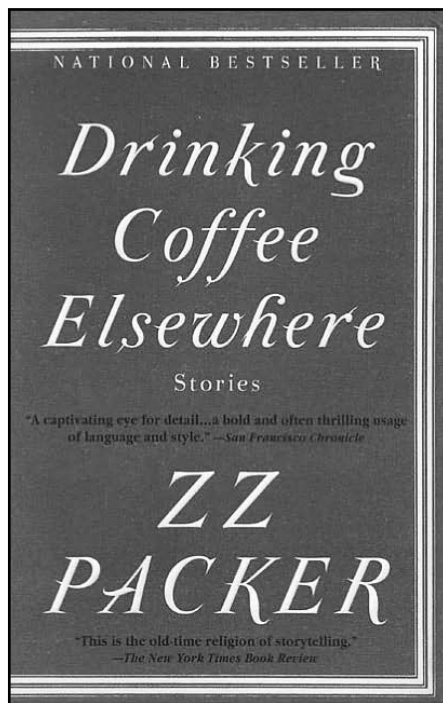


1 BOOK *for* Greater Hartford

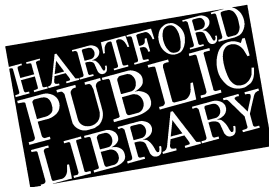


**A Reading Resource Guide
Hartford Public Library**

A Reading Resource Guide for
One Book for Greater Hartford

*Drinking
Coffee
Elsewhere*

By ZZ Packer





Hartford Public Library
500 Main Street
Hartford, CT 06103-3075
Telephone: (860) 695-6295
Fax: (860) 722-6900

www.hplct.org
www.onebookforgreaterhartford.org

One Book for Greater Hartford

One Book for Greater Hartford is a program for everyone! From its beginning, One Book was, and will continue to be, a free literary event. And a unique opportunity to gather together and talk about a great book and important issues.

One Book has brought authors Edwidge Danticat (2002), James McBride (2003), Esmeralda Santiago (2004) and Azar Nafisi (2005) to the people of the Greater Hartford region. This year, we have chosen a book of short stories *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* by ZZ Packer as the 2006 One Book.

Author ZZ Packer's stories showcase ordinary people questioning themselves and their lives. Like all of us – wanting to find our place, to live out a dream or expectation. The library believes the book offers the opportunity to consider a great theme -- the American Dream.

Book discussions, readings, films, panel discussions, book displays, poetry, and art are a few of the avenues used to explore the 2006 One Book theme; *Considering the American Dream*.

We appreciate our One Book partners; the Connecticut Forum, Connecticut Public Television, Greater Hartford Arts Council, the Greater Hartford Literacy Council, *Hartford Advocate*, *Preview Connecticut*, and WDRC/The Talk of Connecticut and the Mary Jones Show; as we work together on this shared literary experience.

This year, One Book culminates on September 22 with an author event featuring ZZ Packer at our downtown Central Library. I hope you'll join us for this wonderful literary event!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Louise Blalock". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Louise Blalock, Chief Librarian, Hartford Public Library

Acknowledgements

Inaugurated in 2002, Hartford Public Library's One Book for Greater Hartford is a regional initiative that engages the community in a shared experience—the reading of one book by a living author.

Denise Nappier, Connecticut State Treasurer, is this year's Honorary Chair.

The library's cultural partners are Connecticut Public Television, the Connecticut Forum, the Greater Hartford Arts Council, the Greater Hartford Literacy Council, the Harlem Book Fair, the *Hartford Advocate*, *Preview Connecticut* and WDRC/The Talk of Connecticut and the Mary Jones Show.

Contents

About the Author	1
About the Book	1
Discussion Questions for <i>Drinking Coffee Elsewhere</i>	2
Bibliography.....	6
Suggested Reading.....	7
Filmography.....	11
Webliography.....	14
Family / Intergenerational Book Discussion Series.....	16
<i>Writing the Short Story</i> by Peter Duval.....	19
Reading Critcially.....	23
Suggestions for Participants.....	25

About the Author

ZZ Packer currently lives with her husband and son in the San Francisco Bay area.



ZZ Packer

She was born in Chicago, Illinois, and raised in Atlanta and Louisville, Kentucky. She received her M.A. at John Hopkins and a M.F.A. at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She was a recent Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, where she also held a Jones Lectureship.

About the Book

ZZ Packer, in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, takes us into the lives of characters on the periphery, unsure of where they belong. We meet a Brownie troop of black girls who are confronted with a troop of white girls; a young man who goes with his father to the Million Man March and must decide where his allegiance lies; an international group of drifters in Japan, who are starving, unable to find work; a girl in a Baltimore ghetto who has dreams of the larger world she has seen only on the screens in the television store nearby, where the Lithuanian shopkeeper holds out hope for attaining his own American Dream.

With penetrating insight that belies her youth—she was only nineteen years old when *Seventeen* magazine printed her first published story—ZZ Packer helps us see the world with a clearer vision. *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* is a striking performance—fresh, versatile, and captivating. It introduces us to an arresting and unforgettable new voice.

Discussion Questions for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

1. How did the epigram from *Roots* by Alex Haley: “Join me in the hope that this story of our people can help to alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners.” influence your understanding of each of the stories? Of the collection as a whole?
2. At the end of “Brownies,” as they ride home on the bus, Laurel tells the other girls about seeing a group of Mennonites in the mall and what her father did thereafter. How does this incident relate to the confrontation between the girls and Troop 909?
3. The crisis in “Brownies” evolves out of the use of one word about which the troop leader can assert “but I guarantee it [the saying of the offensive word] would not have been intentional.” (p. 26) Why does this not seem to matter to the young ringleader Arnetta?
4. “Every Tongue Shall Confess” gets its title from the “old-fashioned hymn” Clareese has the choir sing to introduce Pastor Everett’s sermon. “The hymn ended up sounding like the national anthem at a school assembly: a stouthearted song rendered in monotone.” (p. 41) What does her selection and how the congregation and pastor receive it reveal about her relationship to the church?
5. Her patient at the hospital, Cleophus, challenges Clareese to explain God to him and then appears at her church with his guitar. Is he a threat to her belief?
6. Do Lynnea’s actions at the end of “Our Lady of Peace” seem out of character? “She had a chance to slow down, and she didn’t want to. She’d scare them for once. Make them run.” (p. 80) Who else has made others do things in the story?

Discussion Questions for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

7. “Our Lady of Peace” is the name of the home for girls where the student Sheba lives. Why do you think the author also made it the name of the story?

8. As the father in “The Ant of the Self” exposes his plan to get Spurgeon to drive them to the Million Man March, the young man thinks, “for once I’m glad Ray Bivens Jr. is scheming so hard he doesn’t see me smiling. If he could – if he sensed in any way that I might be willing – he’d find a way to call the whole thing off.” (p. 90+) Why would the father react this way to his son being “willing”?

9. While at the March, Spurgeon hears many sermons. “The preacher ends by telling everyone that freedom is attained only when the ant of the self – that small, blind, crumb-seeking part of ourselves – casts off slavery and its legacy, becoming a huge brave ox.” (p. 101) How does this image fit with your definition of freedom?

10. “It’s not enough to get me where I’m going, but it’s just what I need” (p. 116) Spurgeon says of the twenty dollars handed to him as he sits in the train station. Considering all that has happened up to him up to this point, discuss what the character means by this.

11. In the collection’s title story, the main character Dina essentially changes the course of her college life with a statement made during an orientation exercise. “Until that moment I’d been good in all the ways that were meant to matter.” (p. 118) Later, in one of her mandatory sessions with a psychiatrist, Dr. Raeburn says to her “constantly saying what one doesn’t mean accustoms the mouth to meaningless phrases.” (p. 143) Why has she developed this habit? Does she want to change it?

Discussion Questions for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

12. Tia sets off from her rural home to find her mother in Atlanta after Sister Gwendolyn performs on her “a more aggressive sort of laying-on-of-hands” (p. 153) after the girl has laughed quietly during Sunday school. “Speaking in Tongues” unfolds in the harsh city. Why does Tia continue to be drawn to Dezi, the man who wants her to stay in Atlanta? Why does his friend Maria work so hard to get Tia to go back home?

13. In “Geese” Dina told people in Baltimore “she was going to Japan in the hopes of making a pile of money, Back home, money was the only excuse for leaving[.]” (p. 210) On the next page the reader finds out she understood her real reason for the trip to be “for loveliness.” What does she find?

14. The central character in “Geese” is named Dina and comes from Baltimore, as does Dina in the title story. Can the reader assume they are both about the same young woman? How does such an assumption affect one’s understanding of the stories? Of the character?

15. “Once [Doris] even asked Reverend Sykes if she could go to a march, just one, but the answer had been no, that Saints didn’t go to marches. Then he quoted the scripture that says, ‘One cannot be of two masters, serving God and mammon both.’” (p. 236) How does his response exemplify her dilemma?

16. What leads Doris to hold her own sit in?

17. How does ZZ Packer’s writing shed light on the theme of One Book for Greater Hartford 2006, *Considering the American Dream*?

Discussion Questions for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

18. Talk about how any one of the stories addresses any of the following concepts: risk-taking in relation to one's self and one's group; making one's own way in the world; the American Dream and individual satisfaction; the American Dream and religion; fundamentalism and the world at large; economic opportunity and survival.

Bibliography

Ms. Packer stated in an interview that she reworked, “to varying degrees,” all of the stories collected in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*. Anthologies afford the reader the opportunity to follow the writing process by reading both versions.

The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers / edited by Vendela Vida, 2005.

The Best American Short Stories [selected from U.S. and Canadian magazines] / series edited by Katrina Kennison; guest editor E. L. Doctorow, 2000; guest editor Walter Mosley, 2003.

More Stories We Tell: The Best Contemporary Short Stories by American Women / edited by Wendy Martin, 2004.

New Stories from the South / edited by Shannon Ravenel, 2003.

Shaking the Tree: A Collection of New Fiction and Memoir by Black Women / edited by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, 2003.

Sleepaway: Writings on Summer Camp / edited by Eric Simonoff, 2005.

25 and Under: Fiction / edited by Susan Ketchin and Neil Giordano, 1997.

Why I'm Still Married: Women Write Their Hearts Out on Love, Loss, Sex, and Who Does the Dishes / edited by Karen Propp and Jean Trounstone, 2006.

The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop: Forty-Three Stories, Recollections, and Essays on Iowa's Place in Twentieth-Century American Literature / edited by Tom Grimes, 1999.

Bibliography of Work about ZZ Packer

Contemporary Authors, vol. 221. Gale, 2004.

Suggested Reading - Adult

American Dreams by John Jakes. Fiction

Historical novelist portrays Crown family in early 20th century Chicago.

Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream by Bruce Watson.

History of a 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, MA, the “immigrant city” mill town that became an inspiration to workers around the world.

Digging to America by Anne Tyler. Fiction

Iranian-born woman comes to terms with her “outsiderness” after 35 years in America.

The Failures Of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream by Sheryl Cashin.

Examination of race and class, and how to create a more hopeful reality for all.

Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer by Steven Millhauser. Fiction

Pulitzer-Prize winning story of a shopkeeper’s son who makes a quick rise to the top and satisfies his heart’s desire.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America by Barbara Ehrenreich.

Journalist experiences and relates the sobering realities of unskilled, low-wage workers.

O Pioneers! by Willa Cather. Fiction

Swedish farmer and family battle for survival in 1880’s Nebraska country.

Suggested Reading - *Adult*

Promises Betrayed: Waking Up from the American Dream by Bob Herbert.

New York Times columnist relates the “tragedies and triumphs of invisible Americans in their everyday lives.”

Sula by Toni Morrison. Fiction

Two childhood friends chose divergent paths to cope with life’s harsh realities.

Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation’s Drive to End Welfare by Jason DeParle.

Three women in an extended family struggle with crises of urban poverty.

Typical American by Jen Gish. Fiction

Chinese siblings assimilate and make their American dream a reality.

The Working Poor: Invisible in America by David K. Shipler.

Chronicle of hardships endured by impoverished workers in 21st century America.

Suggested Reading - *Young Adult*

Born Confused by Tanuja Desai Hidier

Seventeen-year-old Dimple, whose family is from India, discovers that she is not Indian enough for the Indians and not American enough for the Americans, as she sees her hypnotically beautiful, manipulative best friend taking possession of both her heritage and the boy she likes.

Bang! by Sharon G. Flake

A teenage boy must face the harsh realities of inner city life, a disintegrating family, and destructive temptations as he struggles to find his identity as a young man.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

An eleven-year-old African-American girl in Ohio, in the early 1940s, prays for her eyes to turn blue so that she will be beautiful.

The River Between Us by Richard Peck

During the early days of the Civil War, the Pruitt family takes in two mysterious young ladies who have fled New Orleans to come north to Illinois.

Caucasia by Danzy Senna

Separated when their parents' interracial marriage ends in divorce, light-skinned Birdie and her dark-skinned sister Cole lead very different lives while hoping for a reunion with one another.

Buried Onions by Gary Soto

When nineteen-year-old Eddie drops out of college, he struggles to find a place for himself as a Mexican American living in a violence-infested neighborhood of Fresno, California.

Suggested Reading - *Children*

How Tia Lola Came to Visit Stay by Julia Alvarez

Ten-year old Miguel learns to love his colorful aunt from the Dominican Republic when she comes to stay with his family in Vermont.

Jubilee Journey by Carolyn Meyer

Emily Rose, a young Connecticut teen with an African American mother and "French American" father, connects with her black heritage through a visit to her great-grandmother in Texas.

Maya Running by Anjali Banerjee

Maya struggles with her ethnic identity, a crush on a classmate, and the presence of her beautiful Bengali cousin, Pinky, who comes for a visit bearing a powerful statue of the Hindu god Ganesh.

No Laughter Here by Rita Garcia-Wilson

Ten-year-old Akilah finds out why her closest friend is silent and withdrawn after a trip to her Nigerian homeland.

The Skin I'm In by Sharon Flake

Dark-skinned Maleeka accepts the scorn of the middle-school "in" group, until a teacher helps her learn how to treasure herself.

Sweetgrass Basket by Marlene Carvell

In alternating passages, two Mohawk sisters describe their lives at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, as they attempt to assimilate to "white" ways.

Filmography for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

1. *Norma Rae*. (1979)

Sally Field won an Oscar for her portrayal of Norma Rae, a worker in a southern textile mill on the verge of unionization. When New York union organizers arrive in her town, Norma Rae is skeptical about getting involved, but eventually she becomes a key activist in the struggle. USA. Dir. by Martin Ritt. Available from 20th Century Fox.

2. *Real Women Have Curves*. (2002)

Story of a young Latina, Ana, who lives in East Los Angeles and wishes to attend college, in spite of her mother's desire to have her put her education on hold to work in her sister's sewing factory. USA. Dir. by Patricia Cardoso. Available from HBO Home Video.

3. *Breaking Away*. (1979)

Peter Yates' film about small town life in Bloomington, Indiana. Dave and his friends, town residents and children of former quarry workers, are looked down upon by the students who stay in Bloomington to attend the town's university. Dave doesn't care. He is too busy dreaming of becoming a champion cyclist and winning the girl of his dreams who just happens to be a university student. USA. Dir. by Peter Yates. Available from 20th Century Fox.

4. *Roger & Me*. (1989)

Award-winning documentary by controversial filmmaker Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11*) tells the story of the decline and fall of Flint, Michigan following the shutdown of the city's General Motors plant. Moore utilizes his signature satirical sense of humor to expose what he believes to be the corporation's complete disregard for its workforce. USA. Dir. by Michael Moore. Available from Warner Home Video.

Filmography for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

5. *A Raisin in the Sun*. (1960)

Starring Sidney Poitier and based on Lorraine Hansberry's award-winning play, *A Raisin in the Sun* presents a portrait of the frustrations caused by a dream deferred. The Youngers of Chicago have just come into possession of a large sum of money and tensions build within the family over what is to be done with it. USA. Dir. by Daniel Petrie. Available from Sony Pictures.

6. *Harlan County USA*. (1975)

This Academy Award-winning documentary follows the progression of a violent and bitter coal miners' strike in June of 1973 in Kentucky. Along the way, the film also takes a look at the poor living conditions of Harlan's residents. USA. Dir. by Barbara Kopple. Available from Criterion.

7. *I Remember Mama*. (1948)

A family of Norwegian immigrants struggles through hard times with hopefulness and love in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. The story is told through the eyes of daughter Katrin who dreams of one day becoming a published writer. USA. Dir. by George Stevens. Available from Warner Home Video.

8. *In America*. (2002)

Follows the story of an Irish family that has just arrived to start a new life in America following the death of the couple's youngest son. The family moves into a tough neighborhood in New York City and must learn how to adjust to their strange new home. UK. Dir. by Jim Sheridan. Available from 20th Century Fox.

9. *Rocky*. (1976)

Oscar-winning film about a small time boxer who gets the once in a lifetime chance to take on the world heavyweight champion.

Filmography for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

It's the story of an underdog striving to go the distance and realize his dreams. USA. Dir. by John G. Avildsen. Available from MGM DVD.

10. *Nothing But a Man*. (1963)

Landmark drama about an African-American railroad worker in 1963 Alabama who wants nothing more than to be treated with dignity, and to settle down with the woman he loves. USA. Dir. by Michael Roemer. Available from New Video Group.

Most audiovisual materials (videos, DVDs, etc.) purchased or borrowed are for home use only. Be aware that if you use them for a public program you must first get permission, called Public Performance Rights, from the copyright holder. A librarian can help you determine who to ask. Most titles listed are available at Hartford Public Library.

Webliography for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

About the Author:

<http://web.mac.com/zpucker/iWeb/zpucker/Biography.html>

Biography

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writer.asp?z=y&cid=1069496>

Barnes & Noble Meet the Writer

<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum103.html>

Interview

http://www.newyorker.com/online/content/articles/021125on_onlineonly01

New Yorker Interview

About the Book:

http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/drinking_coffee_elsewhere.html

Book Club Reading Guide

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/1573222348/ref=dp_proddesc_0/104-6445087-2709566?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

Editorial reviews

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9505E4D6123FF935A25750C0A9659C8B63&n=Top%2fFeatures%2fBooks%2fBook%20Reviews>

New York Times Book Review

Webliography for *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

Sites Related to One Book Projects, Book Groups and Reading

<http://ww2.hplct.org/reader.htm>

Hartford Public Library Readers Services Resources

www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html

Library of Congress One Book

Reading Promotion Projects listing by state.

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebookbyauthor.html>

Library of Congress One Book

Reading Promotion Projects listing by author.

www.readinggroupguides.com

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

In 1868, Horatio Alger published the first of his hundreds of “stories for boys.” His standard narrative core, the impoverished urban youth who improves his station through thrift, diligence, honesty, and quick thinking, is for many the quintessentially “American” narrative – Nathaniel West noted, “Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks.” In 2001, Sharon Flake published **Money Hungry* (Hyperion Books). Thirteen-year old Raspberry Hill sells candy and pencils at school, cleans houses, and works in a car wash. She hides and hoards the money she earns as barrier against the homeless life she and her mother lived, before her mother found a part-time job, and an apartment in a housing project. Theft, cheating, the despair of those around her, and her own obsession conspire against Raspberry. She finds herself homeless and penniless again, before her mother’s strength carries them through the hard times.

The works of Alger and Flake have many commonalities, despite their separation in time: the brutal daily struggle of poverty, which includes the struggle against those who taunt, abuse, and steal from their neighbors; the importance of honesty; the centrality of friendships; and money as a measure of both security and self respect. Their dissimilarities reflect the changing sensibilities of the past century: Raspberry is an African American girl, rather than a European American boy, and racial and gender identity are important elements in her story; her mother is a complex and self-aware figure, rather than an icon; self-education is not a critical element in the hero’s journey; and help comes from within the family and community, not from outside it. Perhaps most importantly, Raspberry’s hard work for money is not represented as a purely laudable, even noble activity, but as at least in part the manifestation of a

**Money Hungry* is probably of most interest to readers ages nine to twelve.

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

disorder, a compulsion. These similarities and differences would make an intergenerational book discussion, comparing and contrasting the two authors, profitable. However, a discussion of *Money Hungry*, facilitated by adults who have read or are knowledgeable concerning Alger and his version of the “American Dream,” would also be illuminating. Adults who have also read *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* can add the perspectives on poverty, racial identity, and parental roles that work brings.

Questions for an intergenerational discussion of *Money Hungry* and the American Dream might include:

Imagine that you are stopped in your car on a street in a poor neighborhood in New York. A 13-year old girl, dressed in a dirty tee shirt and jeans, asks if she can clean your windshield for a dollar. How do you feel about being asked? How do you respond?

Why does Raspberry want money? Why does her friend Ja’nae want money? Why does her friend Zora want money? What does Mai want?

You are homeless – living in a car in a junkyard with your mom, like Raspberry, without friends or family who can help you – and you know you should be going to school every day. How do you get yourself up on time? How do you clean yourself and your clothes? What do you do for homework supplies, and where do you do your homework?

Raspberry will be in high school next year. Try writing a plan of action for her, one that will get her through four years of high school, and into college. What kinds of help will she need, and who will give her that help? Specifically, what should her

Family/ Intergenerational Book Discussion Series

mother do to help her? What can she try to do for herself? Now, pretend you are Raspberry. What does she think about the plan you have come up with? If Raspberry follows the plan, and starts college, what will her friends Mai, Ja'nae, and Zora each say?

Do you actually know anyone – famous person, friend, neighbor, family member – who has gone from real poverty to financial security? If you do, describe that person. What do you think were the characteristics of that person, or of his or her environment, that most strongly contributed to his or her success? Does Raspberry have any of those things going for her?

Writing the Short Story: Nine Points of Departure And a Note of Caution

by Peter Duval



Peter Duval

Peter Duval holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. His stories have appeared in many publications, including *Northwest Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Descant* and *Sun Dog*. Two of the stories in *Rear View*, “Wheatback” and “Bakery,” were nominated for Pushcart Prizes. He is also the recipient of the 2005 Connecticut Book Award for Fiction, presented by the Connecticut Center for the Book, a program of Hartford Public Library.

- **Read as a writer.** Don’t rely on the movies and TV for your narrative models. Read short stories written by accomplished writers of the form, both canonical and contemporary. *ZZ* Packer is an excellent place to start. Here are some further suggestions: Anton Chekhov, Andre Dubus, Ernest Gaines, Ha Jin, Alice Munro, Tim O’Brien, Flannery O’Connor, William Trevor, John Edgar Wideman. Read with a pencil in hand and a notebook close by. Read deeply and slowly. It matters less how much you read than how well you read it. Reread your favorite stories. Ask yourself why the writer made certain decisions: why, for instance, she chose to render one part of the story through scene (that is, in real time) and to summarize another. Why did she begin the story here? Why did she end it there? Read your favorite passages aloud. Honor the language.

- **Cultivate the “habit of art,”** as Flannery O’Connor says. Make a commitment to move through your day with a writer’s eyes and ears. Keep the notebook handy—not only to take your observations down, of course, but to remind yourself of your project and the need to stay alert. The photographer William

Writing the Short Story: Nine Points of Departure And a Note of Caution

Eggleston once said of his work, “I am at war with the obvious.” Be open to the odd, the obscure, the arcane. Notice things others don’t. Think about what people leave unsaid. Story ideas are all around you. Open your eyes.

- **Think in terms of conflict.** When you don’t know what to write about, sit down at the keyboard and try the following: put two very different people together in a situation. (Maybe one of them is elderly, the other young. Maybe they’re on a transatlantic flight or waiting for a bus or in a doctor’s office.) Think of something they both want. It can be something insignificant—maybe there’s only one bag of salted peanuts left in the flight attendant’s pocket—anything. Imagine yourself a fly on the wall, and simply watch and listen. Get the characters talking. Now, don’t think. Write. Resist the urge to get up. “The writer is the person who stays in the room,” as Ron Carlson says.

- **Be specific.** “Detail,” according to John Gardner, “is the lifeblood of fiction.” This is all the more true for short fiction because details in a story do so much of the work. Not only do they deepen the “fictional dream” (another Gardner term for the way we experience fiction), they deepen as well our understanding of character. There are no typical people. Well-chosen details can imply paragraphs of expository background. Your job as a writer is, as O’Connor says, “to convince the senses.” You do this by being specific.

- **Be flexible.** Don’t be afraid to let what happens in a scene—the products of your imagination that arise from nowhere—determine the direction or even the outcome of a story. Distrust neat plots and tidy endings. Work the outer story and let the inner story work itself—at least in your first draft.

Writing the Short Story: Nine Points of Departure And a Note of Caution

- **Consider the importance of dialogue.** Listen to the way people really talk (again, keep the notebook with you at all times), the hilarious and inventive curses, the idiosyncrasies, the nonverbal accompaniments to speech, the regional differences. But always keep in mind that dialogue has its own rules and conventions, that it's not just transcribed speech but the outcome of a crafted selection. When you read fiction, note how dialogue differs from actual human speech (consult your notes) and how it is represented on the page.
- **Don't worry about "theme."** If you're interested in getting across opinions or ideas or abstractions or political points, consider writing an essay, a form ready-made for these intentions. Fiction is about delivering, through language, lived experience. That's why it's so powerful.
- **Learn the conventions of sentence writing**—not just the basics of grammar (which should become second nature), but the inner life of sentences. Ask yourself why some work while others fall flat. When you read, underline sentences that quicken your pulse. Read them aloud. Copy them into your notebook.
- **Don't neglect revision.** Writing the first draft is fun. The adrenaline is flowing, the thrill of invention like some sublime form of play. Hours pass unnoticed. "Revising is," as Robert Stone says, "like cutting your own hair." It's hard to view your work as your readers will. It's awkward. You have to make hard choices. Here's one: is each passage or phrase or paragraph in there because it needs to be, or because it shows how brilliant you are? Faulkner advised writers to "kill your darlings." Well, killing your darlings isn't always easy.

Writing the Short Story: Nine Points of Departure And a Note of Caution

- **Finally, don't underestimate the difficulty of writing short stories.** Accomplished writers of the form, like the masters of any discipline, make it look easy. What you don't see when you read something like ZZ Packer's fine story "Our Lady of Peace" are the hundreds of hours of revision, the days spent at the keyboard working and reworking the most apparently insignificant detail or phrasing. Developing the "habit of art" also takes time. In addition to technical prowess, a writer needs street smarts, a compassionate understanding of human nature in all of its manifestations, and the paradoxical characteristics of both a radical openness to others and a thick skin. No one questions the discipline and commitment necessary to become a professional baseball player or a concert pianist. The same should be true for the art of writing short stories.

Reading Critically

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience. They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepen the reader's appreciation of the book.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

1. Make notes and mark pages as you go:

Reading for a book discussion - whether you are the leader or simply a participant - differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, "Is this significant?" or, "Why does the author include this?" Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

2. Ask tough questions of yourself and the book:

Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book more meaningful.

3. Pay attention to the author's message:

As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing

Reading Critically

about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective.

4. *Analyze themes:*

Try to analyze the important themes of a book and to consider what premise the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, "what if... " questions.

5. *Get to know the characters:*

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

6. *Notice the structure of the book:*

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? If so, how do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the order the author chose make sense to you?

7. *Make comparisons to other books and authors:*

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by other authors that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

Suggestions for Book Discussion Participants

A good discussion depends in large part on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions:

1. **SPEAK UP.** Group discussion is like a conversation: everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

2. **LISTEN** thoughtfully to others. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.

3. **BE BRIEF.** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as a few words as possible. Be ready to let someone else speak.

4. **SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE.** Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comments of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

5. **COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND.** As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

“Reading Critically” was prepared by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. “Suggestions for Book Discussion Participants” is based on New York Public Library’s book discussion program.

**HARTFORD
PUBLIC
LIBRARY**