



Book Groups Unite!

Interview with
Book Group Expo
Founder

Ann Kent



Ann Kent speaking at
Book Group Expo

It

you love reading, and want a unique experience, Ann Kent has created the perfect event for you! Whether you are currently in a book group, want to start or join a book group, or just love events about books and the authors who write them, you'll enjoy my chat with Ann Kent, the founder of Book Group Expo.

Ann Kent never really thought about being in a book group. It wasn't that it was a bad idea—it had just never occurred to her. But when she said, "yes," and the

group started to meet, life just shifted. And that is when the adventure began.

When not focused on Book Group Expo, Ann is busy leading her boutique business consulting firm, working with small and mid-size companies on growth planning and implementation. Her firm, [KENT Consulting Group](#), works with companies that have a desire to grow—and depending upon the company, that can lead to a variety of deliverables. As their mission, KENT Consulting Group works to make good business better.

The creation of Book Group Expo is Ann's passion project and I'm excited to share our conversation about it!

Get comfortable and curl up with a steaming cup of tea, coffee, or hot cocoa (mine has tiny frothy marshmallows in it) and enjoy our chat...



WOW: Ann, I've always believed that for every book lover, there is always a beginning when a seed planted blossoms into a full bloom of passion. When did you first discover a passion for reading?

ANN: I have always been a reader—but maybe it is the type of reader that has evolved over the years. *Bel Canto* and *Blindness* are a far cry from *Nancy Drew* and *Cherry Ames*! My parents were huge proponents of reading when I was a child—especially my mom. So, I guess, it really is my mother's fault!

WOW: Now, you mentioned that you never initially considered yourself someone who would join a book group. How were you first introduced and what was the experience like for you?

ANN: When I emerged as a self-proclaimed refugee of corporate America about 5 years ago, I finally had some time to call my own. I was no longer traveling 4-5 days a week. A 50-hour work week felt like a part-time job! I started reading a few more books for pleasure instead all team building, leadership strategies, growth initiatives and such.

A friend asked me if I had ever thought about joining a book club. I recall very clearly saying, "No, Trace—I haven't." I expected that would be the end of the conversation. (smiles) It wasn't. Trace had friends and acquaintances in book clubs and reading groups and wanted to start one. It seemed easier to start one than to find one to join. And so we did. It is really my personal book group experience that was the impetus for book group expo.

"I have always been a reader—but maybe it is the type of reader that has evolved over the years..."

WOW: After becoming an avid book group member, what was at the heart of what inspired you to consider creating a conference that would bring book groups together?

ANN: I was intrigued by my own relationship with my book group. I would NEVER miss a gathering! I scheduled my business travel around when the group was meeting. On one hand, I thought it was crazy, but on the other, I simply found it interesting. Part of my "make-up" is really being an active observer—a bit of a social scientist in terms of why people do what they do. It is an attribute that has served me well in my business life, and here, it was creeping into my personal interactions as well. If I felt this way about my book group, did others feel similarly? I wanted to find out. So I did. There's a whole narrative that could be crafted on those 100+ conversations as well!

But where it all led was that I wanted to bring the book group experience—and the key elements of those experiences—out into a more public space. And that is exactly what Book Group Expo does.



"What makes our reading groups and book clubs so meaningful are the conversations and the interactions..."

WOW: I love how you've stepped up and taken action to make it happen! So many people come up with great ideas and never follow through, but you've created such an amazing event right from the start! Was it a challenge to gather support for your idea of establishing the Book Group Expo?

ANN: It is hard to give an idea legs, Annette. You are right. There are thousands of really spectacular possibilities in the world and most remain just that...possibilities. In the beginning, I had a hard time articulating just exactly what [Book Group Expo](#) would be. I had the vision in my mind's eye, but assigning words to the vision was hard. Since no one had created this exact sort of experience, I couldn't liken it to anything else. I could only describe what it would NOT be.

My friends were huge supporters. Other businesses and the publishing world, well—since I didn't want to create an experience for ten thousand participants, most didn't see the value of joining in. One of the very first publishers that came on board was [Unbridled Books](#). Fred Ramey and Caitlin Hamilton seemed to really get it right out of the gate. I appreciate that immensely. Amy Tan and Khaled Hosseini were also very willing to join us the first year. Having the two of them say YES really was the anchor I needed for industry credibility.

For Chapter One, there came a moment when I simply needed to commit to making it happen—sponsors or no sponsors. Tickets sold or no tickets sold. Vendors in the Marketplace or no vendors. And so I did. I knew that there was something pretty special that was emerging and I was committed to having people share in that experience.

Over time, others are starting to understand—but there is still work to be done!



"...there came a moment when I simply needed to commit to making it happen..."

(Ann at the Book Group Expo reception)

WOW: Kudos to you for making such a powerful commitment! There must have been so many things to consider when you started to put it together. When you began working through the details of how you wanted to structure the sessions, what was your inspiration?

ANN: It all goes back to the book group experience. What makes our reading groups and book clubs so meaningful are the conversations and the interactions. I knew from Day One that I wanted to honor that—maybe re-discover the salon days of Dorothy Parker or something. I did NOT want to have a panel talking at an audience. I wanted to have a community engaged in a conversation. And that is what our Literary Salons are—a topic-specific conversation that includes 3-4 authors, a moderator, and a room full of avid readers.

WOW: That sounds wonderful! It sounds like the interaction between authors and readers at the Book Group Expo would feel so much more accessible and intimate than the average book fair experience. How did the attendees respond to the informal salon setting?

ANN: The response from the participants—and the authors—has been overwhelmingly positive. The access is reciprocal. Writing is a very solitary activity. And most frequently, so is reading. Creating a space where authors can directly interact with an informed and engaged reader is just as meaningful as creating a space where an avid reader can reach out and connect in conversation with an author.

We have worked hard to have this more informal setting be successful. We need to coach and remind the authors to not read from their work, but engage in a conversation with the audience. It isn't comfortable for everyone. And we remind the audience to reach out to authors and ask informed questions as well.

Again, the feedback has been very, very positive. Since Chapter One, I have seen more groups working to replicate that sort of a model for their own events. They must have heard it was a good approach as well!



**"I did NOT want to have a panel talking at an audience.
I wanted to have a community engaged in a
conversation..."**

Kathi Goldmark and Amy Tan

Kathi and Amy (who usually share a stage with the Rock Bottom Reminders Band) had just as much fun acting in the skit as the audience had watching it.

Book Group Expo San Jose 2006

<http://www.bookgroupexpo.com/sj2006/photos.html>

WOW: BGE sounds like a fresh experience for the readers and the authors. But I have to ask, with so many incredible authors and great books out there, how do you go about choosing which authors to invite to participate in the salons?

ANN: It's a little bit art—and a little bit science. I already have nearly a hundred submissions for the next Chapter! Our focus is on topics and titles that would be of interest to a book club or a reading group. That's really the first layer. It doesn't mean that our audience doesn't read other titles—of course they do! But for Book

Group Expo, it's all about the book group.

We get submissions from publishers, from authors, and also recommendations from people who are a part of our Book Group Expo community. So, that is one of the first questions we ask ourselves after reading a submission. (Yes, we read them!) Is this something that a book group would likely choose to read? Once we address that need, then the next question is: How does the TOPIC of the book relate to Literary Salon topics we are considering? How can we bring in the content to enhance a conversation? And after that it is about working out the details.

Choosing is hard—we have many great titles from which to choose. We want a nice mix of those authors that are already known and those who have yet to be discovered. Book clubs and reading groups love to make a new discovery! We try not to let them down...

"I think the experience is a bit different for everyone depending upon what is important to them."

WOW: You've really come up with a solid process that puts the interest of the book groups first! Would you share with our readers some of the authors who have been featured at the two previous Book Group Expos?

ANN: As I noted earlier, Amy Tan and Khaled Hosseini were authors our first year out, and Khaled joined us last year as well when he was launching [A Thousand Splendid Suns](#). Sara Gruen ([Water for Elephants](#)), Kim Edwards ([The Memory Keeper's Daughter](#)), Dorothy Allison, Cara Black, Andrew Sean Greer, James Dalessandro, James D. Houston, ZZ Packer, Mary Roach, Thrity Umrigar, Norris Church Mailer, Janis Cooke Newman, Elizabeth Gilbert, Caroline See, Terri Jentz, Sara Davidson—and that is just a few of the 150+ who have joined us! Very diverse. And absolutely delightful.

WOW: With the salons being topic-specific, what are some examples of sessions from which an attendee could choose?

ANN: It's different every year—there will always be a few book group-specific salons such as keeping your group vital, discussing the classics—things like that. Topics have related to personal issues, politics, overcoming adversity, laughter—pretty eclectic! Other topics have included: Family Challenges: Tales of Affliction and Healing; Wickedly Funny: Humor as the Spark for Serious Debate; The West is History!: Tales of Struggle and Renewal in California; Where Do You Get Your Ideas: Exploring the Writer's (and the Reader's) Imagination; Yadda, Yadda, Yoda: Learning the Art of Interpretation; Get Out Your Hankies: Memoirs of Hope and Redemption.

We really listen to the feedback from attendees both at the large events and then

comments we receive online. Bringing the authors and topics together can be tough—and then we need to coordinate all of the schedules! (smile) Ahh...the life of creating an event!



"People will have access to authors in a very intimate way—and be able to interact."

(Khaled Hosseini at BGE San Jose 2006)

WOW: I browsed the BGE site and see that you've taken such great care in designing the event to incorporate so much more than what readers would find at an author reading or book signing. I'd love to hear about what attendees can find in the Marketplace.

ANN: The Marketplace is as diverse as our book groups! And that is by design as well. We have a good representation of Independent Book Sellers "anchoring" the venue. Others who have joined us in the past include boutique jewelers, wineries, book accoutrement vendors, publishers, chocolate and sweets distributors, gourmet foods, regional arts groups, an organic micro-brewery, and so much more.

The other element of the Marketplace is that we do book signings after every Literary Salon. Every author who was in a salon comes into the Marketplace to sign. And while they are doing the signings, we offer TASTINGS to the attendees. These might include chocolate, special teas, champagne on Sunday morning (a big hit!), specialty waters, savory snacks—again, I wanted to address all of the senses, and the food and drink element help make that happen.

WOW: With all the good food, drink, and shopping, I can only imagine that the atmosphere at the Book Group Expo is friendly and festive. I am really looking forward to attending this year! Tell me, what is it like to be there?

ANN: I certainly want it to be friendly and festive! And memorable. I think the

experience is a bit different for everyone depending upon what is important to them. It is certainly interactive—someone attending by him or herself would feel very comfortable and included.

The best thing I can do is give you some of the feedback from author and attendee post-event surveys: "Happy and interactive!"; "Thank you for provoking the conversation—and the lovely wine."; "I have been an avid reader for over 30 years and have never been a part of such an amazing experience. THANK YOU!"; "It feels like you have thought of everything—great authors, wine, chocolate, places to sit and relax...and some shopping! What a grand two days!"

I think it is a fun few days. It can be thought provoking. People will have access to authors in a very intimate way—and be able to interact.

You know, when I was first envisioning this experience, I started with "how do I want people to feel when they leave this experience on Sunday night? What do I want them to say?" I wanted them to be glad they came, have it be memorable and something to tell friends about, and something they would want to return to again and again. I wanted them to know from the experience they just had that someone who cared about her book group made it happen. I wanted them to feel great!

I think we have done that—and we will keep getting better at it!

WOW: After Chapter One in 2006 and Chapter Two of Book Group Expo in 2007, did you find that there were any changes or additions to the program that you wanted to make for Chapter Three in June 2008?

ANN: That's a great question. We learn each time we do something—whether the larger San Jose events or a smaller Literary Circle event. For some, they feel we are offering too many choices of Literary Salons. They don't want to have to choose not to go to one! (smiles)

We may reduce the number by a few—but there will still be choices that will have to be made! We have also had requests for more of a "book club workshop" that might happen the Friday before or the Monday after. But for the most part, we seem to have a formula that works and we'll just keep working to make it better and better.

"I wanted them to know from the experience they just had that someone who cared about her book group made it happen..."

WOW: So far, in the last two years of seeing your creation come to life,

what has been the most fulfilling part of the process for you?

ANN: I really am committed to leaving my corner of the world a better place than when I arrived. I know that might sound a bit corny, but it's true. One of the most delightful elements of BGE has been watching people ENGAGE and be a part of something like this. They showed up! And then they showed up again! How cool is that?

This was an idea that really came to life. An idea that has resonated with a few thousand people. An idea that promotes conversation. An idea that brings authors and their readers closer together. An idea that helps writers have more access to readers—and gives readers access to their ideas.

So, I guess the most fulfilling part is that BGE happened. And that people are actually talking about it!

WOW: Yes, it is cool! And after this great inside scoop about everything BGE, our readers will certainly be talking about it! Now, with Chapter Three coming up, do you have any secrets to share with our readers about what you have in store for the attendees?

ANN: Ahh. Secrets! We have just started planning for the 2008 event. I can comment that we will have some well-known names for people as well as new discoveries. There are some new titles coming out that I think people will really enjoy. We have also been asked to consider doing the San Jose event in October versus June and are sorting through those dates as well. I will make that decision in the next few weeks so that we can all plan accordingly.

If your readers are interested in staying in touch with what we are doing, I encourage them to sign up for updates.

<http://www.bookgroupexpo.com/contact.php>

“...the most fulfilling part is that BGE happened. And that people are actually talking about it!”

WOW: At the end of the day, what do you hope attendees take away from their experience at Book Group Expo?

ANN: I have no doubt that they will meet new fellow book lovers and learn about books they may never have been introduced to!

I think book group expo is a great reinforcement of the value and delight of books. Books are at the core of BGE—reading them and then having a conversation about whatever those words/thoughts evoked. I hope being a part of Book Group Expo encourages people to have more of those conversations. Those conversations—the

conversations about our own reaction to what happened in a book—those conversations can help create empathy and understanding. Those conversations support us thinking differently and exploring alternatives. Those conversations can help change our little corner of the world.

WOW: Ann, thank you so much for sharing your passion with us! I'm ready to hop on a plane to San Jose and be first in line to join you at BGE this year! I know our readers will be just as excited to experience such a wonderful event!

WOW! Readers, if you are interested in staying in touch with what is going on with BGE, you can sign up for regular communications either through the Book Group Expo website or by e-mailing connect@bookgroupexpo.com. Ann Kent can be reached at ann@bookgroupexpo.com.

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Annette Fix is the Senior Editor for WOW! Women On Writing, an author, and spoken-word storyteller living in Laguna Niguel, California with her Danish Prince Charming, her aspiring photographer son, and two rescued dogs. Annette's memoir, **[The Break-Up Diet](#)** will be available Valentine's Day 2008. You can read break-up stories and share your own at her new story forum: www.mybreakupstory.com.

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<http://wow-womenonwriting.com>

e-mail: editors@wow-womenonwriting.com