

Librarian's Shelf
By Mimi Ernst

Giving a Successful Book Review

Many book club members will be restarting their monthly meetings this fall, so here are a few tips for reviewing or leading a book discussion.

The basic rules are respect space by avoiding side conversations with the person sitting next to you; allow space by limiting your comments and drawing in those who have not shared; be open by listening with understanding to learn from others and acknowledge differences; offer new thoughts by sharing a fresh perspective; and stay on topic by maintaining a flow of conversation and keeping personal references to a minimum.

Preparing your own review can be divided into three parts: recapping the story, relating the book to your life, and biographical information about the author as well as quotes from professional reviews.

Getting started is often the most difficult part of preparing a review. Avoid typical openers, guaranteed to stimulate nothing but a yawn, such as "When I was assigned to review this book..." Instead, after identifying the title and author, share your answers to factual questions that recap (not retell) the story. Let your answers guide you through the general information about the book: Who are the key characters? Which character(s) is telling the story? How does the narrator's perspective affect the story? In other words, why did the author tell the story through the eyes of a particular character or an all-knowing narrator? Would the story be different if some other character was telling it? Are the characters believable? How do their experiences cause them to grow? What are the themes? Think of themes as repeated messages, phrases, or topics. What are the conflicts in the story? How does the setting and time period affect the story?

Obviously these are meaty questions to answer, so bite them off a little at a time. Try a technique Charles Dickens used when writing his novels. He went to a mirror and spoke out loud as if he were acting in a play. Respond with short phrases, expressing one simple idea at a time, then build into longer answers. Jot down some key words. Set them aside. Return later and make sure some of these significant words are included in your review.

The most important questions to explore are who is telling the story, what are the conflicts, and how did the main character(s) change? Select some passages from the book to read aloud. These will reveal the author's style and enrich your presentation, but keep the selections short and few in number. Book mark them for quick access. Be sure to give your listeners adequate background information to easily understand the meaning of significance passages.

To be continued: Watch this space next week for the final half of "Giving a Successful Book Review".