

Rhonda Rosen

# What's a nice Jewish book group doing in a Catholic university?

## The book group as a community outreach tool

**T**he book group is a staple of the public library system. For years public libraries have used it to gather readers of different genres (mystery book lovers), to celebrate holidays or different times of year (seasons, summer reading programs), and to appeal to diverse patron groups (children's reading groups, student recreational reading groups).

At Loyola Marymount University (LMU), a medium-sized private Jesuit university, we decided to use the book group as a way of reaching out to our neighboring communities. This article will describe how we used the traditional book group to promote a new academic program and the unanticipated success it continues to have in reaching those outside our campus. The Jewish book and discussion group, now finishing its sixth year, has been a valuable way to bring people from all over the greater west side of Los Angeles to our library and to our campus for many educational and cultural programs that LMU offers.

### Background

LMU, founded in 1911, is a private Jesuit institution that overlooks Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean. In 2007, the campus began sponsoring numerous interfaith dialogues and events to reach a broad spectrum of Southern California Jews, including an event with Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. Michael Engh, dean of LMU's Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts, realized that the time had come for Jewish Studies at LMU and enthusiastically blessed the new mi-

nor program to be created by Holli Levitsky, a professor who taught Holocaust literature classes in the English Department. "Jewish Studies is half of the Judeo-Christian tradition that shapes much of Western culture," Levitsky noted. "Jewish-Catholic relations are a focus of much attention now and we see our program as a vital addition to that intellectual discussion. That's why Jewish Studies has a very central place in a Catholic university."<sup>1</sup>

### The ALA grant that started it all

In 2007, the Charles Von der Ahe Library partnered with the new Jewish Studies minor program and applied for the ALA grant "Let's Talk About It: Jewish Literature Identity and Imagination" for "scholar-led, theme-based discussions that explore the best in contemporary and classic Jewish literature."<sup>2</sup> This grant was offered in conjunction with Nextbook, a nonprofit organization that promotes books about Jewish civilization and offers cultural programs in partnership with libraries and other cultural institutions.

The grant offered a variety of different themes. We chose "Neighbors: The World Next Door," as we felt it reflected the University's commitment to diversity and interfaith communication. In January 2008 we were selected as one of the 330 national pilot sites

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to receive training and funding to host the series. The five books within our chosen theme provided readers with a variety of journeys between neighboring cultures from Muslim Spain to Bolshevik Russia to contemporary America.

The “Let’s Talk About It” grant offered each library \$2,500 to support the series. The money was used to hire a scholar to lead the meetings of the series. The library’s Friends fund has subsidized this practice throughout the years. The grant money was also used to purchase a copy of each of the series’ books for each attendee.

Our goals through this reading and discussion series were threefold. First was to enhance the three parts of the university’s mission: 1) the encouragement of learning, 2) the education of the whole person, and 3) the service of faith and the promotion of justice. Our second goal was tied to the new library that was being built. We planned to expand the new William H. Hannon library’s role in the intellectual and cultural life of the community with new programming opportunities. And, finally, we planned to promote the new Jewish Studies minor program to our campus.

In September 2008, the fall semester began with ten students registered in LMU’s Jewish Studies minor program. Our “Let’s Talk About Jewish Literature” book group began with a dozen people. Most of our book group attendees were over 50 years old and residents from the two neighborhoods that surround our university. One faculty member and the dean of the library also attended. The group was half Jewish, half non-Jewish. We met about every three weeks throughout the fall semester (September through December).

### **Beyond the grant**

Over the years, we have seen the Jewish book group thrive. After the first series, we continued the book group using faculty as our facilitators. This proved to keep the books at a more academic level, as we often ask faculty to choose a book that they have used in class or studied.

We have read classics (*Day of the Locust*, by Nathaniel West), biography (*Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*), nonfiction (*Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, by Eva Hoffman), graphic novels (Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis*), as well as some lesser known fiction. And, we have been privileged to entertain one local author each year to come and discuss the work we read as a “special event.”

The group meets during the academic year, during the fall and spring semesters. We meet in the library four times a semester on Sundays, from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m., so that we can honor the Sabbath day of Judaism and meet after church for Christians. I provide light snacks, coffee, tea, and water for each session. In the case of a special author event, where we open the participation to include non-book group members, we will cater, and often it will be Kosher.

At the very beginning, we put an ad promoting the book group in the free neighborhood newspaper and in the larger local paper. We have occasionally piggy-backed on the Jewish Studies programming ads that have gone in the *Jewish Journal*, a large, well known Jewish newspaper. In addition to this, we have had a couple of articles written about us in the campus newspaper. After moving into the new William H. Hannon Library in the fall of 2009, we have used the university’s event calendar, our library’s blog, social media, and word of mouth to publicize the group.

### **Collaborations**

We are very fortunate to have two public libraries very close to campus, which we approached when we were applying for the grant. As partners, they agreed to help publicize our book group by allowing us to put up flyers. From the grant funding, we purchased enough books for each attendee, and those books were often delivered to the closest library where they could be picked up to read. Additionally, with the grant funds, we purchased and donated copies of each of the books in the series to each public library,

making the books more widely accessible within the Los Angeles Public Library system.

The Jewish Studies program at LMU has grown steadily over the years, and the library collaborates with that program in a couple of ways. First, we share mailing lists. The Jewish book group's list has grown to more than 300 people. As we are informing our members of our own meetings, by adding them to the Jewish Studies mailing list, we are also giving them access to the variety of lectures,

the Annual Kristallnacht Commemoration, author events, and much more throughout the year—all sponsored by that academic program. Our book group members have eagerly participated in many of these events, increasing

the awareness of Jewish Studies at LMU, and many of the people on their mailing list have come to our Jewish Book group.

Second, the Jewish Studies program is an interdisciplinary program that pulls faculty from across the curriculum, giving us a pool from which to invite faculty from a variety of disciplines to lead our discussions. Holli Levitsky, director of the Jewish Studies program, has been an invaluable asset in suggesting faculty as potential book group discussion leaders, including faculty from Art, English, History, Film, and Sociology. This format has given the faculty a new and eager audience that they may never have reached, while the attendees are appreciative of our faculty's depth of knowledge and experience.

As the neighborhood surrounding the LMU campus has changed, so has the book group, allowing us to form new partnerships.

Two of the longtime book group members signed up for a new Jewish senior living residence community being built near the LMU campus. Looking for activities to attract people to the residence community, the marketing director asked them what kind of events in the neighborhood they enjoyed, and they informed her about our Jewish book discussion group. We have joined forces, promoting not only the book group, but also inviting the 175 seniors in the neighborhood

to the many activities offered by the Jewish Studies department and to the campus at large.

Over the years, the members of the book group have become like a family. When one of the participants died a few

years ago, a friend of the deceased donated money to the library's Special Collections department, which was used to purchase a book in her name.

While discussing *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* by Farideh Goldin, the faculty leading the discussion on the book, mentioned that she was curating an exhibit on Iranian Jews at UCLA's Fowler Museum and offered to give us a personal tour when the exhibit opened. A group of a dozen or so book group members met and attended the tour.

### Assessment

At the five year mark, I sent out a short survey. Many of the comments written in the survey revealed the appreciation for the group, for the university's flexibility, and for the opportunity to continue learn-



The Jewish Book group visits the Fowler Museum at UCLA for a personal tour of "Light & Shadows: The Story of the Iranian Jews."

ing. I include some of the comments from the survey:

I am a member of another Book Club where all the members are Jewish so it was all the more interesting to me to be able to discuss books with people from religious backgrounds other than my own.

Having facilitators with relevant backgrounds is so helpful in understanding the book. It's going back to school with no homework just the enjoyment of books and learning.

I was not expecting a Jewish book group at a Jesuit College.

. . . Not only have I read some of the books but I've shared the list with friends . . . I think the group adds a wonderful dimension to the LMU community."

As noted in the Hannon Library *Year in Review 2008-2009*:

The series has been a fabulous experience for the Jewish Studies minor program, for the library, and for the participants. The Jewish Studies Program has been introduced to a new, interested group who attend their many events on campus throughout the year; people came into the Von der Ahe Library for the first time, even though they have lived just blocks away; and the group itself bonded into a small family of dedicated readers.

This was an accurate assessment back in 2009, and it still remains true in 2015. The book group is alive and living at Loyola Marymount University. I urge you to be creative and use it on your campus also.

## Notes

1. Loyola Marymount University, "Jewish

Studies Program Celebrates Successful First Year," *The Buzz: University News* (Summer 2008).

2. See [www.ala.org/programming/Itai/Itaijewishlit](http://www.ala.org/programming/Itai/Itaijewishlit).

## Additional reading

Goldberg, Martin. 2012. "Extracurricular reading: creating and sustaining on campus book clubs." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* no. 3: 231. Academic OneFile, EBSCOhost (accessed October 9, 2014).

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Fajardo, Anika. 2010. "Book Clubs: Not Just for Public libraries." *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 17, no. 1: 65-69. Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed October 9, 2014). *zz*

## ACRL-Choice webinars

The ACRL-Choice webinar program connects academic and research librarians with content and service providers, publishers, and other experts. Upcoming topics include:

Information Literacy and Teaching Strategies (June 10, 2015—sponsored by World Bank)

A Dynamic Approach to Digital Resource Development (June 18, 2015—sponsored by Oxford University Press)

Watch for more ACRL-Choice webinars over the summer.

Additional information on the program, along with registration links and an archive of past webinar recordings, is available on the Choice website at [www.choice360.org/acrl-choice-webinars/events](http://www.choice360.org/acrl-choice-webinars/events).