

Virginia Book Festival authors share thoughts

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POINT OF VIEW

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Readers often give me their thoughts about what makes a book a good choice for discussion.

But, until now, I haven't asked any writers for their perspective. I figured five of the authors speaking at "Bring-Your-Book-Club Night" at next month's Virginia Festival of the Book in Charlottesville would have some thoughts, too.

They are novelists Elinor Lipman, Sharyn McCrumb and Tom Perrotta, whose books regularly show up on book group reading lists.

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I also asked two nonfiction writers participating in the festival, Judy Gelman and Vicki Krupp. Both book group veterans, they are the authors of "The Book Club Cookbook," about what America's book groups are reading and eating.

Besides asking them what kind of book leads to the best discussions, I wanted to know what it is about their most recent books that make them good book group choices. And, since they know their work better than anyone else, I asked for questions that would make the discussion soar.

Here's what they said.

Tom Perrotta, "Little Children."

"The books that work best in a classroom or book group setting are those that challenge the readers' expectations and opinions, possibly even those that make readers a bit uncomfortable.

"'Little Children' is a funny and entertaining book that deals with a lot of controversial subjects. Readers will definitely have strong reactions to it and may find it interesting to discuss these reactions with their fellow group members."

His discussion questions:

Festival of the Book

The 11th annual Virginia Festival of the Book takes place March 16-20 at locations around Charlottesville. Most events are free. Especially for book groups:

"An Evening with Alexander McCall Smith," author of "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" and "The Sunday Philosophy Club" series, at 6 p.m. March 17 in Newcomb Hall's ballroom at University of Virginia, followed at 8 p.m. in U.Va.'s Culbreth Theatre by **"Bring-Your-Book-Club Night"** with Elinor Lipman, Sharyn McCrumb and Tom Perrotta. Judy Gelman and Vicki Krupp, authors of **"The Book Club Cookbook,"** will be at U.Va.'s bookstore at 4 p.m. March 17.

Details: Visit www.vabook.org for information and updates.

1. What do you make of the title? Can you remember any references to the title in the book? Who are the little children in the book? Is being a child seen as a good thing within the novel?

2. How is the child molester portrayed in "Little Children"? Is he a villain or an oddly sympathetic figure, or both at the same time?

Elinor Lipman, "The Pursuit of Alice Thrift."

The best discussion books? "Ones that build connective tissue between readers and characters. You know these characters and care about them, so that what

happens to them inspires or provokes the group to discuss, advise, question, dispute or condone their choices.

"I think a good book group book is one that explores a moral dilemma. Oh, make that a funny moral dilemma."

Their own books: "If this isn't too immodest and self-serving, there's the likeability and enjoyment factor. I so often hear people groaning about the unreadable tome nominated by the member with the oddball and over-reaching taste. People find my novels entertaining but also meaningful. I guess the shorthand compliment I hear often and value is, 'I laughed and I cried.'"

Her discussion questions:

1. Do women as smart as Alice Thrift (B.S. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, M.D. Harvard Medical School) fall for men like Ray Russo (traveling fudge salesman without portfolio)?

2. Alice Thrift is tactless, clueless and humorless. Did the author succeed in making her a sympathetic first-person narrator?

Sharyn McCrumb, "St. Dale."

"I think a book that causes people to examine some aspect of their own lives is a useful tool for a discussion that goes beyond the confines of literature.

"In 'St. Dale,' for example, the idea of who our own grass-roots saints are and what hole they fill in our lives would make for an interesting, far-ranging discussion. What is it about some people -- no more holy or accomplished than a dozen others -- that makes their untimely passing leave shock waves through the fabric of society?

"I think a good book should help us to make connections to parts of the world we weren't familiar with before. 'St. Dale' seems to be doing that for people in unexpected ways. I thought that even readers who knew nothing about NASCAR would enjoy the universality of the story of a Canterbury Tales set in the world of racing.

"There are 70 million NASCAR fans in this country. Chances are you are going to have to relate to at least one of them."

Her discussion questions:

1. Who is your own grass-roots saint? Princess Diana? Elvis? Sylvia Plath? Why?
2. What pilgrimage would you make to honor someone who touched your own life?

Judy Gelman and Vicki Krupp, "The Book Club Cookbook: Recipes and Food for Thought From Your Book Club's Favorite Authors."

"The best books for discussion," Judy said, "are books that can inspire some disagreement or controversy within the group, say, where people disagree on the motives of a character or the morality of the character's behavior."

"Books that transport readers to another time and place or that teach them about a culture other than their own are particularly good for discussion," Vicki said.

General discussion questions:

"Most groups tell us it's helpful when each member comes with a question," Judy said, "and that it's best to avoid the question, 'How did you like the book?'"

"Instead," Vicki said, "try asking open-ended questions about the author's style, the plot, events and characters. Ask members to support their views with passages from the book itself and encourage them to mark pages for discussion as they're reading."

Judy suggested a fun question to end a discussion: "If this book were being made into a movie, who would you cast in the main roles?"

Bonus question for the authors: Did you test all the recipes?

"Every recipe in our book," Vicki said, "was tested multiple times. When we were considering a recipe, we would send it to several testers. We reviewed their comments, tweaked the recipe and sent it out repeatedly until we were satisfied with the results."