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THE INNER LIVES OF BOOK CLUBS

A Report on Who Joins Them and Why,
What Makes Them Succeed,
and How They Resolve Problems



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INTRODUCTION

About This Report

BookBrowse is a website and online magazine that has recommended books that entertain, engage and enlighten since 1998. Our carefully curated content coupled with extensive book club resources make us a popular destination for book club members, and those who read to expand their horizons. In the past we have researched the mechanics of book clubs but, until now, we have not looked in-depth at their human side. For example, what do people want from their book club, and why do some groups flourish when others don't? In our quest to get to the heart of this topic, we conducted two surveys, parsing over 100,000 responses from over 5,500 people.

Who Should Read This Report

This report will be of interest to **book club members** looking to gain insight into how other book clubs run, and learn best practices for their own group. **Librarians** and **booksellers** who host book clubs, or advise patrons and customers who are in book clubs will find much of value. It is also of considerable relevance to **authors** and **publishers** wishing to understand the dynamics of book clubs.

Key Findings

There is a widely held perception that book clubs are primarily social groups who use books as a pretext to get together for a gossip and a glass of wine. Our research indicates that this stereotype is far from the reality. While there are some groups that are book clubs in name only, 84% of private book clubs and 90% of public groups spend at least 40 minutes of each meeting discussing the book, and most designate a facilitator to keep the conversation on track. Generally, the longer a book club spends discussing the book, the happier the members are. In groups who discuss for 20 minutes or less, 55% of respondents express themselves "very happy." This rises steadily all the way up to 81% in groups that discuss for 75 minutes or more.

That's not to say that socializing is not important; 71% of those in private book clubs and 43% of those in public groups feel that a social element is very important. But it is generally secondary to the book discussion because, as many of those who value both discussion and friendship observe, it is through the open debate and sharing of perspectives that friendship grows.

Another common misperception is that book clubs mainly consist of women reading "women's" or literary fiction. While 88% of private book clubs are all women, many would be happy to have men in their group, and 48% of public book clubs have male participants. As for what they read, while 70% of book clubs do read fiction most of the time, the qualities that book clubs look for in their books result in most groups reading across a wide range of books straddling multiple genres, including nonfiction; and the longer a group is together, the broader their reading tends to be.

This report shows that the vast majority of book club members share a common interest in focused, stimulating and respectful discussion, with 98% saying that respect for each other's opinions is very important. But that does not mean that they play safe with their book selections so as to avoid differences of opinion. 71% of respondents say that it is very important that their group's choices challenge them as a reader; and, when asked what they personally look for in a book club book, 55% say they are drawn to books that are "a bit controversial."

Of course, disagreements happen and, if they are not resolved, book clubs can disband, or people leave. Common issues include overly dominant participants, poor attendance, book selection, group size, and managing meetings. We explore twelve of these issues in detail, both from the viewpoint of those who left a former group due to dissatisfaction, and current book club members who share their experiences of responding to these challenges.

Despite occasional issues, it is important to note that the vast majority of book club members describe their group as a vital and fun aspect of their life. Book clubbers enjoy a sense of community and, often, personal friendships within their group; but, above all else, they value intellectual challenge and growth.

About the Survey

Interpreting the Numbers

When examining any statistical data, it is important to review the source of the information and understand the potential for bias so as to interpret the results through the correct lens. The bulk of this report is based on two surveys conducted by BookBrowse. Visitors to bookbrowse.com self-selected to participate with the knowledge that the topic was book clubs. In order to look in-depth at the book club experience, we asked those who were currently in more than one book club to pick the group that was most important to them and then answer all questions with just that group in mind. Because the dynamics of online groups tend to be different to those that meet in person, we excluded those whose primary book club met, or used to meet, online. Thus, all information in this report, except Section 5, is based on the experiences of people who are currently in, or used to be in, an in-person book club.

About the Respondents

4,240 respondents took the primary survey, of which 3,705 completed it (see Appendix A for demographics).

- 2,723 were currently in at least one in-person book club. We look at their responses in Sections 1 – 3.
- 1,581 had been in at least one in-person book club in the past that they no longer attended. Of these, 1,101 were also in a current book club (and are thus included in the responses for Sections 1 – 3) and 480 were not currently in a book club. Their combined responses form Section 4.
- 502 respondents read at least one book a month and have never been in a book club. We find out what they think of book clubs in Section 5.

Additionally, 1,434 book club members completed a follow-up survey to provide more depth and clarity on the topics of meeting length and discussion time, and the role of facilitators.

Terminology

The terms “book club” and “book group” are used interchangeably in this report, as they are by respondents – and, as noted above, always in reference to groups that meet in person. Other terms used by respondents include “book discussion group,” “book discussion club,” and “reading group.”