

Looking for a Reading Group?

Try Readerville.com

A Talk With Karen Templer

By John Martin

Of the sites on the Internet that can boast a devoted following, the majority have one thing in common: They encourage and embody the viewpoints of their membership. A site on which content is simply displayed, no matter how regularly that content is updated, eventually becomes tiresome and tends to lose subscribers. The only way to sustain a website as an ongoing interest is to allow it to become a container for the opinions and feelings of the people who frequent it.

This may explain why Readerville.com continues to thrive. Readerville.com, a site devoted to people who read and to all things related to the enjoyment of books, will celebrate its fifth anniversary in summer 2005. It is the brainchild of Karen Templer, former art director for Salon.com, freelance writer, and editor. Templer had also managed *Table Talk*, a forum that Salon.com still maintains for open discussion and free-form opinion. "Before I left [Salon](http://Salon.com), I got really interested in the notion of an online community's ability to affect an industry. Although [Readerville](http://Readerville.com) is about reading and books, it is also about bringing readers and writers and publishers into one common dialogue."

Subtitled "The Social Life of the Mind," Readerville.com strives to give serious readers an outlet not just for thoughts about books, but for the impulses that make people read in the first place, helping them to make sense of a world that is often perplexing and even frightening.

As a testament perhaps to the "rightness" of what Templer had hoped to achieve with the site, fans had already arrived on the scene even before it was launched. "Several active discussions were already under way before we went live," Templer notes. With a total of 746 separate and unique discussions in progress at the time of this writing, Readerville.com offers readers a platform for discussions as diverse as "The Art of the Obit," "Balancing Parenthood & Writing," "Quarreling With Cynthia Ozick," and "Trends."

And what are you likely to discover after dropping in on one of these ongoing discussions? Anything ranging from random comments to considered opinions from the various Readerville.com members, who take very seriously the sense of community and respect for ideas that the site strives to maintain. After becoming a member and posting my very first comment to "Say hello," a thread used to introduce new members to the [Readerville](http://Readerville.com) community, I received more than a dozen responses. The fact that Readerville.com strives to be a place where people can safely share and express their ideas is evident from the moment you visit the site.

Imagining exactly what goes on at Readerville.com, however, can still be a bit difficult until you subscribe and begin working your way through the postings. Click on a topic

such as "Life-changing Books," and you find people talking about books that really did change their lives—which is quite a bit different from the mountains of hype you find almost daily in newspapers, bookstore newsletters, and similar items. What I find particularly refreshing in this age of half-realized e-mails and abbreviations substituting for true communication is the number of well-considered and literate comments people take the trouble to write. It's truly heartening to realize that people who are serious about books are also serious about language.

But Readerville.com is as much a godsend for writers as it is for the people who read their books. The Author Gallery links to more than 50 individual author pages, whose data sheets include everything from lists of awards and books in print (with links designed to facilitate buying the books right on the spot) to detailed synopses and words of praise from fellow practitioners. Templer speaks with all the authors before setting them up with a link. "Not every author is right for Readerville.com, but even if they aren't, I try to steer them in an appropriate direction. Writers can create interest in their books just by subscribing to an appropriate topic and telling the readers who regularly visit that topic about what they have written." With so many knowledgeable and sympathetic readers at Readerville.com, someone looking for an audience soon realizes that s/he has come to the right place.

"Nowadays, writers know that they need a Web presence," Templer explains, "and for some, Readerville.com can provide that presence." Templer also regularly brings in writers for weeklong discussions with the [Readerville](http://Readerville.com) community about their work. "When you compare it to an author tour, where the authors travel all over the country, often on their own dime, just to connect with the public, the Web can provide a far more satisfying and meaningful experience. They can actually talk in-depth about their books and careers, with a sizable group of people, without leaving the comfort of their own homes."

"The people at Readerville.com have been remarkably helpful," says Sheila Kohler, one of the more recent additions to the Author Gallery. Kohler, whose novels include *Cracks*, *Children of Pithivier*, and the recently published *Crossways*, always knew that she needed an identity on the Web, but did not have the technical resources to pursue it. Readerville.com has put her in touch with a community of readers who otherwise might never have encountered her work.

To round out the site, Templer provides a link to a writing workshop (WritingClasses.com) where aspiring authors can learn the craft. Templer and her colleagues also weigh in on memorable cover art beneath the headline of "Most Coveted Covers." It all goes to a cause where language and books are treated with reverence instead of as just so much noise.

Templer's greatest challenge? Keeping up with the maintenance of the site, which until recently she did without charge to her subscribers. "I ask people to pay a monthly fee now, to help with the cost of hosting the site," she explains, "though I do it on an honor system, so people can still visit the site

and get a feel for what goes on before signing up.” But with almost 1,000 discussions to maintain (every comment or opinion ever logged is available to people visiting the site), the time and effort required can become prohibitive—particularly for someone who’s trying to maintain a reasonable balance between running the site and earning a living—a condition unfortunately all too familiar to patrons of serious writing, but one that its subscribers are perhaps in the best position of all to appreciate. ■

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