

Book Clubs: Two Personal Accounts

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I talked to two friends from Santa Cruz, Jacquelyn and Jane, about their respective book clubs. Jacquelyn is currently a member and having a very positive experience; Jane was a member six years ago, but dropped out after a year because it was unfulfilling. Jacquelyn and the members of her club are similar in age to the characters in the play. When Jane was in her book club six years ago, she was also around the age of the characters.

Jacquelyn's Book Club

I took notes and asked questions as Jacquelyn spoke ...

She joined seven years ago. She was invited by her best friend, who was a friend of the originator a year after it started. Her friend joined the club because she wanted to socialize and liked to read.

The members of the book club are friends and friends of friends. There's a core of 10 who have stayed faithful to the club. Some others dropped out because of commitment issues. All the members are women. That's the way it has always been, and that's the way the members want it to be.

Jacquelyn told me, "Don't ask me what I've read!"

Some of the members don't read the books because they are busy: they are moms and have jobs. A lot of times, if the book doesn't interest them, they'll say so but they come to the meeting anyway.

It's not a potluck. The person who is going to pick the new book brings drinks, which is usually a mix of wine, champagne and soft drinks. The person who picked the book they are meeting to discuss brings the snack, which is usually dessert.

No one vetoes the book selection--they honor people's individual interests. They read all kinds of books: long, short, novels, non-fiction. The books relate to their individual interests and are usually something that looks fascinating.

Jacquelyn almost never misses the book club meeting and most members try and go.

The members are white except for one who is Asian. All are around the same age--all are thirty-somethings--and all are married with children.

Two members are veterinarians. Two are stay-at-home moms. Jacquelyn is a part-time manicurist and stay-at-home mom. One is a preschool teacher. Another is an elementary school teacher. One is a former writer at the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* and is now freelance. She moved to San Francisco but still comes to the meetings.

One is a physical therapist, and one is a writer who recommends "intense" books, often New York Times bestsellers. Those books are not everyone's choice--some people want to find something unique and unknown.

For Jacquelyn, the book club has been life changing and sustaining. She was new to town when she joined and it gave her a sense of community. In the 10 years since she joined, she got

engaged, married and had babies. Some members have become very good friends. Their talk “goes to their lives”. They visit for a lot of the time and have to tell themselves to talk about the book.

They have “adopted” a family through the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County at Christmas every year for the last five years. Everyone brings gifts.

They meet every 6 weeks. If the books are long, they’ll meet after two or two-and-a half months.

It’s very sustaining for Jacquelyn to belong to the club. The members are great Moms and good people. Being part of it helped her to decide to have children.

Now that most of them have two kids, reading is hard to fit in. They read books related to raising children and childhood development. It used to be that she got really excited about the books and looked forward to them. Now that she is working and has a job, she doesn’t have as much time to read, so it puts a damper on her enthusiasm.

The group socializes a lot outside of book club. If someone is having a party, they are all invited. It’s “very much a social thing”.

She agreed with Ana’s statement, “I came up with it a good 16 months before Oprah. Connection. Bridges, Revelation...all of those were part of my impetus to start the book club. Book Club is a safe haven...a place to read, talk, and to be our authentic selves.” She felt it applied to her experience of book club.

Jane’s Book Club

Jane is in her early forties and an IFS (Internal Family Systems) therapist. She talked about a book club she belonged to six years ago. Below are my questions and her answers.

Q: Started when?

A: 2010

Q: By whom?

A: A couple of girlfriends who brought the idea of doing it when there were a group of us, a group of friends who were all together for a social event

Q: Just women? Some men?

A: Just women. The idea behind it was for the group of us to get together regularly, bring a bite and talk about a book.

Q: How many?

A: Eight.

Q: Was there a reason/meaning behind it being just women?

A: It was socially motivated, a way to be sure our group of women friends met with one another regularly

Q: How long were you in it?

A: One year.

Q: Is it still going on?

A: No, but went on a year after I left.

Q: Did you drop out?

A: Yes.

Q: Why?

A: One reason was that I typically didn't enjoy the books selected. Other was that I started a new job and needed to work that evening. Books weren't a priority then. Truthfully, I could have worked another evening. It was an excuse. I wasn't enjoying the meetings ... non-scintillating conversation.

Q: What did you read? Do you remember any titles?

A: My book was *Zoli*, [a novel about the Gypsies of Eastern Europe, written by Colum McCann] and it's the only one I remember. It's based on a true story about a gypsy woman in the turn of the century. People liked my book, but otherwise, they chose novels that weren't substantial literature. I like reading but only good writing. I was there purposefully, seriously. Half of the others were there for the same reason I was. The others were there to socialize.

I remember that one of the members didn't like *Zoli* because in the beginning of the book, Zoli [the title and main character] was running away from an abusive man. It made her [the book club member] really stressed out and anxious.

Q: Did some not read the books?

A: Yes. Chronically. You knew who wasn't going to read the book.

Q: Why?

A: Lame excuses.

Q: Commitment issues?

A: Not really

Q: Just not interested in the books?

A: Probably more interested in getting together.

Q: How did the non-readers participate?

A: Maybe one of them would try to talk about the book but the conversation would get derailed. There'd be a couple sentences [about the book] among the people who read. Everyone was dating and wanted to talk about that. I wasn't. I was married and the subject [dating] bored me.

Q: How were the books chosen?

A: People would volunteer

Q: Were people's individual interests encouraged?

A: It really didn't come into the choice

Q: Were there vetoes?

A: Majority rules.

Q: Was it a potluck?

A: Yes

Q: How did the potluck work?

A: Everybody brought snack-y, hors doeuvres-y stuff. And wine of course. All about getting together and having a drink and snack. Every time we met, it was at a different volunteer's house. People who didn't volunteer got flak.

Q: What were the ages of members of your book club?

A: Average mid-thirties

Q: The demographic?

A: Mostly single and dating. Two marrieds. Six singles, of which two were previously married. Three Moms. Two had one child and one had two.

Q: Professions?

A: Three were hairdressers. One was in trust fund management. Two were masseuses [Jane was a masseuse at that time]. The others were an interior decorator, a nurse, and a teacher.

Q: Was there Cultural/Ethnic diversity?

A: None.

Q: Did people generally come?

A: Yes

Q: Were there chronic missers?

A: There were one or two that didn't show up as often. It was tolerated. All these women already had relationships with each other established

Q: How often did you meet?

A: Once a month, evening, same weekday. Thursday.

Q: Was there ever contention?

A: Yes.

Q: Over what?

A: Disagreement around one book everybody read. Half the group liked it. A couple didn't and one was really vocal about it. Trying to make everyone feel bad about liking it. She didn't believe the story and it was based on a true story and she didn't like the writing. [She was] Always kind of a big mouth but hadn't been down on any other book. It's because a few people really liked it. It triggered her. She got more intensely negative about one person in particular who liked the book.

Q: Do you agree with this quote from Ana about her book club? "I came up with it a good 16 months before Oprah. Connection. Bridges, Revelation...all of those were part of my impetus to start the book club. Book Club is a safe haven...a place to read, talk, and to be our authentic selves."

A: Mine wasn't that evolved. It felt like part of the book club inception was to say we were part of a book club because of the intellectual aspect.