



## ONE COFFEE WITH: Book Club Discussion Guide

**Margaret Maron on the writing of *One Coffee With*:** *One Coffee With* began as a short story that kept growing. The inspiration was a temporary job I held while living in NY. Although she is younger, prettier, and more naïve than I was, like Sandy Keppler I was secretary to the chair of the Brooklyn College Art Department. The physical layout of the department that I've described is very similar to the real one, and yes, the professors did come through to hang out, bicker, joke and try to drop pearls of perceived wisdom.

What caught my attention though was the cavalier manner in which the chemicals were handled. One forgets that art supplies are not just innocuous oil paint and canvas. The paints can be made from heavy metals like lead and cadmium, etching a metal plate requires caustic acids, photography makes use of toxic chemicals, as I have described in the book. I kept the key to the poison closet in my desk drawer.

My *unlocked* desk drawer.

Qualified students and faculty could sign it out and were supposed to bring the key right back. "Supposed to" is the operative phrase. In practice, the closet was unlocked in the morning and relocked in the evening.

Until that job, I had thought that college faculty members spent their days as in an ivory tower, thinking lofty thoughts and discussing esoteric intellectual ideas. To my surprise, the main topic of general conversation was tenure, followed by grumbling over schedules and lazy students.

It bemuses me to think how much things have changed since this book was first published 30 years ago: typewriters and carbon paper, no copiers, no computers or internet, telephones tethered to a cord in the wall. Nevertheless, tenured jobs, women's rights, and professional rivalry still make good motives unrelated to technology.

### DISCUSSION POINTS:

1. Lt. Sigrid Harald is seen as sexless and humorless by her colleagues. Is she?
2. In Chapter 5, a student describes Nauman's generosity as a teacher: "He'll give you everything he has because his work is built on truth" not technique. Discuss the difference between insight and technique. Who else on the faculty shares Nauman's philosophy?
3. Should the untalented Harley Harrises of the world be encouraged to pursue their dreams?
4. In Chapter 19, Piers Leyden says, "The gallery-trotting, picture-buying public is smart enough to read, but dumb enough to be influenced by self-proclaimed savants." Do you agree?
5. To many of the characters in this book, art is a commodity, not an aesthetic delight. Discuss.

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