
Let's Talk About It Some More

by Frannie Ashburn

On Thursday evenings this spring, thirty citizens of rural Randolph County gathered in their small public library in Archdale to talk about children's literature in a program called "Not For Children Only." Over a nine-week period, they met five times to discuss the enduring value of such works as *Little Women*, *Wind in the Willows*, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, and *Charlotte's Web*, books that can be read and enjoyed by adults as well as by children.

At the first program, there was lively discussion about the two books that everyone had read in preparation for the evening's lecture and discussion — Iona and Peter Opie's *Classic Fairy Tales* and *Tatterhood and Other Tales*, collections of fairy tales that focus on heroines instead of heroes. The evening's speaker, Dr. Cassandra Kircher from Elon College, was the first of the five humanities scholars who would come every other week to lead programs. Dr. Kircher began with a half-hour introduction to fairy tales in which she discussed the origin and collection of these culturally significant stories. The audience then split into three small groups for the real business of the evening, a "Let's Talk About It" program — and the participants were eager to do just that.

The groups quickly began animated exchanges about their own favorites, and how these special stories had affected their lives and families. More than one person had been surprised to discover the multiple origins of the classic fairy tales and their often violent original versions. Cinderella — in all her cultural permutations — was a hot topic, including the values and lessons

that children learn from her story. There was much talk of family storytelling in one discussion group whose nine members ranged in age from 25 to 80 and included some with college degrees as well as a recent graduate of the library's literacy program. One woman recalled the pleasure of hearing her grandmother's fairy tales, which she has passed on to her own children and grandchildren. She thought the *Tatterhood* tales featuring heroines were "exciting," and wished she'd been told those in her own girlhood. She plans to tell some of these to her granddaughters and grandsons.

The evening ended as most of these evenings do. Cassandra Kircher drove away happy to have spent two hours with enthusiastic people who had read the books and wanted to talk about them. She had expected to have a good time because her husband is an experienced "Let's Talk About It" scholar and has high praise for the project. The Friends of the Library cleared away the coffee and cookies and congratulated themselves on the success of their first programming endeavor. The delighted librarian accepted gracious thanks from the departing patrons, a third of whom milled around in the parking lot continuing the discussion long after the program was "over." "Let's Talk About It" was launched in Archdale, and the only question nine weeks later was, "When can we do

this again?"

Reading and discussion programs just like this one began around a kitchen table nearly twenty years ago in Rutland, Vermont. Pat Bates, then program coordinator at the Rutland Free Library and now project director for the Howard County Library in Columbia, Maryland, experimented with a number of formats before moving the original reading group from her home to the public library and adding a humanities scholar to enhance the discussion. Within two years of settling on this successful formula, Bates had received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop the "Let's Talk About It" project with the American Library Association. A national team of scholars and librarians worked together to develop themes, select books, and set up a workable program format.

In the past 11 years, libraries in all 50 states have participated in "Let's Talk About It" programs, and more than a hundred themes have been developed at the local, state, and national levels. A

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"Let's Talk About It" series has four or five sessions, each featuring a reading selected to address the overall theme. Themes are based on topics like work ("Working"), the Civil War ("Rebirth of a Nation: Nationalism and the Civil War"), romantic love ("Destruction or Redemption: Images of Romantic Love"), popular fiction ("What America Reads: Myth Making in Popular Fiction"), and women's autobiography ("The Journey Inward: Women's Autobiography"). Books are selected because they're "a good read" and because they address some aspect of the series theme. The reading and discussion program is really a "hook" to lure readers into the library and encourage them to explore the wealth of reading already available there; hence, "suggested additional reading" lists are handed out along with the series books.

The North Carolina "Let's Talk About It" project is funded by the State Library of North Carolina and housed at the Duke University Office of Continuing Education. Reading and discussion series on mystery, religion, science fiction, and Tar Heel literature have been developed over the years. The most recent of these explores "Twentieth-Century African-American Literature" and features the works of such writers as James Baldwin and Alice Walker. This theme was developed by Mimi McNamee, "Let's Talk About It" state project director, in conjunction with the North Carolina Humanities Council. Our state council is a strong supporter of libraries and has awarded numerous grants for "Let's Talk About It" programs to the state's public libraries.

Readers and scholars have continued to meet regularly in public libraries statewide and nationwide to talk about books and literature. This is critical for libraries in small rural communities where such opportunities often do not exist outside the library. A 1995 report on reading and discussion programs supported by the Humanities Projects in Libraries and Archives at the National Endowment for the Humanities states that:

- Programs have occurred in every state, the District of Columbia, and the three territories
- Reading and discussion programs have drawn an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from participants, scholars, and librarians
- In comparison with other "parallel school" program formats, the reading and discussion group

entails active personal investigation of humanities subjects over an extensive and sustained period of time (approximately 30 hours of reading, listening, and discussing for a typical five-book series)

- By 1987, nearly 2 million people had attended reading and discussion programs sponsored by all sources. Since 1987, about two million more people have participated in reading and discussion programs, both scholar-led (supported by the Humanities Projects in Libraries and Archives program of the National Endowment for the Humanities' Division of Public Programs) and others
- Replication of programs has become easier, more frequent, and less expensive through the efforts of the National Endowment for the Humanities, state humanities councils, the American Library Association, and others
- The demographic mix of participants has changed. More males are attending programs, especially programs that use nonfiction (usually history, political science, or biography). The age range is wider (from 16 to 83) and the mean age has decreased from 58 to 42.¹

This is a program that works well and continues to grow and expand.

Humans have a genuine need for stories, and we hunger for the intellectual stimulation of connecting and communicating with others through thoughts and words. For as long as books have been written, people have been reading and contemplating what they've read and then gathering together to talk with other readers. This is not a new phenomenon. What is new, is that this "gathering together" takes place in the public library and that the gathering includes a humanities scholar.

The "Let's Talk About It" format (scholar-led reading and discussion programs targeting the out-of-school adult audience) provides an opportunity to talk about books and ideas and life and literature and values and all the other fascinating things explored by readers. Within this context, adults can read a book and gather to talk about it, with the discussion enhanced by a humanities scholar. Scholar participation is the major distinction between these reading and discussion programs and other reading projects such as the Great Books programs.

"Let's Talk About It" scholars do not provide the "answers" nor do they analyze the text. They enrich the discussion with biographical information about the author and critical perspectives on the text. By raising provocative questions about a book's characters and themes, the scholar inspires participants to relate their own experiences and insights to the book and to share their responses with the discussion group. The essayist Hannah Arendt says, "We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human."² The discussion among participants is the focus of "Let's Talk About It," and the reading and lecture are the shared experience which forms the basis for the discussion. This shared experience empowers an audience of strangers to talk easily with one another about important topics.

The scholar is the key to the success of these programs, bringing expertise and personal interests and enthusiasms to the reading and examination of the text. Most readers do not have regular access to scholars with whom they can discuss their reading. And scholars find it stimulating and engaging to talk about literature with a mature audience, people who bring a life experience to their reading that is much different from the average twenty-something college student.

Scholars are recruited for the project by librarians and humanities council staff who know them from other public programs. And they're often recruited by their colleagues who have enjoyed their own participation. At the 1991 Lander University PRAXIS Humanities Conference in Greenwood, South Carolina, Dr. Judith James, professor of English at the University of South Carolina observed in a talk entitled "Cultural Literacy: A Two-Way Street":

This leads me to another observation or two about these lifelong learners who come to ... public libraries to "talk about it." Reading for them is not an "academic" exercise. They are eager to connect their reading to their life experience — in fact, they insist on it. And they have more life experience than the students we customarily teach. They provide, in this way, a useful corrective to ivory-tower

scholarship. They keep us realistic — and humble. As all good students do, they teach me as much (or more) than I teach them.

Talking about books and writers with the adult audiences that participate in Let's Talk About It enlarges my perspective, fuels my enthusiasm, and feeds my soul.

I invite you to consider for yourselves as teachers what Let's Talk About It has to offer. Just think: to engage in lively conversation with interested readers about books and writers worth talking about — with no tests to give, no papers to grade; who wouldn't feel renewed in our calling and better for having "talked about it"?3

Discussion is inspired by the literature, by the life experiences of the participants, and by the humanities perspective of the scholars. Reading and discussing literature from a humanities perspective involves language, history, anthropology, philosophy, and all fields of study united by the search to understand the mysteries of human existence. *What are the links of the past to the present? What is the moral basis for the decisions we must make each day? How can I be my own person and still peacefully co-exist with those who are different from me?*

We read and discuss literature from a humanities perspective in order to see our lives and concerns within a larger context and to understand others in the light of these experiences. We can learn about books from other people, and we learn about other people when they talk about books. *What do the themes of destruction and redemption in Emma Bovary's life have to do with my life? with my loves? How do family dynamics in Pat Conroy's The Great Santini help me to understand my own family or families that I know?*

A library reading and discussion program is a team effort with the scholars, librarians, and participants each playing an important role. And the teamwork at the state and national level has been no less important in providing the structure and the funding for projects that have put programs in hundreds of libraries. The American Library Association and the National Endowment for the Humanities have been the major partners in developing reading and discussion programs at the national level. The American Library Association

recognized the importance of providing packaged programs for busy librarians so that a library did not have to "re-invent the wheel" by selecting topics and books to address them. "Let's Talk About It" materials are available from the American Library Association and include posters, theme brochures including an essay that describes the series theme and an annotated bibliography for additional reading, clip art, and a publicity packet (pre-written news releases, public service announcements, etc.). Major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities has enabled scholars and librarians to develop themes and pilot programs for national projects. North Carolina's State Librarian, Sandy Cooper, was the American Library Association's national project director for "Let's Talk About It," and she also served as a consultant for individual state projects. She knows first-hand the impact these programs have on libraries, communities, and the lives of readers all across the country.

In addition to her work with "Let's Talk About It," Cooper was instrumental in developing the "Voices and Visions" reading, viewing, and discussion programs on modern American poetry that grew out of the "Let's Talk About It" project. "Voices and Visions" was developed jointly by the American Library Association and the Modern Poetry Association with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It expands on the popular "Let's Talk About It" reading and discussion model using videos. Scholar-led discussion remains the key to the program's success. In a "Voices and Visions" series, poetry comes alive through outstanding visual interpretations in the videos created for the popular Public Broadcasting Service series of the same name. Drama, dance, performances, interviews, archival footage, on-location cinematography, and recordings of the poets reading their own works heighten the participants' appreciation and understanding of the poetry. Robert DiYanni's excellent anthology, *Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions*, is the series text.

"Voices and Visions" was so successful that the American Library Association, the Modern Poetry Association, and the National Endowment for the Humanities developed the "Poets in Person" project for public library audiences. In "Poets in Person," engaging and influential writers talked with fellow poets and host Dr. Joseph Parisi, editor of *Poetry* magazine, for a National Public Radio series. The poets use vivid

details and anecdotes to tell how they came to write some of their favorite poems, giving unique insights into the creative process itself. A typical half-hour audiocassette program features five or more poems as interpreted by the poet, demonstrating that contemporary poetry is compelling and easily comprehensible. The series book, *Poets in Person: A Listener's Guide*, gives biographical information on each poet, a critical introduction to the poet's work, the text of all poems read on the tape, a bibliography, and an audiography. Scholar-led programs follow the lecture/discussion format.

North Carolina public libraries are participating in a joint project with South Carolina that will bring "Voices and Visions" and "Poets in Person" programs to over sixty libraries, senior citizen sites, and workplace sites in the two states. *Poetry Spoken Then and Now* is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and is sponsored in North Carolina by the Center for the Book, a program of the State Library of North Carolina. Last fall more than 100 librarians and scholars from the two Carolinas met in Columbia, South Carolina, for a one-day demonstration program and orientation workshop led by Dr. Joseph Parisi, head of the Modern Poetry Association and principal scholar for the "Poets in Person" national project. Dr. Parisi led a discussion on Rita Dove's poetry, allowing scholars and librarians to experience the fun of being participants instead of presenters.

Six-session poetry programs were held this spring in five North Carolina public libraries, one of which was the Shepard Memorial Library in Greenville. Dr. Peter Makuck, Professor of English at East Carolina University and editor of *Tar River Poetry*, led the "Poets in Person" series entitled "Autobiography into Art," and offered the following assessment:

Though I often present these poets to my writing students and am familiar with their work, I both learned more about and deepened my appreciation for, say, A. R. Ammons whom I've also written about. Parisi's taped interviews and his guide book were unknown to me and turned out to be wonderful discoveries. The audience itself was a very positive part of the experience for me. As Parisi quite correctly predicted in his workshop in South Carolina,

these participants were enthusiastic, friendly, bright, and didn't need to be prodded into discussion. As a teacher, you long for but rarely have such charged group participation.

I liked working off campus and out of an academic environment, liked discussing poetry with an informed non-specialized group. I enjoyed too working with MJ Carbo, our local librarian, planning the program and strategies. I did the talking, but she really did the lion's share of the behind-the-scenes work. I risk sounding sentimental, but it was reassuring to realize that there are such good people in our community.

This fall, in addition to poetry, North Carolina public library audiences will discuss the role the United States should play in our rapidly changing world. "Choices for the 21st Century: Defining Our Role in a Changing World" is designed to engage the American public in study and conversation about the values Americans share and the influence these values have on public life. This project is sponsored statewide by the North Carolina Center for the Book in partnership with the North Carolina Humanities Council. The North Carolina programs are part of an eight-state national project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and developed by the Choices for the 21st Century Library Project of Brown University's Watson Institute. The other states included in the national project are Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia.

"Choices" programs provide a forum for examining U. S. foreign policy options in terms of the nation's values and priorities, and they do not advocate any particular point of view. Programs are led by humanities scholars and participants will use the library reader, *What is America, and What Do We Want It to Be?* which was designed for the non-expert. Opinions are shared in the open, supportive, and neutral environment of the public library. These programs will attract people of all ages, educational levels, and experiences and will provide a public forum for citizens to engage in informed discussion — all of it for free at the local public library. This program truly is democracy in action.

At the heart of the "Choices" library program is an exploration of four

distinct visions, or "futures," for the United States in the coming years. Each *future* reflects a different assumption about the goal of U. S. foreign policy in our national life. In the first session, the scholar and the participants use the *futures* framework to:

- explore distinctly different perspectives on U. S. foreign policy;
- examine the underlying values of each;
- identify the pros and cons, risks and tradeoffs of each; and
- consider the connections between values and the development of public policy.

This session lays the foundation for the series. In sessions two and three, participants examine challenges facing the United States in the Post-Cold War era, choosing from the series topics: immigration, China, the environment, peace, and U. S. trade policy. In the final session, armed with a deeper appreciation of the values that are at stake in the development of public policy, participants define a future that reflects their own judgments about the role they believe the United States should play in the future. During this final session, they also fill out a ballot expressing their views. These ballots are then shared with elected officials at the national level.

Literature, poetry, foreign policy — all are topics of book-based humanities programs that are taking place right now in North Carolina public libraries. These reading and discussion programs clearly demonstrate that public libraries are lifelong learning centers in our communities and are an open forum for all citizens. The humanist Richard A. Lewis says,

humanities discussion programs represent an activity that is essential to our survival as a free people We sometimes hear discussion dismissed as idle, nonactive, a waste of time in a busy world. We are told that what is needed to solve our problems is action. But, when it is well conducted, discussion is action. Discussion is growth, clarification, self-discovery, change, understanding and any combination of these and other "events."⁴

Thoughtful discussion is alive and well in public library programs.

The Archdale Public Library's success with "Not For Children Only" inspired branch librarian Naomi Galbreath to apply for a grant from the

American Library Association to participate in "The Nation That Works," a "Let's Talk About It" series that examines work as it is portrayed in films, essays, poems, short stories, and oral histories. Archdale was one of 20 libraries selected nationwide to host a fall series of programs. "Work Across Ages: From Grandparents to Generation X" will examine the attitude of different age groups toward work and the extent to which these attitudes reflect changing national values.

The library's co-sponsors for the programs are the Archdale-Trinity Chamber of Commerce, the First National Bank of Archdale, and, of course, those enthusiastic Friends of the Archdale Library. A newspaper article about the project reads in part,

What does a small community library do when the world is pulling it in opposite directions: forward, on the one hand, to an increasingly mechanized information age, and back, on the other hand, to the deepening need for one-on-one discourse? In the case of the Archdale Public Library, the only solution is to go full speed in both directions.⁵

What a delightful response to the "books? or computers?" dilemma of today's expanding technologies and shrinking budgets!

Whether as a librarian or a patron, discover for yourself the pleasure of the thoughtful consideration of ideas, of reading and talking about books with people in your community. It's fun, it's free, and it can take place in your library. Come on, let's talk about it

References

¹ Thomas Phelps, "Report On Reading and Discussion Programs Supported By Humanities Projects in Libraries and Archives Prepared for the National Council on the Humanities" (Washington, D. C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1995), 1. Photocopied.

² Alan Moores and Rhea Rubin, *Let's Talk About It, A Planner's Manual*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1984), 4.

³ Judith James, "Cultural Literacy: A Two-Way Street," *Let's Talk About It in South Carolina Libraries Newsletter* (Spring 1995): 3.

⁴ Moores and Rubin, 3.

⁵ Lorraine Ahearn, "Library's Discussions to Continue," *High Point News and Record*, (May 22, 1996), G, 50.