

WRITING QUESTIONS FOR BOOK DISCUSSIONS

By Jennifer Baker, Fiction Department, The Seattle Public Library

After reviewing your “critical reading” and research notes, writing your own discussion questions ensures that you will be fully engaged with your material and more comfortable leading the discussion. The example questions below, prepared for discussing *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, may help you develop your own questions. (Some of these questions were adapted from *Good Books Lately* by Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004.)

Questions about style:

- How would you describe the author’s narrative style?
- How does Kidder create a feeling of immediacy?

Questions about narrator and perspective:

- Is the author an objective biographer? Does it matter?
- How does Kidder’s perspective influence your impression of Farmer and the other characters he introduces?

Questions about the characters:

- How does the narrator feel about each of the important characters in the book?
- Who is your favorite and why?
- How do you feel about Dr. Farmer’s patients?
- How does Kidder use these people to bring out the message of the book?
- How well do the characters, especially Paul Farmer, know themselves? How does their self-awareness affect your impression of them?

Questions about plot and structure:

- What is the basic plot structure and how does it influence your understanding of what’s happening? Why did Kidder structure the book in this way?
- How would the story be different if the narrative elements were presented in a different sequence?
- What are the biggest conflicts and how do they reinforce the book’s themes?

Questions about setting:

- How did the physical settings contribute to your feelings as you read the book?
- How important is setting to the author’s message?
- How do Kidder and Farmer successfully break into all levels of society?

Questions about theme:

- What recurring themes and ideas, images and situations carry the big messages?
- What are the main concerns in the book? How do they affect you?
- What big questions about the human condition are asked in the book?
- Is there a single sentence, quote or character that epitomizes the book for you?

Asking the tough questions – How do YOU respond to the book?

Narrative elements don’t tell the whole story. Our personal needs, experiences, culture and mood come into play as we read. Good discussion explores the personal without eliciting the whole saga. Facilitators may never share these thoughts with the group, but should nevertheless be in touch with them, and encourage the group to consider thinking about them.

- How did the book make you feel?
- What have you experienced that enriches your reading of the book?
- What insights have you gained from the book?
- What big questions does the book raise for you?