the book club.
- When the kit returns, it goes back into the book discussion collection.