

The Pros & Cons of Book Group Hosting

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I've been hosting our store's book group for more than eight years now and I must say, it's been both a blessing and a burden.

Belonging to a book group means that sometimes you're committed to reading a book you didn't pick and don't want to read while a stack of books you *really* want to read are gathering dust on your nightstand. Then the day before, or sometimes the morning of, you're [speed-reading and frantically researching the book](#), reminding you of those college days of cramming for exams while hopped up on caffeine. You just pray for those months when you've already read the chosen book so you can read [something else](#). It's like a literary stay of sentence.

For many, belonging to a book group is one of their favorite social activities. When they move to a new town, one of the first things they'll do is seek out a book group to join. It can be a rich, socially rewarding and educational experience.

For the bookstore, it's all good. It supports the idea of us being a resource, an authority, and a valuable "happening" place where readers can come together and discuss books. When that newcomer to the community comes seeking a book group and all of the other established groups in the area are closed, you can be the welcoming portal for them into that exclusive world. The connections they make in your group can lead them to other groups since some actually belong to more than one book group. (How do they do that? I can barely keep up with one!) And to be purely mercenary, it sells books. Although attendance is rarely over ten, we easily sell at least double and often triple that number of each title.

But what about the one who's committed to hosting the group for all those years? It's a weighty responsibility and often unsung. Although the attendees are free to come and go as they please, you are not. You're paid to be there and you're expected to be there not just by the bookstore, but by the regulars. A change of face can be disconcerting for them. I've tried having others from the bookstore substitute for me on odd occasions but they've always been completely traumatized for the next few days so I've given up that idea. I suspect the regulars must be pulling pranks on them much like we did to the substitute teachers in grade school. So I plan my vacations around when book group meets and I'm there month after month after month until it begins to feel like some [Sisyphusean](#) task.

Then there's the group. Like the family you're born into, you can't choose those who decide to show up. You get to know the personalities of the regulars over the years. There's Long-Winded who monopolizes the discussion but has nothing to say, Opinionator who shoots down any opposing viewpoint, Wallflower who won't say anything beyond a few mumbled words at each meeting, and Hater who never likes any of the books you discuss but keeps coming anyway. On the other hand there's Scholar who's read more than anyone and knows loads about the book and the author and educates the group, Nurturer who brings [themed food](#) to the meetings, Psychologist with keen insight into characters, Old Salt who's lived enough to fill five lifetimes, and World Traveler who's been to places most of us only read about.

As host and moderator, it's your job to help this dysfunctional group to talk together for just a couple of hours every month without tearing each other apart. Then

there are the newcomers almost every month who throw off that delicate balance you've cultivated. One [record-setting night](#), we had a group of 25! It was a challenge to stay on topic and give everyone a chance to have their say. [Nancy Pearl](#) recently gave this good advice: Instead of asking whether they liked the book or not, open up with the question, "What's the significance of the title?" This sets the tone and helps keep the discussion from deteriorating into a debate over taste. Another favorite discussion point I like to use is—to paraphrase [Barbara Kingsolver](#)—"The first sentence or paragraph makes a promise that the rest of the book will keep." Then we discuss if that applies to this particular book and how. One compliment I consistently get and that keeps people coming back year after year is that our book group actually talks about the book.

To tell you the truth, we have enough regulars at the meetings anymore, that at times I can just sit back and let the discussion flow with very little input. I must confess, this has allowed me to coast through the few meetings when I've been [unable to finish the book](#) or am just plain off my game. (No, I'm *not* Wallflower.) Hosting is a subtle art and when it's done right, everyone leaves at the end of the night feeling like they've both learned and shared something valuable. To know that you're responsible for that in some small way is extremely gratifying. For me, that warm fuzzy feeling as I'm locking the door behind the last of them overshadows any of the cons and buoys my enthusiasm. This feeling sustains me through the following month when I see that [next book](#) looming.

Being in a book group connects you with your customers on a deeper level than you are able to as a "mere" bookseller. It's like when a group of strangers make it through some [dangerous or traumatic event](#) together, they form a lasting bond that others just can't understand. When they're browsing the bookstore in the clear light of day, we smile to each other knowingly, like we share some great secret. And when I help customers who aren't in the group, the experience allows me to speak much more knowledgeably about the book—thus making me a far better bookseller.

Upon reflection, there are only a handful of books I wish I'd never read and the discussion did nothing to change that opinion. Four out of more than a hundred? That's a percentage I can live with. And even then, at the very least I've learned who's afraid of Virginia Woolf . . . I am.

A FEW OF OUR BEST BOOK GROUP DISCUSSIONS SO FAR

Einstein's Dreams by Alan Lightman

Runaway by Alice Munro

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies

Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee

Blindness by José Saramago

Mariette in Ecstasy by Ron Hansen

GREAT PAIRINGS TO READ IN ONE AFTER ANOTHER

In the Heart of the Sea & Moby Dick & Ahab's Wife

Nickle and Dimed & Fast Food Nation

Samurai's Garden & Memoirs of a Geisha

THE WORST

Sons & Lovers by D.H. Lawrence

The Sound & the Fury by William Faulkner
The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky
Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

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