



Read Like a Writer – for the Pat Conroy Literary Center’s 2nd Annual Book Club Convention

Intro

Isn’t it ironic? I’m here speaking today at the Pat Conroy Literary Center to a room full of Book Club people and I’m a serial book club dropout.

In fact, the title of this talk has been up for debate in my family all week for two reasons:

- 1) When you google “Read Like a Writer” there are a million blogs with that title which means a LOT of people have opinions on this. Books have been written on this.
- 2) Reading like a writer will actually get you kicked out of book club.

It’s true. Writers read voraciously: consuming whole series like a college kid on a Netflix binge. Writers read inquisitively: asking questions like a crime scene investigator. Writers read suspiciously: doubting the author’s intentions, the character’s legitimacy, even the setting’s accuracy. And writers read judgmentally: anything you can do, I can do better.

You all seem like fine people and I don’t want to ruin what I’m sure is a lovely book club experience for you. But I’m about to tell you:

How to Get Kicked Out of Book Club

Read Voraciously

My first book addiction was VC Andrews. I read everything I could get my hands on and not from the library, either. Each fat paperback cost \$4.95 at the grocery store. The covers were these haunting graphics of scared young women. They were gothic family drama novels and I couldn’t get enough of them. To this day, I love to start a series after the last book has been released so I can read them all at once. In, like, a week.

How many of you binge-read series?

I read about 70 books a year. It’s one of the things I don’t get paid to do that takes up more of my time than it should.

Someone asked me last night if Reading Like a Writer didn’t ruin the experience of getting “lost” in a book. For me, no. I am thrilled to be swept away by the story.

Reading voraciously is part of being a writer. Exploring other worlds, savoring word choices, character builds, and plot arcs are all part of being [addicted to storytelling](#). You don’t have to be a writer to read voraciously but you cannot be a writer and not read. Just as professional athletes hit the gym daily and politicians are always campaigning, writers learn their craft by immersing themselves in it.

Exercise 1

How many of you have read 9 books this year? We’re in September, so that’s just meeting your Book Club obligation.



How many of you have read 12 books this year? You're reading ahead.
How many of you have read 20 books this year? You're choosing books over Netflix. Well done.
How many have read 30 books this year? You're choosing books over your family. Careful there.
How many have read 50 books this year? You have too much time on your hands.
How many of you have read 60 books this year? You must be getting paid to do it.

Reading voraciously requires discipline, true, but it also indicates a kind of competitiveness. Book lovers know there are more titles out there than we'll ever be able to consume but Reading Like a Writer means trying anyway.

Some tips for voracious reading:

- 1) get the Kindle app on your phone so you can pick up your book instead of scrolling through Instagram or Facebook at stoplights;
- 2) likewise for waiting in line, waiting for your food in restaurants, and waiting to be seen by the doctor;
- 3) discard quickly whatever you know will suck, life is too short to suffer through a book you're not connecting with and no one drops balloons from the ceiling when you finish a "meh" novel.

To get kicked out of book club, always read the selection. Even if it's rotten. I once suffered through a memoir about a woman whose mother was a hoarder because it was the selection of the club. When I found out no one else in the club had been able to finish it, I was furious. Outraged. Incensed. I mean, if you're not going to read the book then why are you here?

Oh, right. For the wine. I'm a good "Club" person. I make yummy snacks and enjoy a glass of wine. But I will always read the selection. And I expect others to read it, too. Especially if they picked it. Or if they're hosting. It's just good manners, right?

One time I went to book club and some people who hadn't finished yet were there and asked us not to spoil it for them. So, we couldn't talk about the ending. Had I been hosting, I would have shown them to a room with a closed door and let them quietly finish before joining the rest of the group. Oh, come on, I would have given them snacks and wine.

Read Inquisitively

All this reading is an investigation. Like a detective in a mystery novel, I'm assembling the clues as to what makes a novel readable, bingeable, and ignore-my-family good. Get what you need out of the book.

I read genre fiction to learn the conventions and expectations of the genre. Genre novels satisfy their readers by playing out their story according to specific patterns. We talked extensively about this on [Write On SC episode 12](#). Writers don't always start out knowing what kind of book they're writing. Genre is easier for a reader, it's predetermined by the publisher and the marketing effort. But all genres have their conventions and knowing them teaches a writer how to write in that genre.



For example, I read romance novels because I want to write the greatest love story I've ever read. One that will break my heart, turn me on, and keep me so engaged I ignore my family through the entire series. Romance novels have an initial "meet" scene where the characters are introduced to one another for the first time or re-introduced after some time apart. The "meet" scene must establish three things 1) what they have in common, 2) what divides them, and 3) the smoldering undeniable attraction between them.

Knowing the [genre's conventions](#) is a sure way to get kicked out of book club. When you know what to expect from the scene in a mystery novel where the hero is at the mercy of the villain, or you figure out the double-ending before it occurs (no way this book is over, there are 60 pages left), you're reading like a writer.

Investigation can mean identifying a specific theme and working through a list of books associated with it. For example, I recently came upon [a list of alternatives](#) to *The Great Gatsby*. Books that demonstrate privilege, an outsider-looking-in, and the reality of how social class alienates us and divides us.

For a while I read every World War II novel I could get my hands on which meant seeing the Great War in every theatre including [Shanghai](#), [Charleston](#), [Paris](#), [Massachusetts](#), [England](#) and [England again](#), occupied France in [this novel](#) and again in [this novel](#), even [Australia](#). I don't expect to ever write a World War II novel, but they were so popular there for a while, it seemed like every Book Club suggested novel took place in that era. Publishers can binge, too.

That's a kind of book club I'd join – select a theme and then read novels that share the same common time period or style. Later, when you discuss different approaches to Book Club, consider deciding on something like, "Narrator is a Young Woman," and asking members to all bring a book with that common characteristic. Or "Occurs during a war" or "Has multiple first-person narrators" then you can compare the works to one another.

Some writer vocabulary to help you in your inquisition: pace, structure, development. Which scenes made your heart race? How did the author achieve that can't-turn-the-page-fast-enough pace? One trick to increasing the pace is short, concise sentences. Are you reading a scene that should be fast-paced but isn't? A fight scene? Take a look at the length of the sentences. Long, wandering sentences are reflective and thoughtful. Short, direct sentences are action-packed. Another culprit of a ruined scene is the inclusion of too much exposition. Did the author pick now, in this exciting scene, to remind you of the hero's inner conflict based on a childhood trauma? Well-placed exposition can raise the stakes, but reminders – what you already know – can drag down the pace of the scene.

Literary devices are a great indication the author is playing with the form. In *High Fidelity*, Nick Hornby's main character is a record store owner and music enthusiast. He summarizes everything in Top 5 lists, like the Billboard Music Chart. *The Night Circus* follows two timelines that are about a decade apart. In between these timelines is the second-person experience of



attending The Night Circus, “You enter the tent...” in small vignettes to try to mimic for the reader what those who have attended The Night Circus felt in the experience.

Some tips for reading inquisitively:

- 1) Read the Book Club guide before you read the book. It will make you aware of major themes so you can see them unfolding as you’re reading.
- 2) Take notes in the book, in the margins, in the form of questions: “Why?” and “Must she?” When the author *tells* you something, question it.
- 3) Jot the conventions of the genre on the first page and then as you see them, add the page numbers to the list like a kind of alternative Table of Contents.

I read literary novels to see how the greats are playing with the form. Awards like National Book Award and Pulitzer and Man Booker identify writers working at the top of the craft. Literary fiction is character driven and the change to the character is forced by the plot, sure, but we’re reading it for the character’s transformation – not the happy ending, not the solution to the mystery, and not the inevitable lovers-end-up-together of the romance genre. Literary fiction is also about *why* the story is told in this way.

Read Suspiciously

Why did the author write the novel this way?

In the musical Hamilton, King George takes the stage although he and Hamilton never met; the king’s point of view – to use Lin-Manuel Miranda’s words – “robs the revolution of its inevitability.” Authors add characters intentionally. So why is this character here? What is his or her purpose? Why include the killer’s point of view? Why have the little girl in this scene?

I read an autobiography that used cartoons, journal entries, and reviews of the author’s own work to tell the full story. Why not just write the story? What purpose do these variations serve? What do they tell us about the narrator?

Asking these questions might be “going deeper” and will likely get you kicked out of book club.

You don’t have to accept the choices the author made. Reading like a writer means asking, “Why did the author do it this way?”

Exercise 2

Think about *The Great Gatsby*. Why did Fitzgerald tell the story from Nick’s point of view? Why not make Gatsby the narrator? Or Daisy. I’d read that book. If we re-wrote *Gatsby* from Daisy’s point of view, what information would we have that Nick doesn’t have?

I’m a big fan of Young Adult Fantasy fiction – that’s how I’m able to read 70 books a year; I’m not always challenging myself with the best of the craft. Sometimes I’m just enjoying a good teenage drama. A lot of YA Fantasy is told in first person. But first-person narrators have limitations – they only know the action that happens in front of them, they are preoccupied



with their own quests and rarely recognize competing desires, they tell only the parts of the story *they* think are relevant. Sometimes, mid-series, the author will realize that the first-person view is no longer wide enough to tell the entire story and switch to a third-person narration.

Ask *why* the author made that choice. It was a choice. A deliberate one. Writers punish protagonists. It's what we do. Readers should defend the character by questioning the writer's motives.

I started reading like a writer when I read Hemingway. What *wasn't* being said on the page – the subtext – was so thick I was buried in it. To find the subtext, look for it. Why was the dialogue written that way?

In our writers' workshop, we ask one another this question constantly. Why choose that point of view? Why set the scene in a warehouse? Why include these other people if they're not going to speak or participate? Writers are used to these questions and they should have answers for them. Readers sometimes don't question the choices writers make. Once the book is published, the choices have been made, right? They're irrevocable.

Tips for reading suspiciously:

- 1) Consider what the novel would be like if the author had not done a certain thing.
- 2) Ask if the bad things that happen to the main character are necessary?
- 3) Ask what makes the character likeable and what makes them unsavory?

Read Judgmentally

Judge the novel. How did it begin? I picked up a book recently that began with a character on a plane (cliché) and just as I thought to forgive the author, she began the second chapter with a second character being woken up by an alarm (another cliché).

If every man is devastatingly handsome and every woman has a tinge of self-doubt, if the personal conflict just happens to mirror the external conflict, if the dialogue is wasted on greetings like, "What's up?" and "How've you been?" just close the book. Mark it as "never finished" on Goodreads. Give it back to the Kindle Unlimited library. Expect better.

There are so many books out there, we can never read them all. And we don't have to settle for the one that Book Bub or Amazon or a mailing list or even our local librarian foisted upon us. Know when to bail.

The first book club I was ever in selected books month-to-month depending on what the hostess was reading. Inevitably it was a new release – impossible to get at the library, must buy the \$25 hardback. Once we read John Grisham two months in a row. I like early Grisham, don't get me wrong. I was brought up on *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, and *The Pelican Brief*. My dad and I listened to *The Rainmaker* when he drove me to college. But come on. Two months in a row? And hardback-for-purchase-only? Do better.



Exercise

How does your club select books?

The challenge of Book Club is to select books that will both stretch your members out of their YA Fantasy binge reads and also deliver an enjoyable discussion. In that discussion, expect dissent.

Book Club books I hated include *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Unbroken*. Their titles should have told me I wouldn't like them. Titles also have genre-specific conventions and are worth exploring.

For example, commercial fiction often names a character in the title, *Circe*, or provides her title, *The Aviator's Wife*, *The Paris Wife*, *The Girl on the Train*, or his title, *The Prince of Tides*, *The Great Santini*. Some titles tell you what will happen, *The Philosopher's Flight*, *Love and Ruin*, *Into the Water*, and some tell you where it will happen, *Outer Banks*, *The House at Riverton*, *Wildflower Hill*. Some titles hint at mystery, *The Secret Keeper*, *Before I Go To Sleep*, *Sarah's Key*, and some invite you into the macabre *The Night Circus*, *The Monsters of Templeton*.

Consider the title. Is it click bait? Or does it accurately summarize the theme of the story? The title is what encouraged you to pick the book up. Judge it. Did it trick you?

Genre titles are an author's calling card. Books related in a series will have titles that are derivative of one another. Does the title really describe this book? Or were we just up to E in the author's alphabet calling card and needed a word that fit? I once read a book called *Trainwreck Girl* that wasn't about the girl at all but her aimless ex-boyfriend who needed to work on what to do with his life after she had the good fortune to die young and he's stuck turning 30.

Titles have a purpose. It's right that we should judge a book by its title. Maybe not its cover, that isn't usually within the author's control, but the title is first a summary of the book and second a marketing effort. If the title is only a marketing effort, feel free to judge not only the book, but the writer who wrote it, too.

Exercise

What's the best title of a book you've ever read?

What's the best book with a terrible title you've ever read?

Conclusion

Our radio show, *Write On SC*, covered this topic today. You can find the show online at MakeThePointRadio.com every Saturday at 9 a.m. and in archived episodes at WriteOnSC.blog. Today's episode will be up sometime next week. *Write On SC* is for writers, by writers and we're focused first on craft and second on promoting the work of South Carolina writers. We're self-funded but you can support the effort on Patreon.com/writeonsc.

Dr. Kasie Whitener

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Recommended reading for further study:
Francine Prose, Reading Like a Writer
Pat Conroy, My Reading Life

To read like a writer is to be voracious, inquisitive, suspicious, and judgmental. But only in the best possible ways. Take these habits to your book club. And see how long they let you stay.