

The evolution of American book clubs: A timeline

By [Audra Otto](#) | 09/15/09

1634 On a ship headed for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, religious renegade Anne Hutchinson organizes a female discussion group to examine sermons given at weekly services. Eventually condemned by the Bay Colony's general assembly, the gatherings inaugurated a tradition of women's analytical discussion of serious texts.

1727 Benjamin Franklin organizes a prominent Philadelphia literary society called the Junto. Composed of 12 members, the group met weekly to discuss moral, political, commercial and scientific topics of the day.

Late 1760s Hannah Adams, who went on to become the first American woman to earn a living through writing, joins a reading circle in her village of Medfield, Mass. The circle read and discussed the *belles lettres* and shared their own poetry and prose writing.

1778 Hannah Mather Crocker organizes a similar female reading society in Boston to study science and read the *belles lettres*. Crocker took the radical position of asserting that formal study of science and literature was more suitable to women's dignity than the frivolous activities that society deemed suitable.

Early 1800s Various groups of women in New England begin meeting regularly to discuss serious poetry, nonfiction and publications of the day.

1826 The first American lyceum is founded, launching the lyceum movement. Lyceums were



An illustration depicting the Junto, a literary society formed by Benjamin Franklin in 1727.

voluntary local associations that sponsored lectures and debates on current issues. They attracted such speakers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, Daniel Webster, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Susan B. Anthony. By 1834 there were roughly 3,000 lyceums in the Midwest and Northeast.

1827 In Lynn, Mass., the Society of Young Ladies is established, initiating the formation of African-American women's literary societies in cities throughout the Northeast, including Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Providence.

1840 The first known bookstore-sponsored discussion club in the United States begins meeting in Margaret Fuller's Boston shop. Fuller's "Conversations" seminars for women utilized the Socratic method to examine philosophical questions.

1866 Sarah Atwater Denman starts a women's study group in Quincy, Ill., that comes to be known as Friends in Council. The group, which met in Denman's home to read aloud and discuss literature and philosophy, is the oldest continuous literary club in America.

1895 The Cadmus Club, a male reading group, is founded in Galesburg, Ill. The club held regular meetings, hosted lectures and shared knowledge of book-making and book history. Other male book clubs founded at this time included the Grolier Club in New York, the Club of Odd Volumes in Boston and the Rowfant Club in Cleveland.

1900 Around the turn of the century, women's literary societies are thriving. Progressive Era reading groups arose from women's reform groups, church groups, the National Council of Jewish Women and the American Association of University Women.

1926 Harry Sherman founds the Book-of-the-Month Club, a mail-order business that offers customers a new book each month. An Editorial Board of Judges was responsible for recommending and promoting only the most noteworthy books in any category.

1927 Samuel W. Craig establishes The Literary Guild, a competing mail-order book club. The Literary Guild offered lighter reading selections than the Book-of-the-Month Club, whose titles were deemed more literary.

1950s The Great Books movement sweeps the country. Originated in 1929 by Robert Maynard Hutchins, who developed a curriculum based on a canon of famous Western works of literature and philosophy, the Great Books Foundation was established in 1947 and the Great Books Program developed. In 1952, "Great Books of the Western World" was published in a 54-volume series by Encyclopædia Britannica. By the end of the 1950s, more than 50,000 readers were registered with the

Great Books Program, and countless others were following the curriculum.

1974 The Book-of-the-Month Club launches its Quality Paperback Books offshoot.

1980s Discount chain bookstores make books more widely available, diminishing the need for mail-order book clubs.

1984 Helen Hooven Santmyer's "And Ladies of the Club" becomes a national best-seller after being chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Centering on members of a longstanding book club, Santmyer's novel inspired the formation of book groups across the country.

1996 Oprah Winfrey launches her televised book club, creating a massive book-club boom across the nation. The trendy book-club explosion she spurred continues today.

Late 1990s Online book clubs emerge as an alternative to traditional face-to-face groups. Members of clubs no longer need to meet regularly at an appointed place and time.

Early 2000s Book-group activities become more and more encouraged and mediated by publishers, book retailers and libraries.

Today It's estimated that there are more than 5 million book club members in the United States. Most clubs have 10 or more members. 70 to 80 percent of clubs are all-female.

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COMMENTS (2)

SUBMITTED BY PIXIE ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2009 - 1:53PM.

Our book club dates to 1975. Through its several iterations, we have continued to read women authors and explore all sorts of themes, most recently food. We travel together (Geneve, Paris, Boston, Northern Wisconsin), attend movies when they apply (e.g. Julie and Julia after reading My Life in France), arrange tours of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts on themes about which we are reading, wine and dine, enjoy one another's company and, by far the most important aspect: we read!

SUBMITTED BY SHEILA EHRLICH ON SEPTEMBER 18, 2009 - 8:52AM.

Audra,

You are missing the Chautauqua movement. CLSCs - Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles were originally a way for men and women who lived and worked too far away to be able to study at a university. When they first began the assigned books were in the areas of science, literature, history, economics, Latin, Greek(?), economics, mathematics, etc. If, after 4 years you had read all of the books (and, I think, passed some tests), you received a "degree".

CLSCs are now basically a book club. The Institute in Chautauqua, NY selects the 9 books for study for the year. I think a "degree" is still available. (It was when I was still a member in 2003) The Mitchell CSLC in Blue Earth, MN is the oldest, continuous CSLC in the United States and they just celebrated their 150th (I think) anniversary 2-3 years ago.

Sources would be the Chautauqua Institute in Chautauqua, NY and the Faribault County Historical Society here in Minnesota. They would be able to put you in touch with the current CLSC members in Blue Earth.

I was a member of the Blue Earth CSLC for 12 years. If you have anymore questions, feel free to contact me.