

## **Difficult Books Reading Academy takes on philosophers at San Bernardino Library**

**By ADAM C. HARTMANN**  
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SAN BERNARDINO - Book clubs come with many themes: conservative, children's, virtual. Some tackle such difficult material that they eschew the term "club" for labels suggesting more rigor.

For example, a reading group at San Bernardino's Norman F. Feldheim Central Library, moderated by former Redlands bookstore owner Eric Kessler, bills itself as "The Difficult Book Reading Academy."

This hardy band of about a dozen readers plans to tackle a formidable menu -- from Kierkegaard to Kant, Hegel to Heidegger -- that is sure to induce night sweats in generations of former college students.

With its elevated discussion and opaque material, Kessler's group stands in stark contrast to the celebrity-driven clubs of Oprah Winfrey and "Today" show weatherman Al Roker, who recently began a children's book club. Though reading groups proliferate in public libraries across the country, Kessler said the Difficult Book Academy aims to discuss authors in the Continental tradition, mostly French and German authors of the past 500 years.

"It is neither a graduate seminar nor is it a mere book club," Kessler said of the group, 11 of whom joined Kessler on Wednesday to discuss Nietzsche. "We can be scholastic without having to be scholars."

The group grew out of informal discussions between Kessler and his friend William Dwyer, a former education professor at the University of Redlands. The pair craved a place to discuss higher-order topics, and "maybe one of the last places to look is the modern university," Kessler said.

A better place to look might have been the Feldheim library on Wednesday night. The dapper, professorial Kessler engaged in easy yet esoteric banter with readers from college age to retirement age, most novices in philosophy.

Kessler even flashed a philosopher's humor, remarking at one point, "if you really want to lay a Continental philosopher low, call him a nihilist."

The group has its quiet, studious members, and it has its wisecracker: Joel Kilpatrick, a Cal State San Bernardino master's student. Kilpatrick slightly resembles actor Ethan Hawke from Ben Stiller's 1994 film "Reality Bites."

"Will there be a test? Apparently not," Kilpatrick joked at one point.

Later, tongue in cheek, he professed his love for Wikipedia, the user-built Internet encyclopedia, and asked Kessler about a particularly tricky passage, "I don't understand what Nietzsche meant. Am I one of the others?"

For his part, Kessler described the night's reading as "kind of getting into the shallow end of the pool with Nietzsche."

"There's this sense in which he's trying to shake us out of a 2,000-year sleep," Kessler said of the German philosopher.

Gina Bonkowski, a UC Berkeley student down visiting family and friends, said she understands about 60 percent of the reading, depending on the author. A religious studies major at Berkeley, Bonkowski said the philosophy courses she has taken there typically don't match the group's rich conversations.

"We're not sitting around reading the CliffsNotes of Aristotle," Bonkowski said. The group will meet again June 27, but Kessler isn't done. His goal is to start a bi-weekly reading group for younger readers, mentioning a wish list of home-schoolers, gifted students, maybe even college students.

"We're interested in really reading the books, not reading what other people have to say about the books," Kessler said.

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