

PASS THE WORD—ROMANCE READING GROUPS ARE HOT, HOT, HOT!

by Stephanie Bond

Reader groups are experiencing a resurgence of late. Women are especially enjoying the mental stimulation and camaraderie of sharing a good book in a group forum. Perhaps we have Oprah Winfrey to thank for the renaissance—by starting a bookclub with her expansive television viewing audience, she has broadened the medium to staggering proportions.

Bookstores have started their own romance reading groups to attract the volume buying romance readers and to invest readers in the store "community." Members of a reading group are loyal to the store and its events, and will create good buzz for the store by word of mouth. Starting a romance reading group is a great first step in upgrading your romance program, which will result in more overall sales. So how can you start your own reader romance group?

1) **Find an in-store champion.** Ask for a program 'host' volunteer among your employees who read romance. Look for enthusiasm—the success of your reader group will largely depend on the efforts of this individual.

2) **Inform your local Romance Writers of America (RWA) chapter.** Contact the national RWA office at (281) 440-6885 to obtain the name of the local chapter nearest you and the contact name. When you reach the chapter liaison, ask them to pass the word among members that you're starting a romance reading group (post it in their newsletter, on their website, etc.), and ask if published members would be willing to make a guest appearance at the discussion group.

3) **Determine a regular time for the group to meet.** Weekday evenings are popular meeting times, but don't overlook weekday mornings (offer a story reading in the children's section at the same time) or even Sunday afternoon. Decide if the group will meet once a month, every two weeks, etc.

4) **Publicize the start of your romance reader discussion group.** Post a sign in the romance section, or place flyers in the bags of anyone who purchases a romance novel. Most newspapers have a local interest section and will print your promo free of charge. And don't forget to post a sign in the area public libraries.

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5) **Sponsor a local author or a story set locally to stir up interest.** If the author can make a guest appearance, even better. Otherwise, your group at least has a point of interest (locale) on which to start the discussion rolling. (If you can find a non-fiction book that has a tie-in, have copies close by.) Offering a discount on the fiction book selected as a topic for the discussion group meeting will help stimulate involvement.

6) **Assemble a reading guide.** Contact the publisher or surf the Internet to see if a reading group guide is available for the chosen book. Other sources might be the author's web site. If you don't find a reading guide, make a list of questions to keep the discussion going, such as "Who is your favorite character in the book and why?" or "How did the setting impact the story?"

7) **Location, location, location.** Make sure you have enough chairs for the group to sit comfortably when they arrive. If possible, serve light refreshments and seat the participants around a table.

8) **Facilitate discussion.** The "host" from the bookstore should be prepared to facilitate healthy discussion about the book, and monitor the group. Prepare a list of questions to pose, such as "Who is your favorite character in the book and why?", "How did the setting impact the story?", or what was the most memorable scene?" Give everyone a chance to talk. If the time expires, the "host" should gently announce the formal end of the session, but invite those who would like to stay and discuss the book further among themselves to do so, then excuse herself.

9) **Encourage camaraderie.** Ask the members to bring a recommended reading list with them. Make copies of the list and distribute to the group.

10) **Publicity.** Take a photo of the group and send it to the romance review magazines, most of which feature a different reader group every month. Be sure to post the photo in your store, and in the store's newsletter and/or website.

11) **Maintenance.** Expect a certain amount of turnover in attendance. Ask the members of the group to invite a friend to subsequent meetings, then keep advertising the romance reader group to your customers. Invite the group members to other events in your store, especially romance autographings.

Initiating a romance reader group in your bookstore—just one way to help grow the romance market! ~**S**Bond