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## The Joy of Shared Reading

The president of the NYC chapter of the Women's National Book Association shares her devotion to book clubs

BY JANE KINNEY DENNING

Books and conversations about them have always been an important part of my life. Reading books provides us with the opportunity to reflect, immerse ourselves in cultures beyond our own borders, and affords us the occasion to consider ourselves in the context of the generations who have come before.

A few years ago I attended a panel in New York sponsored by the Women's National Book Association; the prestigious panel of authors were gathered to celebrate the "joy of shared reading." It was one of many programs taking place across the country for the organization's sponsorship of October as National Reading Group Month ([www.nationalreadinggroupmonth.org](http://www.nationalreadinggroupmonth.org)). It was a remarkable evening that inspired me to more fully embrace the idea of shared reading. Hearing authors like Julie Otsuka tell the story of how she came to write the beautiful *Buddha in the Attic*, or listening to Heidi Darrow read from her moving book, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, made me see things differently and opened up my mind just a bit more.

In today's world, where technology has affected every aspect of our daily lives, including how we read, shared reading,

and book clubs in particular, provide us with an opportunity to establish and reinforce important connections. Fifteen women founded the WNBA in 1917, when women were excluded from the all-male Booksellers League, were still without the right to vote, and were denied access to many institutions of higher education. As a woman who has benefited greatly from the hard work of so many women before me who have fought for equality and basic human rights, I am very aware of the power we have to promote and facilitate change.



Early book clubs, in the late 19th century, served the important role of providing women with a forum to learn about and gather around pressing social issues. These groups often included slates of officers who paid meticulous attention to parliamentary procedure, took elaborate minutes, and developed slogans and mottoes for their groups. They also provided women with a forum to develop skills that we now take for granted: the running of a formal organization as well as an education for citizenship and leadership. Early book clubs emulated the college classroom typically had a strong social mission and, although they claimed to represent all women, they were, by virtue of the times, stratified by class and race. Still, contem-

porary book clubs, where women gather much more informally in each other's homes, in public spaces, or online, owe a great deal to the women who began the women's book club movement so many years ago.

Today, as book clubs grow in popularity, they continue to provide women with strong social and intellectual support and bring joy to so many of our lives. In addition, as with the early years of the literary club movement, book clubs today still center on the joy of shared reading and the conversations that help us find commonality through both books and life experiences. Deirdre Bair, the author of a number of prize-winning biographies as well as a soon to be published Saul Steinberg biography, states that her book club "is a pleasurable social experience; just being with intelligent, thoughtful, and interesting women who all hold responsible or professional positions has enriched my life." And since the members of her group are not writers, they bring to her the informed opinions of the person she always tries to reach with her own writing, the "so-called literate general reader."

The Women's National Book Association is a strong supporter of the joy of shared reading. Our 10 chapters across the United States begin the fall programming season with events that encourage people to gather and to talk about books. The WNBA Great Group Reads list, ([www.nationalreadinggroupmonth.org/ggr\\_selections.html](http://www.nationalreadinggroupmonth.org/ggr_selections.html)), a juried selection of titles specifically chosen for reading groups and discussion, is a wonderful resource for your own reading group and a great way to carry on the tradition of connecting and find common ground with others. Let the joy begin! ■

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