

# The Jewish Community Library

## Book Club in a Box

### Facilitator Training Handbook

Poet Muriel Rukeyser said, “The universe isn’t composed of atoms, but of stories.” We read stories to better understand our place in the world and to expand our horizons by the sunny, starry, or dark light of another good tale. The job of a book group facilitator is to lead members through the landscape of a shared story and take them deeper into the text. It’s like that of a tour guide to a national park who helps visitors see, hear, and learn more than they might on their own.

#### **What the Jewish Community Library offers you and your group:**

- Twelve copies of any of the titles listed at <https://tinyurl.com/jclbookclubtitles>
- Discussion guides, reviews, interviews, and other resources, arranged alphabetically by the author’s last name at the above link
- Consultation on book titles
- Expertise working with Bay Area book groups
- A focus on adult education in a Jewish context

#### **Some of the roles of a facilitator:**

- Make sure the group starts on time and ends on time.
- Make sure any business/financial matters are taken care of.
- Establish ground rules for the group and enforce them.
- Keep the discussion going.
- Enhance the group’s understanding of a book.
- Find the best in a book and in the group members.
- Make sure members listen, don’t cut each other off, and stay on topic.
- Encourage members to question the book and each other in respectful ways.
- Deal with boredom, tension, and conflict in the group.
- Generate interest, enthusiasm, and momentum.
- Guide the group or another member of the group toward leading if you are gone.

#### **Preparation for group facilitation:**

- Read the book at least twice before the group meets.
- Make notes on what you’ve read about plot, characters, themes.
- Mark passages you may want to refer to.
- Read supplementary material on the author, book reviews, etc.

- Find a few passages from the book that you can read to the group. Reading a key paragraph is often a good way to start the discussion.
- Go over the discussion questions that come with each book and plan four or five questions of your own to use with the group.
- If you know someone who has read the book, discuss it with that person in advance.
- Write out a timed agenda for the group meeting. Depending on how the discussion goes, you may not keep to it, so prepare alternate plans for the meeting.

### **Strategies for group facilitators:**

- Remember that you're the facilitator. It's your task to hold the group together and steer it. Share the ground rules (below) with your group and adhere to them.
- Go beyond discussions about why members didn't like the book or particular characters. Ask members to articulate clearly and succinctly their personal responses.
- Use discussion questions, allowing room for creative responses.
- Don't be afraid to bring people back to the book if the conversation wanders too far afield. Personal stories and opinions can derail a group, and so can references to other books that not all the members have read. Useful guidance for getting the discussion back on track are: "Let's return to the book." "What's the author saying here?" "Let's move on to the next discussion question."
- If the conversation lags, read passages from the book that you've marked, or read the first few paragraphs of the book to spark conversation. Talk about how the author sets the tone, or scene, and introduces place and characters.
- If there are participants who try to monopolize the meeting or are antagonistic to other members, remind them of the ground rules and ask them to allow others to speak. You may have to interrupt them several times. Doing this is one of the most difficult tasks of a facilitator. Don't be afraid to say, "Thank you for your thoughts. Who has a different response or idea?" You may want to introduce a new question and direct it toward another member.
- Shyer members can be included by addressing a question to them. Thank them for their contribution and refer back to them, encouraging them to continue to participate.
- Sometimes cliques form that dominate the discussion. The strategy for handling this is the same as above. Invite others to speak. Address new questions to the group. Be a strong leader and empower all the members of a group to participate.
- Sometimes a group doesn't go well, but most of the time they do. Trust the process and trust your own skills.

### **Sample ground rules:**

- Be brief and to the point.
- Stick to the book. You can discuss personal stories and opinions over coffee.
- If you've already spoken two or three times, refrain from speaking again until everyone has had a chance to say something.
- Don't criticize other people's opinions. We all come to the book in different ways and all of our thoughts and feelings are valid.
- Keep conversations confidential. What is said here stays here.

### **Suggested questions for group discussion (not in any order):**

- What do you think the author was trying to say?
- What was the Jewish content of the book?
- Who are the main characters and how do their interactions express the author's intentions?
- What motivated them to do and feel the things they did?
- How did the book use symbolism?
- What were the social, political, and spiritual implications of the book?
- How do the style and structure convey the meaning of the book?
- What have you come away with from reading this book?
- Would you recommend it to someone else, and why, or why not?

### **Starting a new book group:**

- You can contact area synagogues, JCCs, and other Jewish organizations to place listings in their newsletters, Shabbat handouts, or in their weekly emails.
- You can also post information online or at local bookstores and libraries advertising a new Jewish book group.
- Place (or answer) an advertisement on craigslist.com

### **Questions and suggestions for new groups and their coordinators:**

- Who do you want to be in your group?
  - All women, all men, mixed?
  - Couples or no couples?
  - The same age or varying ages?
- How large do you want the group to be?
  - Six to ten committed core members are ideal.
- What's required in a member?
  - A love of books, a reading level similar to that of other members, a good sense of humor, the ability to listen well, ask questions, be open to other people's opinions, plus a commitment to coming to each meeting, and being on time.
- Where will the group meet?
  - A member's home, community room, library, café, or rotating to different places?
- When will the group meet?
  - Days or evenings? Weekdays or weekends?
- How often will the group meet?
  - Once a month for two hours seems to be ideal for most groups.
- Will the group allow:
  - Smoking?
  - Children or pets?
  - Guests or new members after the group's gotten started?
- Will there be food or drink during or after the meeting?
- Will a fee be charged for membership?
  - If the group rents space or pays for childcare, this may be necessary.
  - If the group buys food, this can be helpful.
- Who will be the group's contact person with the Library?

- How will this person be chosen?
- How long will this person serve?
- Will the contact person be the same person who picks up and returns books to the Library?
- How will this person be chosen and how long will this person serve?
- Will members be notified of meetings by phone, email, mail, a newsletter?
- How will the group determine which books to read?
  - Chosen collectively?
  - Picked in rotation by members?
  - Chosen by committee?
  - Picked by the coordinator or contact person?
  - Chosen in advance?
  - Chosen one month at a time for the next meeting?

### **Tasks in preparation for the first meeting:**

- Think about the group and its goals. Will it be primarily social, or a group with a genuine interest in reading and discussion? Do the members know each other? Do they have any special needs?
- Provide time and directions to the meeting. Arrive early and allow some time at the end to talk with members informally.
- Direct members to the Library's website for a list of titles
- Bring copies of the Library's program guide, along with donation forms from Friends of the Jewish Community Library.
- Think about the book to be discussed at the second meeting. Do you want to have it distributed at the first meeting?
- Pick out a story or poem to discuss with the group. We can provide you with selections if you don't know what to bring.

### **Structure for meeting with a new group:**

- Introduce yourself. Pass around a signup sheet and get contact information for all the participants, and email copies of the list to all the members. Include the names of members who couldn't make the first meeting.
- Have the members introduce themselves and briefly say something about their interest in being in a book club.
- Talk about the format of the group, how often it will meet, for how long, when, and where. If this hasn't been established in advance, come up with a structure that works for most members. Remember, not everyone will be available at the same time. Help the group decide who will be their contact with the Library and who will pick up and return books.
- Talk about how the books to be read will be chosen and come up with a list of books for the next two or three meetings.
- Help the group decide who will facilitate meetings if you're gone.
- Discuss ground rules (see above). Invite members to support each other in keeping the ground rules so that you don't end up becoming the group's police person.

- Read aloud the story or poem you've brought with you, or have one of the members read it. Then discuss it so that the first meeting is a model for future gatherings and not just a business meeting.
- Give out the book and discussion questions for the second meeting.

**Additional resources for book group facilitators:**

Check the Jewish Community Library's [website](#) for a list of titles and other resources.

Rachel W. Jacobsohn's book, *The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Start Your Own Book Club* (Revised Edition, 1998) is an excellent guide for facilitators.

Also helpful is *Running Book Discussion Groups* by Lauren Zina John (Neal-Schuman, 2006).

In addition to publishers' and authors' sites for information on specific books, here are some other websites that you may find useful:

<https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book-clubs>

[www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com)

[www/jw.org/programs/book club](http://www/jw.org/programs/book club)

[www.readinggroupchoices.com/](http://www.readinggroupchoices.com/)

[www.readerscircle.org/](http://www.readerscircle.org/)

**For support and more information on Book Club in a Box, please contact:**

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