

The pleasures and pitfalls of reading groups

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Reading for pleasure has usually been regarded as a solitary occupation, the closest relationship linking reader and author. 'Reading is an act of entering imaginatively into what the author is saying ... The author/reader relationship is a matter of trust', Jane Dörner wrote in LOGOS in 1993; and Gordon Graham, in 1997: 'the act of reading bonds us, consciously or subconsciously, with the authors'. Ian Norrie claims, 'one of the great joys of reading is that one can succumb to it happily alone'. So personal a matter, the enjoyment of books, that as manager of High Hill bookshop in Hampstead Norrie saw bookselling as 'knowing and stocking what people want, sensitive to the expectations of the public. Real bookselling should mean individual bookselling'. Virginia Woolf writes in *The Common Reader*, 'How should one read a book? ... The only advice that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. ... independence is the most important quality that a reader can possess'. In her twelve-page essay she makes no reference to comparing or sharing one's reactions.

Besides such one-to-oneness in private reading, though, there have been various types of gatherings dedicated to communal reading and discussion of books. The Bluestocking Society of the 18th century; the French salons; university seminars; extramural courses; vacation reading parties; summer schools—all academic in nature, studying rather than exulting in the books, seeking shared enlightenment rather than individual pleasure. Away from academia, lovers of literature band together in literary societies or Workers Education Association's voluntarily convened groups, earnestly appreciative of the texts. Before the era of common literacy, groups gathered to share enjoyment of books at 'Penny Readings' or sewing parties as described by Flora Thomson in *Lark Rise to Candleford*, or on 'reading parties' such as occur in Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn* and *The Book and the Brotherhood*.

Where bibliophiles gather, enthusiasm will always be generated. Norrie writes of his years at High Hill bookshop, 'On Saturdays, when all those regulars dropped in to browse and buy, or sometimes just to gossip, I felt as though I was presiding over a meeting of the faithful'. Shared reading experience may also be enjoyable, bringing extra, different, pleasures from the solitary communion of reader with writer.

Book discussions became a regular part of the programme for an expanding, voluntary women's organization in the UK forty years ago. National Housewives Register (NHR) was founded as a sanity-saving social network for women isolated at home with small children (a normal way of life at the time), who missed intelligent discussion of topics other than domestic. It burgeoned from a letter and article in *The Manchester Guardian* in 1960, into locally-meeting groups of women throughout the country — 20,000 members in 700 groups by 1973; 25,000 in 1,267 groups by 1983. Publicity described it as 'A meeting point for the lively-minded woman ... Most members are married, aged between 25 and 40, and have followed some kind of career before marriage'. Discussion of domestic topics was eschewed: these were women who wanted real mental stimulation, as well as friendship.

Discussion of books was a natural development. NHR's *National Newsletter*, published twice yearly from autumn 1965, records increasing book discussions. In the first issue, the Sittingbourne group reported discussing the Bishop of

Woolwich's controversial *Honest to God*. In 1968 the Swindon group wrote, 'We have read and discussed *Silent Spring* by Rachael Carson. This gives some outstanding facts and figures regarding pesticides and insecticides — so much that it has stirred up some quite strong feeling amongst us. Have any other NHR groups, or members, read this book and if so, what are their reactions?'

Burgess Hill group reported in 1975, 'The books we read proved to be excellent for discussion, and we all felt we had deepened our experience of them by the opportunity to share views on them'. Prestwood group in Bucks noted the criteria for choice of books for discussion: 'either for their literary merits — such as *A day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* or *Lord of the Flies*, or for their social comment such as *Scream quietly or the neighbours will hear* or the Tessa Gill-Anna Coote book on *Women's rights*'.

For the organization of book group meetings, Maidenhead group explained in 1976, 'the book we read and discuss each month is one chosen by a member of the group who has particularly enjoyed it and who leads the discussion at the meeting. During the last year the selection has included authors as diverse as Margaret Drabble, Virginia Woolf, Robert Graves, Anthony Burgess and Jane Austen'. Other strategies were those of Caernarvon, Gwynedd (1978):

'We choose a topic and then select two or three works which will contrast with each other, as well as being discussed individually. Over the past twelve months we have considered books under the headings:

Historical (*Rape of the Fair Country* by Alexander Cordell; *Victoria R. I.* by Elizabeth Longford);

Travel (*Alive* by P. P. Read; *Fatu Hiva* by Thor Heyerdahl; *The Snow People* by Marie Herbert);

Classics: *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens; *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte; *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas;

Autobiography: *The Naked Civil Servant* by Quentin Crisp; Angela Davis;

War: *Commandant of Auschwitz* by Rudolf Hoess; *Carve her Name with Pride* by R. J. Minney; *Assault at Mogadishu* by Peter Koch and Kai Hermann.

A group started in the Shetlands in 1979. 'Ambitions to start a book club hit a snag when the mobile library, calling 3 weeks in every 4, thought it expensive to get around eight copies of one title if it was not popular and likely to be taken out by the general public. The group was working out a way round that; say four copies to pass round and getting them to the fastest readers first.'

By 1980 NHR had six correspondence magazines. 'Membership averages between 10 and 12 members. ... A new venture by one, *Athena*, is a book group within the magazine. Each member can nominate a book to be read by all and each month one of these books is the subject of comment by all.'

In 1983 a Hatfield member looked back in the newsletter: 'For years now our group has had a sub-group for book discussion; an ideal compromise between open discussion on a topic where facts may be lacking, and preparing a subject oneself. All can read the book and voice an opinion; books on social problems, such as Erin Pizzey's *Scream quietly or the neighbours might hear* or Virginia Axline's *Dibs: In search of self* are ideal starters for discussions of particular issues.

We meet monthly, and find attendance smaller than that of main group meetings, but more constant in that the same

people tend to come each time - not necessarily those who also attend the general meetings most frequently. For each book, one member undertakes to prepare an introduction to start the discussion, giving a brief account of the author's life and other works, outlining the main themes (not plot!) of the book, and giving their own reactions.

'I drew up the first list of books for our discussions, leaping unashamedly at the chance to impose my own favourite reading on others and hear their opinions of it. Subsequent book group organisers have followed sterner principles of selection; one decided to include an example each of a classic, a work in translation, a modern writer, a poet, short stories, a social problem, comedy and science fiction.

'The list is supplied to the local library in advance, and the books kept in reserve for us each month. The organiser keeps track of who has copies.

'Asked to draw up another list some years after my first stint, I was delighted, but wondered uneasily whether I had used up all my suitable favourites first time round. No problem; I had discovered others meantime, and found again the added zest in book group meetings of introducing members to marvellous books they had missed, so that one feels smugly that Anthony Powell, for instance, is one's own personal protégé.

'Particularly successful books for the group have been: *Children at the Gate* by Lynn Reid Banks, which has great emotional impact for all mothers, and leads to discussion of adoption of children, kibbutzim, and the Arab-Israeli conflict: a tongue-loosening book.

London Girl of the 1880's by Mary V. Hughes, one of a sequence of four autobiographies by a pupil of the North London Collegiate, one of the first girls' schools in this country, who went on to be principal of the first women's teacher training college - with no existing syllabus or texts. A fascinating account of family life and women's education a century ago. It was such a hit with our group that copies continued to be handed round long after the meeting, members' mothers and daughters enjoying it too.

Picnic at Hanging Rock by Joan Lindsay. Another picture of girls' education, early this century in Australia. A haunting, mystifying story; can we work out what really took place?'

Plays or play-readings were sometimes included in groups' book discussion programmes, or play-reading groups might sprout from the book discussion groups. Hatfield NHR book group announced its play-reading offshoot in 1978 under the heading, 'To the book group — a daughter', commenting, 'A 3-act play can, just, be read in an evening with time remaining for discussion, by being stern about starting on time, unfussy about reading parts of inappropriate sex, age, character, and doubling parts when necessary. Successful choices have been — *The Crucible* and *All My Sons*, both by Arthur Miller; *The Cocktail Party* by T. S. Eliot; *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols; *The Fire Raisers* by Max Frisch; *Getting On* by Alan Bennett; and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard.' Borehamwood Group reported, 'We read *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley; a dash to get through, and what a twist at the end!'

NHR changed its name to National Women's Register in 1987. NWR groups today continue to include book discussion among their regular activities, sometimes enhancing them by inviting authors to attend the meetings. Stoke-on-Trent has recently been visited by Jim Crace and Barbara Trapido.

The National Book League (formerly, until 1945, the National Book Council; subsequently, after 1986, Book Trust), included among its book-promoting activities the organization of meetings of readers with authors coming to talk, answer questions and sign books. They planned to establish outposts: the Suffolk Book League was the first, and, as it proved, the last. It was set up in 1981, and still holds ten meetings a year, in Ipswich, with invited authors over a spread of literary genres. Through the country, there are many such

general literary societies, as well as the sub-genre of societies devoted to particular authors (see 'The world's literary societies: Torch-bearers for famous (and not so famous) authors', LOGOS 8.2 70-74). Now such book discussion groups as those above have become pop, as 'reading groups'.

In 1996, on American television, Oprah Winfrey gave the formation of reading groups a mega-power kick-start by opening 'Oprah's Book Club', a monthly programme promoting a single book each session - 28 of which straightway became bestsellers. In LOGOS (vol. 11, 'The serendipitous bestseller'), John Maxwell Hamilton designates her 'not a book reviewer in the sense one normally defines the term. She is a book cheerleader. ... She gushes "wow" over and over as the author talks ... The audience, more thrilled to be with Oprah than the author, clap on cue'. Reviewing Hamilton's book, Stephen Horvath called her 'the most successful practitioner of book promotion'.

Cynthia Crossen, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* (13 July 2001), summed up the 43 books endorsed so far by Oprah's Book Club as 'portraying the modern world as unrelentingly treacherous and joyless ... no appreciation for ambiguity or abstract ideas is required for most of these works. The biggest literacy challenge of some is their length.'

In the aftermath of this 'Book Club' — again, 'not in the sense one normally defines the term' — general, informal, non-intellectual, social, home-based 'reading groups' have become a burgeoning phenomenon. 50,000 of them in Britain and 500,000 in America, with between one and five million members, have been estimated. The original parent organizations may be public libraries, women's organizations or formal education courses, but they have developed and multiplied as a new form. Drusilla Calvert, member of a Newcastle book group, observes, 'The uncanny thing is that almost all book groups seem to choose the same books! The Radio 4 book programme discussed Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* (not, I should have thought, an obvious choice for a ladies' book group!) just a few months after we did it. On three different occasions last year, films of the book we were reading were on TV the same week or month. This year we're trying to be a bit different, and have chosen *Catch 22*, *On the Road* (Jack Kerouac), and Francis Wheen's biography of Marx - but I bet that this turns out to be just what all the other groups have done to try to vary things a bit!

Dr Jenny Hartley of the University of Surrey Roehampton carried out a survey of 350 of them in the UK, and gives a full, detailed report of her findings in *Reading Groups* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Tables of statistics of groups' characteristics are given: — their age, size, location, place and frequency of meetings; age, sex, education and paid work of members. There are appendices listing relevant publications, guides, websites, and sample group booklists.

This is a particular type of reading, social rather than privately pleasurable, literary or intellectual. Hartley calls it 'active and interactive', 'reading in the community rather than the academy', 'embedded reading', and writes, 'The premium is on empathy, the core reading-group value: empathy between reader and character, author and character, and between all the readers in the room'. There are new species of group leaders to aid them, known variously and astonishingly as advisers, co-ordinators, counsellors, facilitators, therapists, and 'enhancers', sometimes in costume. Good Books Lately is a book group consultancy in Denver. In North America there is an Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders.

The emphasis for the reading groups lies often on aspects other than the bookish. Personal relationships among the group may predominate and pre-empt proper discussion. Hartley records instances: 'Favourite books tend to inhibit open discussion as people may hesitate to criticize the work'; 'Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* was dire. It was difficult because the person who chose it, loved it. Everyone else felt they had to be diplomatic'; 'One member left after an unfortunately acrimonious conversation with another ... the

repercussions are still around'; 'A personality clash between two members is beginning to get in the way'; 'One member annoys me most weeks'; 'We had to disband at one stage for six months as two members did not want to talk about books as much as have a social evening. Then we started up again without letting them know'. Groups have been described as 'Girls' night out' and 'the modern equivalent of stitch-and-bitch sewing bees'.

The groups' taste and choice of books get careful consideration in Hartley's book. The amalgamated lists of books read provided a total 2,816 titles over an enormous range, analysed and categorized in various ways: according to type of books (drama, fiction, nonfiction or poetry), with nationality and sex of the authors, date of first publication, numbers of times titles recurred in the lists; the top 50 authors and top 30 books read by groups. These do not coincide with lists of UK bestselling and most popular books and authors of the periods — perhaps because it is more difficult to obtain library copies of books during their peak public popularity. The overall groups' favourite proves to be *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*; next, *Angela's Ashes*, then *The God of Small Things*.

Such choices received scant regard from Hugh Massingberd, reviewing Hartley's book in *The Spectator* ('Seriously furrowed middle brows': 24 March 2001). He contemned them: 'what Anthony Powell memorably dismissed as "pretentious middlebrow verbiage of the worst kind" ... the usual pseudo-intellectual piffle'.

Choices of books may be restricted to particular classes. A group in New York discusses only books by deceased authors: BBC, 'Books by Chicks', in Illinois, only books by women.

Hartley records some groups' reactions to classics:

'One member loved Austen, one gave up after two pages, and most people thought it OK. Didn't go far.' Of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, they pronounced 'complicated sentence structure made it a real chore to read - although we all plodded through it, hopefully, but it didn't improve; however, we liked the cover of the book'.

Group verdicts may be forthrightly expressed. Beryl Bainbridge attracts particular criticism: 'She appears 44 times on lists of books read recently, with five different novels, so groups are reading her, but protesting as they do'. Her novel about the Titanic, *Every Man for Himself*, read by 27 groups, was greatly disliked:

'Not one member of the group enjoyed it; in fact we all thought it was so bad that none of us wish to read Beryl Bainbridge again. We found it boring and without any substance whatsoever.' 'We hated the characters and couldn't wait for the Titanic to sink.'

Dodie Smith, author of the highly regarded novel, *I capture the castle*, also showed scant regard for the judgement of the common reader, according to her biographer, Valerie Grove. 'When the Literary Guild ordered 550,000 copies, Dodie was dismayed: they were lower brow than the Book of the Month club ... They demanded some cuts, and ... they would have preferred Cassandra to marry the humble Stephen. "I see", she wrote in her journal, "how dangerous to the integrity of the author these book clubs are".'

Another shift of emphasis in 'reading group' meetings may be to creature comforts. There are groups for which 'eating is the driving force', Hartley says. 'Americans make food more central to the event.' One group, as she puts it, 'admitted its true agenda and came out as a dining-group'; one in New Jersey is called, 'Mostly We Eat'. A group enjoyed a supper consisting entirely of dishes featured in novels: 'ranging from the spinach pasties in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, through cold ham, cold tongue etc. from *The Wind in the Willows*, to *Cakes and Ale*, Beaujolais and Brie (the suicide supper in *Jumping the Queue*), and a fruit salad which incorporated the titles of four books and two plays'.

All-male reading groups described by Hartley include one that enjoys 'mouth-watering spreads' provided by wives and sisters, another whose host 'takes the day off to prepare the meal served, and the next to recover', a third with a strict rule, 'the bottle of whisky is opened at ten o'clock and must be finished by the end of the evening'. (69% of the reading groups surveyed are all-female; only 4% all-male.) Hartley is going on to research the differences between men's and women's choice of and attitude to reading.

An art institute book-keeper editor, Jan Kaufman, describes her group in Oakland, California:

'For several years I've been in a reading group of twelve women, 'The Book Club'. I think the books are of less importance than the social occasion. We take turns meeting at each other's houses. Two members come very long distances and stay overnight.

'The hostess leads the discussion about the book she's chosen. This may involve going around in a circle with each person speaking in turn - or, frequently, with the heaviest wine consumers talking the most. The books are usually the more obvious ones from the best-seller lists, preferably available in paperback.

'We rotate bringing the food and wine which play an important role in the evenings. Four people bring wine, one brings liberal snacks of fruit, cheese, crackers, and patés, another brings dessert, and the hostess provides coffee. For the discussion of Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun*, I made a recipe given in the book for a polenta cake with a custard filling topped with toasted pine nuts. I thought it added a little literary flavor.

'On the notices members' birthdays are listed, and some kindly souls bring cards or presents for these when a meeting falls near these dates. One pleasant custom is that whenever we're travelling we gather souvenir bookmarks to bring back to the Book Club.'

Another sociable US book group stemmed from an academic course. Dr Frauke Lenckos, lecturer in English Literature in Chicago, writes:

'Our group, called the ABC or Accidental Bookclub, started in December 2000, born out the desire of participants in my seminar on women writers, "The Passionate Language of Geography," to continue as a group of readers. We are a mixed group, ranging in age from 22 to 65, including a retired traveller, a theatre director, a medical and a family lawyer, a finance consultant, an interior decorator, an administrator for the Merchandise Mart Chicago, a paralegal, a banker, a student, and a professor. We meet once a month, and the person who hosts the meeting usually provides a dinner, as we share not only literary but also culinary appetites.

'As my seminar concentrated on English writers, we have moved on to other nationalities and read Simone de Beauvoir and Norma Zeale Hurston so far. In the next months, we will try a taste of Margaret Atwood and Penelope Lively who, though English, gives a pertinent insight of how it was to grow up a child in a foreign country.'

There are groups all round the world: Hartley records them in Australia, France, Germany, Greece, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and throughout the US. Ex-patriates particularly enjoy them. They have spread, too, beyond physical locality. There are Internet reading groups; David Freeman runs a website called *relaxwithabook.com* carrying interviews with authors, as well as a book programme on Sky TV; Oprah's Book Club continues monthly, still, on television; Radio 4 Bookclub in the UK; *The Times* has established a Weekend Readers club' in its Saturday editions, the *Daily Mail* in *Mail on Sunday*. The President of the Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders is also co-ordinator of online information services for book groups. Christine Headley started a virtual book group — VBG, indeed — by posting a message to about a dozen e mail discussion groups she belonged to. Soon she had about

sixty VBG members (almost all women), with herself as list manager. Some dropped out, but others came in, and the group size has remained constant. She says, "VBG isn't widely publicised as I want to keep it as a 'friends of friends' group; if too many people were to try to join in a short space of time, I would stagger their arrival on the list.

"I chose the first two books, one a month — *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *The Vintner's Luck*, and members nominated and voted for subsequent monthly choices: *Chocolat*, *Possession* and *Angela's Ashes*. *The Blind Assassin* was also elected, but was not available in paperback — a necessary criterion. In future I plan to have votes for four titles three times a year.

"We exchanged about ninety messages on *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*; *The Vintner's Luck* was slower, only about thirty. Virtual discussion of *Chocolat* has made a brisk start."

An Australian group, in a rural coastal area, a village of about 250 people in New South Wales, meets every second month in each other's homes. The twelve members choose the books themselves in rotation, and buy twelve copies from the local bookshop, who gives them a group discount (about 10-20 per cent). Each member pays \$25 (Australian — about £11.35) into the kitty per meeting. Each member gives a review of the book, which they discuss, then have a supper ('this tends to get more and more sumptuous!'). 'Any extra money in the kitty is rounded up from time to time and they go out on the tiles.' Books recently read there are:

Snow falling on Cedars by David Guterson

Shiver by Nikki Bemmell

The Belarmine Jug by Nicholas Haslinck (or Hasluck?) (good discussion)

The Reader by Bernard Schlink (very good discussion)

The Pilot's Wife by Anita Shreve

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

Closed for Winter by Georgia Blain.

The new type of reading groups has been spotted and fostered by the book industry, which now offers them sponsorship in abundance. Orange Reading Groups were launched in the UK in 1997 by the founders of the Orange Prize for Fiction together with National Heritage, Book Trust, Waterstones, the National Organisation for Adult Learning, and European Social Fund. They produce a free pack to help readers to set up groups. Penguin has set up The Penguin Readers Group website, offering each month a featured author, book and classic (their distinction), cult book (ditto), reading guides, Readers Group Diary, special offers, contact notice board. Random House has been producing reading guides to single books, offered as a free resource to reading groups, since 1997, and now has over fifty available. These include extracts from reviews, suggested topics for discussion, suggestions for further reading and other books by the same authors, and 'some soundbites which may provide a jumping point for discussion'. The guide for *Kiss & Kin* by Angela Lambert quotes the author:

'I am a passionate fan of reading groups, which seem to me the perfect way to read a dozen good books a year with care and attention, and compare notes afterwards. The variations in people's critical responses are fascinating and often prompt me to re-evaluate my own. It is the best possible way to encourage serious, in-depth reading, often of authors one might not otherwise pick up - and the gossip afterwards is great fun, too!.

Random House also sponsors Red Fox Reading Gangs that meet after school, 'encouraging reading and discussion in a fun and non-classroom-based way', as their Group Marketing Executive, Liz Smith, describes them in *newBooks.mag*.

North America has the world's most reading-group-friendly book industry, according to Hartley. Bookstores routinely offer discounts for registered groups, and publishers offer free reading guides and reading-group

gazettes. *The Wall Street Journal* reported (15 January 1999), 'In 1990, Barnes & Noble had just one in-store book group; now all its 500 stores host at least one. ... The industry that has sprung up around book clubs is booming — with books on forming book groups, "facilitators" paid to lead them and published guides to decipher bestsellers.' 'Politics and Prose', a bookshop promoted as 'the polestar of the most literate people in the [American] nation's most literate city — Washington', with only 550 square metres of selling area, devotes 90 of them to its coffee shop, and holds nightly author talks that prove highly popular; some are televised throughout the US. It also services about a hundred and fifty reading groups (including the Vegetarian Society Book Club). Some meet in the store, monthly, free (it's open till 10.30 pm Monday-Thursday, till midnight Friday & Saturday); others around the city. Titles selected for discussion are offered to registered bookgroup members at 20% discount, bought in and posted on request. Notices of new clubs forming are displayed in the store, and books that groups are reading shelved near the main checkout island. One of the owners, Carla Cohen, says, 'Book groups have taken the place of bowling leagues'. 'Politics and Prose' combines the advantages of 'the physical bookstore' with the facilities of the Internet, maintaining a website that announces dates of reading group meetings and books to be discussed, suggestions for titles, and allows e-signing up to receive a weekly emailed update.

Another who has recognized the potential of reading groups to foster the habit of reading and purchase of books is former publisher Guy Pringle of Wokingham, Surrey. He explains, 'After nearly twenty years in publishing I felt there was a niche for a magazine to support the sudden growth of reading groups. Using the redundancy money from HarperCollins, and their support (together with that of Random House and The Women's Press) in my new venture, I published the first issue of *newBOOKS.mag*. in November 2000 — and sold all 3,500 copies. I had to prove it could be done in order to convince other publishers that the concept was viable and — more importantly — that it would help promote their books in a cost effective way. Many of my contacts in the library sector believed in what I was doing and bought into the idea. I have now supported my supporters with professionally produced Point of Lend materials - a pillar poster and bookmark, to help them promote the magazine and the books featured therein.

'The mix of books has been from the well known and much loved (Ruth Rendell/Bernard Cornwell) to the first-time authors that I believe deserve a wider audience (Bill Broady, Diane Smith and Ha Jin for starters). Then there are the authors (Joan Barfoot, Sue Woolfe) who I am sure would appeal to a wider audience - if they just knew they were there.'

The second issue of *newBooks.mag* appeared in January 2001, 34 pages, A4, glossy, with colourful cover, copiously illustrated and including plenty of mini-reviews as well as articles, and of course advertisements, well tailored to the reading group market. The size and print run of further issues are to increase, and Pringle hopes to organize readers' conferences involving publishers, authors, and librarians.

So are reading groups 'a fantastic social activity', as Liz Smith calls them? Is the reading group 'an institution with a lot going for it: a rich past, a vigorous present, and a phenomenal future', as Jenny Hartley concludes her book? How does all this affect the present and future of reading itself? The original groups focused their attention, sole or communal, on the books themselves, their content and significance. The new type of group dilutes members' attention with food, drink, conviviality, inter-group personal relationships, outings, celebrity (author) acclamation. Perhaps it is a popularization of reading in two senses — both broadening its appeal, and dumbing it down. Ian Norrie suggests caustically, 'I suppose group reading is a good idea for those who are reluctant to be drawn to books'.

Norrie is not the only doubter. A Rockford, Illinois member observed, 'Many in our book group have mentioned how differently we read a novel when we know we'll be discussing it in the group ... Our group has an informal rule that each member should bring a discussion question or two to class'. An Oxford English graduate recoiled: 'This must explain my aversion to the idea of taking part in a book group discussion. I don't want to have to read a book with a view to noting passages, themes, etc. which would provide material for discussion with others. I would rather start reading a book just for enjoyment, with an open mind. I suspect it would take some of the pleasure out of it to know that I would have to

give an account of the book to others. Too much like preparing for a tutorial when I was at university! I do so much reading for work purposes — I want to have some books that I can read just for my own pleasure.'

Perhaps, in the case of reading, a pleasure shared is a pleasure adulterated.

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