Starting a Voice of Witness Book Club

Voice of Witness books aim to foster a more nuanced, empathy-based understanding of human rights crises through first person oral history narratives. By choosing to start a book club, your group will be discussing and learning from many vital, and often unheard, stories from the United States and around the world.

Will your club have a theme or focus?
In choosing to create a Voice of Witness Book Club, there are many themes, or points of entry, to choose from in order to frame the guiding principles of the group. For example, your club may have a human rights focus, an oral history focus, or something that can incorporate aspects of both, such as “amplifying unheard voices.” Whatever topic or guiding principles you choose will help you select the books you’re going to read.

Which books will you read?
Choosing which book you would like to read really depends on what reflects the diverse interests of your group the most. Voice of Witness books range in topics from the struggles of incarcerated women to narratives of the abducted and displaced peoples of Sudan. Voice of Witness releases an average of two books per year, one on domestic human rights issues and one on global issues. There is sure to be something for everyone!

Do you want to establish agreements and procedures for your club?
Voices of Witness books cover a variety of contemporary social justice issues through the lens of oral history. They reflect a diversity of topics and perspectives. We recommend that before beginning your book discussion group, you think about how to best to create an inclusive and lively atmosphere for your discussions. For example, you may decide to establish a list of agreements for your group, or you may feel that having a respectful moderator provides enough structure.

Who would you like to invite?
Make a list of all the people you know in your various networks—school, work, friend circles, and neighborhood—who would commit to reading a book or who would be interested in a “living room” conversation. Ideally, choose people who represent a diverse set of experiences and perspectives and feel comfortable sharing and listening. If this is a new reading group, invite twice the number of people you’d like to host so that you get a good size. Having a group of fewer than twelve people for the discussion is ideal.

What will be your regular date, time, and location?
You might consider using doodle.com, a free scheduling tool that can help the group find a date and time that works for the most people. Similarly, you can also pick a location yourself or pose the question to the group. Keep in mind that your location will be dependent upon convenience, your desired atmosphere, and group size.
How should you handle book orders and invitations?
Decide how members are going to get copies of the selected book. For ordering Voice of Witness books, you can order directly from the McSweeney’s store site. Bulk orders receive a discount. You can also order individual copies from Powell’s Books, Barnes and Noble, or Amazon. Once you do pick a date and time, send an invitation four weeks in advance, and make sure the invitation includes location as well as driving and/or transit directions. Don’t forget to send periodic reminders! Perhaps your reminders can include a favorite quote or question you want the group to reflect on as they read. In any case, make sure that the discussion date is far enough away, so members have enough time to do their reading!

Will you read the whole book or just selected stories?
Some groups are up for reading the whole book. Other groups may want to select a smaller set of stories. If choosing a smaller set of stories, we suggest reading and discussing a mix that will reflect and also challenge the experiences or interests of the group. Make sure to communicate with your group which stories you’ll be discussing at each meeting so members can be prepared to dialogue about them.

Should you serve food?
Having food available can help create a congenial atmosphere. Also, knowing that food will be provided increases people’s investment in coming to the discussion. We recommend a potluck to enhance the sense of community and sharing.

What kinds of discussion questions will inspire the group to share?
Open-ended discussion questions give people an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings and go deeper into how the book has made an impact on them. Below are some sample discussion questions that will hopefully inspire you to create questions of your own!

- Which story did you identify with the most, and why?
- Describe one moment from the book that stayed with you.
- What challenged you about a particular story or the book as a whole?
- What surprised you about a particular story or the book as a whole?
- Who do you most want to share this book with and why?
- What are three words to describe your experience with the book?
- What action(s) will you take as a result of reading this book, e.g. share the book with someone, find out more about an issue or organization mentioned in the book, create a project, get involved another way?

When are you going to meet again, and how should you/continue the conversation?
Establish another time, date, and location if possible. Will you create a follow-up project such as a blog, or online discussion forum for group members? Share ideas amongst members about how to best continue the conversation in between club meetings. Consider creating a sign-up sheet for members to be responsible for the various tasks associated with the club’s chosen way to communicate between meetings.

How often should the club meet?
Meeting frequency depends on the needs and schedules of group members, but we recommend meeting monthly or bi-monthly. This allows plenty of time for reading selected books, and for managing the various club logistics and details mentioned above.

For discussion facilitator tips, click here.