

# Book Groups

## BOOK GROUP

SUBMITTED BY BARBARA REIMERS

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### How did your group start?

We held our first meeting in September 1997 with a discussion of *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* by Gregory Williams. Our premise was to read books that were multicultural in one way or another in order to gain a better understanding of other races, nationalities, and ethnicities. We soon expanded our parameters, however, to incorporate books about other topics such as the handicapped (*Choosing Naia: A Family's Journey* by Mitchell Zukoff and *Waist High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* by Nancy Mairs); adoption (*The Boy from Baby House 10: From the Nightmare of a Russian Orphanage to a New Life in America* by Alan Philips); poverty (*The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls and *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* by David Shipler); immigration (*The Devil's Highway: A True Story* by Luis Alberto Urrea and *Strength in What Remains* by Tracy Kidder); and homosexuality (*Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* by Mel White).

### Who are your members, and how are the meetings structured?

We have grown to be a rather large group of 21 members—men and women ranging in age from their 30s to their 80s. In spite of the size and the diversity in age, the group works. No one monopolizes the conversation, and everyone listens to what the others have to say. We meet nine times a year (not in December, July, or August) in the library of Wesley Methodist Church, but members come from a variety of faiths. The same person moderates the discussions each month.

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### How do you choose books?

At our May meeting each year, we browse through an assortment of about 18 books that members have suggested, and we choose 9 for our reading list for the following year. The books, both fiction and nonfiction, are available in paperback and are usually between 300 and 400 pages long.

### What are your favorite and least favorite books?

It is hard to narrow down the favorites from 20 years of good reads, but here are a few: *Teatime for the Firefly* by Shona Patel; *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell; *Ishmael's Oranges* by Claire Hajaj; *King Peggy: An American Secretary, Her Royal Destiny, and the Inspiring Story of How She Changed an African Village* by Peggien Bartels; *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini; *The Gift of Rain* by Tan Twan Eng; *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman; and a number of books about the Holocaust. We generally don't find magic realism or collections of short stories appealing. Interestingly enough, some of our best discussions have resulted from books everyone disliked. Three that were not liked were *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods* by Michael Wex; *The Orphan Master's Son* by Adam Johnson; and *American Dervish* by Ayad Akhtar.

### Do you have any special activities?

Occasionally, we have had an author visit us during our discussion time. Once or twice, we have gone to a movie together or in small groups to see how well a book we liked translated to the screen (Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*), and several times we have gone to an ethnic restaurant (Lebanese, Indian, and Greek) to become familiar with other cuisines. ■