

# Academy of Public Scholars is for Redlands bookworms seeking a challenge

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The Academy of Public Scholars might not be a title that attracts the average book club attendee, but founder Eric Kessler of Redlands doesn't necessarily see that as a hindrance.

"It's a fine line to walk between making something so accessible that it's hardly worth going to because you can get it anywhere and too sort of elitist or exclusive-sounding," said Kessler, a research librarian at the Feldheym Central Library in San Bernardino. "At least people know by the title what they're in for."

Still, Kessler, 47, emphasizes that everyone is welcome to join the group, which tackles texts from the likes of Nietzsche, Benjamin and Kierkegaard.

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Eric Kessler, a research librarian at the Feldheym Central Library in San Bernardino, says he hopes to expand the Academy of Public Scholars.

"I think the experience for most people is once they get in there they realize that we're not there to test people," he said. "We're not even there to demand conversation from them."

The Academy, which has expanded from 20 committed members to about 35 since its name was changed from the Difficult Book Reading Academy, includes academics, students, the self-

taught and even a group of retired women who just like to hear what's being said, according to Kessler.

"They're very diligent in their readings but they really like coming and hearing what people have to say that's of a different order than what you'll get at a book club meeting."

The group meets twice per month: a formal meeting in the library and the informal "Caffeinated Critique" at the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf in Redlands.

There are no research papers or tests, but Kessler provides the group with critical review questions to mull over. The Academy fills a void left by the media and public critics, Kessler said.

"There is this absence of what we might call citizen scholarship or public scholarship out there now," he said. "Maybe the time is right for a site or opportunity for people with a sense of curiosity and these people are totally marginalized now."

Kessler hopes to expand the Academy of Public Scholars. He recently returned from a trip to Berkeley where he hopes to establish a branch of the Academy.

Also in the works is a journal, a summer reading fair at Cal State San Bernardino and a field trip to Los Angeles where the group will tour the old theaters along Broadway. The tour relates to themes in the text they'll be reading.

The group's readings seem to straddle that fine line the Academy is walking.

"These are challenging texts," he said. "The writers who have incredibly dense work out there, I try to find the works that are a little more accessible, but what I insist on is that we have unedited, direct encounters with the full text of these writers, not secondary literature, and not an anthology, which is another form of a secondary literature."

The Academy of Public Scholars will conduct its next formal meeting on Wednesday at the Feldheim Central Library, which sponsors the organization. The first session begins at 3 p.m. and the second at 6 p.m. The next Caffeinated Critique is set for 6 p.m. March 26 at The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf in Redlands.

"If your interest is just simply to listen to people talk about things that people just don't talk about anymore, this place is for you," Kessler said. "We have spirited discussions about challenging texts at what we consider to be a pretty welcoming environment in the library."