

The **BOOK** or the **BOND?**

Women find strong
connections in the comfort
of reading clubs **BY STACEY ZABLE**



Writer Stacey Zable's book club

Twelve years ago, a few women in my neighborhood and I formed a book club. What started as a way to share our love of literature ended up rewarding us with long-term friendships. In between dissecting and discussing books, we navigated life together. Acting as a collective support system through trying times, we provided each other with advice on parenting, marriage and divorce, medical issues, career challenges, early retirement, and the health concerns and eventual >

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deaths of elderly parents. Through the years, and perhaps even through the loosening of lips via the wine served during our meetings, we have learned each other's personal highs and lows.

Certainly, our book club's longevity has helped to strengthen our personal bonds. Long-lasting book clubs seem to be typical, according to research from the 2015 Book Group Survey, presented by Readinggroupguides.com, an online resource for book clubs. More than 80 percent of survey participants belonged to a book group that met for five or more years; the largest percentage, 39 percent, met for 11 to 20 years. Among the reasons survey participants joined a book group, 96 percent said it was because they love to read, 88 percent wanted to be introduced to new books and 80 percent enjoyed the company.

Even Hollywood has picked up on the female bonding that dominates today's book clubs in this spring's aptly named movie *Book Club*. Starring some of the film industry's top actresses over age 50, including Jane Fonda, Mary Steenburgen, Candice Bergen and Diane Keaton, the movie weaves in the book club meetings and the risqué *Fifty Shades of Grey* and how it affects each woman. But the real emphasis is on their strong friendships.

Art, in this case, mirrors life for real-life book club members such as New York City school teacher Karri Kaufman, 53.

"Initially, the book club meetings were a place to talk about books that I enjoyed reading and to share that joy with other people that love to read," says Kaufman. "What happened from it and why I love to go now are the friendships and camaraderie. I look forward to it every month."

Kaufman adds that during the book club's beginnings, members would spend 75 percent of the time discussing the book and 25 percent on personal topics. Now, more than 10 years later, she says

the percentages have flipped, with real-life discussions dominating the meetings.

Jenna Kern-Rugile initially joined a club at a local bookstore to prompt her to read more and meet new people, but it became much more for the 56-year-old who is the director of communications for a nonprofit children's mental health agency on Long Island, N.Y. "I didn't know we would grow as close as we have and it would become so important," she says. "It really is a sisterhood."

And like sisters, the personalities sometimes clash. Orna Wittenberg's book club dissolved after five years because some of the members didn't mesh. But despite how things ended, Wittenberg, 49, who works in commercial real estate in San Diego, would love to get into another book club: "The characters and issues in books bring out topics in your own life you wouldn't have thought to discuss and makes it easier to talk about. I miss that."

For Robin Stevens, a teacher from Margate, Fla., the books provide insight about her fellow club members. "We are more brutally honest about parts of life by sharing stories through characters," says Stevens, 52. "It's reading something and being real about how it affects you and your life and getting to know people on a different level."

Book club friendships can often expand into socializing beyond the regular meetings. This is true for Nadia Blake, a 58-year-old from Wilton, Conn., who works in advertising. She joined her book club because she liked the idea of talking to women with different jobs and interests outside of her own profession, and she now considers them friends. She says members have enjoyed outings such as the theater or events at the library and the women get together with their spouses once or twice a year. Blake's advice for a successful book club is simple: "Make it whatever works for you, so that it is fun and you want to keep going back." ■



BOOK CLUB BENEFITS

Teresa Grella-Hillebrand, director of Hofstra University's Counseling and Mental Health Professions Clinic in Hempstead, N.Y., and a licensed marriage and family therapist, says book clubs are a "phenomena" because of these "4 Cs":

CONNECTION

Despite technology's ability to connect us at a moment's notice, there has been a decrease in relationship satisfaction, says Grella-Hillebrand. "We all want to connect," she says. "Book clubs allow us to connect through the shared experience of reading a book."

COMMITMENT

Generally speaking, women are very busy running in 100 different directions, and it's difficult to stick to something that's just for themselves, stresses Grella-Hillebrand. When it comes to reading, many women will want to do it but may put it off because of other tasks. If you are part of a book club, it helps you commit because you don't want to show up at the meeting not having read the book.

CONTINUITY

As a part of a book club, members know that every week at the same time, they will be there with the same people, says Grella-Hillebrand. "It's something pleasurable to look forward to. With all the uncertainty in life and running here and there, it's good to know that on Wednesdays at 8 p.m., I'm coming together with these women and doing something enjoyable."

CAMARADERIE

In the book club, you get together and talk about the book, but you also bond with each other. "You find out about each other's lives and root each other on," Grella-Hillebrand says. "You make friendships that sometimes extend beyond the book club."

— Stacey Zable

READING LIST

Looking for a tome for your group? Check out one of these 10 favorite titles suggested by longtime book club members:



1

YEAR OF WONDERS: A NOVEL OF THE PLAGUE
by Geraldine Brooks;
Penguin Books



2

ONE THOUSAND WHITE WOMEN: THE JOURNALS OF MAY DODD
by Jim Fergus;
St. Martin's Griffin



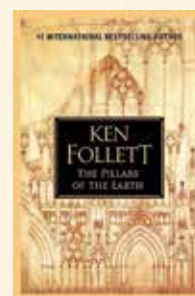
3

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA
by Arthur Golden;
Vintage Books



4

GONE GIRL
by Gillian Flynn;
Crown Publishing Group



5

THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH
by Ken Follett;
Viking Books



6

THE BRIDAL CHAIR
by Gloria Goldreich;
Sourcebooks
Landmark



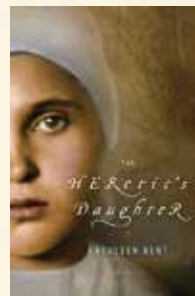
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LOVING FRANK
by Nancy Horan;
Ballantine Books



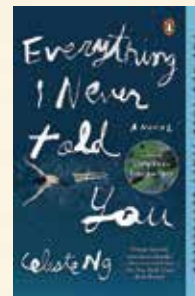
8

THE KITE RUNNER
by Khaled Hosseini;
Riverhead Books



9

THE HERETIC'S DAUGHTER
by Kathleen Kent;
Little, Brown Book Group



10

EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU
by Celeste Ng;
Penguin Books