

# ***THE BOOK CLUB PLAY***

***BY KAREN ZACARIAS***

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## **A STUDY GUIDE**

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**THE AUTHOR.** Born in Mexico, Karen Zacarias went directly from college to a job with The National Endowment for Democracy as an assistant Program Officer for Latin America. As she has told Jacqueline Lawton of the “Women Playwrights of DC” website, she “missed creative writing, so I took a night class on playwriting at Georgetown University.” She followed that up with a master’s degree in the same subject from Boston University, where she studied with such notables as Nobel Prize winners Derek Walcott and Elie Wiesel.

Her plays began receiving professional productions in the mid-90s, and have since won a number of prestigious awards, including the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play in 2000. She is also the founder of Young Playwrights’ Theater, which is described by The Playwrights’ Center as “an award-winning non-profit dedicated to enhancing literacy, arts empowerment and conflict resolution through playwriting in Washington, DC area schools.” Ms. Zacarias is also a resident playwright at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. and a member of the faculty at Georgetown University, where she teaches playwriting.

She told John Barry of “DC Theater Scene” that much of the material on which she based *The Book Club Play* derives, not surprisingly, from her own experiences as a member of a book club for fourteen years. “When you talk to other people at book clubs, they share these amazing stories. It’s about people getting together to talk about how literature affects them. But really, it’s an excuse to share your life and connect with other people. So book clubs can become a really wonderful social gathering place, but also can become a petri dish for feelings and things going wrong as well.”

The play first opened in 2008, and was revised and restaged in 2011 at Arena Stage. This is its Maine premiere.

**THE SETTING.** The action of *The Book Club Play (TBCP)* takes place at the home of Ana and Rob Smith, urban-dwelling members of the professional middle class. The physical environment of the setting is less important than its implied social location: in an affluent neighborhood in a large American city, populated by literate, culturally ambitious, economically successful men and women, mostly people between their late 20s and early 40s. It’s a part of the world where the activity of reading ranks somewhere between fun and a quasi-religious obligation.

The most important physical feature of this setting is a movie camera hanging from the ceiling that impassively and uninterrupted records everything that happens during the meetings of the group, capturing material for a documentary about book clubs by a famous film-maker, Lars Knudsen. The physical presence of this camera will affect the behavior of the clubbers, sometimes afflicting them with self consciousness, sometimes un-erasibly catching words and actions that people would much rather remain concealed.

**THE PLOT.** The play is organized into six scenes showing six different meetings of the book club of the title, with each meeting focused on a different book. Between these scenes, five different “Pundits” directly address the audience, commenting on various aspects of the relationship between life and literature.

As the play begins, the five members of the book club are gathering for their regular meeting, this time to discuss *Moby Dick*. The hostess, Ana—a newspaper columnist—informs everyone of the presence of the documentary camera, introducing them to the vicarious eye of the absent film-maker, and admonishing them to, “Pretend it’s not there. Act natural. Make yourselves comfortable. More comfortable. (*All pretending to be relaxed and comfortable . . . but not succeeding.*)”

The filmmaker's demand for material will require that they increase the frequency of their meetings, reading a new book every two weeks rather than once a month, a prospect daunting to some, bracingly challenging to others. From the outset, then, the normal flow of events for the members of the club is disturbed.

As the members discuss Melville's novel, the subject of the narrator's relationship with Queequeg—with whom he shares a bed—arises. Lily, Ana's young African-American assistant, argues for the obvious existence of a homosexual subtext, which leads her to ask how Rob, Ana's husband, and Will, his ex-college roommate, came to be friends, since she finds it "cool that two such different men can be so close. . . . It's refreshing to see a jock and a gay man as best friends."

A sensation ensues during which Rob, Will, and Ana—Will's former girlfriend—insist that Will—despite being a bookish, impeccable dresser who loved making "thematic window displays" in his parents' grocery store, and who is now a museum curator who adores musical theater—is straight. Nonetheless, a previously unacknowledged possibility now floats in the air.

To prove their point about Will's sexual orientation, Rob and Ana, with Will's eager participation, tell the tale of the love triangle among them that resulted in Bob's winning Ana away from Will, and with Will's reading a selection from *Paradise Lost* at the couple's wedding. "Who would have thought *Moby Dick* would bring out so much personal revelation," Lily marvels, little imagining the ever more sensational disclosures that will follow before the play ends.

Throughout, Rob has been notably unenthusiastic about the literary conversation that justifies the club's existence. Instead, we learn that he often—like tonight—doesn't read the assigned book, and that he is unhappy with the kind of reading matter usually selected by his fellow members, even though he has been shirking his duty to name a book of his own choosing for years. And he really would like to limit the length of their selections to fewer than 400 pages.

As the readers begin saying their good-byes to one another, we learn that the choice for the next meeting is Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, a mere 278 pages. Will and Lily embrace—no hard feelings about the gay/straight mix-up!—which moves Ana to declare that "that hug . . . is what Book Club is all about." Once everyone leaves, Rob and Ana talk over their evening, with Rob promising to read the Wharton novel, a development Ana welcomes in a soliloquy directed at the peering camera.

If the moment of crisis and climax in the first meeting was between Lily and Will over sexual identity, the corresponding events in the next meeting involve Rob, whose encounter with *The Age of Innocence* has a far greater impact on him than he or anyone else might have expected.

Before getting down to a discussion of Wharton's novel, however, the members have to answer a question posed by the documentarian. What books, he wants to know, "had the deepest impact on you, when you were young?" Lily names *Sounder*, a story about a boy and his dog; for Ana it was *Where the Red Fern Grows*, another dog-centered children's book. Rob reveals his attachment to *Tarzan of the Apes*, which led him to promise himself that someday he "would move to Africa and work with baby gorillas," a revelation that surprises his wife. Will declares his love for *The Little House*, though not the one on the prairie. And Jen, the character initially described as, "Pretty. Shy. Smart. . . Awkwardly truthful," and lacking in "self-confidence," veers radically off the track of children's literature and names *Wuthering Heights*—that story of wounding and unrequited love— as her life-changing book. Later, we learn that her life has been thrown into disarray by a scandalous affair she conducted years before with a married politician. Thus we see how books characterize their readers: Ana and Lily are similar in their taste for sentimental stories about dogs; Rob was enthralled by the vision of a man living in the jungle, outside the constraints of human society; Will found resonance in the story of vulnerable little house being smothered by the growing city; and Jen perhaps anticipated her own passionate mistakes in the story of Heathcliff and Catherine.

As the club gets down to business and opens its discussion of *The Age of Innocence*, Rob springs a surprise on his fellow members: he has actually read the book, and he has a passionate opinion about it. "I hated *The Age of Innocence*," he declares, saying that, "It . . . troubled me. I couldn't sleep." Rob is breaking precedent here. He usually maintains an air of playful disengagement from any sort of serious literary conversation, but something in the novel has touched him deeply, which becomes evident as he reads aloud a crucial passage from the book. He chooses the moment when the main character, Newland Archer, realizing he has married a woman whose poetry and romance was "spent," and who would never surprise him, is overcome by the revelation that "he had missed . . . The flower of life." Closing the book, Rob sinks to the floor, with his heart feeling "heavy . . . and tight . . . like something is . . . cracking."

As his friends mill around in the kitchen and bathroom looking for an Alka Seltzer to relieve his pain, he begs Jen to tell him where he can find the flower of his life, and then impulsively kisses her *with passion*," forgetting that Lars Knudsen's camera is recording the scene.

When the others return, Ana insists that they continue with their meeting, dismissing Rob's behavior as a mere episode of heartburn. Focus now moves to Lily, whose race prompts the

group to reflect on whether they have been inclusive enough in their reading choices, or whether they have limited themselves to dead white men, with the occasional dead white woman and living white male. Feeling sheepish about their ethnic parochialism, they ask Lily to choose the next book, expecting her to opt for something by James Baldwin or Toni Morrison. Instead she picks *Twilight*, a contemporary vampire novel, opening the book club's doors for the first time to the hoi polloi of literature: mass-market popular fiction.

With Rob's emotional upheaval, and with Lily's choice of a shlocky vampire novel, the book club continues its movement in disturbing new directions, a process initiated by the arrival of the intrusive, all-seeing camera.

The third meeting begins with Ana announcing that she is taking a leave of absence from her newspaper job, which Rob interprets as an opportunity for them to have a baby. Ana quickly kyboshes this idea, and instead reveals that she is "taking a creative leave," which means that she plans to try her hand at writing fiction. So Rob remains frustrated in his desire to become a father. We learn, however, that Jen has been actively investigating sperm banks as a road to pregnancy for an unattached woman like herself.

At this point, the doorbell rings, announcing the arrival of a new character, Alex, who has been invited by Jen to attend their meeting. Since admission to the club has always been predicated on a strict vetting process, this development is highly unorthodox. Will and Ana respond with disapproval; Lily wants to know if Alex is cute; and Rob seems indifferent. But since Jen spotted Alex reading *Twilight*—tonight's selection—in the laundry room of her building, she made a spontaneous decision to invite him. After some discussion, Alex is admitted, and another disturbing element joins the little world of the book club.

Alex, a professor of comparative literature, has realized that he remains completely ignorant of the books that the vast majority of people are actually reading, lowbrow books like *Twilight*. He feels that in order to understand the culture he inhabits, he must widen his focus to include shlock along with the classics. This opinion scandalizes Will and Ana, but arouses no strong response in Jen, Lily, or Rob. Alex's suggestion for their next reading further exacerbates the conflict: he urges them to choose *The Da Vinci Code*. Will and Ana are vehement in their opposition; Lily and Jen both support the idea. Because of Alex, the book club has become a house divided against itself. Jen and—especially—Lily are infatuated with Alex, and in spite of the opposition of Will and Ana, they invite him to return. When Alex leaves, everyone feels something momentous has happened to their group. They vote on whether to admit him as a new member: there are two yeas and two nays, with the deciding vote falling to Rob. Even

though he knows Alex is “trouble with a Capital T,” he elects to admit him. And so, at the end of Act I, the book club takes another step toward radical change.

Act II begins with the club’s discussion of *The Da Vinci Code*. Everyone is stunned when Will announces that he loved, “every gasp-inducing, page-turning second” of the book because everywhere in its labyrinthine plot are secrets waiting to be revealed, truths waiting to be told, a realization that prompts him to reveal his own secret: he is in fact gay! His friends profess joy at this self-discovery, and in a spirit of generosity toward Rob agree to read *Return of Tarzan* next time. As the session ends, Will delivers a monolog in which he reflects on the way, “Some books just turn you upside down. . . . reading a book is really the act of searching . . . of following a trail of signs to reveal the truth at end.”

In the book club’s next session, the process of change picks up more speed. A liberated Will is feeling his oats, wearing a rainbow necklace under his Brooks Brothers shirt, while Rob feels the need to get his feelings out in the open. For one thing, he confesses he was unable to finish reading the Tarzan book because, since he’s now a grown-up, it no longer speaks to him. He also reveals that he has turned down a promotion to vice-president at his pharmaceutical company because, “Being a VP is not who I want to be . . . at all.” And for good measure he adds that he has kissed Jen. All this truthfulness stems from his recognition that he is missing the flower of his life, and that his age of innocence is over. So, like Will, Rob, too, has been upended by a book.

Other characters also behave surprisingly. Lily reveals that she’s taking over Ana’s job. Ana, usually the model of poise and sweet reason, unravels at this news, calls Lily a freak, and unleashes her rage on Lars Knudsen’s camera, which she attempts to blind by covering it with a blanket. As she struggles to regain control of herself, she produces the manuscript of the novel she has been working on during her leave of absence, declaring that she cannot finish it because the people on whom it is based—the members of the book club—have changed beyond recognition, making it impossible to continue writing about them. Indignant that Ana has been using them as material for her book, the other clubbers decide to read Ana’s novel before taking further steps. As they go off to carry out this task, they leave Alex behind, who declares that the book club has become like *The Lord of the Flies*, a famous dystopian novel in which a group of English schoolboys marooned on a Pacific island lapse into barbarism, violence and bloodshed. And, he says with sardonic relish, “I hate it! I love it! Whoa!”

In the play’s final scene the members of the club are appalled by the ruthless use Ana has made of them in her novel, where she emphasizes their flaws and weaknesses. The character based on Jen, for example, is described as, “a woman of promise who had been eroded by her own

lack of vision. . . . She had flittered her life away. . . .” The other clubbers are subjected to equally unflattering portrayals. But Ana protests that these are not literal accounts of her friends—who are not “compelling” enough to be characters in a book—but literary inventions, loosely based on the members of the club.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Ana’s novel turns out to be the last straw for the club, the disruption beyond which it cannot continue—except that it does. Having declared the club kaput, the members immediately reconstitute it, this time with Jen as the host, and all the old members—including Ana, once she finishes her novel—reinstated. There then follows a gusher of happy revelations: Jen will return to law school and she and Will will have a baby together; Alex will earn tenure at his university; he and Lily will marry; and Rob and Ana will adopt—not a human child, but a baby gorilla in Kenya.

Jen ends the play with the observation that book club is “most of all . . . about people, being people together.”

## **THE CHARACTERS**

*ANA* acknowledges that it “sucks being an overachiever,” which describes her role throughout the play. An “overachiever,” after all, must be in control of her situation, so that she can be sure of . . . achieving. And so it is: Ana is the hostess of the book club; she claims credit for its founding; she is most vigilant in policing its membership and its agenda; and she arranges to have its proceedings filmed without consulting the other members. In her novel she even takes possession of the book club and its members, reshaping them to suit her vision.

*ROB* sees himself reflected in the character of Newland Archer, who realizes he has lost the flower of his life. A college athlete and son of a successful family, Rob is a familiar type: the perpetually immature preppy, charming, handsome, and unfulfilled. Being married to an “overachiever” has contributed to his immaturity: why bother to take responsibility for things when somebody else is always there to take it for you? Edith Wharton shocks him into recognizing his shortcomings and his unfulfilled longings: he lacks the flower of life. But what would that be for him? At one point, he begs Ana to make him a father, declaring that his greatest desire is to become a “stay at home dad.” But that never happens, and in the end we are told that he settles for an ersatz version of this objective by “adopting” a baby gorilla, which is really a regression to his Tarzan-based youthful fantasies.

*WILL* is another familiar figure from the socio-sexual landscape of the last forty years: the closeted gay man who finally emerges into the light. Unlike many such characters, however, it seems that Will is quite unaware that he is closeted because he has never understood himself

as gay. But eventually, thanks to Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code*, he realizes that it was not a love of literature that drew him to the book club, but rather the presence there of Rob, and it is not until he turns from serious reading to mass-market pulp that he sees the truth of his situation. Paradoxically, it is the preppy, non-literary Rob who is liberated by a great book, while Will, the cultural snob, is set free by shlock.

In the character descriptions supplied by the playwright, *JEN* is said to be “the grounding center of the group.” What this means in practice is that Jen rarely draws attention to herself. Unlike Ana, who is always in some imaginary spotlight, or Will, the outspoken partisan of serious fiction, or Rob with his conspicuously breaking heart, or Lily with her radical introduction of vampire lit into the group’s syllabus, Jen rarely expresses a vehement desire or strong opinion. And yet, given her life-ruining adulterous relationship with an important politician at the threshold of her career, her past is probably the most sensational in the group. One such exposure to tumultuous passion has perhaps been enough for Jen, who embraces the book club for the security and stability it offers, not as a forum for emotional display. But paradoxically, it is her decision to invite Alex to join the group that dramatically accelerates its unraveling.

*LILY* is another character who unwittingly stirs the pot. She raises the possibility that Will is gay without intending any mischief or pushing any social agenda, and perhaps sets in motion his discovery that she is right. She proposes the vampire book that Jen sees Alex reading, an encounter that results in Alex becoming a member of the club. More wittingly, she causes an uproar when she accepts a position as Ana’s replacement, which results in Ana producing her manuscript, and all the ensuing fallout.

*ALEX*, having been dumped at the altar by his bride-to-be, decides he must change his life, which for a professor of comparative literature, means changing what he reads. He abandons his regimen of highbrow books, and plunges into the cultural jungle of mass-market fiction—a tamer version of Gauguin going to Tahiti. Like Gauguin, Alex needs to escape from the constricted, over-refined world he inhabits and discover the wisdom of a more primitive place. This is an attitude that has been called “*nostalgie de la boue*,” which means a nostalgic longing for the mud. This is a phrase invented by a French playwright in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe what the Oxford English Dictionary calls, “a desire to regress to more primitive social conditions or behavior than those to which a person is accustomed.” And, indeed, Alex’s *nostalgie* does result in a kind of rebirth: tenure at the university, and a healing of the wound of previous abandonment through his marriage to Lily.

**THEMES.** It has been said that we don’t read the great books; they read us. This can mean that in coming to understand a serious work of literature, we make discoveries not only about the

characters and events it describes, but about ourselves as well. It can also mean that in failing to appreciate such books we demonstrate not their defects, but the flaws in our own maturity and judgment. This play explores these themes, showing how each character's taste in literature provides insights into their emotional and moral lives.

It also probes the ways in which everything human is an interwoven fabric of conscious purpose, explicit intention, and innumerable hidden strands of feeling and desire. A man seems to be talking about *The Age of Innocence*, but he is really looking sorrowfully at the pieces of his broken heart. A group of people come together ostensibly to discuss books, but they are really there to look for love, comfort, admiration, and even hope.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Has a book ever caused a major difference in your life? How?
2. Do you discuss books with your friends? Movies? TV shows? If so, what kinds of things do you talk about?
3. Do you think Rob has any inkling that Will is gay? Why? Why not?
4. Will the book club be significantly different when it meets at Jen's home?
5. How much of what happens at the meetings of the club is a result of the presence of the camera? What specific ways does it affect things?
6. What do you think it means that the new version of the book club will start by reading *War and Peace*—a novel of more than a thousand pages?
7. Should the book club members be angry at Ana for basing the characters in her novel on them?