

Women's Groups and the Rise of the Book Club

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When New York–based photographer Lynn Gilbert decided to start a book group in 1989, she had no idea where to begin. She longed for a salon-like atmosphere where people could come together to discuss literature and ideas at a high level. “But how do you put a salon together? I don’t know those kinds of people,” she recalls thinking at the time. “Reading groups were not really on the horizon then. Getting people into it was like pulling teeth.”

Gilbert asked other members at her gym. She put up fliers at the bookstore. If she went to a cultural event, she scouted potential members. She finally managed to organize a core group that, 26 years later, is still going strong. Over the years, some members have dropped out, some have moved, but many more have joined. Now, Gilbert finds herself turning prospective members away.

Gilbert’s story is not unique. Since 1989, leisure reading groups have become a full-fledged phenomenon and are now found everywhere from offices to religious communities to, increasingly, virtual platforms. Although exact numbers are hard to come by, [the *New York Times*](#) reports an estimated 5 million Americans belong to a book club. Even more belong to online reading groups like those housed on the popular site [goodreads.com](#), which has 40 million members. Large-scale book clubs even have the power to influence the publishing market. When Mark Zuckerberg announced in January he was starting an online reading group humbly titled *A Year of Books*, his first pick shot up [amazon.com’s](#) sales list, surging overnight from 45,140 to the top 10. The public, it seems, has fully embraced book club culture.

Or, at least, a certain demographic has.

The population of in-person book clubs skews heavily toward college-educated women, and a large proportion of these groups are single-sex, either by default or design. As Audrey Zucker, a founding member of Gilbert’s group, explains, “We didn’t want men. We wanted the female voice, the female point of view.” It appears many women who like to read also like to read in book clubs. A 2014 survey of American women who read at least one book a month found that [56 percent were in book clubs](#), and the majority of those were clubs that met in person.

So why have book clubs become this popular, particularly among women? What do women gain from them, and how do they fit into the history of literary culture? There are a few explanations.

Women’s Education, Self-Culture, and the 19th-Century Women’s Club

From Puritan Bible-study groups to Parisian salons, there are many forerunners to the contemporary women’s book club. Perhaps most significant among these predecessors are the [women’s clubs of the late-19th century](#). Predominantly comprised of white women from the middle and upper-middle classes, these “culture clubs” emerged out of the era’s progressive movements, but instead of social reform, the women met to discuss literature, history, and the fine arts.

One of the first such societies, Sorosis, was founded in 1868, when several female columnists were barred from a New York Press Club event honoring Charles Dickens. Journalist Jane Cunningham Croly, who created the club with a circle of professional female colleagues, took the name from a botanical term: *Sorosis* refers to a type of fruit formed from an aggregate of flowers. Inspired by Sorosis and the New England Women’s Club in Boston, women across the nation began forming similar societies, from the still-running Ladies’ Literary Club of Ypsilanti, Michigan (1878), to the Ladies’ Reading Club of Houston (1885).

These tightly run organizations had hundreds of members who gathered to hear lectures, discuss readings, and generate reports. [May Alden Ward, writing in 1906](#), detailed how these clubs promoted female education: They offered scholarships for women’s colleges, opened public libraries, and even raised money to create a girls’ trade

school in New York. Women's clubs were also active in political and social reforms. Ward states that these societies created "better schools, better surroundings, better industrial conditions, and better laws...the club movement is a beneficent influence in the United States."

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In many ways, these older groups paved the way for women to view themselves as having a rightful place in intellectual culture. The seriousness of their work gave credence to women's participation in public intellectual life, something that today's female book clubbers take as a given. Another strong link exists in the mutual desire for self-cultivation through literature.

For 19th-century clubwomen, [reading great literature was aimed at self-development](#), or what was in that era popularly referred to as "self-culture." Self-culture, similar to today's self-improvement philosophies, called for rigorous study and practice to cultivate one's own intellectual and moral character. Unlike altruistic reform societies, culture clubs allowed women to focus on personal betterment, and this idea of self-improvement through reading remains pertinent to today's readers. Every book club member, male or female, interviewed for this article gave the same reason for joining: They wanted to read more, and they wanted to read books they wouldn't otherwise pick up. For many, reading more is a noble cause in and of itself. But book clubs provide more than exposure to new texts—they offer a social space in which individuals learn and grow through collective intellectual engagement.

Consciousness-Raising and Collective Engagement

The book club's confluence of the individual and collective—where the private act of reading meets the public act of discussion—echoes that rallying cry of second-wave feminism: "The personal is political." The desire to bring women together to better both themselves and their communities was the impetus behind the consciousness-raising ("CR") groups that were foundational to the women's movement of the 1960s and the '70s. Those smaller meetings more closely resemble today's book clubs than the women's clubs of the previous century.

In the late 1960s, New York Radical Women first coined the term "consciousness-raising" and advocated for a model of women's liberation that differed slightly from the mobilizing forces of larger, more bureaucratic civil rights organization. CR meetings united women so they could discuss how sexism had affected them personally and how they might inspire change. The collectivist organizing of the 19th-century women's movement influenced such groups, but they differed in both scale and purpose.

As historian [Voichita Nachescu demonstrates](#), radical feminists wanted to move away from the legal focus of their suffragist foremothers. Instead of creating a revolution that advocated for more rights within a patriarchal system, researcher Alice Home notes CR groups promoted "[greater self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-awareness, and feelings of more independence.](#)"

Zucker points to the influence of such groups as one reason behind her decision to join Gilbert's book club in 1989. "[CR groups] permitted women to be together comfortably. It would have been very difficult for me, earlier, to leave my husband and children at home for the night." Although discussion has shifted away from gender inequality, book clubs continue to provide opportunities to talk over the difficulties women face in their day-to-day lives. CR groups set a precedent so women could feel free to leave spouses, children, and work behind for a night out with other women. And, just as the first wavers' clubs allowed women to view themselves as intellectuals, CR groups permitted them to view their personal experience as significant and worthy of sharing.

Self-Culture, Self-Help, and Oprah's Book Club

If the book club boom of recent decades has any clear starting point, it would be 1996, when Oprah Winfrey launched the book club segment of her enormously popular television program. Oprah's Book Club established a template for millions of women to follow: A few friends discuss the monthly selection over dinner, share personal

stories, and give empathic interpretations of the text. R. Mark Hall calls the popularization of this model the “[Oprahfication of literacy](#).”

Literature, according to the Oprah formula, is a vehicle for learning about oneself: Books have “lessons,” the novels’ characters are potential “friends,” and reading is a transformational act. Hall notes that in the televised segments, moments of tearful confession and self-revelation are favored over rigorous literary analysis. Hall writes, “Here, the uses of serious fiction are not primarily academic, but aimed, instead, at self-help and healing.” This healing is also social: Oprah’s discussions often include references to issues of race, class, and gender, though the language remains loyal to the self-help ethos.

It is perhaps this emphasis on emotion over intellect that has led critics of Oprah’s Book Club to decry its deleterious effects on mass culture. Although Oprah chooses only “serious fiction,” her book club is synonymous with middlebrow culture. Jonathan Franzen famously expressed this sentiment when, after Oprah chose his novel *The Corrections* for the club in 2001, he referred to her previous picks as “schmaltzy” and “one-dimensional.” Franzen also balked at seeing a corporate logo on his book cover. This debate embodied the discomfort writers and academics had with Oprah’s Book Club, which came to represent the commodification of literature and the lowering of literary standards. At the same time, this debate brought up questions of gender bias in the creation of such literary standards. The idea of women gathering to discuss their emotional responses to a work of fiction is an affront to academic ideals of rigorous literary interpretation, and thus reflects poorly on Oprah’s “schmaltzy” choices. Franzen himself worried that being in Oprah’s club [would turn off male readers](#), who might find her seal a sign of low-quality literature catering to sentimental women readers.

Yet the hand-wringing about the middlebrow character of Oprah’s Book Club is nothing new. It is almost identical to earlier debates surrounding the Book-of-the-Month Club, a mail-order book sales club founded in 1926 by advertiser Harry Scherman. The BOMC targeted college-educated Americans who were eager to maintain intellectual pursuits even after entering the workforce. An expert panel of five writers and critics carefully selected the reading lists and included commentary with the monthly mailings.

[Early advertisements for the club](#), running in publications like the *New York Times Book Review*, asked, “How often have outstanding books appeared, widely discussed and widely recommended, books you were really anxious to read...but which nevertheless you *missed*. Why is it you disappoint yourself so frequently in this way?” The remedy to such self-sabotage was obvious: Let the BOMC help you with the important reading you’re missing.

[Critics](#), however, argued that the BOMC, like Oprah’s Book Club, selected books of middling quality and focused on best-sellerdom over true artistic merit.

Both Oprah’s Book Club and the BOMC sold the idea of self-improvement through reading. And though detractors have always argued that they aren’t sufficiently literary, the clubs never, in fact, have attempted to engage with literature for literature’s sake. The same could be said for women across the country who are part of the book club boom. From self-culture to consciousness-raising to self-help, women’s cultures of individual improvement have often had a communal aspect. Book clubs provide opportunities for individual intellectual development, but they also emerge from a tradition that stresses the power of the group to implement social and personal change.

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