

BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES ALAN BENNETT'S NOVEL

THE UNCOMMON READER

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BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Alan Bennett's novel **The Uncommon Reader**

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the paperback edition of **The Uncommon Reader**. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for **The Uncommon Reader** has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure.

This guide was co-written by Erin Balser. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for People of the Book

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CONTACT INFORMATION: SEE BACK COVER.

BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your Bookclub.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a Bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourself

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Keys to the Novel

Author Information

Background Information

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

As unlikely as it might seem, the Queen could be the ultimate cocktail party guest or trivia player. She has a tremendous range of knowledge. She knows how to make interested, but not intimate conversation that involves small talk, but not debate. She is a model royal, taking to her public duties with pride and care.

But the monarchy is turned upside down when the Queen discovers a portable public library on the grounds outside the royal kitchen. The book-mobile is there for the use of the palace staff. Ever polite, she borrows a book because she feels it would be rude otherwise. One book leads to another, and the Queen discovers the joys of reading for pleasure. Her literary guide is a minor palace character, Norman Seakins. (see *Norman*, p.24)

As the Queen reads more and more, and is involved in her duties less and less, her loyal servants and handlers are afraid, confused and even angered by how this newfound interested has thrown the monarchy and its activities into upheaval.

notes

Keys to the Novel

The Uncommon Reader

- The phrase, “the uncommon reader”, is adapted from Virginia Woolf’s 1925 collection of essays called **The Common Reader**, a book that pays tribute to the act of reading for pleasure. But, Woolf, in turn, had reached back to Samuel Johnson who used the expression to honor all the ordinary readers for whom writers write.
- The word “common”, defined by the dictionary as “ordinary”, is actually anything but, and has several complex applications. First, it links together people who share things, places, and languages in common. Second, it describes the frequency of shared thoughts and activities, as in “commonly” held viewpoints. Third, it binds together the large mass of people who are less than royal in social and economic standing. These are the people in the mainstream of society: ordinary, work-classing folk, commoners who serve royalty. Situated directly opposite all of them is the Queen, who as head of the monarchy is, obviously, anything but common.
- The concept for Bennett’s novel **The Uncommon Reader** came to him when he was returning home from a weekend in Yorkshire. He thought:

What if the Queen began borrowing books from a mobile library and was transformed into a indefatigable reader? What if her family and her courtiers became first suspicious and then panicked by her new intellectual pursuit? (Globe and Mail)

- It is in this sense that Alan Bennett plays with the concept of the uncommon reader – the definition, its significance, and its use to readers of all kinds. We watch with curiosity and delight as the Queen, who begins as a very common reader, grows to be a very astute and perceptive reader. (see **The Power of Reading**, p.29)
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Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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