

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: The Faith Club

Author: Ranya Idliby

Born 1965, in Kuwait; Married; children: two.
Education: Georgetown University, B.S.; London School of Economics, M.S.; Religion: Muslim.; Memberships: The Faith Club.; Addresses: Home: New York, NY.
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Career:
Writer.

Name: Ranya Idliby
Born: 1965
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Author: Priscilla Warner

Born c. 1953; married; children: two sons.
Education: Graduated from University of Pennsylvania.
Religion: Reform Jewish.; Memberships: The Faith Club.
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Career:
Writer. Also worked as an advertising art director in Boston, MA, and New York, NY.

Name: Priscilla Warner
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Author: Suzanne Oliver

Married; children: three. Education: Texas Christian University, B.A., 1987; attended Institute of European Studies.; Religion: Episcopalian.; Memberships: The Faith Club.; Addresses: Home: New York, NY, and Jaffrey Center, NH.
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Career:
Writer and editor. *Woman's Day*, New York, NY, editorial assistant; *Boardroom*, New York, NY, staff writer; *Financial World*, New York, NY, staff writer; *Forbes*, New York, NY, became senior editor; *SmartMoney.com*, New York, NY, managing editor.

Name: Suzanne Oliver
Education: Texas Christian University, B.A., 1987; attended Institute of European Studies.
Address: New York, NY
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Authors: Ranya Idliby, Priscilla Warner, Suzanne Oliver (2)

Sidelights:

Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner are the authors of the 2006 memoir *The Faith Club: A Muslim, Christian, Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding*. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Idliby, a Kuwait-born Muslim living in New York City, began writing a children's book highlighting the commonalities between the Abrahamic religions. She invited Oliver, an Episcopalian who was raised Catholic, to join the project, and Oliver in turn recruited Warner, a Jewish friend who had attended Hebrew day school, to help with the work. The children's book never got off the ground, however. According to *Washington Post* contributor Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, the women "quickly came to realize how little they knew about each other's traditions and how much they needed, initially, to deal with their own prejudices and stereotypes."

Idliby, Oliver, and Warner began meeting regularly in each other's homes to discuss religious practices and traditions. "Things got pretty heated after just a few meetings," Warner recalled on *The Faith Club* website. "We were forced to examine a lot of things I never in a million years thought we'd have to address." Warner and Oliver, for instance, engaged in a fierce debate of the Crucifixion story, and Idliby created waves by aggressively defending the Palestinian cause. "Eventually—and as they make abundantly clear, not easily—conflict and anger gave way to a special kind of rapprochement that merged mutual understanding and respect," wrote *Booklist* reviewer June Swayers. "As we pursued the adult dialogue, and we became the Faith Club, our conversations came about organically," Idliby remarked. "Life was our biggest source of material, from aging parents and curious children to cocktail parties and Easter bunnies."

Compiled from four years of the women's taped conversations and private journal entries, *The Faith Club* provides an "engaging account of their interfaith dialogue," observed a critic in *Kirkus Reviews*. "The dialogue among the three friends comes across as genuine and thoughtful," Rosenblatt commented. "They try valiantly to be frank with one another, which becomes easier as they learn to trust one another's motives and to respect each other's integrity." In the words of Kendra Nordin, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, each woman "grows in her understanding of faith and doubt, life and death, individualism and community. These moments of conviction and real friendship offer tangible hope for a peaceful humanity." *World & I* contributor Surekha Vijn similarly noted that "the trio has done a tremendous job in modeling a positive step toward understanding people of different faiths at a time when the United States is becoming an increasingly multi-religious society. *The Faith Club* creates peace and strengthens the hope that individuals can take their own similar steps to directly advance that cause."

On the website, Oliver stated, "*The Faith Club* is a book about people challenging themselves and challenging each other about the meaning of life, the meaning of being human today, being American today, of being religious or non-religious, believing in God or not believing in God. It's about people exploring the opinions they have about other people—opinions that we walk around with every day but don't really recognize. It's about understanding the stereotypes and prejudices that have influenced us since childhood and recognizing that those attitudes influence the way we view the world today. And that's something that every person...can benefit from."



Authors: Ranya Idliby, Priscilla Warner, Suzanne Oliver (3)

Further Readings About the Authors:

Books:

Idliby, Ranya, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, Christian, Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding*, Free Press (New York, NY), 2006.

Periodicals:

Booklist, September 1, 2006, June Swayers, review of *The Faith Club*, p. 25.

Christian Science Monitor, November 7, 2006, Kendra Nordin, review of *The Faith Club*.

Contra Costa Times, December 17, 2006, Rebecca Rosen Lum, "Mothers Question, Embrace Their Faiths," review of *The Faith Club*.

Jewish News Weekly of Northern California, November 10, 2006, Stacey Palevsky,

"Book Explores Common Ground of Different Faiths," review of *The Faith Club*.

Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2006, review of *The Faith Club*, p. 664.

Library Journal, September 1, 2006, Carolyn M. Craft, review of *The Faith Club*, p. 153.

Publishers Weekly, August 14, 2006, review of *The Faith Club*, p. 198.

USA Today, September 27, 2006, Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Moms Find Spiritual Friends in Faith Club," review of *The Faith Club*.

Washington Post, October 12, 2006, Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, "Getting Religion," review of *The Faith Club*, p. C4.

World & I, winter, 2006, Surekha Vijh, "Uniting Abraham's Daughters," review of *The Faith Club*.

Online:

The Faith Club website, www.thefaithclub.com (February 20, 2007).

Washington Post Online, www.washingtonpost.com/ (November 17, 2006), "The Faith Club Chat."



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Reviews:

Booklist Review

September 1, 2006

Starred Review Ranya Idliby is a Palestinian Muslim; Suzanne Oliver, an ex—Catholic now in the Episcopal Church; and Priscilla Warner, Jewish. Initially, the idea behind establishing a faith club was simple—the three women would collaborate on an interfaith children’s book emphasizing the connections among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that would reinforce the common heritage the three religions share. In post-9/11 America, however, real life began getting in the way. Almost from the start, differences that culminated in conflict emerged; at one point, the tension even jeopardized the project altogether. Prophetically, while searching for a story to help illustrate connections among the religions, Suzanne chose the Crucifixion, which immediately set off alarm bells for Priscilla. Yet they persevered. All three agreed that to work together they had to be brutally candid, “no matter how rude or politically incorrect.” Eventually—and as they make abundantly clear, not easily—conflict and anger gave way to a special kind of rapprochement that merged mutual understanding and respect. Each woman brings to the table her prejudices, unique faith stories, and personal stereotypes and misconceptions (Priscilla, for example, had those of one who had never before met a Palestinian woman). Brimming with passion and conviction, and concluding with suggestions for starting a similar faith club, this is essential reading for anyone interested in interfaith dialogue.

Library Journal Review

September 1, 2006

In writing a children’s book highlighting the commonalities among the Abrahamic religions, Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, sought Christian and Jewish collaborators. She was joined by Episcopalian-turned-Catholic Suzanne Oliver and Jewish children’s book writer Warner, who both came to realize they needed to deal with their own questions, stereotypes, and concerns before starting the book. After several meetings, the trio’s relationship and project seemed in jeopardy, but they painstakingly worked through their differences, accompanying one another at significant times to each of their places of worship, reading one another’s Scripture, and supporting one another’s doubts and fears. In the process, the women developed a strong bond that strengthened the way each practiced her own religion and moved them all toward deeper commitment to interfaith dialog, to justice, and to one another. This book, which concludes with suggestions to readers for forming their own Faith Club and includes sample questions for thought, is a documentation of Idliby, Oliver, and Warner’s discussions, debates, and reflections. The world needs this book or others very similar! Highly recommended for all libraries. Carolyn M. Craft, formerly with Longwood Univ., Farmville, VA

Kirkus Review

July 1, 2006

Three mothers’ engaging account of their interfaith dialogue. At first glance, the authors don’t seem to have much in common. Idliby is a Muslim of Palestinian descent; Warner is a Reform Jew; Oliver grew up Catholic but was drawn to the more liberal Episcopal Church as an adult. Beneath those differences lie some important similarities: All three are mothers who want to teach their children religious tolerance, and each places great stock in her religious identity. In order to learn about the religious traditions of their neighbors, the authors came together to form a “faith club,” meeting regularly to discuss prayer and ritual, their beliefs about God and the relationship between spirituality and social justice. They never shy away from potentially explosive topics, such as the way that Christian descriptions of Jesus’ crucifixion have been used to provoke anti-Jewish violence, or the question of whether people can criticize Israeli policy without being accused of anti-Semitism. Over time, the women’s religious commitments evolved: Idliby, who had felt spiritually homeless, found a community of like-minded progressive American Muslims; Oliver began to question some of her commitments to classic Christian



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Reviews: (continued)

doctrine; and Warner became more comfortable praying to and talking about God. The three charming narrators transform potentially dry theological discourses into personal, intimate heart-to-hearts. For readers who wish they could pull up a chair and join Idliby, Oliver and Warner in their chats, the concluding chapter explains how to form your own faith club. The only weakness here is that all three authors represent decidedly liberal expressions of their religions. The conversations would have been even more interesting, albeit considerably more fraught, had they included an evangelical Christian or an Orthodox Jew or a Muslim woman who wears hijab. An invitation to discussion that's hard to turn down—and a natural for book groups.

Publishers Weekly Review

August 2006

In the wake of 9/11, Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, sought out fellow mothers of the Jewish and Christian faiths to write a children's book on the commonalities among their respective traditions. In their first meeting, however, the women realized they would have to address their differences first. Oliver, an Episcopalian who was raised Catholic, irked Warner, a Jewish woman and children's author, with her description of the Crucifixion story, which sounded too much like "Jews killed Jesus" for Warner's taste. Idliby's efforts to join in on the usual "Judeo-Christian" debate tap into a sense of alienation she already feels in the larger Muslim community, where she is unable to find a progressive mosque that reflects her non veil-wearing, spiritual Islam. The ladies come to call their group a "faith club" and, over time, midwife each other into stronger belief in their own respective religions. More Fight Club than book club, the coauthors pull no punches; their outstanding honesty makes for a page-turning read, rare for a religion nonfiction book. From Idliby's graphic defense of the Palestinian cause, Oliver's vacillations between faith and doubt, and Warner's struggles to acknowledge God's existence, almost every taboo topic is explored on this engaging spiritual ride.



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Reading Group Guide from Simon and Schuster:

Summary:

The Faith Club was started when Ranya Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, recruited Suzanne Oliver, a Christian, and Priscilla Warner, a Jew, to write a children's book about their three religions. As the women's meetings began, it became clear that they had their own adult struggles with faith and religion, and they needed a safe haven where they could air their concerns, admit their ignorance, and explore their own faiths.

Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla began to meet regularly to discuss their religious backgrounds and beliefs and to ask each other tough questions. As the three women met and talked, there were no awkward silences—no stretches of time with nothing for them to say to each other. Honesty was the first rule of the Faith Club, and with that tenet as a foundation, no topic was off limits.

With courage, pain, and sometimes tears, Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla found themselves completely transformed by their experience inside the safe cocoon of the Faith Club, and they realized that they had learned things so powerful they wanted to share them with the rest of the world. This is their story.

General Questions:

How did the book's format (a three-way memoir written in first person) contribute to the overall feel of the book? At what points did the women write different versions of the same event? (One specific example can be found when Ranya confronts Priscilla about the Israel/Palestinian conflict, pages 129-138.) How does each woman's individual prejudices and religion color her interpretations of the discussions?

How does each woman's role as a mother influence the direction and tone of the Faith Club? Would the club have been different if it included both mothers and women with no children? How did the children play a role in the challenges to each woman's faith?

To which woman did you most relate, and why? Was it the one you expected to when you began the book? If you identified with one of the women because you share her religious beliefs, did you agree with her presentation of your faith? What did you disagree with, and why?

Much of the first half of the book deals with Suzanne's and Priscilla's struggles to define anti-Semitism and to confront their prejudices about the other's faith. Did you feel that Ranya was unfairly relegated to the role of "mediator" (p. 46), or did she welcome it? "For months, I had to bide my time patiently" (p. 126). Why do you think Ranya waited to bring up her own struggles with Suzanne's and Priscilla's faiths?

On page 106, Ranya says, "The more that science unravels about the wonders of life and the universe, the more I am in awe of it." Do you think this combination of science and faith is realistic, or must one ultimately take precedence over the other?

Suzanne's first sentence speaks of the "cozy, homogeneous community" at her Episcopal church. What is Priscilla's "comfort zone"? What is Ranya's? How does each woman step out of her individual cozy and homogeneous comfort zone, and in what ways does each of them remain there?

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On page 147, Priscilla wonders if worrying is “a form of gratefulness.” What do you think she means by this? Does Priscilla’s worry ultimately strengthen her faith? How does each woman show gratitude in her life and in her faith?

On page 204, Craig Townsend tells Suzanne, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it’s certainty.” What does he mean by this? Is doubt necessary for true faith?

In Chapter 12, “Intimations of Mortality,” the women discuss their differing views about death and the afterlife. Which understanding of death was most comforting to you? Which image of the afterlife was most comforting? Are they from the same religion?

When Priscilla confronts Suzanne about her confession that she was uncomfortable being mistaken for a Jew, Ranya says, “She wouldn’t want to be a Muslim either.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Is Suzanne’s discomfort an inevitable result of being a member of the majority, of “not [being] forced to accommodate [herself] to the culture, religion, or even friendship of minorities”?

Ranya provides a vivid description of her own method of prayer on page 175: “My prayer is essentially a form of meditation in which I singularly apply my limited human physical capacity to try to connect with that omnipresent universal unknown force: God.” (Suzanne’s description of her prayer is on page 162; Priscilla’s is on page 175.) How is each woman’s method of prayer different? How is it similar? How do Suzanne’s, Ranya’s, and Priscilla’s prayer styles reflect the differences and similarities in their childhoods?

Activities:

Before the meeting, visit the authors’ website, www.thefaithclub.com, to explore viewpoints about your own and others’ faiths. Use the *Faith Club Guide* in the back of the book to suggest journaling topics; have each member select a topic and bring in questions and reflections to share with the group.

During the meeting, serve some of the food that Priscilla, Ranya, and Suzanne served at many of their Faith Club meetings. For example, you could serve hot chocolate and jasmine tea to your guests. And don’t forget Priscilla’s favorite—a variety of chocolate bars for a special treat!

An important aspect of the authors’ Faith Club is their visits to each other’s places of worship. Schedule a weekend visit to your local mosque, synagogue, and church. If you can, set up a discussion with the imam, rabbi, or priest.