

# **THE BOOK CLUB PLAY**

**By Karen Zacarías**

The United States of America circa now, AD  
A living room  
This play is stylized like a film documentary.

The characters know that they are being filmed but forget sometimes.

Names of the experts, 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.**

**THIS PLAY CAN BE DONE WITH 6 or 7 ACTORS.**

If you are using 6 actors and doubling for the pundits, then the costume changes for the pundits should be fast and minimal (1-2 articles at most). Pace and flow is vital for this play. If you are using a 7<sup>th</sup> actor for all the Pundits...then a fuller transformation can occur. The seventh actor **MUST** play all the PUNDIT roles: female and male.

**OTHER:** The Book Club Play is as much about connection as it is about books. Theater patrons could write their favorite book on an adhesive name-tag as they walk into the theater, 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.

**A PLAY FOR SIX OR SEVEN or TWELVE ACTORS**  
(but I prefer the theatricality of 6)

**MEMBERS OF THE BOOK CLUB:**

**ANA:** (White or Latina Female, 30's) Pronounced "Ah-nuh" Beautiful. Charming. Smart. Accomplished. Organized. A columnist for a Daily paper. The Mother Bee. Her grace masks a need to control.

**ROB:** (White Male, 30's) Her golden-boy handsome charismatic under-achiever husband who is starting to search for meaning. Met in College. Upper Crust background.

**WILL:** (White or Asian Male, 30's) ROB's conservative, well read, well dressed, disciplined college roommate. Ana's former boyfriend. History buff. Unmarried.

**JEN:** (White Female, 30's) 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:** (African-American Female, 20's) 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:** (White, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Jewish, -30's) 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 (Male or Female actor):** Plays all five PUNDITS: SAM WAL-MART GUY, FRANK SECRET SERVICE AGENT, ELSA-JADED LITERARY AGENT, MRS. SIMPSON- SKY DIVER, CARL-INMATE BOOK DEALER-

If you choose to have doubling and only use six actors : the PUNDITS can be played by the following characters with minimal costume changes.

**ELSA-JADED LITERARY AGENT- played by JEN**

**FRANK- SECRET SERVICE AGENT- played by WILL**

**SAM-WALMART GUY- Played by ROB**

**CARL- INMATE BOOK DEALER- Played by ALEX**

**MRS. SIMPSON-Played by LILY**

**THE BOOK CLUB PLAY**  
**ACT I**

**TITLE PROJECTION ON SCREEN:**

SPOTLIGHT: ANA SMITH (name flashes on screen)

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 16 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.

I

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

WILL

I simply adore books. I seriously considered getting a Masters 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.

TITLE FLASHES ON SCREEN:

**MOBY DICK by Herman Melville**

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

ANA (looking at her watch)

OK. People. Places! Places! It's almost time.5-4-3-2 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 and 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 III. 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

Brook Brother's 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

(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 7pm-to midnight its records everything from here to here.

JEN

Really?

ANA

Yes. Jen. 7pm. 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 and 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

(JEN is madly reading a beat up soft cover. She 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 on to 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 and 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  
(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.

(LILY absorbs the fact, the room)

LILY  
Oh Will, I'm sorry. (Sees the camera) I am so sorry. I just -

ROB  
Lily, why would you think Will is gay?

LILY  
Ah...I don't... know... (LILY looks around for help. JEN looks down at her hands).

WILL  
Is it the way I dress?

LILY

No. That's- not-

ANA  
I love the way you dress, Will.

LILY  
It's very elegant.

WILL  
Is it my voice?

LILY  
Not at all!

ROB  
You have a total guy voice, Will.

WILL  
Or my love of literature-or musical theater-?

LILY  
Nooooo!

ANA  
Will, I'm sure Lily meant nothing of the sort.

LILY  
Ana is right. And besides, everyone knows gay is cool. Very cool.

WILL  
Not one of us is disparaging Gayness in any form.  
I'm just curious what made you think I was gay.

LILY  
Oh, I don't know what made me say that...Maybe it's because you  
are almost 40 years...young! and unmarried and I assumed...

WILL  
Oh, so do you think Jen's gay too?

LILY  
No!

WILL  
So Jen's not cool enough to be gay?

LILY  
That's not what I meant at all

JEN  
Hey! I'll have you know, I kissed a girl my sophomore year of college.

ROB and WILL (Look at LILY)  
Really?

LILY  
Who didn't!

ROB and WILL  
Really?  
(ROB AND WILL TURN hopefully to hear the same thing from ANA)

ANA  
Lily, Will was my first real kiss.

LILY  
Oh! Really?

WILL  
Freshman year. We were each other's first real love.

ANA  
Long walks by the river, picnics in the park,

WILL  
We kissed under the elms.

ANA  
We did.

WILL  
Beautiful Ana was all mine, until this handsome bastard stole her away and broke my heart. Right, buddy?

ROB  
Right.

ANA  
Rob and I fell for one another during crew practice.

ROB  
Ana was my coxswain.

ANA  
Something about the way Rob rowed really... rocked my boat.

ROB  
All I had to do was look at Ana's mouth... opening and closing,  
telling...me... what to do.

WILL  
They tried to hide it from me. Until I walked in on them in the heat  
of love-making!

ANA  
Oh God! I was mortified.

ROB  
Will was so upset. He screamed at us, then threw a book at me.

WILL  
PARADISE LOST by Milton.

ROB  
In hardback. It knocked me out.

WILL  
And then I turned to run for help and broke my nose against the  
door.

ANA  
Things were so intense and passionate between us back then.  
We all found each other at the hospital, hurt and bruised, and I wept  
for the pain I caused these two wonderful men...whose friendship  
was torn apart because they both loved me. I vowed to myself that I  
would bring us back together by building something strong and  
beautiful which became our Book Club. And my men agreed.

WILL  
(beat) I thought Book Club was my idea.

ANA  
No, it was my idea.

WILL

Oh, because I thought-

ANA

Will, it was my idea that I shared with you, my Book Lover!

WILL

(Flattered) Oh, Ana.

LILY

How inspiring! After all that heartbreak, you are all still friends.

JEN

It's a pretty amazing love story, huh?

ROB

Ana and I got married. Will was the Best Man

WILL

At their ceremony, I read a gorgeous excerpt of PARADISE LOST.

LILY

Who would have thought Moby Dick would bring out so much personal revelation?

ANA (From the end of the book)

“Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but un-conquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee, thou damned whale!”

(People clap)

WILL

God, I love Book Club!

ANA

Now honey, don't you wish you had read the book?

ROB

Maybe if I got to pick something I liked.

WILL

Ana has been taking your turn for the past five years, Rob.

ANA

Oh honey, I'm sorry! I thought you liked it that way.

ROB  
I did. But I think I would like to take my turn back now.

ANA  
Oh Rob! Really? (Hugs him)

WILL  
What do you want to read, buddy?

ROB  
Something fun and exciting.

JEN  
Can I suggest a new rule that it be less than 400 pages?

ROB  
Absolutely!

ANA  
It will be a window into your soul, Rob.

LILY  
Rob, just pick a book and we will all read it with you.

ROB  
Right now? I don't know what to pick right now!

ANA  
Listen, honey. Jen has already selected her book for the next meeting, right?

JEN  
THE AGE OF INNOCENCE by Edith Wharton. An American classic set in 1870's New York. 278 pages.

LILY  
Nice choice, Jen!

WILL  
Rob, that gives you two weeks to choose your book. And then we will all read yours. OK?

ROB  
OK! Jen, I promise I'll read your book too.

ANA  
We'll see...

JEN  
That would be great!

LILY  
Goodnight everyone. Thank you. The dip was great.

ANA  
Don't mention it.

LILY  
Again, Will. I'm sorry for my assumption about you.

WILL  
Worry not, dear Lily. As you know, you can't judge a book by its cover.

LILY  
I'll say.

WILL  
You of all people should know that!

(Beat. The whole room freezes)

LILY  
Oh- Why? Because I'm... from Akron Ohio?

WILL  
No. No. Yes! But...I love...Akron Ohio.

LILY  
Me too! Some of my best friends are "Akron-Americans".

WILL  
Oh, Lily...I'm sorry. I just put my foot in my mouth.

LILY  
Will, I did the exact same thing too. And I'm sorry as well. (They Hug) Goodnight, Will.

WILL  
Good night Lily!

JENNY

Will, can I have a ride?

WILL

Did you lose your keys again?

JEN

They're not lost. They're just not with me.

WILL

C'mon then! Thanks for everything, everybody. Bye, Ana, my love.

JEN

Thanks! Bye everyone!

(Everyone dashes out. LILY looks at ANA and ROB )

ANA

Lily, that hug between you and Will is what Book Club is all about.

LILY

I'm sorry, I just really thought Will was Gay!

ANA

Lily, I didn't want to embarrass Will, but the discomfort you sense from him is because he is still in love with me.

LILY

Omigoodness.

ANA

Rob and I have discussed it...

ROB

We have.

ANA

And there's nothing we can do but try to make Will feel as happy and comfortable as we can.

LILY

It's a testament to your friendship that Book Club works as well as it does.

ANA

Oh Lily. I see so much of myself in you. You are a great writer,  
...and you're already so connected to the pulse of this city! You are  
heading straight for the top!

LILY

(Laughs) I don't know about that. But thank you for your help and  
support. Goodnight Ana. Goodnight Rob

ROB

Goodnight, Lily. (LILY leaves)

Well, that went well!

ANA

Oh, I really hope so...

ROB

Your dip was great.

ANA

Thanks...but...I just... (she looks at the camera lowers her voice)  
Oh forget it.

ROB

Is it because of the camera?

ANA

I'm sure Lars will edit this out.

ROB

OK. Then.

ANA

I mean "That Sperm whale " joke, Rob? Was that necessary?

ROB

Jen laughed!

ANA

And Lily's assumption about Will. And Jen arriving late. And Will  
offending Lily! Rob, what are the Danes going to think about us  
when they see that?!

ROB

You said we should be ourselves.

ANA  
I mean “our better selves.”

ROB  
Our better selves?

ANA  
Book Club is about elevating our conversation, our thoughts, our souls through great literature. And being brave and trying new things and allowing the world to see how reading improves our lives. This documentary means a lot to me.

ROB  
Is that why you told everybody, in front of the camera, that I was a disappointment?

ANA  
What? When? I would never say that about you!

ROB  
After I said I would read THE AGE OF INNOCENCE- You said: “We’ll see...”

ANA  
Rob, I love you, but why do you come to Book Club and never read the books!? You are missing the whole point!

ROB  
I think the books are just an excuse to hang out, eat, and be...people.

ANA  
Yes, but the best people you can be!!! (Beat) Sorry, honey. It’s really my problem not yours. I just need to be a stronger me and make my peace with it.

ROB  
Ana, you wait and see! I am going to read THE AGE OF INNOCENCE if it’s the last thing I do.

(ROB storms off)

(LIGHTS Shift)