

# Resolute readers, no question

BY LYNNE PATE

**T**hink about the last book you read. Would you (a) put it in the fireplace, (b) put it on the bookshelf or (c) use it as a table leveler?

This is not subtle literary analysis, to be sure. But the members of the Sistias Are Reading Book Club, who must answer this question at every meeting, find it's a light-hearted and effective jump-start to their book discussion. And they come prepared to answer: the group's strict bylaws require them to read the books.

"We want it to be a discussion of the book, not just hanging out," says LaVosha Payne-Prescott, president and founder. "We're serious."

So serious, there may also be a quiz — no report cards, just a prize for the highest score.

Each of the nine members, who live in Passaic and Essex counties, hosts the meeting at least once a year, with the host choosing the book for that month. The group focuses on African-American authors and books by other women of color. Titles the group has read include the novels "Chocolate Sangre" by Tracy Price-Thompson, "Selah's Bed" by Jenoyne Adams and "Hits & Mrs." by Lori Bryant Woolridge, and the nonfiction "I Say a Prayer for Me" by Stanice Anderson.

The group recently read Brandon Massey's vampire tale "Dark Corner." Massey joined the group's discussion by phone, as have other authors in the seven years since the group's founding.

Though the members choose titles from different genres, "We try to stay away from self-help books," says Payne-Prescott. "We did that the first year, and by the end of the meeting everyone was crying."

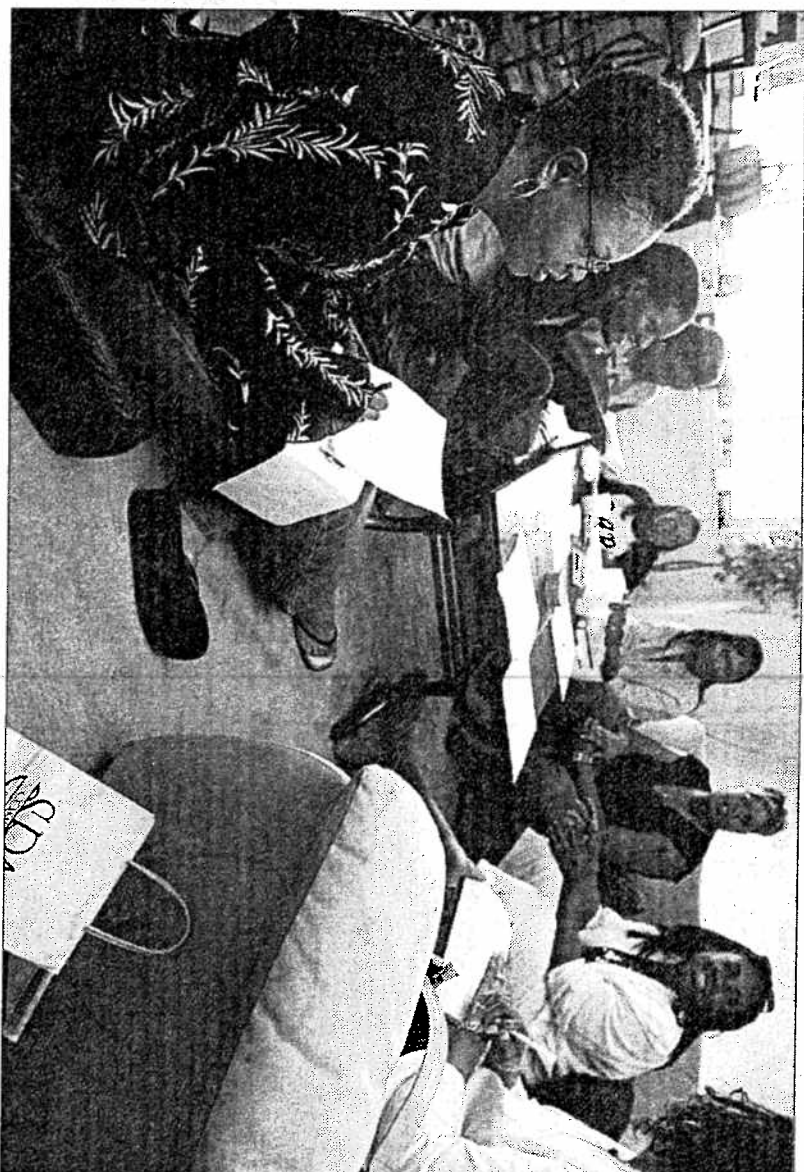
The group's activities aren't limited to book discussions. Sistias Are Reading also awards college scholarships to girls from the members' own high schools; the scholarships are supported by fund-raisers open to the public, including Mother's Day brunches, ski trips and bowling parties. The members also travel as a group and took a course together in teaching literacy at the Paterson Free Public Library.

But their focus remains on enriching their lives by sharing their love of reading.

"The whole thing about a book club is that if there's something (in a book) you can't decipher, somebody else can," says Payne-Prescott. "It's also the camaraderie. We each have a different personality, and that brings spice to the discussion."

"You can just step out of your life for a while."

Below are several members' comments on "The Good House" by Tananarive Due.



Members of the Sistias Are Reading Book Club discuss "The Good House" at a recent meeting.

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envelops the characters. This book can make you wonder if you would be as receptive as some of these characters were to situations totally outside your normal life experiences.

The story is complex and centers on how a wrong decision can affect not only the person making it but also future generations. Did Angela experience everything that occurred in the book or did the book tell you what would have happened if she had made the wrong decision? Perhaps the answer to that question is not as important as the question itself.

#### **Kimberlin Matthews**

I really enjoyed the book. It kept you on your toes because you had no idea what was going to happen next. Due knows how to grab you and keep your interest. I enjoy reading books when the characters are believable and you can relate to where they are coming from, and Due achieved that.

In this book there was a deep connection between the main character and her grandmother. Their relationship was like a thread that wove through the entire book. I enjoyed the closeness that was portrayed between the two characters. I felt for them and what each one was going through.

#### **Stephanie Talbot**

I like Tananarive Due. She is a very frightening writer. However, compared to her earlier book "My Soul to Keep," I did not like "The Good House." The story was well-written, well-researched and scary, but it was so complex that she lost me. I kept having to go back to reread certain passages to put the story together. Also it delved into topics that I really don't like to read about: casting spells and conjuring up spirits.

I would definitely read her books again. I feel that she is a very mature and very good writer. She knows how to scare her readers and have them ponder if this story could really happen.

#### **LaVosha Payne-Prescott**

One of the things that draws you immediately into Due's works is her uncanny ability to tell a story — a chilling one at that. She has a way of pulling you in from the beginning with her detailed imagery, which can leave you delightfully scared. The book at times reveals facts that change the interpretation of earlier scenes, so you do have to pay close attention.

The amazing thing about Due is that she showcases a topic that is rarely seen in current African-American writing: the science-fiction experience. It is such a wonderful genre. I am grateful that African-American writers are beginning to embrace it and see that there is an audience who loves it just as much as they enjoy writing it.

#### **Nicole R. Hampton**

The book was excellent. The characters kept me wanting to read throughout the night. The author's writing style brings you right into each scene without making the outcome seem obvious.

I am not sure that I believe in voodoo and the spirits, but it seemed to work for the story. I would recommend it to anyone who likes to read horror books.

#### **Natasha Hogges**

Tananarive Due continues to prove herself a gifted horror writer. This powerful storyteller took me on a ride that was suspenseful, thrilling and downright frightening. Due slowly feeds you just enough information to get you interested in the characters, enough to keep you wanting more.

#### **Jawana Hardwick**

Due has outdone herself once again. She believes in allowing the reader to see inside each character and to give them a voice. Once you understand each character and their responsibility to the book's overall purpose, then you understand their actions. Angela's relationship to all of the characters was key to this book's success.

The tale was told so well that the ending made you wonder about what really happened. I guess that is what an author wants — for her readers to think about the book long after it is read.

#### **Leann Cosley**

"The Good House" was full of suspense. In fact I was so involved with the characters and story line that I could not put the book down. Due is a descriptive author; when you read her words you can see the trees moving in the wind, you can smell the scent of evil that

*The Book Club is a monthly column featuring New Jersey book discussion groups. Tell us about your group. Write to Lynda Pate, The Star-Ledger, 1 Star-Ledger Plaza, Newark, N.J. 07102 or e-mail lpate@starledger.com.*

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