

HOW TO READ A BOOK



AUTHOR OF *THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY*

MONICA WOOD

READING GROUP GUIDE

PRAISE FOR *HOW TO READ A BOOK*

"I laughed and wept my way straight through *How to Read a Book*.
What a beautiful, big-hearted treasure of a novel!"

—LILY KING, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Euphoria* and *Writers*

"What a master of plot and character Monica Wood is. I love the various worlds *How to Read a Book* took me to: a prison, a bookshop, and a laboratory, all in Portland, Maine. And I love how hopefully Wood writes about grief and second chances on behalf of her three protagonists.

Surely everyone who reads this novel will want to offer Ollie,
a voluble African grey parrot, a home."

—MARGOT LIVESEY, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *The Boy in the Field* and *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*

"A young female ex-con, a widower who was collateral damage, and a woman who runs the prison book club—three indelible voices (and let's not forget one extraordinary parrot's) remind us that life is full of mysteries, and sometimes the ones we believe are unsolvable are the ones that might save us. About second chances (our lives need not be apologies), the weight of forgiveness, our bond with our books, and the stubborn way love can make us see a world shining with mercy, Wood's new novel is both incandescent and unforgettable."

—CAROLINE LEAVITT, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *With or Without You* and *Pictures of You*

"Gorgeously told . . . A finely wrought story,
with deeply memorable characters."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review)

"Told with compassion and empathy, Wood's tender novel explores the ways people can surprise themselves and others. A deeply humane and touching novel; highly recommended for book clubs and fans of Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures*." —BOOKLIST



BEHIND THE BOOK

How to Read a Book is not a novel about prison, though one of its characters, Harriet, volunteers in one, her experience based loosely on mine. A few years ago, I was asked to make an author visit to a prison book group that had just finished reading my story collection *Ernie's Ark*. It was an intimidating entry—gate after locked gate; dark, ugly corridors; an ambiance of scraping metal and distant, overheated voices. The women's unit was different, though: airy, filled with light, more like a college dorm than a conventional prison. It's the landing place for any female in Maine with a sentence exceeding fourteen months, which means some of the women were there for relatively victimless offenses, others for violent, life-sentence crimes that were hard to fathom.

Judging from the universally warm welcome I got from the twelve readers waiting in the chow hall, I could never have guessed who was who—not that I wanted to. They asked penetrating, original questions ("Was the wife secretly angry, do you think?"); they laughed easily; they thanked me profusely for coming in. Afterward, in my safe and cozy house, I couldn't get these women off my mind. Like me, they loved to read. Like me, they loved to laugh. And we were nearly all Maine girls who'd grown up in small towns. A turn here, a turn there, and they could be me. I could be them.

Within a month I had funding for a 12-week program I called "Meet the Authors." I chose five books by Maine women, all friends of mine, who agreed to make a visit after we'd finished their books, which ranged from a children's picture book (*Little Beaver and the Echo* by Amy MacDonald) to a layperson's guide to brain chemistry (*Quirk* by Hannah Holmes). We added a writing component by popular vote, writing in the genre of whatever book was on deck. A couple of the women had master's degrees, others hadn't made it past ninth grade, but they were all willing, lively, smart, and far less profane than their fictional counterparts.

I ran the program four times over three years. The highlight came at the end of the second round, when the women agreed to perform a public reading at "town meeting," the mandatory all-hands gathering that occurred every Wednesday afternoon. The meeting is designed to convey information ("Library donations suspended for eight weeks"), air grievances ("We're out of tampons again"), and relay positive energy ("The ice-cream social was awesome, thank you"). The powers that be agreed to put our reading in the "positive energy" slot, and so, with my stomach in knots, I introduced each woman and prayed for a warm reception to their work—a poem about missing your kids; a humor piece about the vending machine; another poem about missing your kids; an essay about mice; and a choral reading of Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice."

I need not have worried; the audience responded with tears, laughter, thunderous applause, like the end of a cornball movie. The most lasting detail, one that did not make it to the book, was the reaction of the COs "guarding" the meeting. At first their eyes darted around, looking for trouble, but after a few minutes they attended to the performance and began to nod, to chuckle. And though they didn't applaud, they clearly became part of the audience. Through their hard-won writing, the women were being fully seen in a place designed to make you invisible.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Violet has spent two years in prison and yet she retains a sense of innocence: "I move along with the other people . . . memorizing my route so I can get back, what if I can't find my way back?" Why is she not more street-hardened by her experience?
2. Early on, Harriet observes: "Once Sophie left for good, this—this dusty quiet—would once again become the sound of evening." Does this imminent "quiet" affect Harriet's desire to help Violet? Might she have acted differently had Sophie decided to stay?
3. Of his current job, Frank observes: "His demotion to handyman felt like cool air whooshing through his body." After a career as a professional machinist, why is this minor bookstore job such a joy?
4. The novel features many instances of generational miscommunication, as when Baker warns Frank off ordering flowers, or when Sophie unapologetically googles Harriet's students. Sometimes the generation gap is comical, sometimes poignant, sometimes all too recognizable. In what ways did the multigenerational cast of characters affect you as a reader?
5. Did you notice all the parent/child relationships in this novel? Violet and her mother; Harriet and her daughters; Frank and his daughter; the incarcerated women and their children. How do these relationships help us understand the characters? Do they have anything in common as parents?
6. Thinking of Misha, Violet observes: "My theory is that all humans secretly long for the mother they always wanted. This longing turns half of us into resentful babies who didn't get properly mothered, and the second half into surrogate mothers for the first half." Is Violet projecting here, or is this a truth you recognized as true as soon as you read it? Were there other observations that struck you in that same way?
7. Seeing Violet for the first time, Frank "plummeted into the ditch of memory." How did this happen so fast? What does this incident in the bookstore show us about how memories work, especially those we try to suppress?



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

8. In all of Monica Wood's novels, characters are shown at work. How do you think seeing Frank, Harriet, and Violet at work deepens our sense of who they are?
9. Though she doesn't quite know it, Violet is on a journey of self-forgiveness. How does working with the parrots contribute to that journey? How do animals in general contribute to our sense of who we are?
10. Were you aware of avian-cognition research before meeting Ollie and his colleagues? Were there other things you learned by temporarily living these characters' lives?
11. How do you explain Dr. Petrov's overwhelming influence on Violet? What does she need that he provides?
12. When Frank and Harriet meet, they have an entire life behind them, plenty of mileage on their bodies and on their psyches. How does this affect their budding relationship? How is "old" love different from "young" love? How is it the same?
13. Violet tells Misha, "The writer writes the words. The given reader reads the words. And the book, the unique and unrepeatable book, doesn't exist until the given reader meets the writer on the page." What life experience did you, the given reader, bring to this book that made it exist?
14. In one of the final scenes, Violet's prison experience returns to her in a profoundly different light. How does her interaction with Dawna-Lynn demonstrate how Violet has changed since her release?
15. At the end, when you realize that Violet has been teaching us not "how to read a book" but how to read *this* book, what did you think?

