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## 5

# Older Adults and Reading

*Iron rusts from disuse, stagnant water loses its purity . . .  
even so does inaction sap the vigors of the mind.*

—Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519),  
*The Notebooks*

Long before there were free education and free lending libraries, reading was often a social activity. Factory workers often had books read to them to relieve the tedium of work, after which there were spontaneous discussions about the book.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of reading aloud, which allowed everyone to enjoy the printed word, carried over to the worker’s household. Talking about what was read was an important part of their day, their life, and their culture.

The culture of the twentieth century was one that valued reading and the written word. It was, therefore, natural to see libraries hosting book discussion groups. Successful library-sponsored programs, including those targeted at the senior population, have a long history of centering around the “book.” Librarians wisely hypothesized that when there wasn’t a way to attend school, self-education through reading was a way out of the ghetto. During the Great Depression and the post-World War II years, reading groups flourished. In 1947 the Cleveland Public Library had more than fifty Great Books reading groups, with 2,000 members.<sup>2</sup> It seems reasonable to believe that the youth of 1947 would still want to read and discuss books.

## Special Media and Collection Development

All reading groups should choose titles that are available in a format all members of the community can read, but it is essential for senior groups to ensure titles that will be discussed are available in large print, recorded format, and Braille. Libraries can also supplement their special media materials by borrowing. As previously discussed, it is helpful when there is a basic collection of books in formats that seniors with declining vision can access.

### *Large Print and Recorded Media*

The publishing industry as a whole has recognized the growing need for large-print and recorded materials. Over the last few years the number of companies producing multiformatted books has risen, and as a consequence, the selection of books has grown, allowing prices to remain stable.<sup>3</sup>

When purchasing audio titles to use with book clubs, buy the unabridged edition. Unfortunately, those doing the abridgement aren't always good judges as to what may be important to readers and what may be analyzed and discussed in a book discussion group. It would be unfair for a person to be excluded from discussing a point because the text wasn't there to "read" in the format they used.

Although it's a time-consuming task, another option for securing some of the classics in large print is to download titles found on public domain literature websites and reformat them into large print or Braille. The text can be taken in a word-processing document, the type enlarged, and the book newly formatted and printed. Care should be taken to provide a wider left margin, allowing staff to punch out holes for a three-ring binder. Many of the titles on these websites are the classics, and classics always make for good book discussions.<sup>4</sup>

### *Braille*

Generally speaking, people who become blind later in life do not learn to read Braille, but this does not mean that libraries should neglect this medium. People who learned Braille at an early age will want to continue to read Braille throughout their lives. Some may rely on it more, if their hearing becomes diminished.

Unlike recorded and large-print book publishers, there are only a limited number of producers of Braille. Most Braille is costly to purchase and con-

sumes a lot of shelf space. There are a few exceptions, as some benevolent groups produce health guides or religious materials in Braille, free of charge (or on a cost-recovery basis). It is also possible to borrow titles from one of the Braille lending libraries, which are part of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) network.<sup>5</sup> The NLS maintains a multitude of titles (modern and classic) that would make for good reading and discussion.

### *Special Media Books, Free for the Borrowing*

Remember that libraries that do not have a budget for recorded books, or those that want to offer more titles, can still provide readers with a browsing collection of recorded books. The NLS network of cooperating libraries throughout the United States and its territories can provide books on cassette.<sup>6</sup> Some of these libraries also loan large-print books and descriptive videos to patrons and libraries in their service areas. A similar service is orchestrated by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Library for the Blind. The Canadian service also offers their patrons access to a multitude of electronic texts, made possible by savvy partnerships.<sup>7</sup>

The United States and Canada are not the only countries that provide loans of materials in special media. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Russia, France, Germany, and Japan all have lending libraries. This could be useful if there are members in the reading group who have language needs in addition to access needs. Loan procedures and collection media formats vary, but generally, most libraries will only loan titles to NLS cooperating members.<sup>8</sup> Most network libraries will work with public libraries to offer needed titles for patrons through interlibrary loans.

### *Book Talks*

Book talking is a tool used by most public service librarians throughout their workday. The public still relies on library staff to give them the insider's track on the latest and the greatest books that are being published. Admittedly, there are book reviews and reviewers everywhere, but the librarian is still the person who knows about the really good books.

Book talks are used with the senior population much as they are with the general population. They

are used to tantalize and inspire patrons to read books they are not aware of or unsure if they want to read. They are also used by seniors to keep them up-to-date with new titles, new authors, and new ideas.

Nora Jane Natke, a professional book talker and proprietor of Hooked on Books, Ltd., has been working with senior populations in Florida for a number of years. She has provided book-talk programming at libraries, assisted-living facilities, senior complexes, and charitable groups. She has found the experience stimulating, as seniors are encouraged “to read and share their love of books.” Natke offers the following tips for presenting effective book talks for seniors:

Schedule the book talks at a time that will appeal to most seniors. The themes of “Breakfast and Books,” “After Lunch with Books,” and “Early Evening and Books” often work.

Know your audience. Be aware of patrons who may have vision, hearing, or other physical-access disabilities. Ensure the talks are held in an accessible venue.

When planning book talks, try to center the talks around themes, for example, “Great People in Fact or Fiction,” “Thriller-Chillers,” “Italian American Stories,” “African American Stories,” and “Gandhi, Mandela, and King,” or authors such as Ayn Rand, Chaim Potok, and M. K. Rawlings.

Never talk about a book you didn’t read and like. Presenters should plan to spend five to ten minutes on each title.

Always introduce yourself, your library, your service, and any special services offered by the library of which the participants may be unaware.

Distribute a list of books that will be discussed.

Display print or recorded books in a manner that will encourage participants to browse.

When giving the talk, refer to the theme of the book talk, that is, what is the “link” that binds the books together?<sup>9</sup>

Distribute “See You Soon” bookmarks or flyers with the dates of future book talks clearly indicated at the end of each talk.

If doing book talks off-site, distribute library business cards or flyers to make participants and

their families aware that the library is coming to them.

Although it may not be necessary to seek an evaluation from each book-talk presentation, it might be useful to occasionally assess the talks to determine if the presentations are on target with seniors’ needs.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of book talks are to encourage reading, yet some participants might attend book talks for companionship or to keep current with what is being read by others. A good book talk will allow the senior participants to conduct a cursory conversation with acquaintances. A good talk will also help seniors feel they are part of the mainstream.

## **Book Discussion Groups for Seniors**

Why a reading group for seniors, rather than encouraging them to become a part of the adult reading group? Some of the oldest of the older adults are slightly stigmatized when in a group that is comprised of youth, who seem to speak another language. Many will embrace their own group because they know there will be people in this group who, like them, may have visual or hearing impairments. Seniors will feel comfortable talking about what the book means to them when they know that others will get their meaning.

In addition to library-hosted book discussion groups, there are many senior-hosted “online” book discussion groups on the World Wide Web (WWW).<sup>11</sup> Many of the titles have been discussed by hundreds of seniors and could be used with the library’s senior book group.

### ***Starting the Group***

Once the library decides to start a book discussion group, it is necessary to organize. It is important to consider seniors who are currently patrons as well as those seniors who have not visited the library for some time. The goal of the book discussion group should be to share literature while making (or retaining) old friends.

As with most book clubs, club members and staff will have to determine how often to meet, how titles will be selected, and who will lead the discussions.

Additional suggestions for starting and maintaining the senior book discussion group follow:

1. Survey current patrons to determine a time and a place for the group to meet. Keep a list of those patrons who said they are interested in joining a book club to enable staff to notify them of details when formulated. Schedule all dates for the defined time period.
2. Advertise the formation of the book club at places such as senior and recreation centers, community websites and bulletin boards, bookstores, coffeehouses, and the library's bulletin board. Be sure that the typeface used to announce the club is easy to read.
3. Send formal invitations to those on your mailing list as well as any community partners that the library may have.
4. Start all meetings on time. Use the first meeting as a planning session. Get to know the group by asking the participants for titles of their favorite books.
5. Determine how many and what type of special media books might be needed on an ongoing basis. It's acceptable to ask members which version of a book they would like. Determine if you will need any type of listening aids for persons with hearing impairments.
6. It is sometimes helpful to distribute a listing of typical discussion questions, suggesting readers read the book in hopes of finding answers to them.
7. When discussing the book, be sure to encourage all members to contribute while discouraging others from monopolizing the discussion.
8. A quick telephone call or postcard reminding seniors of the next meeting is always appreciated and many times needed.

Additionally, the room chosen should be free of white noise and distractions. Staff should also be careful about the number of people admitted into the group. Too large of a group dissuades some people from offering an opinion and encourages "clock watching."

For those just getting started with hosting a book discussion group, the following information will help with decisions about the questions to ask and the titles to choose.

#### TYPICAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Most of the standard questions that apply to book discussion groups will work for seniors. Questions

should be phrased to avoid the use of jargon and slang. The person posing the questions should speak as loudly as possible.

Librarians, when asked for a few standard book discussion questions, offered those below, with the caveat to pay attention to the intellectual comprehension ability of the group and the content of the book. If it is observed that participants do not understand topics such as theme, imagery, and characterization, staff might want to spend a few sessions talking about these topics, using an online senior course entitled "How Literature Works" as their guide.<sup>12</sup> Good starting questions include the following:

- Did you like the book?
- What was the theme? Were there multiple themes?
- Did you like all of the characters? If no, which didn't you like and why?
- If this movie was cast in the 1950s (or 1960s, 1970s, etc.), who would play what parts?
- Why did the author write this book? What do you think the author wanted you to learn?
- What did you think of the plot development? Was it believable?
- Did the author paint the time period accurately?
- What type of tone does the author use? Is it humorous, prophetic, ominous, optimistic, pessimistic, preachy, or threatening?
- Do you see this work being set in another country or another time?
- How did you feel at certain key times during the plotline? Were there moments when you felt mad, sad, or glad?
- What did you think about the ending?

With some groups it may be necessary to throw all the questions away and just talk about why the members liked or disliked the book.

#### POSSIBLE BOOK DISCUSSION TITLES

Should the book club decide to let the librarian choose all the titles, staff may be concerned that their individual reading tastes might not make for a varied and mind-expanding experience. Choosing titles to read outside of familiar topics will not be a problem as publishers now post book discussion guides on their websites.

Jim Pletz, director of Adult Services and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance for the Chicago Public Library (aka Czar of Book Clubs of Chicago), offers a few tips for choosing book discussion titles:

Choose books that do not have a lot of heavy sex or profanity. But be cautious to use this as a guideline rather than as a hard-and-fast rule.

Choose books that are reflective in nature, requiring seniors to call upon past experiences.

Choose books that have an obvious touchstone.

Choose books that reflect back upon life's experiences or books with quirky characters.<sup>13</sup>

Staff can also log on to aforementioned senior-focused websites to note what titles are being discussed and which are receiving insightful input from the participants. Staff might also check the websites of libraries that host senior book talks to see what readers in a different city or state are reading. Librarians could also consider teaming up with one of these libraries to allow the members of their reading group the opportunity to exchange thoughts about a book with seniors at another library. This could be done through e-mail, chat rooms, videotape, or letters. This would expand both the seniors' and librarians' reading experiences and allow them to meet new friends and colleagues as well.

Figure 5-1 offers some initial title ideas. These titles were used successfully by senior book discussion groups at the Chicago Public Library, Cleveland Public Library, SeniorNet, Vacaville Public Library (California), and Almaden Branch Library (San Jose, California).

## Book Discussion Groups for New Senior Readers

If there are seniors in the library's service area with low literacy skills, or new older adult readers, staff should consider forming a book discussion group for them as well. There are books written for the express purpose of encouraging new readers to get hooked on books. A literacy volunteer who worked with new teen readers and senior readers shared the story of how her group read and discussed an easy-to-read short novel. The novel (a literacy program creation) opened at a funeral home, with a widow crying over the coffin of her late husband. As the plot transpired, the group learned that the widow was actually laughing so hard that she was crying. The group became so entranced with the twist that all of the members signed up for library cards and became regular library users. This is a story that can be repeated with ease, by connecting with your local literacy league.

### FIGURE 5-1

To Get You Started: A Year's Worth of Book Discussion Titles for Senior Groups

Alexander, Michael *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*  
 Byatt, A. S. *Possession: A Romance*  
 Fitch, Janet *White Oleander: A Novel*  
 Guterson, David *East of the Mountain*  
 Hannah, Kristin *On Mystic Lake*  
 Harris, Joanne *Chocolat: A Novel*  
 Ishiguro, Kazuo *When We Were Orphans*  
 Lee, Harper *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
 Lewis, Sinclair *Elmer Gantry*  
 Mah, Adeline Yen *Falling Leaves*  
 McCourt, Frank *Angela's Ashes*

Milford, Nancy *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*  
 Naipaul, V. S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*  
 Nordhoff, Charles, and James Norman Hall *Mutiny on the Bounty*  
 Sobel, Dava *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith, and Love*  
 Stegner, Wallace *Angle of Repose*  
 Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*  
 Vidal, Gore *Golden Age*

## Conclusion

Senior book discussion groups can be a lot of fun and at the same time offer patrons and staff a chance to grow intellectually and socially. Suzanne Rostamizadeh, manager, Almaden Branch Library, San Jose, California, sums up the reason for establishing book discussion groups for seniors: "The seniors get an opportunity to share good reads, new authors, interact with each other, form bonds with each other . . . [and] the library gets increased circulation, additional library supporters, and a presence in the community as the book discussion members talk to other seniors about their experiences." Rostamizadeh added that she feels that she gets the same perks from the book club as the seniors.<sup>14</sup> This sentiment is shared by many librarians who host book discussion groups.

## NOTES

1. Beth Luey, *Starting a Reading Group: Reading in Company*, Arizona Center for the Book, available at <<http://aspin.asu.edu/azcb/readgrp.html>>. In certain countries, such as Cuba, professional readers are employed by cigar factories to keep the workers entertained as they hand roll cigars.
2. C. H. Cramer, *Open Shelves and Open Minds: A History of the Cleveland Public Library* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Univ., 1972). The Great Books Foundation conducted leadership training programs, from which a number of discussion groups emerged on what many considered to be a "high literacy" level.
3. Bowker, *Complete Directory of Large Print Books and Serials* (New Providence, N.J.: Bowker, annual).
4. Project Gutenberg, available at <<http://gutenberg.net/>>, allows the easy download and printing of numerous public domain texts. Braille translating software and an embosser are needed to translate text to Braille format.
5. Patrons and institutions who qualify for the service may download and print one copy of titles, magazines, sports schedules, and Braille music through the NLS website. To learn more about the Web Braille service, or to register your patrons, go to <<http://www.loc.gov/nls/web.blnd>>.
6. All residents of the United States and its territories who cannot use standard print material because of a physical disability are eligible for this free service. To locate the regional library in your state, see <<http://www.loc.gov/nls>>. Recorded media from the NLS can only be played on a four-track cassette player, which plays the tapes at the speed of 15/16 ips. This is done to ensure only eligible readers will use the books and to conserve tape. All four sides of the tape are used, meaning a full tape will play six hours.
7. The Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Library for the Blind, available at <<http://www.cnib.ca/library>>.
8. An international directory of information on various special media lending libraries is Misako Nomura and Mayu Yamada, eds., *International Directory of Libraries for the Blind*, 4th ed. (Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag, 2000). Also available at <<http://ifla.jsrpd.jp/default.htm>>.
9. Natke presented a book talk to several women's groups in Florida using the theme "Superior Women" and books that demonstrated how women are superior at different points in their lives. Some of the titles and traits included were *David's Harp* (Chaim Potok) and *Clan of the Cave Bear* (Jean M. Auel), demonstrating a young woman's fiber and grit; and *Out on a Limb* (Shirley McClaine) and *Terms of Endearment* (Larry McMurtry), talking about the mature woman. Natke also selected books that talked about the "whole of a woman's life."
10. Nora Jane Natke, "Book Talking Seniors" (presented at the Northeast Florida Library Information Network [NEFLIN] Headquarters, Orange Park, Fla., August 10, 2000).
11. Two of the more popular book discussion groups are hosted by the AARP at <<http://www.aarp.org>> and SeniorNet at <<http://www.seniornet.org>>.
12. *Tools for Readers: How Literature Works I* offers a four-week course and is found on the SeniorNet website at <<http://www.seniornet.org>> (Books and Literature, Round Table Discussions). The discussion is led by an authority in literature and walks participants through three short stories.
13. Jim Pletz, e-mail to author, April 2002.
14. The Web page of the Almaden Branch of the San Jose Library is <<http://www.sjpl.ca.us/branches/ab/default.htm>>. The group has been in existence for two years and meets once a month. The group began with a core membership of five members and has doubled in size. The group chooses books a year ahead of time to enable all members to read a book when it is available through the system. The book club is marketed through the monthly senior newspaper. The monthly title is mentioned in the library's resource column in the neighborhood newspaper.