This paper reports on a study of The Discourse of Reading Groups (also book clubs, or book groups) – people who meet in one another’s houses and a range of other contexts to share their experiences of reading contemporary fiction and sometimes more established canonical literature. The study is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and has as a major focus the kinds of interpretations and evaluations reading group members provide of the books they read, and how these relate to the professional judgements made by literary critics and academics. We are, however, also interested in how interpretations/evaluations are discursively constructed, and how such literary activity is interwoven with the social, interpersonal and affective demands of group interaction. A striking finding in our analysis is the prevalence of humour in reading group discourse – something we had not set out to investigate, but which became evident as we worked through the data.

In the study we are working with 16 groups. These are geographically dispersed and include groups who meet in different contexts and where there are different types of relationship between participants (e.g. friendship groups who meet in one another’s houses; groups who meet in institutional contexts such as a school, workplace and prison; groups who meet in bookshops or libraries and may not to have other forms of contact with one another; groups with a special interest, such as a gay reading group who read books of gay interest). Our sample includes female, male and mixed-sex groups, though with a majority of female readers. Humour is more common in some groups than others, but occurs across our sample.

In the paper, we draw on a qualitative analysis of transcribed audio-recordings of group interaction. We focus on different types of conversational humour (e.g. conversational joking and, occasionally, joke telling; puns and other forms of word play; irony); how humorous episodes are collaboratively co-constructed in spoken interaction; and the interactional and interpersonal functions with which these are associated. Reading groups vary in the amount of time they devote to talking about the book, and to talk that ranges across other topics and that is seen as having a more obviously ‘social’ function (a distinction made by some group members). Humour occurs across the interaction as a whole, but of particular interest in our analysis is how humour may be closely embedded in literary activity and the literary judgements made by participants.