

How to Read a Book

by Monica Wood

Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:

How to Read a Book by Monica Wood

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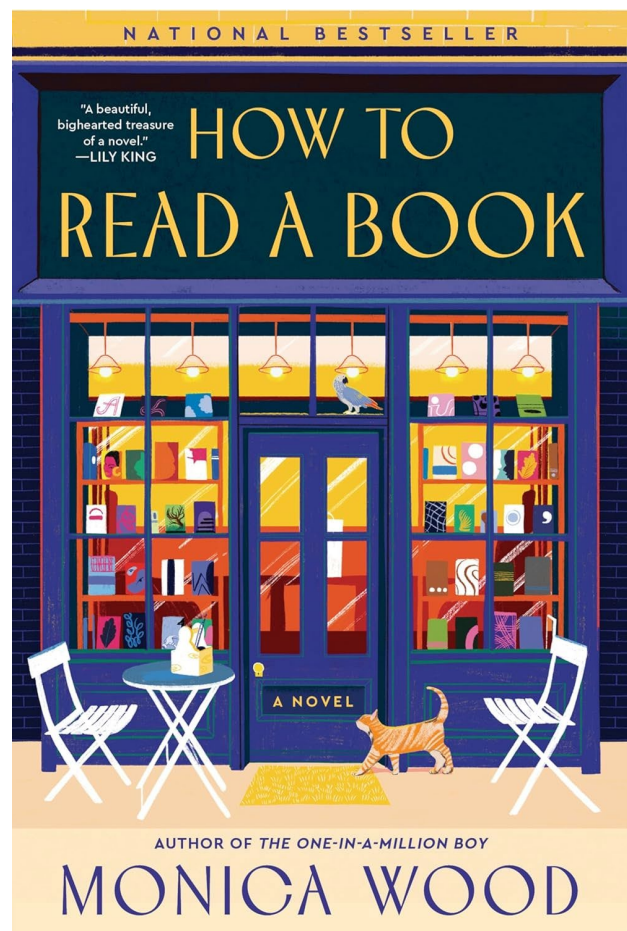
Book summary

Violet Powell, a twenty-two-year-old from rural Abbott Falls, Maine, is being released from prison after serving twenty-two months for a drunk-driving crash that killed a local kindergarten teacher.

Harriet Larson, a retired English teacher who runs the prison book club, is facing the unsettling prospect of an empty nest.

Frank Daigle, a retired machinist, hasn't yet come to grips with the complications of his marriage to the woman Violet killed.

When the three encounter each other one morning in a bookstore in Portland- Violet to buy the novel she was reading in the prison book club before her release, Harriet to choose the next title for the women who remain, and Frank to





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dispatch his duties as the store handyman-their lives begin to intersect in transformative ways.

How to Read a Book is an unsparingly honest and profoundly hopeful story about letting go of guilt, seizing second chances, and the power of books to change our lives. With the heart, wit, grace, and depth of understanding that has characterized her work, Monica Wood illuminates the decisions that define a life and the kindnesses that make life worth living.

Source: <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/how-to-read-a-book-monica-wood?variant=41107239469090>

Meet the Author

Monica Wood is a novelist, memoirist, and playwright; the 2024 recipient of the Sara Josepha Hale award for excellence in New England literary arts; the 2019 recipient of the Maine Humanities Council Carlson Prize for contributions to the public humanities; and the 2016 recipient of the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance Distinguished Achievement Award for contributions to the literary arts. She lives in Portland, Maine, with her husband, Dan Abbott, and their cat, Susie.



Source: <https://www.monicaewood.com/about.html>



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Discussion Questions

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. 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?
7. 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?
8. How do you explain Dr. Petrov’s overwhelming influence on Violet? What does she need that he provides?



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9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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?

Source: <https://b0f646cfbd7462424f7a-f9758a43fb7c33cc8adda0fd36101899.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/reading-guides/RG-9780063243675.pdf>

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Recipes

Easy Spanish Tortilla Casserole

- 2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes (about 6 medium), peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 medium yellow onion, thinly sliced
- 2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for the baking dish
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 12 large eggs
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 cup whole or 2% milk
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped chives



Arrange a rack in the middle of the oven and heat to 375°F. Coat a 9x13-inch baking dish with a thin layer of olive oil; set aside.

Place the potatoes, onion, oil, garlic powder, 1/2 teaspoon of the salt, and pepper in a large bowl and toss to evenly combine. Transfer to the prepared baking dish and spread into an even layer. Bake until the potatoes are almost fork-tender, about 20 minutes.

Whisk the eggs in a large bowl until the whites and yolks are completely mixed and the eggs are a bit frothy. Add the sour cream, milk, garlic, and remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt, and whisk to combine. Pour over the potatoes.



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Bake until the top is light golden-brown and a knife inserted in the middle comes out clean, about 35 minutes. Let cool for 5 minutes before sprinkling with the chives and serving warm or at room temperature.

RECIPE NOTES

Storage: Leftovers will keep for up to 4 days stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

Source: <https://www.thekitchn.com/recipe-easy-spanish-tortilla-casserole-254830>

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Cranberry ginger fizz mocktail

- 16 oz Ginger Beer
- 8 oz Cranberry Juice unsweetened*
- 8 oz Fresh Orange Juice

Fill your glass with ice and pour in the ginger beer.

Add in your cranberry and orange juice.

Stir, serve with garnishes and enjoy!

Serves 4

NOTES

You don't need any fancy garnishes to make this delicious mocktail, just a nice orange slice and you are good. But it can be fun to make them more festive for the holidays. I used dehydrated oranges and candied cranberries and rosemary for these photos. For the candied garnishes, I just dipped them in a simple syrup and let them dry (they are still sticky) before rolling them in sugar. For dehydrated oranges, slice them really thin, lay them on parchment and bake at 200 F for 3 hours, they should be dry.



Source: <https://thebetteredblondie.com/cranberry-ginger-fizz-mocktail/>

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