

# Book Talks

## Promoting the Library and Creating Community

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**ABSTRACT** Book talks, however defined, have been programming staples in all types of libraries. In theological libraries, they tend to be focused on faculty authors, or perhaps members of the institutional community. The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, has thrown a wrench into how or if book talks are offered and has changed how these events are developed and implemented. In this session, three library directors discussed what book talks look like in their libraries and offered practical suggestions for building similar programming. This included discussion of how book talks contribute to institutional missions and goals, and how they demonstrate value.

### INTRODUCTION

Suzanne Estelle-Holmer (Yale University), Amy Limpitlaw (Boston University), and Michelle Spomer (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) work at different theological schools. They discovered that each of their libraries were including some sort of book talks (hosting an author who speaks about their research and/or publications) in their library programming. While there are many similarities between the three programs, there are also quite a few differences in how each library plans for and implements these events.

It is the belief of all three presenters that almost any library can develop and implement book talks in some form. Whatever the library budget, staff size, or space available, there is likely some combination of time and resources that would be conducive for a book talk — or several! Statistics for each of the presenters' institutions might help you envision your own book talks:

### **Yale Divinity School**

- FTE: 274
- Number of Faculty: 43
- Number of Library Staff: 10
- Degrees Offered: MDiv, MAR, STM

### **Boston University School of Theology**

- FTE: 314
- Number of Faculty: 31
- Number of Library Staff: 5
- Degrees Offered: MDiv, MTS, MSM, MARPL, STM, DMin, PhD

### **Pittsburgh Theological Seminary**

- FTE: 185
- Number of Faculty: 16
- Number of Library Staff: 6
- Degrees Offered: MDiv, MAPS, MTS, DMin

Each presenter took turns answering seven questions about the book talks at their institutions:

1. When and why did you start having book talks? Do you collaborate with anyone?
2. Who is the audience at your book talks? Who are the speakers and what do they write?
3. How do you promote book talks? Do attendees need to register?
4. Are your book talks in-person, online, or both? If in-person, what space(s) do you use? What kind of setup is there (chairs, refreshments, technology)? If online/hybrid, are they recorded and posted somewhere?
5. What is the format of your book talks?
6. Are there ways that you link library resources to your book talks?
7. What tips do you have for those who want to start having book talks?

Following the summary of panelist responses are a book talk planning worksheet (Appendix 1) as well as a list of online resources (Appendix 2).

## **QUESTION 1: WHEN AND WHY DID YOU START HAVING BOOK TALKS? DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH ANYONE?**

*Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

I must admit from the outset that I am the novice on the panel, having organized only one book talk. However, this one event was tremendously successful with over fifty participants, so I learned a great deal from the experience. One reason for the lack of library book talks is that Yale Divinity School (YDS) is a very book-rich environment, with an annual all-school read, a faculty book party, and other book-related events. It was difficult for library to get a foot inside the door, until we discovered that our alumni are an untapped group of talented authors. YDS has incredible alumni who go on to write books in many different spheres of knowledge and influence. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, alumni visiting the library would often approach me, asking if they could give a book talk in our iconic Day Missions Room. I began planning an alumni book talk series in 2019, which never got off the ground because of the lockdown. In the Fall of 2022 things began to open up and we held our first book talk during the annual alumni convocation. I worked closely with the YDS Alumni Relations Office, which embraced the idea as a way to build stronger relationships between alumni and current students. We look forward to future collaboration with an alumni book series in the fall of 2023.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

To answer this question for the BU Theology Library, first I need to clarify that unlike Suzanne and Michelle, the events we hold at our library aren't technically "book talks" — although the initial idea came from the idea of having book groups. What emerged for us was a series of events focused on a faculty member's (or other community member's) research, with a specific focus for the conversation on either an article or a chapter from a book.

In 2014, my staff and I were trying to think of some kind of events we could offer for Theological Libraries month in October. One of our staff, Stacey Duran, who is our Instruction and Collection Development Librarian, came up with the idea of having something like a book group meeting, where people have the opportunity to read something and discuss it. We first discussed the idea of an entire book. However, we decided that few people would have the time to read an entire book. Then we decided that we would select and provide a

single chapter or article, which would be the focus for the discussion. And though originally we thought about doing one of these each week in October that year, that seemed like a little bit too much work and not likely to get much attendance, so we opted for a monthly format. We offered these events intermittently over the years. (Probably we were most consistent in the first few years.) Initially, we only had faculty authors, but we expanded the talks to include other members of the community including some of our doctoral students. The name of these events also changed over the years: first we called these “Faculty-Author Roundtable Discussions” then after we broadened them to include not only faculty authors but other members of the community, we titled them “STH Library Talk Series.” During the first year of COVID-19 we stopped hosting these events. When we resumed holding them in the Spring of 2022, we renamed the series “Library Conversations: Research and Scholarship at the School of Theology.”

### *Michelle Spomer*

Though the format was quite different, book talks existed at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (PTS) before I arrived as library director in 2016. From what I understand, these consisted of a group of faculty giving very brief (ten minutes or so) talks about their most recently published books during the PTS Alumnae/i Days annual event. The faculty would speak one after the other, and then attendees could purchase the books and get them signed.

Due to the renovation of Barbour Library, we didn’t have any book talks until 2019. My reasons for having book talks were manifold: (1) the library and library staff were a bit siloed from the rest of campus, so book talks would be a way to connect with the PTS community; (2) I wanted to demonstrate that the library wasn’t just a collection in a beautiful, renovated building, but also that it also had a strong library program; and (3) I wanted to connect our library users with the collection in a different way. Another reason to have book talks manifested after our first book talk in February of 2019: it turned out to be a great way to collaborate with another department (the writing center).

Dr. Shan Overton (Director of the Center for Writing and Learning Support) and I began to meet to discuss how we could “combine forces” and develop book talks into something a bit more than faculty lectures outside of the classroom. Dr. Overton brought her writing expertise, author connections, and interview skills to the table, and the library provided space and connections to library resources.

## QUESTION 2: WHO IS THE AUDIENCE AT YOUR BOOK TALKS? WHO ARE THE SPEAKERS AND WHAT DO THEY WRITE?

### *Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

The audience has primarily been alumni, students, and staff. Our first author was Dr. Alisha Lola Jones, a professor of Musicology at the University of Cambridge (UK), specializing in Black Gospel and Pentecostal musical performance. My next author will be a YDS alum, originally from Poland and now a UCC pastor in Massachusetts. His first major book is a study of the Reformed Church in Poland, published by Brill. I am also recruiting authors who have written about clergy experiences with mental health, and issues of practical ministry. Ideally, I would like to host a book talk series that represents a variety of topics and distinct kinds of writing — both academic and popular.

### *Amy Limpitlaw*

The audience is any member of the seminary community: faculty, staff, students. The speakers — or rather, conversation partners — are usually faculty members, but they can be anyone in the community who has written something interesting, regardless of whether they are a faculty member, a staff member, or a student.

### *Michelle Spomer*

The audience for our book talks is pretty much anyone who registers, whether they are faculty, staff, students, alums, seminary community members, board members, local clergy, or members of the general public.

We have three book talk series: (1) the Faculty Series; (2) the PTS Community Series (this includes PTS staff and anyone related to the seminary, such as alums); and (3) the Guest Speaker Series (authors outside the PTS community). Examples for each category include:

- **Faculty Series:** Dr. Kimberly Russaw, *Revisiting Rahab: Another Look at the Woman of Jericho*
- **PTS Community Series:** Christina Kukuk (alum), *Loving What Doesn't Last: An Adorations of the Body*
- **Guest Speaker Series:** Andrew Nagy-Benson and Andrea Lloyd, *Letters from the Ecotone: Ecology, Theology, and Climate Change*

### **QUESTION 3: HOW DO YOU PROMOTE BOOK TALKS? DO ATTENDEES NEED TO REGISTER?**

*Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

Promotion of our book talks is primarily through email and other alumni-oriented announcements. Last year we enrolled in Yale's Yale-Connect, a platform for campus and student organizations. We have experimented using it as our major vehicle for promoting library activities and services. Although we ask students to register for programs, it is not mandatory, and there is no guarantee that they will attend. I also recommend using social media, especially for alumni book talks.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

One of my staff members creates a flyer for the event which we put on our library's web site, both on a page for the event but also on a revolving banner we have on our homepage called "Library Highlights." The banner links to a page for the event. We also advertise it on our social media feeds: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. We put the event on the school's calendar so that it automatically gets put on the school's web site. We also submit the flyer to be put on LCD screens that are located in various corridors of the school, and it also gets announced in a weekly email sent to the community called "Collegium." Initially, we did try putting up paper flyers around the school, but once they implemented the LCD screens, that seemed redundant so we stopped doing that. However, there is a weekly free lunch on Wednesdays for the community, and we usually do print out some of the flyers and put them on the tables. Finally, since I'm always nervous that we're not going to get many attendees, I usually send an email to the community the day before reminding them of the event. We used to have people register, but more recently we stopped doing that.

*Michelle Spomer*

We promote book talks using several different methods and platforms: emails to the PTS community, social media, the library website, the PTS calendar on the seminary website, campus LED screens, and library signage.

Currently, book talk attendees need to register so that we can plan for refreshments if it's an in-person event, and also to send Zoom links to online attendees. (Some book talks are only online, and the

in-person books talks are live-streamed to online attendees.) I am planning to reconsider required registration. We may get more attendees if it weren't required.

**QUESTION 4: ARE YOUR BOOK TALKS IN-PERSON, ONLINE, OR BOTH? IF IN-PERSON, WHAT SPACE(S) DO YOU USE? WHAT KIND OF SETUP IS THERE (CHAIRS, REFRESHMENTS, TECHNOLOGY)? IF ONLINE/HYBRID, ARE THEY RECORDED AND POSTED SOMEWHERE?**

*Suzane Estelle-Holmer*

Yale's book talks are in-person. We had hoped to use space in the library, but the number of attendees necessitated that we move to a larger venue. The talk was moved to a nearby university conference center where there was auditorium seating and a full range of AV equipment. There are many requests to use the Day Missions Room for book talks. This space is a reading room reminiscent of a gentleman's library of the nineteenth century. Audio-visual equipment needs to be moved in along with additional seating. But it can be done! It does involve several hours of set-up time and custodial help. The first Divinity Library book talk was recorded and is archived in the library's AV library and on YDS' YouTube channel.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

They are in person. We did try doing it via Zoom in the Spring of 2022 when the school was operating in a hybrid mode, with classes being held both in-person and on Zoom. During that year, there were very few people on campus, but our library was open. We held that event with our new Dean as the guest. But now that the school is fully open as it was before the pandemic, we hold these events on-site in our library conference room. Scheduling is tricky, because we want to schedule them for a time when we'll get the most attendees, and nearly all times during the week there are classes scheduled, except Fridays — but then, because there are few classes on Fridays, few people actually come onto campus that day. This past year, we decided to hold them once a month immediately after the community lunch on Wednesdays, which is the same time we offer our instruction sessions. So, one Wednesday a month is always reserved for the Library Conversations event. And we try to make it even more enticing by providing refreshments. The communications department at the school sends someone to make a record-

ing, though it is not the whole event, just highlights which are posted both on our library's web page, on the school's web page, and on the school's YouTube site. These are usually about three to five minutes long.

### *Michelle Spomer*

We've been having one book talk per month but are scaling back a bit since there tends to be several other PTS events and activities that compete for attendees. We generally have our book talks on Fridays, from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. Classes meet Tuesday through Thursday, so we figured that this would be a relatively free time for folks, and early enough to still have the evening to do other things. This day and time also worked best with Dr. Overton's and library staff schedules. Of course, the downside of this is that for in-person book talks, many people just want to get home, and don't hang around for a book talk.

As mentioned previously, our book talks are either only online or hybrid (i.e., in-person and live-streamed). As you might imagine, online-only book talks served us well during the pandemic lockdown. When the campus reopened, we started having in-person book talks again, with the addition of live-streaming. Online-only book talks can be great for authors who live somewhere else and can't do the book talks in person. Our in-person book talks are great for those who like socializing, especially socializing with refreshments!

For our in-person book talks, we use a lounge on the main level that is close to the library entrance. We rearrange the lounge furniture and add folding chairs, and otherwise make it conducive for a book talk. This space affords us the ability to expand the number of folding chairs into the lobby area. We also have one or two tables for refreshments, which usually include sweet and savory appetizer plates ordered from a local grocery store, as well as a variety of drinks (including wine!). One of the Information Technology (IT) staff brings a video setup so that the book talk can be both live-streamed and recorded. He also monitors the Zoom chat and Q&A sections for us. The recording is posted on the book talk page in the PTS website within a day or two (see the link in the Online Resources section). It is also posted on the PTS YouTube channel.

For our online-only book talks, we coordinate with IT staff to provide the Zoom link for registrants. The author, as well as Dr. Overton and library staff, receive special host links that are set up by IT staff. Online-only book talks are also recorded and posted.



**QUESTION 5: WHAT IS THE FORMAT OF YOUR BOOK TALKS?**

*Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

So far, we do not have a fixed format. Two of the authors requested a conversation partner, in both cases a faculty member who was familiar with the book. This type of format is often more interesting to the audience than a purely lecture-style talk. However, this does lend an additional layer of complexity to the programming, as getting two people together at one time can be challenging. With our initial book talk, the professor was unavailable, so the author discussed the book on her own. Dr. Jones is a talented presenter and used film clips and other images to illustrate the issues she was examining in her work. Going forward, I want to arrange conversation partners for our authors.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

I serve as the host for the event, and in preparation I make sure first, to have some background information about the author – if it's a faculty member, who they are, what their title is, etc. I make sure to read the chapter or article and have questions prepared to get the conversation going. And I always start with the same question: tell us about your intellectual journey, how did you get interested in whatever the topic is? Although we provide the reading (again, a chapter from a book or an article) in advance, I don't assume that everyone attending has read it, so I try to provide a short summary. And then I move on to more specific questions related to the reading. I also always try to ask a question about the library, either, something along the lines of how has the library or the resources we provide helped you in your research and/or what can the library do to support your scholarship. The discussion is scheduled to last an hour, so after maybe 30 minutes of back and forth between the author and me, I open it up to the rest of the attendees for questions and comments.

*Michelle Spomer*

We essentially have four possible formats for our book talks: (1) in-person, lecture style; (2) in-person, conversation style; (3) online, lecture style; and (4) online, conversation style. "Lecture style" means that the author talks about their book for most of the time and allows time at the end for questions. These types of book talks are not as commonly done as conversation-style book talks and have been done

almost exclusively by PTS faculty. Our preferred format is conversation style, which means that Dr. Overton reads the book, and then has a conversation with author about it. We believe that students in particular like this format because it gives them the chance to experience their professors differently than they do in the classroom. Another wonderful thing about this format is that Dr. Overton asks the authors about their writing processes, so it's really a perfect collaboration between the writing center and the library.

### **QUESTION 6: ARE THERE WAYS THAT YOU LINK LIBRARY RESOURCES TO YOUR BOOK TALKS?**

*Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

We have an area at the entrance to the library where we display the book under discussion. We could also display related titles but have not done this yet. Going forward I hope to develop this more.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

Yes, we provide either a scan or a link to the article or book chapter being discussed. And I try to always ask the guest how the library and its resources have contributed to their scholarly work.

*Michelle Spomer*

Since one of the reasons we have book talks is to connect people with library resources, we developed a couple of ways to do this. The newly renovated library has several shelving endcaps throughout the collection that have book displays in them. We use one or more of these to display the book for the book talk and also add related books from the collection. The books in the displays can be checked out, and there are also bibliography handouts that library users can take with them.

Another way we connect book talk attendees to library resources is through our LibGuides. We are able to expand the number and types of resources by using these. Not only are physical books related to the book talk listed (with links into the catalog), but also journal articles and Internet resources. We feel that in addition to providing resources for book talk attendees, these guides also demonstrate the value of the library staff. See the link to our guides in the Online Resources section at the end.

## **QUESTION 7: WHAT TIPS DO YOU HAVE FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO START HAVING BOOK TALKS?**

*Suzanne Estelle-Holmer*

- Start small and do not make the programming overly complex. It can be difficult to communicate and coordinate with authors, especially if they are not a part of the school community.
- Take the time to talk with the author to describe the audience and the time allotted for the talk.
- In planning a series of book talks try to have a variety of books and authors to appeal to a wide audience.
- Do not hesitate to collaborate with other offices or units on campus. They may be able to offer AV services or refreshments for an event that serves their mission and constituencies.

*Amy Limpitlaw*

- Prepare – make sure you have good questions to ask that will get the conversation flowing, and make sure you've read the reading. But also, don't assume that members of your audience have actually read the reading. When I start asking about it, I try to kind of summarize the chapter/article a bit and link it to the author's larger research.
- I try to focus on inviting newer faculty or doctoral students.
- For in-person events, refreshments are helpful to draw people in.
- Make it easy for the author. Since I always begin with the same question — about their intellectual journey — I let them know that this is what we'll start with. At the same time, I try to make these events easy for them. When I make the invitation, I stress that they don't need to prepare anything. I also tell them that it is fine to invite their students.

*Michelle Spomer*

- Connect book talk programming with your institutional mission, strategic plan, and/or your library mission. This will show administrators that you are deliberate in supporting the goals of the institution, and it may come in handy if you need to ask for funding.

- On a related note, be sure to assess your book talks in some way. Simply recording the number of attendees is a very basic and easy type of assessment. We have been recording this statistic for each of our book talks, including our online ones. However, we think a more substantial type of assessment needs to be implemented. We will likely develop some sort of evaluation form that we ask attendees to fill out when the book talk is over (much like the ones that are used for instruction evaluation).
- Mainly for promotional purposes, plan book talks months in advance, if possible. Our communications staff generally want the full slate of book talks a few months before the first one happens.
- Be sure to take photos of your event. These can be used in planning more book talks and can also be added to the library and/or institutional website.
- Take some time to evaluate each book talk. You might want to develop an evaluation form that lists the details of the book talk (including refreshment quantities and cost), and what worked and didn't work.

## **APPENDIX 1: BOOK TALK PLANNING WORKSHEET**

Why have a book talk? How does this advance the library's and institution's mission?

Is there an opportunity for collaboration?

Who is the audience? What kind of authors/speakers will be sought?

How will the book talk be advertised/promoted? Will attendees need to register?

Will the book talk be in person, online, or both? If online, will it be recorded and posted? If in person, what will the setup be?

What will be the book talk format?

How will library resources be linked to the book talk?

How will the book talk be assessed?

## **APPENDIX 2: ONLINE RESOURCES**

### ***Boston University School of Theology***

- Trading Futures: Dr. Filipe Maia's Research and Latest Publication  
<https://youtu.be/HYL8V2gQmBk>
- Spiritual Seeking: Research and Vocational Discernment of Nicolette Manglos-Weber  
<https://youtu.be/cc3wwDLyOBE>
- Library Conversations: Research and Scholarship  
<https://www.bu.edu/sthlibrary/engage/sthlectureseries/>

### ***Yale Divinity School***

- YDS Library Book Talk with Dr. Alisha Lola Jones '07 M.Div.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBLYP1SR7zE>
- YDS Audio-Visual Collections  
<https://yaledivinitylibrary.aviaryplatform.com/>

### ***Pittsburgh Theological Seminary***

- Book Talk LibGuides  
[https://guides.pts.edu/sb.php?subject\\_id=200520](https://guides.pts.edu/sb.php?subject_id=200520)
- Seminary Hosts BookTalk Series  
<https://www.pts.edu/BookTalks>
- PTS YouTube Page  
<https://www.youtube.com/@pghseminary/videos>