



Page Turners

Building a book club that suits your style



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How to use this resource

If you've picked up this resource, you are likely an avid reader. And because of that, you've probably already discovered what great companions books can be on your spiritual journey. Like author William Willimon, you can say that "When I walk with Jesus, a considerable crowd of unlikely saints walk with me, giving me encouragement for the journey, an invitation to join in a conversation which began long before we were born and shall continue long after we are dead—God rendered through literature, ancient and modern, God with us as the Word made flesh, then made words so that we might be the Word enfleshed again."¹

The solo reader will find *Page Turners* an interesting read if for no other reason than the list of suggested books each contributor has included. Upon reading *Page Turners*, the solo reader might be inspired to join a book club or participate in a book retreat.

For those wanting to know more about book clubs or how to start one, *Page Turners* provides helpful information. Gather like-minded readers, share copies of this resource and then talk about how you might organize your own group. The suggested books included by each contributor can provide a starting point when you select books for your new book club.

For those in existing book clubs who want to take their group to the next level, *Page Turners* offers creative ideas, including ones using blogs and Facebook. Again, share copies of this resource with group members and then brainstorm ways in which you might change your group. The suggested books included by each contributor can be considered as your group selects its next round of books.

1 *Reading with Deeper Eyes: The Love of Literature and the Life of Faith* by William Willimon (Upper Room Books 1998).



Introduction

I was driving to the airport one morning to pick up my husband, listening to Terry Gross interview author Gail Godwin on National Public Radio's show "Fresh Air." In talking about what was then her latest novel, Godwin spoke of her slow return to faith. She hadn't been to church in 25 years and wasn't in the habit of praying. But she found herself writing about spiritual people in her novel *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, and she began attending worship services "for research," she said.

Godwin continued to attend worship and she soon realized that she was not just doing research. "It was a form of conversion . . . I was changing myself inwardly to be more like my characters . . . and at the end of it I emerged changed myself. God and the spiritual life became a daily habit and one I didn't want to break."

What reader hasn't found herself changed from reading a book? That's one of the compelling aspects of all art, including books. Godwin spoke so eloquently of her art and faith that I was mesmerized. Until that point, I had not heard of Gail Godwin.

There was a shopping mall near the airport, and I knew it included a good bookstore (this was before the day of e-readers). I made a quick decision to go into the mall where I bought some of Godwin's books, letting my husband wait. Such is the power of a good book!

What is there about Lutheran women and books? It's not just former English majors and librarians. Lots of Lutheran women across generations are avid readers and even more so, like discussing books with each other. Multiple research studies conducted by Women of the ELCA have shown this to be true.

Perhaps it's this. Books show us other dimensions of God. They take us on journeys that we would otherwise never take. They offer glimpses of lifestyles and experiences that will never be our own. And when we get together with others to discuss books, those new dimensions, journeys and glimpses multiply many times.

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, said it this way. "The books will always be there. We can browse among the millions of words written and often just what we need can nourish us, enlighten us, strengthen us—in fact, be our food just as Christ, the Word is also our food."²

Page Turners shares the experiences of five different book groups, each unique. These book groups offer readers opportunities to express ideas and feelings in an open and safe environment. They offer opportunities to be heard, to experience different realities and cultures and to learn about all the diversity of God's creation.

Beyond book groups, *Page Turners* also shares the story of a solo reader, one who has tried book groups but prefers a singular approach to the spiritual discipline of reading. Sprinkled throughout *Page Turners* are the names of books that other Christian women have found to be helpful companions on their spiritual journeys.

It is our hope that every reader will find this resource to be a useful and inspirational tool on their personal journey as well.

Linda Post Bushkofsky (Chicago, Illinois)

² *Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day* by Brigid O'Shea Merriman (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994)

Chapter One

The doorbell rings and women enter the house singly and in groups with their latest faves in hand, chatting animatedly about their recent book reads. They all head for the dining room to select a glass of wine or pop and some appetizers before settling into comfortable chairs in the host's living room.

It's the September ritual for Chapter One, a book club begun in 1998 with five women and two men at All Saints Lutheran Church in Palatine, Illinois. Over time, the men dropped away, but the women now number 23, ranging in age from 37 to 77. In September each of the members comes bearing her favorite books, prepared to pitch them to the group hoping that at least one of her favorites will be on that year's reading list. Each woman has a chance for "show and tell" to describe and recommend her books. The gathering is concluded with a discussion of the selection we read over our summer hiatus.

After that meeting, the year's facilitator emails every member a comprehensive list and summary of the books suggested. We cast our votes and the top vote-getters are chosen. Members volunteer to serve as host, co-host or discussion guide; and the facilitator creates a monthly schedule. We have only one rule—one we find delicious: Anyone who doesn't read the book brings chocolate to the gathering.

Chapter One gathers monthly in members' homes or in the church library. Sometimes we invite an author to join us in person or find other ways to engage directly with the work. For example, when we read *The Girls from Ames* by Jeffrey Zaslow, we had a phone conversation with one of the women about whom the book was written. Although all our discussions are fun, those times are particularly fascinating. While we always begin with prayers both general and specific, we vary our routine from month to month. For book discussion, sometimes we'll go around the group, giving a thumbs up or down. We often follow with some questions posed by

The women of Chapter One offer these as among our favorites:

Emma by Jane Austen

Hanna's Daughters by Marianne Fredriksson

Sarah's Key by Tatiana de Rosnay

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

The Hungry Ocean by Linda Greenlaw

The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean

The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series by Alexander McCall Smith

The Red Tent by Anita Diamant

The Samurai's Garden by Gail Tsukiyama

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

the person guiding discussion. Other times we just have an open and free-flowing discussion. The leader for the session always provides background on the author and any interesting details about the book or author—or perhaps something about it being made into a movie.

We don't always agree on whether a book was a good read. But we all agree that because of Chapter One, we read books we might never have picked up otherwise. When I suggested *Pope Joan* by Donna Woolfolk Cross, several said they would never have known about it or read it had I not pitched it. This year we read *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court* by Jeffrey Toobin. But for the club, I might never have read it. However I found it intriguing.

Recently we read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which many of us had read in class when we were far younger. One member said, "It was so interesting to struggle with this book as adults." Our members disagreed on the book's merits. That's not unusual. Our diversity makes our discussions lively.



Occasionally we all agree (as happened with *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett) when we had an amazing discussion on racism, enriched by some personal stories of growing up in the South or under apartheid in South Africa.

Although good books remain the focus of our group, we have become a group of soul sisters who share our lives and concerns along with our feelings about any given book. It doesn't get better than that!

Sonia Solomonson (Streamwood, Illinois)

Breaking New Ground

Breaking New Ground is, admittedly, a rather strange name for a book group. We're reading and discussing the same books that many other groups are . . . no new ground there. We became a book group the same way many others do—one friend said to some other friends, "We should form a book group." We did, and we invited others to join us. We meet about once a month, discussing a book selected by the person who moderates the group that month. There's no new ground in any of that.

What *is* new ground, however, is that most of the 31 members of Breaking New Ground have never met. We live in eight states, from Nevada to Delaware, and our book discussions last up to two weeks. Breaking New Ground, you see, is a virtual book club which meets on Facebook, a social networking site on the Internet.

The group began when women who had attended an event at their alma mater (Susquehanna University) began friending one another on Facebook. Some of us started a conversation about reading, leading to the idea of a Facebook-based book club. Initially, we weren't sure if it would work. None of us had been involved in such a virtual venture before, but we decided it was worth trying.

Breaking New Ground was set up on Facebook as a private group, which means that members have to be invited to join and only members can see the group's communications. From the original group, we expanded rapidly as we enthusiastically recruited friends, coworkers and family. We are now on our third book, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford, having spent about two weeks each discussing *Pope Joan*, by Donna Woolfolk Cross, and *Love and Summer* by William Trevor. As with more traditional book groups, not every member reads every book, and not every member chimes in on every discussion.

Generally, it works like this. Toward the end of one discussion, someone volunteers to lead the next. That person announces the book she's selected as well as

Books we have read:

Pope Joan by Joan Woolfolk Cross

The Grace That Keeps This World by Tom Bailey

Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford

The Messenger by Markus Zusak

Love and Summer by William Trevor

The London Train by Tessa Handley

the date on which the discussion will start. She posts the first question on the group's Facebook wall, which sends the posting to each member's private news feed. Members use the comment feature to discuss that particular question. If someone wants to ask a new question or the moderator feels it's time to move the discussion along, the new question is posed as a new wall post. This isn't a foolproof method, but it's the best way we've found so far to keep the discussions from overlapping.

The fact that this is a virtual book club appeals to many members. As Breaking New Ground member Eileen Moninghoff Horn says, Facebook "has allowed a group of women, from different areas of the country, known to each other from various times in our lives, or meeting each other for the first time, to get to know one another through the discussion of books." Shirley Gies Dickstein and Judy Reich concur, also pointing out that the group, though diverse, is respectful of each person's opinion in the discussion. Andrea Hagen-Arndt states simply, "I love this group."

And that, for me at least, has been one of the most amazing aspects of this group. Despite the fact that many of us have never met face to face, we've bonded over books. There's talk of an East Coast rendezvous in June . . . or maybe a trip to Las Vegas, near which a number of our members live. One member has declared herself the group's statistician and is busily trying to chart how we know one another and where we live. We've even played around with the idea of trying to write a book together, with willing members each contributing a chapter. As the song says, "We've only just begun," but our virtual book club seems to be in it for the long haul.

Linda Nansteel Lovell (Ellicott City, Maryland)



Women of Trinity Book Blog

No one can deny the effect social media has had on communications. Whether it's Facebook or a blog, people have become accustomed to the two-way dialogue offered online.

With this in mind, the Women of Trinity Lutheran Church in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, began thinking about new ways to encourage younger women to participate in educational programs. We wanted to offer a program that women could participate in from home, especially after they have worked all day or if they have small children. While we considered taking advantage of the popularity of Facebook, we didn't want to have that as a requirement to participate in our program. We decided to try an online book blog where members could live blog about a pre-selected book once a month and so <http://wotbookblog.blogspot.com/> was formed.

We publicize the book blog and the book selection on the church's Web site, in the bulletin and in the newsletter. The blog is hosted for free on blogger.com, an easy blogging program that allows you to create simple, customized sites. You don't need a technology degree to use it.

Initially, the group took six months to read the first book. We found that to be a little too long to read a book, and it required a longer commitment. In subsequent readings, we have divided the book into three parts and we publish what chapters need to be read by certain blogging dates.

Each month, we have someone serve as host to the blogging session to help spark discussions. The host may talk about what in the book moved her, how the author's experiences affected her or how her faith journey is similar. The blogging can be a bit slow, so sometimes as one person is typing a comment, another one is posting at the same time. It takes a bit to get used to the delay in conversations, but we have adjusted.

Books we have read:

Girl Meets God: A Memoir by Lauren F. Winner

Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith by Martha Beck

Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion by Sara Miles

Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith by Nora Gallagher

A small group of women are regularly participating in the live blog sessions. They are enjoying having the ability to read a common, spiritual book and discuss it with others. While it's a small number, we have discovered that many women throughout the church are reading the book at the same time, although they are not actively blogging.

Our books have all focused on a variety of women's faith journeys. As the authors examine their faith, events that have shaped their beliefs and how they view God, their experiences provide an excellent opportunity for those of us reading their books to reflect on our own beliefs. I think we have all been moved by this experience and impacted by the author's search to deepen their relationship with God. Ultimately, I think that's what we all are working toward.

Kim Wilkinson Shindle (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania)

Bestsellers and Bibles

As a lifelong bibliophile and active Lutheran Christian, I frequently read a novel and think, there's a sermon in there. However, it wasn't until I encountered *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, that it struck me how much more significant the novel would be if juxtaposed with biblical teachings on slavery, racism and classism. Thus was born the idea for Bestsellers and Bibles, a small group the pastors of my home congregation, First Lutheran, Ellicott City, Maryland, encouraged me to develop and implement.

Initially the group was publicized via the newsletter and worship bulletins. All were invited to participate, but our group of 15 has emerged as all women. Using a free online survey tool (surveymonkey.com), we decided to meet monthly for 90 minutes. I identify the book and related Bible passages in advance so everyone can read both before the meeting. The goal of Bestsellers and Bibles is to use the Bible to enlighten the book discussion and the book discussion to deepen our study of the Bible.

Our first book, *House Rules* by Jodi Picoult, the story of a single mother raising two sons, was combined with the Jacob cycle of stories in Genesis. The older of the two sons, 18-year-old Jacob, lives with Asperger's syndrome, so his mother and brother live with Asperger's as well. One of the approaches we took was creating a chart comparing the Hunt brothers from the novel with what we took to calling the Isaacson brothers from the Bible. As the 90 minutes came to an end, we realized that we had explored nuances of both the Bible and the novel that we wouldn't have seen by discussing either in isolation.

The second novel was Stockett's *The Help*, an eye-opening novel of relationships between the races and between parents and children. There was no single, easily identified Bible story; instead, we used a collection of passages like Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) and Hagar and Sarai (Genesis). As we'd

Books we have read:

House Rules by Jodi Picoult and Genesis 25–36

The Help by Kathryn Stockett and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See and the Book of Ruth

East of Eden by John Steinbeck and Genesis 4:1–16 (17–25 optional)

Jephthe's Daughter by Naomi Ragen and Judges 11 (with 2 Samuel 11:1—2:24 optional)

Caleb's Crossing by Geraldine Brooks and Genesis 2–3

done with *House Rules*, we discussed *The Help* and the Bible passages simultaneously. For instance, we considered how the black characters in the novel would react to Proverbs 17:2, "A slave who deals wisely will rule over a child who acts shamefully, and will share the inheritance as one of the family," and then how the white characters would react. We incorporated a list of racism-related definitions into the discussion as well.

Future pairings for discussion are John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* with Genesis 4 and Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* with a look at family relationships in the Bible.

Though Bestsellers and Bibles is still in its infancy, response from participants has been strong. I'm currently developing a Web site (www.bestsellersandbibles.com) to support the group by providing links to online sources of Bible study and book discussions as well as by offering questions about book and Bible pairings for those who can't attend our discussions. As a group, we're enthusiastically moving forward in our exploration of the intersection of literature and faith.

Linda Nansteel Lovell (Ellicott City, Maryland)

Reading Retreat

It's a Northwood's dark-black sky when we turn right from the country road onto the lane that leads to the clearing where we park our rental car. We take out flashlights to find our way along the path to the door of the inn where we'll spend a long autumn weekend at a Reading Retreat sponsored by the BookWomen Center of Minnesota Women's Press (www.womenspress.com). It's a long day for my friend and me. We fly from Chicago to Minneapolis and then drive another two-plus hours to this remote destination. But we excitedly put our duffels in our cozy single rooms, put on our slippers and gather—mugs of tea in hand—for the opening of this time away for books. We've read the words other women have written. Now it's time for discussion.

The reading for this retreat occupies the 15 or so women over the summer after a list of seven titles—chosen by primary retreat leader Glenda Martin—arrives in the mail. The list includes adult books as well as some children's literature. The adult titles are paired together by a daily theme, as the leader will take them up in the morning or afternoon devoted to them. Martin, co-founder with Mollie Hoben of the Women's Press, a free, feminist newspaper in 1985, said: "We started the Women's Press because we believe in the importance of women's voices." It's true for books, too. And [during the retreats] for the voices we hear, sitting and listening to each other. We begin to value each other and learn from each other.

The list is never, then, a smörgåsbord of classic or contemporary favorites but a carefully planned menu of offerings that just might startle the tastes of even eclectic and sophisticated readers. Brain food and soul food sure to nourish. We chew the ideas carefully and savor the conversations they bring about.

A favorite theme of mine reveals Martin's central belief about writing—and, so, reading. It is: All History Is Fiction, and Personal. "We get into this craziness, debating what is fiction and what is non-

All History Is Fiction, and Personal

A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War by Susan Griffen

Threaded with each of these pairs:

The Dress Lodger by Sheri Holman with *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* by Geraldine Brooks

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels with *Moon Tiger* by Penelope Lively

Enemy Women by Paulette Jiles with *In the River Sweet* by Patricia Henley

And these children's books:

A Penny for a Hundred by Ethel Pochocki

The Ballad of the Pirate Queens by Jane Yolen

Eleanor by Barbara Cooney

fiction," she said. "What's important to me is story. And the story always comes out of the writer. Even someone who does research and presents 'just the facts,' chooses which facts to include. What is true is that each of us defines truth for itself." And so, in the books for this theme—historical fiction, memoir, and essay—we talk about story and about truth.

For a retreat like this to work, a skilled leader like Martin—who also taught educational psychology at the University of Minnesota—is a key ingredient. She excels at asking intriguing questions and probing answers. Marvelous as it is to get away from routine and responsibility, when we head home on Monday afternoon what lasts is knowing I've thought in a way I never had before about truths offered by the writers and by the other retreat readers.

Kathleen Kastilahn (Evanston, Illinois)

The Solo Reader

When I was a little girl, I looked for escape wherever I could find it. I grew up the fourth of five children, which put me sixth on the list of a seven-person household. At that spot, I had no power. If I had been the last child, I could have invoked my baby-of-the-family status to get my way (and would have cried out for my own room). But my home was a tiny brick structure with three bedrooms and 1.5 baths. For a person who gets her energy from solitude, that was unfortunate.

Like you might have done, I created my refuges. I requested a bottom bunk in the room I shared with my two sisters. Then I would tuck a long blanket under the top mattress and drape it over the space above my bunk, creating a cave. What a delight it was to crawl in with a flashlight to read a love-story comic book (certainly the young girl's precursor to romance novels, which I now avoid as an adult).

But my soul needed more privacy. So I continued to search for a spot to escape into my books and my fantasies. The neighbor's tree house was no good; too many kids showed up unannounced. The giant hole I dug in my backyard for my personal bomb shelter filled with water during the humid southern summers. The basement under my house was dank, dark and musty.

But then I found it. My perfect spot: the attic above our one-car garage. I would pull down the folded, wooden stairs, climb up and tug them shut from above with a long rope tied to the bottom rung. My own invention.

And I was alone. No brothers and sisters; no mother and father. Only me and my invisible companions. When I wasn't hiding out as a secret agent, I was a reader. The escape was magical, and the books grew slightly more sophisticated as I did—from *The Wind in the Willows* to the *Adventures of Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren, to *To Kill a*

Chronicles of Barsetshire by Anthony Trollope

- *The Warden* (1855)
- *Barchester Towers* (1857)
- *Doctor Thorne* (1858)
- *Framley Parsonage* (1861)
- *The Small House at Allington* (1864)
- *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867)

Cranford by Elizabeth Gaskell

Lit: A Memoir by Mary Karr

Major Pettigrew's Last Stand by Helen Simonson

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

The Help by Kathryn Stockett

The Starbridge series by Susan Howatch:

- The first three books of the series (*Glittering Images*, *Glamorous Powers*, *Ultimate Prizes*) begin in the 1930s, and continue through World War II.
- The second three (*Scandalous Risks*, *Mystical Paths*, *Absolute Truths*) take place in the 1960s.

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

Mockingbird, by Harper Lee. Sure, it was sweltering in the summer and frigid in the winter, but the solitude was worth it.

To this day, reading alone gives me joy. I look forward to my weekends, especially Sundays, my nap day, when after church I curl up on my bed and read and snooze. I shut the door to my room, take the phone off the hook, and turn on the sound machine. I am transported.

I've tried book clubs; in fact, as a young adult, working woman, I was in a reading club with other women my age. We called ourselves Sharp Gals. We didn't really get through any books that I remember,

but we had fun. With legitimate, serious reading clubs, which you are reading about in this resource, there are rules . . . and they include reading somebody else's great idea of a book on somebody else's schedule and then talking about it! I am not a critic. I am just a lover of books.

I appreciate the differences among us that allow so many to enjoy book clubs. For me, reading is a spiritual practice, which I prefer to experience alone. Just me and a good book.

Terri Lackey (Berwyn, Illinois)