

Tips for Book Discussions

from Washington Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library

Reading Critically

Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. These books usually present the author's view of an important truth and not infrequently send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important 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 gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don't know the answer yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, “what if ... “ questions.

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? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author's style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into 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 often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself into 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.

The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion.

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 book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "It just didn't appeal to me" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing, and world view. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. 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 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.

Author's Statement

My narrator in "The Whistling Season," Paul Milliron, educator and bookman and graduate of a one-room school that he was, would have fully known the value of a community read, all the way from its linguistic beginnings. "Communitas," the root of our usage of "community"—in Paul's well-thumbed Latin-to-English dictionary, these several meanings of "communitas" are given: "sharing, partnership, social ties, fellowship, togetherness." What better rewards could readers and writer alike ask for, than the common ground of literary fellowship through reading?

Regards, Ivan Doig

About the Book (from the author, originally published by Powell's Books)

"Can't cook, but doesn't bite." It is only the line atop a classified advertisement in a weekly newspaper, that of "an A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" seeking to relocate to Montana early in the twentieth century. But for young Paul Milliron, his two younger brothers and his widower father, and his rambunctious fellow students in their one-room school, it spells *abracadabra*.

Paul is the voice of the book: a bit wry, contemplative, and literally bedeviled by dreams – lifelong, he has had the disturbing knack of vividly recalling the episodes of imagination that swirl in his mind at night. Paul has risen to become the state superintendent of education, and at the vantage point of 1957, strapped for budget in what he knows is going to be a changed world of education because of the Soviet landing of Sputnik, he is facing what is more like a nightmare, everything he has believed in is "eclipsed by this Russian kettle of gadgetry orbiting overhead." In his heart he knows the powerful political pressures on him to "consolidate" the rural one-room schools, which will be the death knell of those perky idiosyncratic little institutions such as the one that produced him at Marias Coulee.

Before his crucial convocation of rural educators to give them his decision, though, he impulsively drives out to Marias Coulee, now a scatter of mostly abandoned homesteads just beyond the northern fringe of a successful irrigation project. There the story begins, with Paul swept back in memory to 1910 when the Milliron family's hard-bargained new housekeeper, Rose Llewellynn, and her unannounced brother step down from the train, "bringing several kinds of education to the waiting four of us."

About the Author

Ivan Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, growing up the only child to his ranch hand father and ranch cook mother, living along the Rocky Mountain Front where much of his writing takes place. Doig knew he wanted to be a writer his junior year of high school. His first book, "This House of Sky," was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1979. Doig is a former ranch hand, newspaperman and magazine editor. He is a graduate of Northwestern, where he received bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism and he also holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. He lives in Seattle with his wife Carol.

Author's Web Site

Visit www.ivandoig.com for reader's guides on Doig's other books, an interesting biographical note from the author and his thoughts about books that have changed his life.

Other Books by Ivan Doig:

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind (1978)

Winter Brothers (1980)

The Sea Runners (1982)

English Creek (1984)

Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987)

Ride With Me , Mariah Montana (1990)

Heart Earth (1993)

Bucking the Sun (1996)

Mountain Time (1999)

Prairie Nocturne (2003)

The Eleventh Man (due out Oct. 2008)

Author's Awards

National Book Award nomination and Christopher Award, both 1979, both for "This House of Sky"

Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1988, 1994

Governor's Writers Day awards, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1988

Honorary Doctorates in Literature, Montana State University, 1984 and Lewis & Clark College, 1987

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, 1985

Western Heritage Award for Best Western Novel, 1985, for "English Creek"

Distinguished Achievement Award, Western Literature Association, 1989

Evans Biography Award, 1993, for “Heart Earth”

Pacific Northwest Writers Association Achievement Award, 2002

Author Interview

(from Harcourt Brace, publisher)

Q: In “The Whistling Season,” Paul and his brother decide to keep a secret from their father because doing so will deliver the right outcome. Throughout the book, Paul becomes the guardian of an increasing number of secrets. What are your feelings about individuals who withhold potentially damaging information out of a sense of personal justice? Do you sense this type of behavior was more prevalent a century ago than it is today?

A: Paul indeed starts to feel inundated with secrets, some of them of the slyly funny, schoolyard variety and some vitally serious. He is a very bright thirteen-year-old, who at one point realizes his life is about to change, that he is “less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy.” But in the case of the ultimate secret, he has to draw on instinct and innate decency to reach his decision. So I see Paul’s chosen course as one of compassion, in the name of giving his family a chance to knit itself together and to offer amnesty to someone who has made a misstep in life, but who shows every sign of having retrieved her full worth. To me, and I suppose this is reflected in Paul, there is sometimes not just one justice in a situation but rather a choice, and my hope is that Paul chose wisely.

Paul’s kind of decision possibly was more in line with his time and place—the early twentieth century and a community, rural, but full of nuance toward neighbors and family—than our screen-driven, tell-all era of e-mail, television, movies, and so on. Yet, my belief is that decent behavior is never out-of-date.

Q: Rose Llewellyn is an interesting, endearing character. She works hard and is understanding; however, her motives are suspect and we learn that her behavior—both past and present—is less than respectable. As a woman of the early 1900s, Rose is a bit unconventional. Would her behavior be considered acceptable in today’s society, or would she more likely be viewed as an opportunist rather than as a good businesswoman?

A: Mark Twain, a Halley’s Comet among writers whose spirit is invoked at one point in “The Whistling Season,” liked to refer to his hard-dealing publisher of that time, Harper & Brothers, as Sharper & Brothers. Rose has a bit of that quality of a “sharper.” She is a clever dealer, someone you really don’t want to play poker with. But the incident in her past that left her “less than respectable” was a scam played on a disreputable bunch, much in the same way Paul Newman and Robert Redford delightfully fleece the gamblers in *The Sting*. As I see it, her endearing side—not to mention her capacity for work and caring for others—wins out. If she were in today’s society, she’d still be Rose and we would have to gauge her as individually as Paul, Morrie, and the others do in the book.

Q: On your web site, www.ivandoig.com, you mention that your initial motivation to be a writer was “simply to go away to college and break out of a not very promising ranchwork future in Montana.” But your talent has led you far beyond those modest goals. In “The Whistling Season,” Paul is an ardent student, yet seemingly destined for the same ranchwork life. How much of yourself, if any, have you infused into Paul’s character?

A: My secret is out, sort of, kind of. Maybe more than any other character or, at least any other narrator who I have ever created, Paul has a few of my mental fingerprints. He loves language, even Latin—which I took in high school. He’s an inveterate reader of books. He eavesdrops with his eyes. He admits to a bit of a pedantic streak. He’s his own person, though. I’ve never had his nightly flood of dreaming, and I could not function in politics and government as skillfully as he does. I have never had any siblings. Nor, full disclosure, did I ever attend a one-room school.

Q: Please tell us a bit about your love of “poetry under the prose.”

A: As squarely as I can look at myself and the kind of writing I’ve produced—which on the one hand relies on dogged research and on the other, fancy flights of words—I seem to be something like a poet yearning to be a clerk, or a clerk fumbling around with poetry. In either case, I can tell you poetic leanings caught up with me in an unexpected place—while I was working on my Ph.D. in history. What graduate school taught me in the late 1960s was that I didn’t have what it takes to be on a university faculty. During grad school at the University of Washington, I found myself writing freelance magazine articles—as if I didn’t have any seminar papers due. I also began, to my complete surprise, to write poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet’s final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But I still wanted to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art. It was back then that I began working on what my friend Norman Maclean referred to as the secret of writers like him and me: poetry under the prose. Rhythm, word choice, and premeditated lyrical intent are the elements of this type of writing. In the diary I kept while working on “This House of Sky,” I vowed to try to have a “trap of poetry” in the book’s every sentence. I suppose that inclination is visible in all my books.

It maybe hasn’t been generally recognized, but one way I have openly indulged in this is by writing the songs and poems that show up in my fiction, instead of simply tapping into the existing body of music and literature. From the snatches of the nineteenth-century Scandinavian drinking song in “The Sea Runners,” to the old Scottish ballad that provided the book title I wanted to use for “Dancing at the Rascal Fair,” to the “spirit songs” Monty Rathbun sings during the Harlem Renaissance in “Prairie Nocturne”—I have tailored rhyme and rhythm to fit the time period in all eight of my novels. There’s only one dab of singing in “The Whistling Season,” when the Marias Coulee community homesteaders greet the appearance of Halley’s Comet in the Montana sky of 1910:

When I see that evening star,
Then I know that I've come far,
Through the day, through all plight,
To the watchfire of the night.

I seem to be more hooked than ever—note the front rhymes, “When/Then” and “Through/To,” as well as the ending rhymes.

Q: Your first book, “This House of Sky,” is a memoir. Fifteen years later you complemented it with the memoir “Heart Earth.” In the time between the two books you have concentrated more on fiction. The ability to create fiction and nonfiction with the poetic phrasing for which you are known is a rare talent. Do the experiences of the characters in your works of fiction differ greatly from the experiences described in your works of nonfiction? Or is there a point where the experiences between fictional characters and real people begin to blur?

A: I started my writing life as a journalist, and I am devoutly careful to keep real people and my fictional characters separate. True, on a couple of occasions I have used incidents from history as a springboard for fiction—the four men escaping servitude in Russian Alaska in 1853 were reimagined into “The Sea Runners.” Most notably, my townsman Taylor Gordon’s rise to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance was fashioned into Monty Rathbun’s singing career in “Prairie Nocturne.” But even there, the fictional counterparts are sheerly residents of my imagination, as distinctly different from the historical templates as I can make them. My profession as a novelist is to create, not to copy. In an article I wrote for the Washington Post about creating characters, I counted up some 360 characters I had invented in my fiction at that time, and the head count in “The Whistling Season” must be another fifty or more. I make up these people from file cards, historical photographs, books of lingo, and imagination. So, no, I don’t let the actual and fictional blur together.

Q: You have recorded several audio books including “This House of Sky.” How does listening to an audio recording of a book differ from the traditional reading experience? Do you feel the listening experience is altered when someone listens to an audio book recorded by the writer as opposed to one recorded by a professional voice actor?

A: I think good writing is as pleasing to the ear as it is to the eye. The main difference I can discern is the delicious ability offered by the printed page: to reread a phrase or a line you like.

An actor certainly can provide a more theatrical reading than a writer, but there is no reason why a writer shouldn’t be a professional voice, too, particularly in this day and age of bookstore readings. I admit to my own personal angle on this—a little-known secret about me is that I majored in broadcast journalism in college, when worthy giants such as Edward R. Murrow still worked in that profession. I also am an inveterate practicer, professional as I can be, before giving speeches and readings. But anything worth doing is worth doing well, so I believe writers should

work to become good readers—aloud, too. It has paid off for me not only in the popularity and recognition of the audio recording of “This House of Sky.” For my participation in the recording of Norman Maclean’s classic and national bestseller, “A River Runs Through It,” I received an Audie—the audio recording industry’s equivalent to an Oscar.

Q: How long does it take you to research and write a new book and what processes help you to successfully achieve this goal?

A: Generally, it takes me three years to put a book together. The processes are many, but I’ll cite just one trade secret: when I am rough-drafting a manuscript, I write four-hundred words a day, every day.

Q: Are you currently involved in any new projects?

A: I always have book ideas cooking and, blessedly, the next one is on the burner right now for Harcourt. The novel is set during World War II in the American West and various theaters of combat, and involves a soldier caught in a mystifying duty in the world of war and a hotshot woman pilot who ferries fighter planes from the factory to the flight line. Look for it in three years or, if my sainted editor and I are lucky, sooner.

Book Discussion Questions
(from Harcourt Brace, publisher)

1. Does the life of a homesteader in 1907 Montana as portrayed in the novel appeal to you? What is appealing about it? Would you trade the comforts and the disconnection of modern life for the simplicity and the hardships of these characters' lives?
2. How does Doig foreshadow and hint at the novel's plot twists? For example, when did you first realize that Rose and Morrie might not be who they claim to be? Did you have a theory about their true identities? How does this kind of foreshadowing contribute to the novel's effect on you?
3. Do Paul's dreams ring true to you? Why or why not? Does Doig do a good job of capturing the feeling and content of a vivid dream? What do Paul's dreams say about him?
4. What is the significance of the verse that Aunt Eunice quotes on page 22: "Yet, Experience spake / the old ways are best; / steadfast for steadfast's sake, / passing the eons' test?" Do you think the adult Paul would agree with the gist of this verse? In trying to save the schoolhouses, is he being "steadfast for steadfast's sake?" Is this novel an argument that "the old ways are best," or is it simply an elegy to those old ways?
5. Compare the students' excitement over the arrival of Halley's Comet with the panic over Sputnik and the quality of American education that has led to the adult Paul's being ordered to close the schoolhouses. Why do you think Doig frames the novel with these two events?
6. What do you think of the education that the children of Marias Coulee receive? How does it differ from yours or from today's education? What are the advantages/disadvantages of today's educational system relative to that of the one-room schoolhouse?
7. Was there one teacher whose effect on you was like the effect Morrie had on Paul? What makes Morrie a good teacher? Discuss great teachers and what qualities they shared with Morrie.
8. In his review of "The Whistling Season" in the New York Times Book Review, Sven Birkerts wrote that Doig's writing answered the question, "Is there any way to write nowadays...that can escape the taint of knowingness, of wised-up cynicism?" How would you describe Doig's style of writing? Do you agree with Birkerts? Did you find the characters believable? Compare this novel to other contemporary novels. Are there any contemporary writers to whom you would compare Doig?

9. Discuss Brose Turley. What does he represent, and what purpose does he serve? Is it significant that he is the only character whom we see at a church service, in the revival meeting? What is the significance of his coming to Morrie when he is frightened by the signs of drought and the appearance of the comet?

10. On page 294, the adult Paul reflects that closing the one room schoolhouses will “slowly kill those rural neighborhoods...No schoolhouse to send their children to. No schoolhouse for a Saturday night dance. No schoolhouse for election day; for the Grange meeting; for the 4-H club; for the quilting bee; for the pinochle tournament; for the reading group; for any of the gatherings that are the bloodstream of community.” Today, 50 years after the time when Paul is reflecting, do you think other gathering places have replaced the schoolhouses? What have contemporary American communities lost or gained since the days of close-knit rural neighborhoods like Marias Coulee?

11. Do you blame Morrie and Rose for keeping their identities secret from the Milliron family? Does Paul do the right thing in keeping their secret from his father? How does his decision to do so relate to the closing passage of the novel, in which the adult Paul decides to mislead the appropriations committee in an effort to save the schoolhouses?

Further Reading for Adults

“The Divide” by Nicholas Evans, 2005

The body of a young pregnant woman is discovered, frozen, at the bottom of a Montana creek. She is Abbie Cooper, missing for several years and, incidentally, wanted by the FBI as part of a notoriously violent eco-terrorist group. This book tells her story.

“Montana Sky” by Nora Roberts, 1996

The three daughters of late multi-millionaire Jack Mercy, each born of separate marriages and unknown to one another, meet for the first time at their father’s Montana ranch for the reading of the Will. They are shocked to learn that before they can take a share of his \$20-million ranch they must live on it together for a year.

“Plainsong” by Kent Haruf, 1999

“Plainsong” is a story of family and romance, tribulation and tenacity, set on the high plains east of Denver. In the small town of Holt, Colorado, a high school teacher is confronted with raising his two boys alone. A teenage girl—her father long since disappeared, her mother unwilling to have her in the house—is pregnant and alone with nowhere to go. And out in the country, two brothers, elderly bachelors, work the family homestead, the only world they've ever known.

“Telegraph Days: A Novel” by Larry McMurtry, 2006

Nellie Courtright and her younger brother Jackson become orphans when their father, an unsuccessful rancher, commits suicide. The 22-year-old Nellie accompanies Jackson to Rita Blanca, a frontier town in the future state of Oklahoma. Jackson becomes a deputy sheriff and is soon propelled to fame.

“The Willow Field” by William Kittredge, 2006

Rossie Benasco is the son of a Reno pit boss. In the early 1930s, when he’s 15, he goes to work as a cowboy for a retired rodeo legend, Silvers Flynn, who immediately finds the boy’s designs on his daughter disturbing and gives Rossie the assignment of herding several hundred horses a thousand miles away.

Suggested Companion Titles for Children

“Caddie Woodlawn” by Carol Ryrie Brink, 1958

The adventures of an 11-year-old tomboy growing up on the Wisconsin frontier in the mid-19th century

“The Family Under the Bridge” by Natalie Savage-Carlson, 1958

An old tramp, adopted by three fatherless children when their mother hides them under a bridge on the Seine, finds a home for mother and children and a job for himself.

“The Courage of Sarah Noble” by Alice Dalgliesh, 1954

Remembering her mother’s words, an 8-year-old girl finds courage to be alone in their new home in the Connecticut wilderness while her father goes back to bring the rest of the family.

“B Is for Betsy” by Carolyn Haywood, 1967

This is the story of 6-year old Betsy’s first year in school. This series has been a favorite for three generations now.

“Addie Across the Prairie” by Laurie Lawlor, 1986

Unhappy to leave her home and friends, Addie reluctantly accompanies her family to the Dakota Territory and slowly begins to adjust to life on the prairie.

“Sarah, Plain and Tall” by Patricia MacLachlan, 1985

When their father invites a mail-order bride to come and live with them in their prairie home, Caleb and Anna are captivated by their new mother and hope that she will stay.

“Dandelions” by Eve Bunting, 1995

Zoe and her family find strength in each other as they make a new home in the Nebraska Territory.