

## Arizona Humanities Council

### Managing a Successful AHC Book-Discussion Group Tips for Discussion Facilitators

*This guide was adapted from a book discussion guide developed by the California Council for the Humanities.*

#### **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.

#### **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 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**

Discussion questions can focus on the book, its themes, the author, the readers' responses to the book, or comparisons with other works. AHC will usually provide you with a list of discussion questions to help you guide the book discussion. 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?
- What were the images or scenes that stood out? What about them made them memorable? How did these images make you feel?
- Is the period in which the story is set important to the theme? Why? Are the values presented dated? How?
- How is the setting of the story important to the theme? 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 or why not?
- What is the author's worldview? Which of the characters embodies the author's point of view?
- 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?
- What symbols were important in the book? Why?

The authors' lives and experiences can provide additional topics for discussion. You can find out more about them by using resources such as Current Biography, Contemporary Authors, and 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.