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'My most memorable occasion was when we went slumming and read Danielle Steele.'

— Walt Allen,
Great Books club



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Books clubs say they are a great way to keep the romance of literature alive.

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Book Worms

"... the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader; the profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mind until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

By CHRIS WATSON
Sentinel staff writer

FOR SOME, cracking a book isn't all it's cracked up to be. Millions of non-readers would rather walk on hot coals than endure the pain of the written word, but those unfortunate souls learned early in life that reading a book was nothing but a tortuous rite of passage into adulthood.

But — Ah! — for the reader who was weaned on words, who associates the golden days of youth with the romance and adventure of literature, the enrichment of reading is a passion that can never be quenched.

Many passionate readers have discovered that book discussion groups are a great way to keep the romance of literature alive and, bye the bye, not a bad way to spend an evening or two a month.

Ben Rice's book group is a good case in point: the heady mixture of good books, food and drink and friends makes the monthly meeting an event all 10 or so members look forward to eagerly.

"We rotate hosting duties every month," Rice said. "We spend the first hour catching up on each other's lives over a glass of wine and the second hour discussing the book."

Most recently, they've been reading John Irving's "A Prayer For Owen Meany."

Rice is enthusiastic about the group because "after college there is no op-

portunity to get involved in this kind of discussion. Our members have a variety of professions and we each have special insights into the books we read."

The group has been meeting for five years and the members have weathered divorce and death and remain a cohesive group.

"We rate each book from 1 to 10, compare it with other books, discuss authors, criticism, etc. and then we have coffee and a fabulous dessert."

The group reads only fiction but classics form the bulk of their diet, including such authors as Marcel Proust, Emile Zola, Henry James, Yasunari Kawabata, Wallace Kennedy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Robertson Davies. At one time they tackled

19th-century authors and another time they dissected the works of Hemingway. Hemingway came out a little scathed.

One group meeting was turned into a weekend getaway to Carmel, where the members rented cottages, swam, shared a potluck meal, read books and watched videotaped film interpretations of the books — "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and Marcel Pagnol's "Manon of the Spring" and "Jean de Florette."

Courtney Welles' book group also plans special evenings, especially during the Christmas season when it is not uncommon for the group to meet over dinner and exchange books.

The group of 10 readers is just start-

ing its seventh year and they meet 10 months out of 12. The person who selects the book for the next month hosts the meeting.

"The books reflect different people's taste," Welles said. "People are revealed through the books they choose. I like this way of choosing books because then I read things that I might normally avoid."

Welles said the group got started after she read Helen Hooven Santmyer's book "And the Ladies of the Club," a book about a women's literary group that formed after the Civil War.

Some of Welles' favorite choices include "Cold Sassy Tree" by Olive Burns, "Prince of Tides" by Pat Conroy, and "Beloved" by Toni Morrison. The group also reads non-fiction like "The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat" by Oliver Sacks and popular fiction like Scott Turow's "Presumed Innocent."

One book club with a grand tradition in this country is the Great Books Discussion Group. First conceived in the '50s, the national group publishes a list of 200 or so classic pieces of literature including "all the titles and authors you recognize but have never read," according to Margaret Brezel, a local Great Books leader.

Margaret Brezel and her husband have been involved with the group for, respectively, 25 and 45 years, although the local group is only about 14 years old. Since they have read the titles on the list many times over, they have modified the selections to include other works. Currently, the group is reading from a short-story collection.

Favorite characters touch readers' hearts

- Ben Rice: "My favorite character in a recent book is Alba in *House of Spirits* by Isabelle Allende. Despite witnessing human folly, ignorance and cruelty, she comes to a profound love of life and the human condition."
- Frances Schacht: "I love Sam Spade — especially in *The Maltese Falcon*. He's a brilliant character and introduced a new American type. He was a rough knight who didn't just do his job for money. He had heart — something that's lacking today."
- Walt Allen: "I'm most impressed by MacBeth because he goes from one extreme to another. Here is a man who changes from being an extremely loyal and patriotic general to being the disloyal murderer of the man he once served."
- Margaret Brezel: "I'd say Billy Budd because Melville drew such an interesting portrait of innocence. Billy is complexly innocent."
- Courtney Welles: "As a young girl I loved Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. When I read it as an adult I loved her again. She's romantic and I am too and I like her ability to overcome adversity, her eternal optimism."
- Raissa Allayaud: "Hamlet. I like his mind and he suffered so much, it touched my heart. He was an intellectual man, a thinker — and that appeals to me."

Books

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"We've been reading about 30-40 pages a month, so it's not too much," Brezel said. To break up the short selections, the group has chosen four longer works to read this year: "The Dubliners" by James Joyces, "Billy Budd" by Herman Melville, "Walden" by Henry David Thoreau and "Of Human Bondage" by Somerset Maugham.

"The group is a congenial, pleasant blend of people from many walks of life" Brezel said, "and although we have 35 people on the roster, only about 12 or 14 show up at any meeting and that's an ideal number: any fewer and there wouldn't be the variety; any more and people wouldn't get a chance to speak."

The members attempt to discuss the basics about a book: what does the author say; what does the author mean; the relevance of the work to their own lives.

The group is open to the public and meets from 8-10 p.m. on the third Friday of each month. Interested book readers can call Margaret Brezel at 426-2203 for more information.

Walt Allen's "almost" Great Books Club is also open to the public and meets every other Tuesday at La Selva Beach Library at 7:30 p.m. Interested readers are welcome to call Allen at 684-0128.

Allen has been leading the group for six years and reticently admits that "the group mostly defers to me in matters of selection. I tend toward the classics: Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, E.B. White, Somerset Maugham, William Shakespeare."

He said that one of the biggest problems is in choosing titles that are generally available. "My most memorable occasion was when we went 'slumming' and read Danielle Steele. There were plenty of her books available."

Currently they are reading the

Russians: Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoi, Chekhov, and Nabakov.

The group's roster currently lists 12-13 members, although only about 10 show up for each meeting.

"There was only one time that only one person showed up and that was at Christmas. After meeting for six years," Allen pondered, "It still amazes me that someone shows up for every meeting."

But Raissa Allayaud isn't surprised when people show up at the Friday Shakespeare Club. That's because the Santa Cruz club has been studying the works of William Shakespeare since 1903. Currently there are about 38 women in the group, most of them older. To date, men have not been invited to join, a decision that is voted on.

Allayaud, president of the club for 1990-91, is eternally enthusiastic about the joys of studying Shakespeare but can be nudged to admit that "it's not as exciting as going to a burlesque."

Each year, the club divides into

four groups to study four selected plays. This year, the club has chosen Shakespeare's "Timon of Athens," "The Merchant of Venice," "King John" and "Measure for Measure."

Research on the plays is encouraged to enliven the discussions and the group is fortunate to have a private library of Shakespeare criticism which is housed in a member's home.

The club meets on the first and third Friday of each month from 2-4 and anyone interested in joining can call Allayaud at 462-1750. Dues are \$7.50 a year.

For those looking for a brand new group to join, The Book Lovers Thursday Afternoon Club has just finished their first month at the Branciforte Library. The membership is currently 6 but growing, according to leader Frances Schacht.

"Book clubs are the last frontier against the electronic media," Schacht believes, "and a great place to find literate people to chat with about things more important than day-to-day living."

Schacht thinks the group's focus might eventually be to look at how books reflect the culture of their

time. So far, they have discussed detective fiction and will be looking at the rise of women private investigators in today's popular literature. They might also mix video in with the books as so much detective fiction has been filmed.

For more information, call 426-7054.

Still, if you can't find the perfect club, there is a solution: start your own. That neighbor you enjoy talking to, that co-worker who always has her nose in a paperback — they might just be looking for the perfect way to spend an enchanted evening.