

## Let's talk about books

### An activity with the Coffee and Conversation group Central Library, Bexleyheath

Rather than try to set up a one-off reader-centred activity, which may not have attracted many attendees (especially during the summer months when lots of people are away, or enjoying outdoor activities), I decided to “hijack” an existing group which meets at the Central Library – that way, getting together a reasonable sized group would be more likely and as regular attendees of the group would be familiar with each other already, getting everyone to participate would be easier.

The target audience for the activity were older people who use the library socially, but who may not read very much or whose reading choices may be stuck in a bit of a rut. I therefore decided to join one of the coffee mornings at the library for a “Let's talk about books” activity.

### **The Group**

The Central Library holds Coffee and Conversation groups weekly, on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings. It is a friendly social group, offering a cuppa and a chat, with the aim of reducing social isolation. Usually, members of the group chat amongst themselves, although library staff will help facilitate discussions and make sure no-one is left out, often using current affairs, topical issues, books displays or promotions to spark conversations.

The Coffee and Conversations groups are promoted using posters and flyers in libraries, slides on LCD screens (inside the library and on windows facing out onto the street), and on social media and the library website.

This is the slide used on LCD screens. Posters and flyers to promote the group are very similar.



This is the “Events” page on the Library website.

The screenshot shows the Bexley Libraries website. The header includes the London Borough of Bexley logo and the word 'Libraries'. A search bar is located in the top right corner. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for Home, Libraries, Catalogue, Information Service, Children, Books Etc..., My Account, Teens, Local Studies and Archives, and Contact us. On the left side, there is a 'Navigation' menu with various options, including 'Events', 'eBooks', 'eMagazines', 'eReference', 'Library App', 'Joining and Using the Library', 'Using Computers', 'Volunteering', 'Rose Bruford College', 'Council Services', 'Access to Services', 'Meeting Rooms for Hire', 'Citizens Advice', 'Learning', and 'Case Studies'. A blue arrow points from the 'Meeting Rooms for Hire' link to the 'Coffee & Conversation' event in the main content area. The main content area is titled 'Central Library - Regular Adult Events' and contains a table with the following data:

| Event                                   | Day  | Time          | Notes   |
|---|--|---------------|---|
| Adult Reading Group                     | 4th Thursday of the month                              | 5.45 - 6.45   | Dickens Room, 1st floor   |
| 'Readers' Choice' Reading Group         | 2nd Thursday of the month                              | 10.30 - 11.30 | Junior Area – for parents and carers with babies or toddlers. Tea and biscuits provided   |
| Reading group for the visually impaired | 1st Wednesday of the month                             | 10.30 - 12.00 | Dickens Room, 1st floor   |
| Games Club                              | Every Wednesday  | 2.00 - 4.00   | Ground floor cafe area  |
| Coffee & Conversation                   | Every Tuesday and Wednesday                            | 10.30 - 11.30 | Refreshments provided   |
| Chess Club                              | Every Thursday   | 4.30 - 6.30   | All ages and levels welcome   |
| I.T. Buddy                              | Please enquire with the library for days and times     |               | A volunteer is available to support you in using the library computers.   |
| Crafters' Choice                        | Monthly on a Wednesday<br>Check dates with the library | 1.00-2.00     | Children's Library (this is a child-friendly session)<br>Learn how to knit and crochet  |
| Carers' Surgeries                       | First Tuesday of the Month                             | 10.00-1.00    | Drop in sessions to find out about voluntary organisations that can support you and to talk about your caring role and if you would like an assessment. Appointments are held in the afternoon to complete a carers' assessment. These appointments need to be booked in advance. Please call on 020 3045 5816. |

The Coffee and Conversation group is mainly composed of retired people, although there are sometimes a few younger attendees. The majority of attendees are female. On the day of the activity, 14 people attended (plus one child, who sat in with her mother). Four attendees were male and ten were female.





### **The activity**

I attended one of the Coffee and Conversation mornings to provide a “Let’s talk about books” session. The aim of the session was to provide a reader-centred activity, which focused on the attendees own experience of reading.

We did two separate activities – the first was an ice-breaker activity to encourage the group to get chatting, while the second encouraged customers to share their reading experiences. I also handed out bookmarks at the end, as a follow-up activity.

#### Ice-breaker activity

Attendees were given sticky “post-it” notes – some red, some amber and some green.

Ten different novels were then passed round the group.

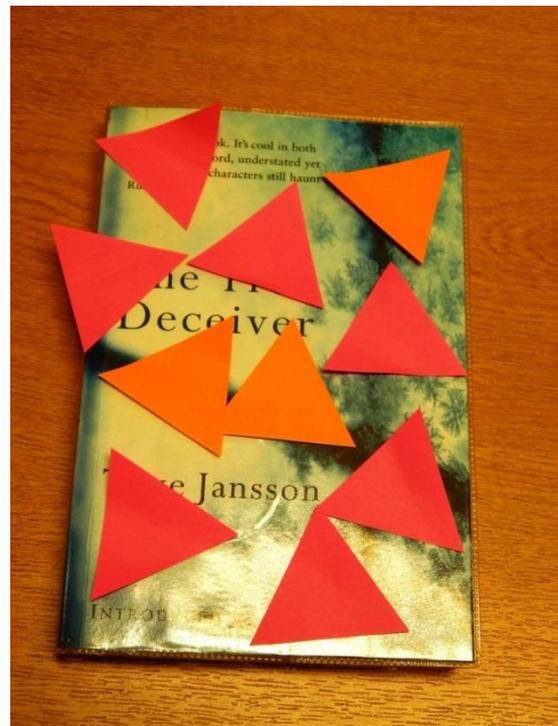
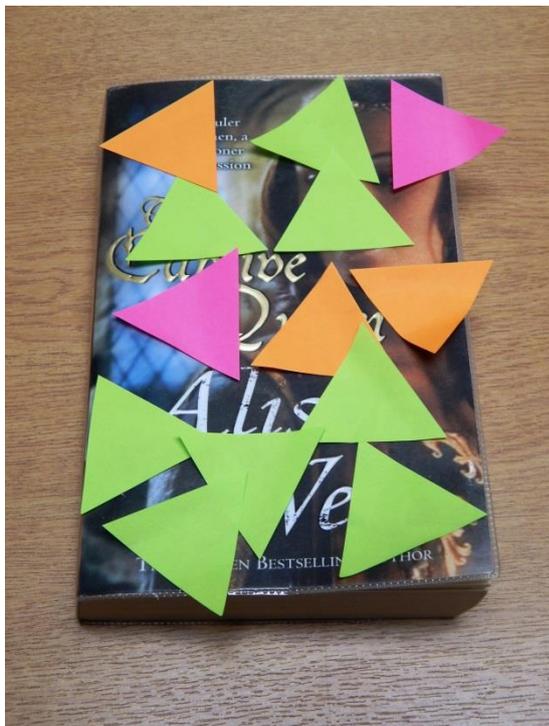
Attendees were asked to look at the jacket cover of each book and make a quick decision about whether they would choose to borrow that book (or not), just based on the jacket design and illustration.

If attendees felt they would definitely choose to read the book, they were asked to put a green “post-it” note on the cover; if they definitely wouldn’t choose the book, to add a red “post-it” note and if they would have to read the “blurb” to be sure it was a book they would like to read, to add an amber “post-it”.

As I asked the group to make a snap judgement just based on the jacket design, the exercise was fairly quick – only taking a few minutes for everyone to complete. However, not everyone chose to add a “post-it” to every book.

Once I had identified the most popular book (based on the number of green “post-its” added), I asked those who had given it the “thumbs up” to say why they had chosen it. We then had a quick discussion about what the publisher was telling us about the book by using the images they had on the jacket and who they were aiming the book at.

I then held up the least popular title and repeated the exercise.



The results were as follows (with the most popular titles first);

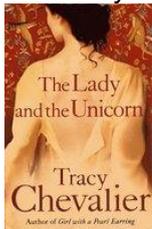
1. Captive Queen by Angela Weir



This title received eight green, three amber and two red flags.

Reasons given for choosing this title were the attractive cover, which clearly showed that this was a historical novel, featuring a strong female lead character. One customer also mentioned reading a previous novel by Angela Weir, which she had enjoyed. The consensus seemed to be that the publishers had clearly conveyed what the book was about and who the target audience were (women!).

2. The Lady and the Unicorn by Tracey Chevalier

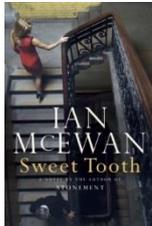


This title received seven green, three amber and two red flags.

An overheard comment – “Unicorns? I’m not reading that!”

It was agreed that the novel was aimed at female readers and was likely to be a historical novel. However, one customer thought the book was likely to be set in the Far East (based on the tapestry design on the book jacket, I think) so perhaps the jacket design was a bit misleading in that respect.

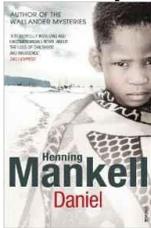
3. Sweet Tooth by Ian McEwan



This title received five green, two amber and three red flags.

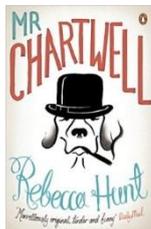
One man thought the book was likely to be a crime novel, as it looked as if the woman in red on the jacket cover was being followed by a rather sinister male figure on the stairs. Again, the jacket design may have been slightly misleading as the book is more of a love story set against a backdrop of espionage and intrigue.

4. Daniel by Henning Mankell



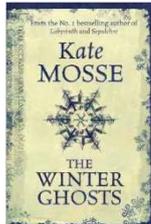
This title received four green, three amber and one red flag.  
I suspect that a few people were swayed by the legend “Author of the Wallander mysteries” at the top of the front cover into thinking that this is a crime novel.

5. Mr Chartwell by Rebecca Hunt



This title received three green, four amber and three red flags.  
The cover design seemed to confuse people. No-one seemed to understand from the cover what the book was about or who it was aimed at – there was some surprise among the group when I said it was about depression.

6. Winter Ghosts by Kate Mosse



This title received two green, six amber and four red flags.  
One lady had read another book by Kate Mosse and hadn't enjoyed it – hence the red flag. However, the large number of amber flags showed that most members of the group were unsure from the jacket design exactly what the book was about.

7. Alone in Berlin by Hans Fallada



This title received two green, four amber and six red flags.

One man said that if he had realised that the book was set in Berlin during the Second World War, he may have been more tempted to read it.

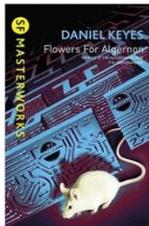
8. Pigeon English by Stephen Kelman



This title received six amber and six red flags. Comments overheard were it was impossible to tell what the book was about from the jacket.

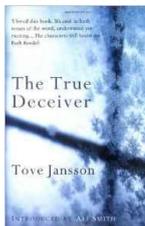
After the voting, I asked the group if the fact that the book had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize would have made them more inclined to read it - the consensus seemed to be that it wouldn't!

9. Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes



This title received four amber and seven red flags. The SF masterworks logo seems to have deterred some people who don't enjoy Science Fiction, although one commented that having read the blurb, they might be more tempted to give it a try.

10. True Deceiver by Tove Jansson



This title received three amber and seven red flags. One reason given for not choosing this title was the boring and insipid cover that doesn't give you any clue as to the type of book it was. Attendees seemed unsure about who the book was aimed at.

Reading out the “blurb” didn't seem to encourage anyone to change their mind either!

At the end of the session, we seemed to agree that, despite the large sums of money that publishers spend on jacket design, they don't always get it right!



10. Do you re-read?
11. Are you influenced if a book has won a prize?
12. How do you decide what to read next?
13. What is most likely to irritate you in a read?
14. Do you skip the boring bits to get on with the action?
15. How do you hear characters' voices in your head? Can you do accents?

I asked each member of the group to choose a card at random (the cards were face-down on the table) and then pair up and chat about the questions they each had. I allocated five minutes for the paired-up chats. I hoped that starting off the discussion in pairs would encourage shyer members of the group to participate and share their reading experiences.

At the end of the allocated time, I asked each pair to share one question they had discussed with the rest of the group. The rest of the group were then asked to chip in too. (I had to share my experiences first on a couple of occasions to get the ball rolling!)

The first question discussed by the whole group was “do you ever look at the end before you get there?”

I started off the discussion by saying that I never look at the end – even if a book is boring and I have decided not to finish it! A couple of attendees did confess to peeking at the end – readers of crime tended not to do that (or if they did, they didn't admit it!). We then had a brief discussion about whether the type of book being read increased the desire to peek at the end to see what happens – there was no real consensus here among the group.

This question didn't really spark much discussion, so we quickly moved on to the next question – “what kind of book do you tend to avoid?”

Not surprisingly perhaps, one man reported that he avoids “mushy books” – romances, sagas and Philippa Gregory style historical novels.

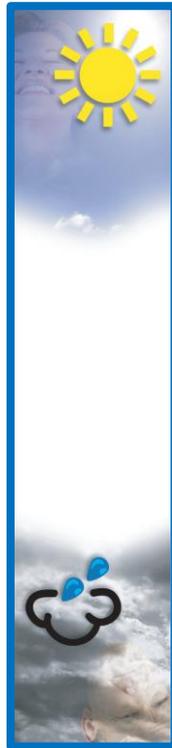
One lady mentioned that she avoids science fiction and fantasy – as this is my favourite genre, this question sparked a fair bit of debate about what I liked about a genre often associated with spotty teenage lads. I then mentioned that I would avoid crime novels, which is a genre that was obviously popular with several of the group, so this also sparked an interesting exchange of views.

When conversation dried up, we then moved on to another question – “do you read in public places?” One lady talked about reading on the bus, but most people seemed to read at home, or in bed. Luckily for the condition of library stock, no-one confessed to reading in the bath!

We repeated the exercise for several more questions.

### Follow-up activity

At the end of the session, I gave everyone in the group a small bundle of laminated sunshine/clouds bookmarks (from the course resources) and asked them to tuck one inside each book they returned to the library to indicate whether or not they had enjoyed it (sunshine icon at the top for those they enjoyed and clouds for those they didn't).



### **Conclusion**

In the past, most reader development work I've carried out has focused on the books – author talks, promotion of books by a particular author or on a particular theme, book displays etc.

This activity was different, in that it focused on readers' choices and experiences. The books that I brought along were almost incidental to the discussions we had.

### Ice-breaker activity

Preparation for this activity was very quick and easy – all I needed was a bundle of red, amber and green “post-it” notes and a selection of general fiction novels, which I picked off the library's shelves just before the activity.

Most of the group participated in the activity, although there were a few who didn't. If I was to repeat this activity, I would perhaps try to be clearer with the instructions beforehand about what everyone had to do – and perhaps be a bit more explicit about people not having to speak up to justify their choices if they didn't want to!

However, the activity was largely a success, in that it seemed to help people relax and even the shyer members of the group could participate. It probably helped that several members of the group seemed to be familiar with each other – they were probably “regulars” at the Coffee and Conversation sessions. I think that the session did help some members of the group to think about why they choose particular books over others.

### Let’s talk about books activity

Preparation for this activity was also quick and easy. Questions were typed up and mounted onto card and laminated in advance of the session.

Most of the group participated in this activity, although several were a bit quieter and needed some gentle encouragement to speak up. There were a few who didn’t speak at all, but they were listening to what others had to say, so I think they still got something out of the activity. It may have been that those attendees were not really “readers”.

Some questions worked better than others – the question about the type of books that people tend to avoid worked well whereas the question about where people read was dealt with fairly quickly.

If I was to repeat this activity, I would review the questions and take some out and perhaps add in a few different ones. Trying this activity with colleagues in advance of the session with customers would perhaps help identify questions which work best at sparking lively discussions.

On the whole, though, it was an interesting and useful exercise and I think that most of the attendees enjoyed talking about books and their reading experiences.

### Follow on activity

Staff at the Central Library are piloting the use of the sunshine/rainy day bookmarks on their “quick choice” displays.

At the end of the session, I gave some laminated bookmarks to attendees and asked them to use them in their returned library books, as a way of helping the promotion gain momentum with more and more customers taking part (hopefully).

Feedback from staff about whether any attendees used the bookmarks has been inconclusive – perhaps it is too early to say.