

NHR /NWR Book Groups through forty years

Hazel K.Bell

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 Guardian* in 1960, into locally-meeting groups of women throughout the country - 20,000 members in 700 groups by 1973. Publicity described it as, 'A meeting point for the lively-minded woman', stating, 'the only qualification for membership is a lively and enquiring mind. 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.

Regular national newsletters began to be issued, twice yearly. The development of book groups within the local NHR groups can be traced through these.

In the first newsletter, in 1965, the Sittingbourne group reported having discussed John Robinson (Bishop of Woolwich)'s *Honest to God*. In 1971 the Great Yarmouth group had consolidated its 'literary group', with a reading list drawn up for the next six months. The following year Newton Abbot group wrote, 'we have a diary of book reviews written by members who are avid readers in the hopes of helping non-bookworms to get more enjoyment from reading'. Book discussions became regular features of most groups' programmes. Burgess Hill wrote (1975), 'The books we read proved to be excellent for discussion, and we all felt we had deepened our experience of the books by the opportunity to share views on them'. The books cited were *Journey into silence* (Jack Ashley), *I never promised you a rose garden* (Hannah Green), *The descent of woman* (Elaine Morgan), *Watership Down* (Richard Adams). Prestwood group in Bucks provided a note on 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'. The Autumn 1976 *National Newsletter* gave the first list of suggestions for book discussions, and asked for more, 'avoiding the obvious: *Watership Down*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Scream quietly or the neighbours will hear*, have been discussed by many groups already'. The books recommended were: *In cold blood* (Truman Capote), *The Stepford wives* and *This perfect day* (both by Ira Levin), *Children's rights* (Adams, Berg ed al), *Games people play* (Eric Berne), *The death of grass* (John Christopher), *Consuming passions* (Philippa Pullar). Further suggested titles, and reports of group discussions, were given in the following issues. For example, these four reports:

Caemarvon, Gwynedd, 1978

We have a thriving book discussion group, meeting every four weeks with approx. eight members attending. 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 following 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 (as a playreading).

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.

Of these titles some stand out as having been more successful than others for discussion.-

Alive - The account of and reasons for the survival of sixteen young Uruguayans after an air crash in the Andes. Their faith and courage make compulsive reading, as does their account of cannibalism. Not a pleasant book but well worth reading.

Fatu Hiva - The author and his wife go to a desert island to carry out an experiment in 'back to nature' and 'self sufficiency'. The trials and tribulations make for discussion; but was it necessary to go to the Pacific to get back to nature?

The Naked Civil Servant - Autobiography of a self-confessed homosexual who rose to prominence in the early 1930s. He tells his story with a touch of humour, but nevertheless the social attitudes to eccentricity made for discussion. This book was found to be either fascinating or else a confidence trick. (Hilda Thompson)

Bedford, Beds, 1978

Our Book Group meets weekly in the morning. The reading for a whole term is chosen at a planning meeting, then all books for the term are purchased together for those who request them. This means an initial large cash outlay, but ensures that when the time comes to discuss a book, most people will have read it!

We read two-three major novels per term, interspersed with poetry, plays and 'oddments' recommended by members. A recent selection is:

Tess of the D'Urbervilles and *Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy; *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot; *Emma* by Jane Austen; *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. These six were chosen because we felt we had probably read them (or been made to read them) when we were too young to appreciate their subtleties.

The Outsider by Albert Camus; a good introduction to existentialism - Meursault, the protagonist, observes the facts of life, death and love from 'outside'.

The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley; a beautiful study of adolescence, with overtones of class warfare and Edwardian morality.

We have also all bought copies of *The Penguin book of English short stories*, which is useful for selecting two or three stories to fill a blank week; and *The new poetry* (Penguin), from which we have taken individual poets to study - Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas. (Sue Allen).

St. Albans, 1978

One of our problems has been circulating the one or two copies of books available in time for the deadline; but we circumvented this recently when we chose to read different autobiographies by the Mitford sisters, to see how the one home background could have spawned such different offspring.

Diana Mosley's *A Life of Contrasts* was read, together with Jessica Mitford's *A Fine Old Conflict*; although Nancy Mitford's *Hons and Rebels* might perhaps have been a better choice. Some of us tried the biography of Unity Mitford by John Price Jones, but found it very heavygoing. The idea as a whole, however, was a success, and we hope to 'do' the Kennedys in like fashion later on.

We all found *Go Ask Alice*, by an anonymous drug addict, a horrifying but revealing diary of how a nice, middle-class girl took a wrong turning on to the path of destruction. All of us resolved that our children should read it as soon as they were old enough. Another most stimulating discussion was on Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*, and his new book *Bodylanguage* is on our list for future use. (Pippa Collingwood)

Trowbridge, 1979

Our Literary Group held its first meeting some three and a half years ago. Members meet monthly and we plan our programme to cover four or five meetings ahead. We have no set pattern, members suggest items which they have already read or feel would make for an evening of interesting discussion. To avoid the problem of lack of availability, we try to choose something in paperback. From Austen to Solzhenitsyn, Thackeray to Ken Kesey and a great deal in between, many works have been enjoyed by the group.

We have listened to recordings of the works of Chaucer and Dylan Thomas, followed by discussion. We have theatre visits; the last one was to see R. C. Sheriff's play *Journey's End* which we preceded by an evening devoted to reading the play. Our poetry evenings have been successful after facing the initial reluctance of some members to read poetry aloud. Our study of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* prompted a day out in Hardy country very much enjoyed by everyone.

For more detailed study, we chose the *Life and Works of Katherine Mansfield*, and another project involved reading three novels and the short stories of Susan Hill. This meeting

was open to the whole NHR Group and there was a surprisingly good turn-out, everyone having read at least one book.

Particularly stimulating discussion has arisen from the following books: *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence, *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles; and *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling.

Much of the pleasure derived from belonging to our small group is the enthusiasm and committal found within it. Everyone is prepared to take a turn in doing some basic research and leading a meeting, and this is refreshing and encouraging. (Joan Davies)

Play-readings

Plays or play-readings were sometimes included in groups' programmes, or play-reading groups might sprout from the book discussion group. 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!'

Nowadays

NHR changed its name to National Women's Register in 1987. Now NWR groups continue to include book discussion among their regular activities. Hatfield group meets weekly, with one meeting a month a book discussion. The book is chosen by the member who will open the discussion with a short talk outlining the life and career of the author and their other works, then focussing on the book in hand, before members' opinions and reactions are pooled. The programme of books is drawn up in advance at the group's twice-yearly planning meetings, and the list of books given to the local public library, where a collection of copies of each title are collected each month, available on request to NWR members.

-- by Hazel K. Bell in *newBOOKSmag* No. 4, 2001