

ONE BOOK – ONE  
FEDERATION



*READING GUIDE FOR GROUPES DE  
LECTURE*

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*Some thoughts on how to organize and conduct your French reading group*

There are many resources available on how to start and conduct a reading group, or book club, many of them on the internet. See, for example, [www.spl.org/booklists/bookclubs.html](http://www.spl.org/booklists/bookclubs.html) (by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library) and [www.readinggroupchoices.com](http://www.readinggroupchoices.com). The objective here is to look at some special issues for reading groups comprised primarily of Americans who are reading and discussing in a foreign language. These comments are those of the author, based upon experience with the Café Littérature sponsored by the Médiathèque at the Chicago Alliance, and are neither based upon scholarly research, nor should they be attributed to the Federation.

*Individual proficiency of group members.* It is inevitable that individual members of any group will have different levels of proficiency with the French language. Furthermore, any one individual's ability to read may be very different from his or her ability to discuss what has been read. A good leader will be sensitive to the need to draw out those who are more reticent, while respecting what may be their discomfort with the ability to speak. Of course, the discussion could be conducted in English – but most people want the opportunity to practice and improve their French.

*Selection of books.* Selection of the books to read may be the most difficult job of all, unless

you are fortunate enough to have a French teacher to help lead the group, or someone very familiar with French literature. A common experience in book clubs is that there is more discussion over the selection, than there is on the books themselves. But that is where all the members have reading experience and firm opinions. In your case, there may be few or no members with any significant experience in French literature.

For this reason, some groups select only classic works of literature. The benefit to that is that there are plenty of background resources, such as author biographies, critiques, translations, and theater and motion picture adaptations. Café Littérature has chosen, instead, to read modern literature because we are all experiencing it for the first time. But this makes the selection more difficult.

French newspapers and newsmagazines, most of which are available on the internet, often have literary critiques. *Lire* and *Magazine Littéraire* are also excellent resources. One way to select is to rely on the selection process of the groups who select the literary prizes in France. This fall, in celebration of the centenary of the Prix Goncourt, we are selecting the most recent Prix Goncourt winners. If experts have chosen these novels for a major literary prize, we can assume they have literary merit – although the challenge sometimes is to determine what that is! In this regard, some prize winners are very long, and we have better

participation when the length of the book is around 200 pages.

Price is a factor for some groups. In that case, you may want to select not the most recent novels, but ones that have been reissued in a version like a Folio edition. That also gives you the benefit of a little more time for a following to have developed.

A word is in order about where to buy the books. Many cities in the United States do have foreign bookstores, but you may find that you still have to special order for your group. One possibility is to use a credit card and order from any one of several web-sites. Some to consider are:

[www.amazon.fr](http://www.amazon.fr)  
[www.chapitre.com](http://www.chapitre.com)  
[www.fnac.com](http://www.fnac.com)  
[www.alapage.com](http://www.alapage.com)

And a good source in Canada is:

[www.renaud-bray.com](http://www.renaud-bray.com)

(Incidentally, don't overlook the possibility of Francophone literature from outside France for your group).

American readers of modern French literature will probably be unfamiliar with the context of the work, and the style in which it is written. A marketer for an American publisher has said:

“A lot of foreign literature doesn’t work in the American context because it’s less action-oriented than what we’re used to, more philosophical and reflective. . . . We’re into accessible information. We often look for the story, rather than the story within the story. We’d rather read lines than read between the lines.” (*New York Times*, July 26, 2003)

Introducing the book to the group may indeed require some report on the place or the historical context in which the story takes place. And it is often helpful to spend some time analyzing the structure of a modern French novel and identifying where that structure differs from what we are accustomed to. That brings us to the importance of leadership for the group.

*Importance of a group leader.* It can be fun to be part of a group where the main object is to socialize and share personal experiences – as long as everyone agrees on that purpose. If the stated purpose is to focus on the book, however, then leadership that knows how to raise open-ended questions that focus on the book, and keep the group on that topic, is important. As the group develops experience, perhaps each member could be asked to come prepared with at least one open-ended discussion question.

Leadership that provides the background research on the author, the literary criticism, and the context of the book is especially important for a

foreign language book group. The leader should search for audio-visual materials on the author. The Alliances with libraries have video collections that may contain documentary materials on the authors that they are willing to share. The internet is another resource for audio-visual aides. For example, an interview in which Andreï Makine discusses *Le testament français* in French on Radio Prague can be found at [www.radio.cz/fr/article/15295](http://www.radio.cz/fr/article/15295). The leader doesn't have to be the same person for every session or for all of these tasks. It may be enriching to spread the responsibility among the group. But it should be understood in advance which members do have that responsibility.

About the author: *ANDREÏ MAKINE*

«Le sentiment d'être enfin chez moi se mêlait imperceptiblement à cette langue étrangère que j'apprenais. L'alliage devenait si intense que, bien des années plus tard, le français évoquerait toujours pour moi un lien et un temps semblables à l'atmosphère d'une maison d'enfance que je n'avais jamais connue.»

Andreï Makine, *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme*, Mercure de France, 2003, p. 49.

Andreï Makine thus returns in his latest novel to the theme of his 1995 novel, *Le testament français*, which was awarded three literary prizes: Prix Goncourt, Prix Medecis and Prix Goncourt des Lycéens. Makine describes the source and essence of this theme in an interview in the February, 2001, edition of *Lire* magazine:

«La présence d'une Française (qui apparaît sous le nom de Charlotte Lemonnier dans *Le testament français*) forme un monde à part dans l'univers sibérien de mes jeunes années. Elle m'initie à la langue et à la culture française. Devenant bilingue, je découvre aussi une autre forme de bilinguisme; celle que manie la poésie en réinventant la langue. Les poèmes (de jeunesse) que j'écris me laissent expérimenter cet "entre-deux-langues" de l'écriture poétique que j'ai déjà exploré dans le passage du russe au français. Ces expériences de bilinguisme me font prendre conscience que le monde n'est pas unique, que la résistance à la pression idéologique est possible précisément grâce à

ces mondes doubles, qu'il y a toujours un ailleurs.»

Andreï Makine was born on September 10, 1957 at Krasnoïarsk in Siberia, where he spent his youth, much of which he described in his novel *Au temps du fleuve Amour* (1994). He studied at Kalinin and Moscow, and taught philosophy at Novgorod. Before settling in France in 1987, he traveled extensively inside and outside the Soviet Union. He taught several courses at Sciences-Po and ENS, while writing and earning a doctorate with a dissertation on the Russian poet, Ivan Bounine.

As he describes in the last part of this novel, he wrote on park benches and even among the tombs at Père Lachaise. He was able to get his first novel published in 1990 (*La fille d'un héros de l'Union Soviétique*) only by convincing the publishers he had written the original in Russian, and that it was translated into French (using the name of his grandfather as the translator).

Makine's other novels include:

*La crime d'Olga Arbelina* (1998);  
*Requiem pour l'Est* (2000);  
*La musique d'une vie* (2001); and  
*La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme* (2003)

### *Suggested discussion questions*

The website for the Washington Center for the Book cited in the first part of this guide contains a good section on how to lead the discussion, and some sample questions that could be applied to almost any book. Among other good suggestions are these: “Don’t be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get beyond the ‘I just didn’t like it’ statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing?” “Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. It’s often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences.”

The following are presented as possible discussion questions specific to this book.

1. When asked how Paris came to influence his imagination in his Russian youth, Makine replied: “Paris came to me in my youth solely through literature. Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust. To this day, I have a kind of double vision of Paris – its daily reality and its literary reality.”

What examples from the book can you identify in which Paris was portrayed, and in which of these realities?

2. Describe the different ways in which Charlotte Lemonnier is portrayed in the book.

How is her character developed, changed, over the course of the book?

Is the significance of French in her life different from its significance in her grandson's life?

3. In the third part of the novel, the narrator "discovers" that he is truly Russian.

What are the examples of the ways in which he believes he is "truly Russian?"

Is he "truly Russian?"

What does he mean by the term "la griffe Française" that he uses at the end of chapter 2 of Part III?

4. In chapter 3 of Part III, the narrator finds himself "entre deux langues", a concept Makine applied to himself in the *Lire* interview cited above.

Could it be said that language, itself, is a character in this novel?

What is the significance of the title of the novel: *Le testament français*?

How does the English title confirm or contradict this significance: *Dreams of my Russian Summer*?

If the novel were set in Anglophone America, could the principle themes be carried as well?

*Thematic outlines to consider*

Ways in which the theme of *time* is handled:

- Time as histoire
- Time as mémoire
- Time as réalité

Ways in which the theme of *language* is handled:

- Language is identité
- Language is beauté
- Language is utilité

Ways in which the theme of *culture* is handled:

- Culture is héréditaire
- Culture is a lien à la langue
- Culture is a lien à mémoire