



Book clubs gone wild

WE JOIN THEM WITH THE BEST INTENTIONS: A CHANCE TO MEET NEW PEOPLE AND ENJOY A NIGHT OUT WITH A LITTLE ELEVATED CONVERSATION. BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THINGS DON'T GO BY THE BOOK?

We all know affordable childcare, honest repair shops and, God knows, a good man are hard to find. But there is another elusive dream that many of us long for, something that enriches our souls and stretches our minds, something that we turn to for solace and stimulation: the book club.

I love my book club precisely because we don't always stick to the book. Talking about *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine led to a rousing discussion about teenage hormones, the state of feminism and lesbian sex. The very night James Frey was revealed to be a big liar-liar-pants-on-fire, we met to talk about *A Million Little Pieces*, but had a hearty debate about Oprah instead. Another evening, we

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collapsed in laughter as one of us admitted to reading the latest Dr. Phil offering (but only because her psychic recommended it).

In our group of nine, most of us have kids, some of us have husbands and all of us have attitude. In the past year or so, three babies were born, two marriages blew up and one of our moms died. During the births and deaths and the stuff in between, some of us dropped out for a while. But we all came back, because even if we don't enjoy the book, we genuinely enjoy one another.

Lynne Kearns, a Calgarian in her sixties, has been reaping the benefits of her book club for more than 35 years. "We've become good friends and I think it's also a very strong support group for things that have happened to all of us as the years have gone on." Since the early 1970s, the women in Kearns' club have read a huge variety of books and shared an even wider array of viewpoints. "We don't all think alike, but we can listen

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to one another's opinions civilly and with respect," she says.

Like me, Kearns only had to accept an invitation to find her beloved book club. But it's not always that easy.

Forty-eight-year-old Melissa Howard* joined a book club in Calgary a few years ago because she was craving literary — and literate — conversation over a glass of wine with like-minded women. "I love reading and I like talking about books, and I was hoping I

would find a book club where I could have really interesting discussions and people would introduce me to books that I would not normally read."

But instead, she found herself slowly simmering in a room full of women who were happy to sit back and nod as one of them talked a ton and said absolutely nothing. Howard knew it was time to get out when she found herself defending a book she hated (Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*) just to contradict the woman who was droning on and on.

"Some of the women in that group were great," she says, "but others would get all freaked out if the book had any sex in it." Despite their prudishness about sex, Howard would watch, incredulous, as some women would get rip-roaring drunk.

So she joined another book club. But that one had a serious snack issue. When it was her turn to host, Howard would put out some cheese and crackers and open a bottle of wine in anticipation of feasting the mind.

Finding a club that fits

SHOPPING FOR A BOOK CLUB can be as difficult as finding that perfect pair of jeans, the one that makes your butt look small and your legs appear long (and happens to be on sale).

Start by asking around and then asking yourself what you're looking for. Do you want a literary triathlon or would you prefer something a little less strenuous? Think English lit class

versus chatting over cocktails with your close chums.

Be honest with yourself about how much time you can devote. There are some months when getting through the book will be a chore. But will you feel like a dope if you're the only one who didn't Google questions and arrive with a stack of research about the author?

Think about how much structure you'd


like in an evening. Do you want to spend three hours talking about plot, themes and character development or would you like the conversation to drift in and out of new jobs and old boyfriends?

A reminder: Pick people you like being with. And there is no reason the book club has to be exclusively female. Make sure you join people who like to read the same

kinds of books you do. While part of the fun is being exposed to new titles, if you want to learn the classics, don't get in with a self-help crowd.

Keep in mind that there are as many types of book clubs as there are pairs of jeans. But unlike the quest for perfect denim, with book clubs you can always create your own. That way, you can tailor it to fit perfectly.





But when it was their turn to host, the other members would lay out sautéed shrimp, homemade phyllo pastries and other fancy treats that took hours to prepare. It was an unspoken but very real competition and while Martha Stewart would have been proud, Howard just rolled her eyes and gave up on book clubs.

Now she just trades books and an occasional stick of gum with the woman across the street. It's a perfect, private book club. "My neighbour buys a million books and then she lends them to me, and then I go over to her house and we talk about them for half an hour and that's it!"

Another Calgarian, Monique Michaels*, admits she's not a great reader and thought a book club would make her read more. "It forces me to read a book a month. I love that. And I wanted to learn from other people who are more proficient readers than I am."

So the 48-year-old joined a book club where she knew three women but, unfortunately for Michaels, they were the three who rarely showed up. Soon, she found herself wearing a strained smile perched in the living rooms of women she barely knew and with whom she had little in common.

They all had kids. Michaels didn't. Most of them were stay-at-home moms. Michaels had a big job. They all lived in one of the swankiest 'hoods in town. Michaels lived a couple of 'hoods over. They all went to the same society parties — except for Michaels.

And it drove her crazy that every month there were at least a couple of women who hadn't read the book. In fact, they barely even talked about it. After a cursory chat about the plot and a character or two, it would be all about the parties and the kids' schools.

Eventually, Michaels had to change her email address and she found her-

self forgetting to alert her book club. She is much more discerning now.

"I don't feel like I see my own friends enough so if I'm going to join another book club, it's going to be with people I want to spend time with," she says. To that end, Michaels is starting up a book club with a group of running friends.

Of course, for every horror story (did you hear the one about the book club that exploded while discussing Tom Harpur's *The Pagan Christ?*), you hear of someone who has lucked out with not one, but two great clubs.

Take my friend and book club compadre Michele Durling, who's in her early forties. For the past five years, she has spent the third Tuesday of every month with our informal book club in Calgary, where the conversation is known to veer wildly from books to boys to babies.

But the second Wednesday of each month, she gathers with her "other book club," a group of women with whom she has little in common except the books they've read. It's a far more structured and formal gathering with a series of questions prepared by the host and a strict no-snack rule until after the book has been discussed.

"It's just a really interesting group. Everyone is so different. The ages are different, the socio-economics are different, the jobs are different," Durling says. "Without my other book club, I wouldn't really have the opportunity to sit down with such a diverse, intelligent and well-travelled group of women and just hear what people have to say."

While she has three kids under five and a business to run, Durling always tries to make time for both of her cherished clubs. Still, she's thrilled when our group picks a title she's already covered in her other club. **M**

**Names changed by request*