

Book Discussion Kit #187

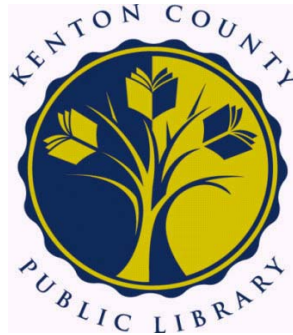
# Chocolat

by

## Joanne Harris

A book discussion manual provided by the  
Kenton County Public Library.

Please return this manual along with the rest  
of the materials provided in the book discussion kit.



502 Scott Street  
Covington, KY 41011  
(859) 962-4060  
<http://www.kentonlibrary.org>

## Book Description

Illuminating Peter Mayle's *South of France* with a touch of Laura Esquivel's magic realism, *Chocolat* is a timeless novel of a straitlaced village's awakening to joy and sensuality. In tiny Lansquenet, where nothing much has changed in a hundred years, beautiful newcomer Vianne Rocher and her exquisite chocolate shop arrive and instantly begin to play havoc with Lenten vows. Each box of luscious bonbons comes with a free gift: Vianne's uncanny perception of its buyer's private discontents and a clever, caring cure for them. Is she a witch? Soon the parish no longer cares, as it abandons itself to temptation, happiness, and a dramatic face-off between Easter solemnity and the pagan gaiety of a chocolate festival. *Chocolat*'s every page offers a description of chocolate to melt in the mouths of chocoholics, francophiles, armchair gourmets, cookbook readers, and lovers of passion everywhere. It's a must for anyone who craves an escapist read, and is a bewitching gift for any holiday.

## Editorial Reviews

### USA Today

Joanne Harris may have created the perfect diet book in her debut novel, *Chocolat*, a bittersweet confection that's light on plot but satisfying....The novel tries to be profound about life and death, but the pleasure comes from the food...delicious enough to satisfy any sweet tooth and spare you the calories of dessert.

### People Magazine

...[An] irresistible confection....explores the struggle between good and evil...but ultimately celebrates...indulgence.

### The New York Times Book Review

Magic abounds in Harris' novel....The gods of legend may dine well in their celestial palaces, but the true sorcery of cooking cannot take place unless the cook and the guests are mortal. This paradox of the human condition is surely one of the messages of Harris' book.

### Literary Review

This is a truly excellent book, one of the best it has been my pleasure to read in the line of duty for years. Joanne Harris achieves everything a novelist should aim for, with no sense of effort or striving...Harris's achievement is not only in her story, in her insight and humour and the wonderful picture of small-town life in rural France, but also in her writing...In short, this is what we call a rave review.

### Kirkus Reviews

A first novel that rather cloyingly describes the transformations that overtake the residents of a small French village when a mysterious stranger and her daughter arrive and open a chocolate shop. The townspeople of Lansquenet live in the present day, but the patterns of their lives were established long before they were born-and change very little from year to year. A hamlet straight out of Flaubert, Lansquenet is filled with busybodies who have nothing better to do with their days than spy on one another, until two new arrivals provide fresh grist for the mill. What inspired Vivianne Rocher to move to Lansquenet with her daughter Anouk and to open a chocolate boutique is never explained, but her effect on the populace is profound and immediate: the grim little town and its sniping inhabitants are transformed through the magic of Vivianne's confections into an almost surreal assembly of sensualists, each somehow discovering in bonbons the key to happiness. Elderly crones find themselves remembering long-forgotten loves; shy young couples work up the nerve to break the ice. Is this all the result of only chocolate? Or is some more sinister force at work? The local priest suspects the worst, and his suspicions are reinforced by his awareness that Vivianne opened her shop on Shrove Tuesday-and thus has been tempting the entire parish from its Lenten austerities for the past six weeks. Now, she has even announced plans for a "Chocolate Festival" to take place on Easter Sunday itself! Horrified, he hatches a plan to foil her festivities, but God does not always side with the just. Who will win the soul of the town? Premise, prose, and pace all march along capably, but they fail nevertheless to raise the whole above the debilities of heavy symbolism and excruciatingly precious plot.

## About the Author

**Joanne Harris**  
(1964-)

**Variant(s):** Joanne Michele Sylvie Harris

**Personal Information:** Full name, Joanne Michele Sylvie Harris; born March 7, 1964, in Barnsley, England; father a language teacher; mother also a language teacher; married Kevin Harris, 1989; children: Anouchka. **Education:** Catharine's College, Cambridge, B.A., 1984, M.A., 1987; University of Sheffield, postgraduate certificate of education, 1985. **Addresses:** Home: Huddersfield, England.

**Career:** Worked briefly as an accountant, c. 1985; teacher of French and German at a secondary school in Dewsbury, England, 1986-88; Leeds Grammar School, Leeds, England, teacher of modern languages, 1988-99; writer, 1999--.

**Awards:** Whitbread Prize nomination, novel category, Booksellers Association of Great Britain and Ireland, 2000.

### WRITINGS:

#### NOVELS

- *The Evil Seed*, Warner (London, England), 1992.
- *Sleep, Pale Sister*, Arrow (London, England), 1994.
- *Chocolat*, Viking (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Blackberry Wine*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Five Quarters of the Orange*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Coastliners*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Holy Fools*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Gentlemen and Players*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2006.

#### OTHER

- (With Fran Ward) *My French Kitchen: A Book of 120 Treasured Recipes*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Jigs and Reels: Stories*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2004.
- (With Fran Warde) *The French Market: More Recipes from a French Kitchen*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor to *Harpers and Queen* and *Woman's Weekly*.

**Media Adaptations:** The novel *Chocolat* was adapted by Robert Nelson Jacobs as a film of the same title, directed by Lasse Hallstrom, starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, released by Miramax Films in 2000. The novels *Chocolat* and *Coastliners* were adapted as audio books.

## "Sidelights"

The vampire novel *The Evil Seed* juxtaposes two narratives, one from 1948 and the other from the current day. In the 1948 narrative, Daniel Holmes, a scholar of pre-Raphaelite art at Cambridge, recounts his rescue of a beautiful young red-haired woman named Rosemary with whom he is instantly smitten, as is his best friend Robert. In the current-day narrative, Alice Farrell, a young artist, is asked by her ex-lover Joe to take in his new girlfriend, a beautiful red-head named Ginny. "As the stories unfold, the links between them become more and more apparent," reported Pauline Morgan in *Horror, Ghost, and Gothic Writers*. "Rosemary is dead. But Ginny is Rosemary. ... When Alice discovers Daniel's diary ... she begins to piece together the horror that hides behind Ginny's lies."

*Sleep, Pale Sister* is set in 1881 and tells the story of Henry Chester, an artist obsessed with two things, his acceptance into the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and his wife Effie, who has served as his model since she was a child. Chester embodies the hypocrisy of Victorian sexual mores, said Morgan: "On the one hand his wife must be pure, innocent, and submissive, having no sexual desires whatsoever, yet he can go weekly to a brothel and demand virtual children as his bed-partners." Chester's obsession with his wife's purity comes to be challenged from many quarters; by Moses Harper, who wants to have an affair with Effie, and more sinisterly by Fanny Miller, a brothel owner who holds Chester accountable for the death of her daughter Marta ten years before. Morgan wrote: "You can choose as to whether Marta's ghost has been hanging around waiting to possess a suitable host or if Fanny uses narcotics and mesmerism to shape Effie's behavior. The possibilities are deftly handled, the characters realistic, and the writing atmospheric."

In the novel *Chocolat*, Joanne Harris relates what happens when Vianne Rocher and her six-year-old daughter arrive in a small French town, Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, on the day of the Mardi Gras carnival, and set up shop. "So isolated is the place, it still rigorously maintains Lenten abstinences," reported *Booklist* contributor Mark Knoblauch. When Vianne opens a chocolate shop, the local priest sees her as the Devil's handmaiden, tempting his parishioners from the paths of righteousness. Father Reynaud is driven to the limits of his endurance when Vianne decides to arrange a festival of chocolate for Easter Sunday.

Vianne is no ordinary chocolatier; her roots as a sorceress go back to her mother, who, it is hinted, was a witch herself. Vianne is drawn to the town, and she creates magic in a saucepan for the local villagers. Her creations--Eastern journey, white rum truffle, Nipples of Venus--drive the villagers to distraction from their Lenten sacrifices and small-town ways of thinking. Although it is implied that Vianne has magic powers, the element of the supernatural is very subdued in the novel.

The novel interposes chapters from Vianne's viewpoint with chapters from Father Reynaud's, enabling the reader to see Vianne's desire to open the villagers hearts through pleasure, and Reynaud's growing obsession with what he considers the evil influence of the chocolatier. "Harris gives each of these characters an interior life," commented *New York Times Book Review* contributor Nancy Willard, "and shows both sides of the story--although Reynaud's does not make him any less of a villain."

On the whole, reviewers responded positively to the novel. Although the *Kirkus Reviews* contributor mentioned that "premise, prose, and pace all march along capably ... they fail nevertheless to raise the whole above the debilities of heavy symbolism and excruciatingly precious plot," Knoblauch was impressed with Harris's evocation of life in a small French town. Michael Jacobs writing in *USA Today* called the novel "delicious enough to satisfy any sweet tooth and spare you the calories of dessert."

Nancy Willard, writing for the *New York Times*, gave the book a lengthy, positive review: "Though we all know that witches live in gingerbread houses, who among us could resist the spell cast by the gingerbread house that appears in the window of Vianne's shop, 'with the detail piped on in silver and gold icing, roof tiles of Florentines studded with crystallized fruits, strange vines of icing and chocolate growing up the walls, marzipan birds singing in chocolate trees?'" Willard concluded that "Harris's description of the chocolate festival also describes the novel: 'It is an amazement of riches. ... Try me. Test me. Taste me.' Few readers will be able to resist."

In the novels that follow *Chocolat*, Harris uses similar food-related analogies and the ingredients of magic and mystery to whip up concoctions of suspense and intrigue, but her stories gradually move away from the culinary focus toward an increasing preoccupation with some darker elements of the human feast, and with the interplay of past and present, history and memory, magic and reality. In *Blackberry Wine*, the bouquet of an aged bottle of wine and the memory of a childhood mentor called Jackapple Joe inspire a young man to buy a dilapidated French vineyard, where he encounters mysterious neighbors, attempts to revive a flagging career as an author, and rediscovers the magic of his youth. In *Five Quarters of the Orange*, an elderly woman returns to the French village of her uneasy childhood, disguised by a pseudonym and armed with the journal she inherited from her mysterious and "disturbed" mother--an album containing a recipe collection full of encoded secrets spiced with magic. *Coastliners* also involves a reunion with the past, minus an obvious culinary metaphor, when a woman returns to the island home of her youth and attempts to restore her deteriorating village to prosperity in the face of coastal erosion, the encroachment of real estate development, and, of course, the mysteries of the past. *Holy Fools* seems to mark a departure, for it is set in a French convent in the year 1610, but, like Harris's other writings, the story involves people that are not who they seem to be, mysterious connections between past and present, secret and menacing agendas, and, as some reviewers have noted throughout Harris's work, a subterranean morality tale. The institutional setting of *Gentlemen and Players* is a remote British boys' school, but the tale is similar: a former student returns to the school under a false name with a secret objective: to exact revenge for past wrongs; in this case, the mystery is laced with mortal danger.

Harris's novels, as well as her short story collection *Jigs and Reels: Stories*, have evoked contrasting responses from her critics. For example, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor described *Coastliners* as "underwhelming" and stereotypical, while *Book* reviewer Beth Kephart described the novel as Harris's "best work yet;" *Gentlemen and Players* was characterized by *Spectator* contributor Andreas Campomar as "a brave, if ill-conceived, attempt at a difficult genre: the school novel as murder-mystery" with "a denouement [that] is far too fanciful to be believed," but to *Library Journal* critic Susan Clifford Braun, the novel is "intelligent, compelling, technically well crafter, and entertaining." In similar fashion, *Jigs and Reels* was alternately praised and castigated, but a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer offered an assessment of the story collection that seemed to echo several of Harris's other critics by suggesting: "this may dismay some old fans, but win her new ones."

[Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006.]

### **Suggested Questions for Discussion**

- To what extent is Reynaud the villain of the piece? Is it possible to understand or sympathize with the motivations and feelings behind his actions?
- Reynaud and Vianne seem to be natural enemies from the start, and yet they both have significant elements in common: a haunted past, a desire for acceptance. How do you think this affects their relationship?
- The preparation and eating of food is described in detail in many parts of the book. What is the significance of this, and what do the attitudes of the main characters towards food show about their personalities?
- The author uses the first-person narrative voice for both of her principal characters. Why do you feel she does this, and how effective is each in showing the character's attitudes and motivations?
- Vianne appears to other people as a strong and confident woman, but is secretly filled with fears and insecurities. To what extent do you think she has been strengthened or damaged by her relationship with her bohemian mother?
- The themes of moving on and settling down recur frequently in the book. Why do you think Vianne wants so badly to remain in the village? Do you think she eventually decides to stay?

## Successful Book Discussions

Here are some tips for leading a successful book discussion:

1. *Have a comfortable environment for your discussion.* Some groups meet in the same place monthly (a library meeting room or a church). Some groups like to rotate between their members' houses. In any case, make sure the location is conducive to quiet discussion.
2. *Pick a comfortable seating arrangement.* This is tougher than it sounds. Some groups will prefer to have tables in front of them for their books, notes, drinks, food, etc. Some groups would rather have an open circle with no tables. Try several arrangements.
3. *Have a designated leader.* It's nice to have someone who can bring control to a situation. As with any leader, diplomacy and good sense will be prerequisites for the job, but you might want to rotate the position around. Everybody has something useful to add to a group. Even the truly bad leaders teach us something, even if it's only to recognize *good* leadership.
4. *Choose books that challenge your group but that are within everyone's tolerances.* You might consider picking books that match a theme (mysteries, for example) or allowing each member to pick a book for each month. Some people like to have a year long plan of books, other people want to be surprised each month. It's really up to your group.
5. *Give everyone the chance to participate.* This doesn't mean that everyone *has* to participate. Just that the chance is there. Some groups will have a different leader for each book they discuss. Some will have the same leader but set time limits for the amount of time any one member can speak. Be aware that some members may simply want to come and listen.
6. *Prepare material beforehand.* The notebook that accompanied this kit contains much useful information. You could copy selections or all of the material for your group to hand out with the books. Often an author's life and experiences have great bearing on their writing. This might be a fun point of discussion. The materials also include reviews from standard sources. How did these differ from your group's opinion? A quick trip to the Library to look at other reviews and criticisms might also yield more insights.

## Book Discussion Group FAQs/Troubleshooting

*One of our members insists on talking too much. How do I get her to stop without being rude?*

Talking too much is rude in itself. You might have to be rude to make that point. Allowing anyone to dominate could threaten the existence of the group. Tactfully though, you can try to break into the monologue, agree with a point, and then quickly ask another question. Time limits for speaking could also be a solution. Another idea is a signal (holding up a hand) that everyone agrees upon as a sign that the person speaking should stop.

*How do I attract people to our group?*

Word of mouth is best, but flyers can also generate some interest. Sometimes pastors will make announcements about groups. If you decide to generate a flyer, advertising a specific book tends to be more effective than a general announcement about a book discussion. Groups always wax and wane. If you're disappointed in the numbers, just keep focusing on the quality.

*We just can't keep up our membership. How do I keep people in the group?*

People come to book discussion groups for different reasons. And they leave for many different reasons too. You shouldn't take it personally if folks come and go. You can, however, give people a better sense of belonging and continuity to make them stay. If people want, you can celebrate your members' birthmonths during your monthly meeting. Whenever possible, compare the book you're currently reading to past books. This tactic will sometimes lead people back to memories of past discussions and will give a sense of oral history for the group. Also...consider name tents to place before each member of your group. Sometimes it's something as simple as being unable to remember people's names that causes enough discomfort to keep a person away.

*No one wants to lead the discussion. What do we do?*

If you're willing to pay, there are people who will come and lead discussions for you. Check with a local bookstore. A better solution, though, might be to divide the duties. Maybe each person brings in one question for each meeting. Or... maybe one person could bring the snacks for one meeting and then lead the discussion at the next, with somebody else bringing the snacks, and so forth.

*How do we think of questions?*

This guide comes with some sample questions (some guides may not), but these might not fit your group. Questions are simply a device to get conversation started and directed. Maybe your group discusses the book fine without questions.

If questions are required, the best way to get them is from your own reading. It's the question "what happens next?" that keeps the pages turning. What are you wondering about that keeps you reading? Write that down. It's much harder to wait until the end of the book to write questions down. Do it as you go along. Reading reviews also yields questions and different opinions. Make your questions open-ended, conversational, thoughtful, and appropriate for your group. Try to write the question so that they don't imply opinions. "Wasn't Charles a terrible father?" is not quite as good as "What did you think of Charles' parenting skills?"

*People always complain about the choice of books. What do we do?*

Some of the best books to discuss are the ones that half of the group loved and the other half hated. "It's difference of opinion that makes horse races," said Mark Twain. But... if the discord over the choices starts to threaten the success of the group then you might have to take a new approach. Start with a book that everyone can generally agree was pretty well written, that made for lively discussion, that had an interesting plot, and that had a good ending. Ask your librarian to help you find books that are similar to this. Another way to get over discord is to use disagreement as a tool. Keep track of the books you read and the group's feelings about them. Take a vote: thumbs up or thumbs down. Go back through the list periodically to see if people change their minds. Often they will. Going through the list creates a nice sense of group continuity.

*How do we pick good books?*

You can ask your librarian for suggestions. Often, librarians have led groups themselves and will know a few titles that were particularly good for discussions. Books-on-tape are a great way to scan through books quickly to see if they are fitting for your group too. Remember that books that are great to read sometimes are not as good to discuss. If your group is willing, think of topics that you would like to discuss and then read a fiction book that focuses on that topic. And don't forget non-fiction! Maybe try a biography of John F. Kennedy or a travelogue of India or a book about environmental concerns. Test your group's stomach to see what it can handle.

## Other Formats

If you have a book club member with special needs or know of someone who might like to participate in a discussion but is not able to read standard print, please contact your library for information about other formats.

All people in the Greater Cincinnati area have access to a Talking Book Library. These Libraries are provided for people with visual problems that prevent them from reading. Eligible participants are mailed a free listening device for enjoying books in a specially recorded format. The books are mailed to the participant at no cost and can be returned by mail at no cost. Copies of all of the books available in the book discussion kits are also available in this format.

Other people you know may not be eligible for the Talking Book program but may still have special needs. Regular, unabridged recorded copies of some titles are available at your library. Please contact them to check on availability.

Some books are also available in large print. Check with your library.

Some libraries have special computers that can "read" a book to a person who has physical difficulties. Ask at your library for details.

Everyone enjoys sharing a book.