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The Book Club Play

By

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Dramatic Publishing Company

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“*The Book Club Play* received its world premiere at Round House Theatre, Blake Robison, artistic director, January-February 2008. It was subsequently presented at Berkshire Theatre Festival, Stockbridge, Mass., Kate Maguire, artistic director, July 13-20, 2008, and at Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., Molly Smith, artistic director, Oct. 9-Nov. 6, 2008.”

“Development of *The Book Club Play* was supported by the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center during a residence at the National Playwrights Conference of 2007 and at the Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis, Dr. Polly Carl, producing artistic director.”

The Book Club Play

CHARACTERS

ANA SMITH (w): 30s. Pronounced “Ah-nuh.” Beautiful. Charming. Smart. Accomplished. Organized. A columnist for a daily paper. The “Mother Bee.” Her grace masks a need to control.

ROBERT NOVUM SMITH JR (m): 30s. ANA’s golden-boy handsome, charismatic, underachiever husband who is starting to search for meaning. Met in college. Upper-crust background.

WILLIAMLEENOTHNAGEL (m): 30s. ROB’s conservative, well-read, well-dressed, disciplined college roommate. ANA’s former boyfriend. History buff. Unmarried.

JENNIFER McCLINTOCK (w): 30s. ANA’s friend. Pretty. Shy. Smart. Tends to burst out with awkward truthful comments. Despite some lack of self-confidence, she is the grounding center of the group. Unorganized and oblivious to her own attractiveness. Unmarried.

LILY LOUISE JACKSON (w): black, 20s. A go-getter. Former debate captain who is on the cusp of all current trends and yet can still put her foot in her mouth in social occasions. Laughs at appropriate and inappropriate times. A great lover of books and ANA’s protégé at the paper.

ALEX (m): 30s. The new guy. A very smart, well-read academic who has lost his moorings and is searching for real connection. Professor of comparative literature.

PUNDIT (either): plays five characters: SAM, Wal-Mart guy; FRANK, Secret Service agent; ELSA, jaded literary agent; MRS. SIMPSON, sky diver; CARL, inmate book dealer.

CHARACTER NOTES

Pace and flow is vital for this play.

For professional productions: Double the roles, using only six actors. The PUNDITS can be played by the following characters with fast minimal costume changes (one or two articles at most):

ELSA, jaded literary agent- played by JEN

FRANK, Secret Service agent- played by WILL

SAM, Wal-Mart guy- played by ROB

CARL, inmate book dealer- played by ALEX

MRS. SIMPSON, sky diver- played by LILY

If you are using a seventh actor for all the PUNDITS, then a fuller transformation can occur, so long as the pace and flow is unaffected. The seventh actor **MUST** play all the PUNDIT roles as written, man or woman.

For non-professional productions: The cast can be expanded to 11 actors by having each of the PUNDIT roles played individually.

CASTING NOTE

ALEX can be cast in any race or ethnicity. LILY must be black. ANA, JEN, WILL and ROB can be any race or ethnicity except black.

SETTING

A living room in the United States circa now.

PRODUCTION NOTES

This play is stylized like a film documentary. The characters know that they are being filmed but forget sometimes.

Names of the experts and titles of the books should be projected, but all the roles, including the pundits, should be live. All the dialogue should be spoken by live actors, not filmed. The set-up is a film documentary, but the language is theatrical.

This is not a farce; it is a play about real people. The funny should come from the humanity of the characters.

DISCUSSION AND ENGAGEMENT

The Book Club Play is as much about connection as it is about books. Theatre patrons could write their favorite book on an adhesive name tag as they walk into the theatre and wear it during the play to spark discussion during intermission. At the end of the performance, the stickers could be placed on a banner when they leave, so that people can see and discuss the books others have read. Book drives and video “confessionals” of reading pleasures to “Lars Knudsen” are all various easy ways to engage audiences in discussing books before and after the play.

The Book Club Play

ACT I

(Projection: The Book Club: A Documentary.

Spotlight: ANA SMITH [name flashes on screen].)

ANA. And my idea for Book Club was, simply, why don't I start a club where we all read books ... together! I came up with it a good sixteen months before Oprah. Connection. Bridges. Revelation ... all of those were part of my impetus to start the Book Club. Book Club is a safe haven ... a place to read, talk and to be our authentic selves (*Beat.*) Was that OK? I'm happy to do it over again if you want it better.

(Spotlight: LILY LOUISE JACKSON [name flashes on screen].)

LILY. Why Book Club? Well, I like to read. I'm a writer ... although, right now I'm more of an editor and fact-finder at the *Herald*. Ana, who's a columnist at the paper, invited me to Book Club. To come every month and hang with her and her old—not "old" old, but you know ... longtime mature-age type friends. I just moved here to start the job and I don't know anyone, so I didn't really have a good excuse for not coming. So, why not Book Club?

(Spotlight: ROBERT NOVUM SMITH JR. [name flashes on screen].)

ROB. My wife, Ana, and my best friend, Will, started Book Club way back. I don't think they even asked me to join; it was kind

of assumed I would be there. I'm not a particular big reader. But I like being around great people. I like being around good food. And it usually happens at my house. So I'm already there. I guess Book Club just sort of happened to me.

(Spotlight: JENNIFER McCLINTOCK [name flashes on screen].)

JEN. Books are like best friends to me. Truth be told, I like books more than I like most people. I'm a paralegal at a law firm where I deal with the "fine print," and angry clients, and stressed out attorneys. Book Club is a place that reminds me of the better parts of being human. It is the only place in my life where the idea of community really thrives. I truly believe a good book and a good friend can bring out the best in a person. Even me.

(Spotlight: WILLIAM LEE NOTHNAGEL [name flashes on screen].)

WILL. I simply adore books. I seriously considered getting a master's in library science, but the whole idea of letting other people take home books I had so carefully tended and organized, distressed me. Book Club is the best of two worlds. I share what I have read with people that I like, but then I take my own beautiful book home with me.

(Projection: Moby Dick by Herman Melville.

ANA, ROB, WILL and LILY are all downstage looking at the audience.)

ANA *(looking at her watch)*. OK. People. Places! Places! It's almost time. Five-four-three-two-Red light! It's on! It's on!

ROB. That's amazing!

ANA (*clears her throat, to the camera*). Hello there. I am Ana Smith. Although you might recognize me ... from my picture byline for my “Connections” column in the style section of the *Herald*, I am here in a very different role.

ROB. This is so weird.

WILL. Shhh.

ANA. And I am surrounded by some very special people Rob, Lily, Will—say hello!

LILY & WILL. Hello.

ANA. Rob, honey—Say hello.

ROB. To who? Nobody’s there.

ANA. Please say hello to the camera, dear.

ROB. Hello.

ANA. This wonderful man is my husband: Robert Novum Smith Jr.

And this is Lily. This amazing, hip young woman just moved from ...

LILY. Akron, Ohio

ANA. Lily is an assistant editor at the *Herald*.

LILY. Thanks to Ana, I’ve also written some short opinion pieces for the metro section.

ANA. Oh Lily, I see a slightly younger me in you! It’s so fun to hang outside of work.

LILY. It sure is, Ana.

WILL. Salutations.

ANA. This is William Lee Nothnagel the third. Our first member and our dearest friend.

WILL. I am curator of Greek antiquities at the history museum.

ANA. And one of the best dressed and best read men that I know.

WILL. Brooks Brothers and a good book, what could be better?

ANA (*turns to the audience*). This is most of my Book Club.

TA-DA

(*JEN walks in late, harried, and still reading Moby Dick.*)

ANA (*cont'd, introduces her*). Jennifer McIntock ... an old childhood friend of Will's and now a longtime cherished Book Club member.

JEN. Good God Jupiter, is that the ... thingy?

LILY. It's moving.

ANA. It's focusing ... It has a sensor that detects movement. (*Some of the Book Clubbers test it by moving.*) From seven p.m. to midnight its records everything from here to here.

JEN. Really?

ANA. Yes. Jen. Seven p.m. Sharp.

LILY. Amazing.

ANA. This state of the art camera is transmitting images to ... none other than the documentary director Lars Knudsen.

JEN. Lars Knudsen!?

WILL. I can't believe this! Lars Knudsen!

LILY. I loved his film *Hard Hats*.

WILL. Mesmerizing! It was all about construction workers in Canada.

ROB. Who is Lars—

ANA. KNUDSEN?

LILY. He is a cutting edge documentary director from Denmark whose work captures the essence of humanity by unobtrusively filming real people going about their real lives in real time.

ANA. And our Danish director is focusing on the American phenomenon of Book Clubs. And our Book Club is going to be the centerpiece of his study.

Book clubs are one of the biggest social groups in America ... people want them ... people need them. I know I do.

LILY. When you first brought it up, I thought it sounded like a hokey local cable access project. But, Ana, this is fantastic.

ROB. I've always secretly wanted to be on a reality show.

ANA. Rob. This is a serious documentary study by a renowned international director. Now as for the camera. (*Everyone looks at it.*) Look away! (*Everyone looks in different directions.*) Pretend it's not there. Act natural. Make yourselves comfortable. More comfortable. (*All pretending to be relaxed and comfortable ... but not succeeding.*) It'd not be out of the realm of possibility that this could end up in Cannes.

WILL. Cannes! Fantastic!

JEN (*blurts*). It's dreadful.

ANA. Excuse me?

JEN (*beat, touches her lips*). I said that out loud, didn't I?

LILY & WILL. You did.

JEN. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to ...

WILL. Jenny, this is a great opportunity for our Book Club.

JEN. But why does our Book Club need an opportunity?

ANA. Because when a wonderful Book Club works so well for so long, it becomes our responsibility to share it with others.

JEN. But won't having THAT bug-eyed thing looking at us—change us?

ANA. Lars Knudsen is very clear—Nothing will change. We will take turns picking the books. All of us will read it and discuss. The big difference is we will meet here for filming every two weeks.

LILY. A new book every two weeks?!

ANA. Lars has some film festival deadlines; I thought we could handle the reading pressure.

WILL. Of course we can handle the reading! Right?

ALL. Right.

WILL. After all, Book Club is all about the books.

ROB. I thought Book Club was about the food.

ANA. Book Club is food for the mind and nourishment for the soul. And since I am the one that dragged us all into this crazy adventure, here at our house, I will be happy to cook all the meals

WILL. Glorious food by Ana.

LILY. But can we use your kitchen to cook when it's our book?

ANA. Use my kitchen?

JEN. Or just order take-out?

ANA. Take out? (*Beat.*) Of course! Whatever you need. Your book. Your meeting. It will just happen to be at our house.

LILY. With a freaky looking camera on us.

(*All laugh.*)

ANA. Rob, why don't you bring in the wine and lox dip I whipped up?

ROB. Great idea, Ana

ANA. And let us begin with Will's book selection *Moby Dick* or *The Whale* by Herman Melville. A classic American novel.

WILL. "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the

mouth; whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul; whenever it requires strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street or knocking people's hats off, then I account it high time to get to the sea as soon as possible. This is my substitute for pistol and ball."

ANA. Sublime reading, Will.

WILL. Thank you, Ana.

ROB. Great job, buddy.

LILY. A classic in every sense of the word. Right, Jen?

JEN (*madly reading a beat-up soft cover; looks up*). I'm not finished yet.

LILY. OH! AS I WAS SAYING: I—

ANA. Lily, you know, we have a rule about turning off cell phones before Book Club.

WILL. Book Club is just like the theater.

LILY. Oh Ana, no worries. My Kindle is on the fritz and I left my iPad charging at work. I just downloaded *Moby Dick* for free onto my cell.

WILL. Really?

LILY. It's easy and in the public domain.

ANA. I just like the feel of a real book: the paper, the cover.

LILY. But this is the future. (*To the camera.*) And this saves trees!

ANA. Right. As I was about to say: we could focus the whole conversation on the first line alone! Who is "Ishmael"?

LILY. Did you know Ishmael is the Biblical name of a social outcast and—

ROB. Wait. All I needed was to read the first line?

WILL. But, Rob, if you only read the first line, then you wouldn't know what happens at the end.

JEN (*blurts*). Finished!

ROB. Oh, I know what happens. In the end, poor Moby Dick dies.

JEN. Not really, Rob. (*Beat.*) The ending is still very fresh for me.

ROB. Moby doesn't die?

WILL. The White Whale can never die.

LILY. He is God

ANA. He is destiny.

JEN. He is nature.

ROB. Oh.

ANA. You didn't read the book, did you, Rob?

ROB. It's 615 pages dense and long ... and I love animals.

ANA. Rob—

ROB. Seriously, I tried, Ana, I really tried.

ANA. Thank you for trying

LILY. Will, I wasn't surprised that *Moby Dick* was your book choice.

ANA. Why is that, Lily?

LILY. It's just such an ambitious ... and male book. Captain Ahab seeking revenge on the whale that destroyed his leg.

WILL. Thank you, Lily. Funny, his book got terrible reviews when it first came out. And now it's a great American classic.

JEN. I suppose people just thought of it as a popular adventure book.

ROB. How could this be popular? It's so long.

JEN. I learned so much from this book ... About life. About people. About harpoons ...

WILL. My favorite line was, "Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian."

LILY. Which makes me wonder if there's a homosexual subtext, between Queequeg the Cannibal and Ishmael.

WILL (*beat*). I don't think so.

LILY. Queequeg has to be gay.

ANA. Queequeg is not gay.

WILL. Queequeg is a cannibal.

LILY. Maybe a bi-curious cannibal?

(LILY and JEN laugh.)

ANA. This is an American classic, Lily.

LILY. I know! And this American classic is filled with homoerotic subtext.

JEN. Is there subtext in the title?

(Everyone laughs varying degrees of laughter; less from ANA.)

ANA. That's so funny. But "Dick" meant something different back then. Perhaps, we should deepen instead of broaden, don't you think?

ROB. Well, isn't Moby Dick a SPERM whale?

(JEN snorts, she laughs so hard. This time, ANA is not amused.)

ANA. Jen, we are trying to have a serious conversation here.

JEN. Sorry. I'm working too much and sleeping too little.

LILY. No matter, this book is a long beautiful ode to "man love."

WILL. Really?

LILY. Page 113, "Some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair." Isn't that homoerotic?

WILL. No. That is just roommate stuff. Right, Rob?

ROB. Right.

WILL. Rob and I were roommates in college.

LILY. Oh, I wondered how you guys got to be friends.

WILL. Rob was the handsome, athletic type from a very good family.

ANA. His grandfather was a brilliant scientist that helped invent the birth control pill!

ROB. My middle name is “Novum.”

ANA. Will, on the other hand, was more hard-working and organized.

WILL. I liked making thematic window displays in my parent’s little grocery store. Corn, corn flakes. Corn syrup.

ANA. A born museum curator.

LILY. Well, it’s cool that two such different men can be so close.

(WILL and ROB high-five)

ROB & WILL. Oh yeah!

LILY. It’s refreshing to see a jock and a gay man as best friends.

(The men are about to bump elbows or high-five again and freeze. Stunned pause.)

ANA. Lily—Will is not gay.

LILY *(laughs)*. That’s a good one! *(Laughs. Stops.)* Wait, you’re serious?

JEN. Very serious.

LILY *(laughs a little)*. Really?

WILL. Lily, I am not gay.