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## Academic Libraries and Shared Reading Programs

*By Abby Kasowitz-Scheer*

This summer, thousands of soon-to-be college students are reading books as part of campus-wide “shared reading” programs (also referred to as common reader programs, one book programs, etc.). Such programs are designed to provide incoming students with a common experience and invite exploration of particular themes (e.g., diversity, etc.), while promoting reading and intellectual engagement (Twiton, 2007). A variety of special events and initiatives are planned during fall and sometimes spring semesters to give students multiple opportunities to connect with the book, such as author visits, discussion groups, and book-related course assignments. This *College Connection* highlights several shared reading programs and their special offerings, including areas where librarians collaborate with faculty and others to promote information literacy.



### Background

According to Twiton (2007), campus shared reading programs are a relatively new phenomenon, a majority of programs in existence for only four years or less, and they are coordinated by a variety of different campus units such as Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, academic departments, and the library.

Institutions that offer shared reading programs typically send copies of the book to incoming students during the summer before they arrive on campus. Students are expected to read the book over the summer, so that they can begin school in the fall prepared to take part in related academic and cultural activities.

### Library Participation

In a small number of cases, the campus shared reading program is coordinated by the library. At Bowling Green State University, the “[Common Reading Experience](#)” has been led by a librarian. Up until Fall 2007, Colleen Boff, Acting Chair, Library Teaching and Learning & First Year Experience Librarian, has chaired the book selection committee, organized workshops to assist faculty in using the book with students, organized author visits, and maintained the program web site and intranet site for faculty. While much of the logistics and faculty training is now coordinated by an office outside of the library, Colleen continues to lead the reader advisory component, suggesting titles and managing the selection process, and helps develop the curriculum for sessions in UNIV 100--University Success, a two-credit course for first-year students (C. Boff, personal communication June 5, 2007 and June 8, 2007).



Libraries on other campuses participate in shared reading programs by having librarians serve on the book selection committee or as discussion facilitators; developing resource guides related to book themes; hosting events; and providing instruction on finding and using research materials.

### Using the Book to Teach Information Literacy

Shared reading books often provide a great foundation from which to develop course discussions and assignments and to introduce critical thinking and information literacy. At Northern Kentucky University, librarians focus the information literacy instruction sessions in Orientation to College (UNV 101) on NKU's "[Book Connection](#)" selection. The library also helps to facilitate the faculty's teaching of information literacy skills in the classroom. Librarian Mary Chestnut presents to UNV 101 instructors about library resources that support the Book Connection. As Peg Adams, Interim Director of the Office of First-Year Programs, explains, "Our library also collaborates with First-Year Programs to create a resource guide for instructors and students, and assignments related to the Book Connection so that students can connect their developing research skills to the Book Connection topics they are discussing in various classes" (P. Adams, personal communication, June 5, 2007).

Syracuse University's Writing Program incorporates the University's Shared Reading book into an early fall semester assignment for first-year students in the required course, WRT 105: Analysis, Argument, and Academic Writing. In 2006, students explored questions based on their reading of Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner." Students were required to use information resources for this [assignment](#) (e.g., scholarly articles or book chapters, newspaper articles and images). Since this assignment was focused more on using information resources than finding them, students were directed to the Shared Reading [web guide](#) created by Syracuse University Library staff which linked students directly to resources on a wide variety of topics related to the *Kite Runner*.

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The screenshot shows the Syracuse University Library website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'contact', 'search', 'home', and 'A-Z INDEX'. Below this is a banner for 'SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY' with a search icon and the text 'ASK US!'. A secondary navigation bar includes 'ABOUT US', 'SERVICES', 'HELP', and 'RESEARCH TOOLS'. A third bar lists 'TRAILS Home', 'Classes/Tours', 'Faculty Services', 'Help', and 'Contact Us'. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column contains a 'Home' link and a 'Help' section with links to 'About the Book', 'About the Author', 'Newspaper search', 'Writing Program Connection', 'CNY Reads', and 'Campus Events'. Below this is a 'Research Topics' section with links to 'Afghanistan History', 'Afghanistan in the News', 'Art and Culture', 'Cooking and Foods', 'Discrimination', 'Ethnic Relations', and 'Human Rights'. The middle column features a book cover for 'THE KITE RUNNER' by KHALED HOSSEINI, labeled as a 'NATIONAL BESTSELLER'. The right column contains the title 'The Syracuse University Shared Reading Program and Syracuse University Library Present A Research Guide for *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini', compiled by Susan Miller, Adina Mulliken & Rosemarie Romano in July 2006.

Students in Niagara University's NUS 102 (First Year Niagara) course are required to submit a one-page response to the "[Niagara Reads](#)" book. According to librarian Samantha Gust, this assignment in addition to the program's "Response and Reflection Contest," promotes the development of information literacy skills because "students must produce something using the information they learned by reading the book." (S. Gust, personal communication, June 6, 2007.)

## Library Research Guides

Many academic libraries develop research guides to assist students in exploring themes associated with shared reading books. These guides often include links to articles and web sites and lists of resources in a variety of formats.

Duke University Library creates guides related to specific book themes. For the Summer Reading 2006, Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, librarians developed guides entitled "Law: Informed consent and medical decision making" and "Economics: How do economics impact transplant surgery?" (see <http://library.duke.edu/research/summerreading/>). Each guide contains an introduction to the topic, a working bibliography, and tips for finding library materials.

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## Summer Reading 2006 - My Sister's Keeper

The [Duke Summer Reading Program](#) is designed to give incoming students a shared intellectual experience with other members of their class. During Orientation Welcome Week, First-Year Advisory Counselors (FACs) will facilitate a discussion with first-year students. Other conversations and events related to the reading will take place throughout the fall semester.

This summer's reading is [My Sister's Keeper](#) by [Jodi Picoult](#).

### Research and Discussion Guides

Whether to find term paper or discussion topics, these guides can be used to relate the themes in [My Sister's Keeper](#) to current research and practice in the disciplines. Most of these topics overlap with one another-- law with ethics, economics with medical research, social work with women's roles— offering any number of opportunities for additional discovery. A working bibliography is provided for each subject, as well as a section for students to "Jumpstart Your



The W. Frank Steely Library at Northern Kentucky University develops web pages each year to support the ["Book Connections"](#) program. Each guide contains Library of Congress subject headings, reference books, electronic databases, and web sites as well as research tips.

Syracuse University Library's "Shared Reading" research guides connect students to resources on a variety of themes related to each book. For instance, the 2006 guide for the [Kite Runner](#) included resources on 17 topics including Afghanistan history, Afghanistan art and culture, discrimination, ethnic relations, the morality of silence, and women in Afghanistan. Multiple media formats were highlighted such as audio files, films and videos, images and music.


## Community-Wide Programs

Some shared reading programs extend beyond the college campus into the wider community, involving institutions such as public libraries and K-12 schools. Such efforts promote reading and information literacy throughout the community and strengthen relationships between campuses and their neighbors.

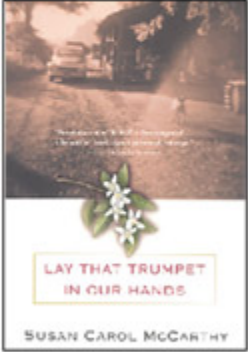
[PREFACE & SLO County Reads](#) is a collaborative effort involving California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) and San Luis Obispo (SLO) City-County Libraries. As part of this partnership, SLO City-County Libraries help recruit and train community members to serve as volunteer discussion facilitators during Cal Poly orientation and for community-wide discussions. Cal Poly staff provide support and recommendations for the book discussions (P. Ponce, personal communication, June 4, 2007).

Michigan State University (MSU) and East Lansing partner to provide the ["One Book, One Community"](#) program, which encourages all members of the community -- elementary school students to MSU students to adults -- to read and discuss the same book. This six-week program, held in August and September, includes many events and activities such as classroom-based book discussions in K-12 schools and MSU, film showings sponsored by MSU Library and East Lansing Public Library, author lectures and discussions, writing workshops, and theme dinners in MSU

residence halls (P. Sebastian, personal communication, June 6, 2007 and June 8, 2007).



<b>ABOUT "ONE BOOK"</b>	<b>Info for First Year Students</b>
<b>THE BOOK</b>	<b>FRESHMAN READING ASSIGNMENT</b>
<b>THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>The One Book, One Community Project</b>
<b>INFO FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS</b>	<b>Michigan State University and City of East Lansing</b>
<b>ESSAY CONTEST</b>	<b>What's the assignment?</b> All first-year students are expected to have read <i>Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands</i> before arriving on campus for the Welcome Days for the fall, 2007, semester. There is no written assignment, although you may want to use the guide questions on the back of this information sheet to provoke your thinking about the book.
<b>NEWS</b>	
<b>EVENTS</b>	<b>How will I use this book?</b> Susan Carol McCarthy, the author of <i>Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands</i> , will speak to you on your first full day at MSU, August 23, 2007. You will likely be involved in a discussion of the book in your residence hall, have an opportunity to join a book discussion during the Academic Welcome activities, get an opportunity to attend theme-related events on campus and in the community, and may find the book assigned in one of your courses designed for first-year students.
<b>PHOTO GALLERY</b>	
<b>PARTNERS &amp; SPONSORS</b>	



Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) partners with local public libraries and schools to promote the "[Summer Reading Program](#)." The book is discussed in many MTSU freshmen courses as well as community reading groups. The author is invited to speak on campus at convocation, visit one MTSU class during the first day of fall semester, participate in a book signing at the city library, and speak with community book clubs. In addition, seven local high schools will use this year's book, *An Ordinary Man*, by Paul Rusesabagina, as summer reading for honors and AP English classes (L. Witherow, personal communication, June 4, 2007).

## Conclusion

Shared reading programs provide an excellent opportunity for academic libraries to collaborate with faculty, university staff, and the greater community to promote information literacy skills in creative and motivating ways. Many institutions have already developed innovative programs to help students and others explore common books through discussion and research and often create written or artistic products based on their own interpretations.

### What are College Students Reading This Summer?

Here's a small sample of shared reading selections for 2007 - 2008 adapted from the web page "One Book, One College: Common Reading Programs" maintained by Barbara Fister, librarian at Gustavus Adolphus College: <http://homepages.gac.edu/~fister/onebook.html>):

- Appalachian State University: *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America*, by Paul Cuadros
- Ball State University and University of North Carolina at Charlotte: *The Color of Water*

James McBride

- Bellevue Community College (WA): *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* by Timothy Egan
- Bowling Green State University: *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls
- California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo: *All Over Creation* by Ruth Ozeki
- Duke University: *The Best of Enemies*, by Osha Gray Davidson
- Eastern Kentucky University: *The Mercury 13* by Martha Ackmann
- Florida State University: *A Hope in the Unseen* by Ron Suskind
- Gustavus Adolphus College, Syracuse University and University of Florida: *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder
- Howard Community College (MD): *Small Wonder* by Barbara Kingsolver
- Indiana University of Pennsylvania and University of Washington: *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* by Elizabeth Kolbert
- Michigan State University: *Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands* by Susan Carol McCarthy
- Middle Tennessee State University: *An Ordinary Man* by Paul Rusesabagina
- Midlands Technical College (SC), Parkland College (IL): *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon
- Murray State University (KY): *Something to Declare* by Julia Alvarez
- Niagara University: *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
- Northern Kentucky University: *Lost Mountain* by Erik Reece
- Ramapo College of New Jersey: *Long Way Gone: Memories of a Boy Soldier* by Ismael Beah
- St. Louis University: *Heroic Leadership* by Chris Lowney
- San Jose State University: *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* by Z.Z. Packer
- University of Alaska, Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Swallows of Kabul* by Yasmina Khadra
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: *The Death of Innocents* by Helen Prejean
- University of South Carolina: *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka
- University of Wisconsin, Parkside: *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman et al
- Utah State University: *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* by Atul Gawande
- Winthrop University: *The Creative Habit* by Twyla Tharp

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## About the Author



Abby Kasowitz-Scheer is Head of Instructional Services at the Syracuse University Library. She also leads the effort to expand the *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* project to higher education and has authored or co-authored several professional books and numerous publications.