

**Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for Being:  
A Study of Contemporary Women's Book Clubs**

by

DeNel Rehberg Sedo

B.A., University of North Dakota, 1987

M.M.C., Arizona State University, 1992

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the

School of Communication

DeNel Rehberg Sedo

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

February 2004

All rights reserved. This work may not be  
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy  
or other means, without permission of the author.

APPROVAL

**NAME** DeNel Rehberg Sedo

**DEGREE** PhD

**TITLE OF DISSERTATION:** BADGES OF WISDOM, SPACES FOR  
BEING: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY  
WOMEN'S BOOK CLUBS

**EXAMINING COMMITTEE:**

**CHAIR:** Prof. Yuezhi Zhao

---

Prof. Catherine Murray  
Senior Supervisor, School of Communication, SFU

---

Prof. Janet Giltrow  
Supervisor, Department of English, UBC

---

Prof. Alison Beale  
Supervisor, School of Communication, SFU

---

Prof. Kathy Mezei,  
Internal Examiner  
Department of Humanities, SFU

---

Prof. Catherine Ross  
External Examiner  
Prof. & Dean, Faculty of Information and Media  
Studies, University of Western Ontario, Middlesex

**DATE:**

2 February 2004

---

# SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY



## Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author's written permission.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Bennett Library  
Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby, BC, Canada

## *Abstract*

This study explores the social contours and the talk within contemporary women's book clubs. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on theories of interpretive community, feminist epistemology, and cultural studies to illustrate the social relations of the groups as more than a sum of its readers. Ethnographic and survey methods are blended in an original interpretation of the reading motivations, practices, pleasures of five Canadian reading groups and more than 252 readers found on line. An account of the descriptive, normative and ideological concepts of book club community, the work supplies an important gap in studies of women's reading experiences in Canada.

This dissertation argues: (1) that book clubs are social structures in which women are able to articulate and valorise their experiences thereby demonstrating social agency, and (2) that there is an interpretive community dimension to a reading group that unfolds over time.

The readers recognise the importance of women "trusted others" in introducing them to reading, the importance of pushing personal tastes boundaries within safe spaces, and the benefit of the liberal humanist vision of learning outside of the perceived constraints of gender language, politics or power.

The groups form and exist around shared genre tastes and interpretive preferences. The acquisition and negotiation of cultural competence works differently in the virtual clubs than in the face-to-face groups. Resistance is more evident in the face-to-face groups than it is in a virtual club, where group membership is more fluid.

This study finds rather than a kind of essentialist “sisterhood” that provides only minimal resistance to patriarchal structures, there is instead a creation of space for agency, and utopian mutual affirmation of badges of wisdom that is important to clubs in providing enrichment of daily lives. Oral and virtual culture can and does enhance literate culture, even if it does not conform to traditional conceptions of political mobilisation.

The surprise of this study is that while it is useful to examine the book club as a genre of collective women’s action, it is also worthwhile to examine the “book club” type title, as a new form of social expression.

*Dedication*

For Brent, my primary “second person”

and in memory of  
Maureen Barr  
and  
Alison Robson

*To read little and meditate a great deal upon our reading, or to talk it over extensively between ourselves, that is the way to thoroughly digest it.*

“A Nouvelle Heloise” by Jean Jacques Rousseau

## *Acknowledgements*

Many special people have been involved in the process of conceptualising, researching, writing and revising this project. Those who have been with me through the years are probably as happy as I am that it is finished, if not more so. To see this work in print is most likely all they would want. Yet I feel it necessary to publicly thank the individuals without whose support, love and friendship, I would not be writing this last section of the manuscript.

I owe the most debt to the women of Lileth's Library, my own book club, and to the readers who shared with me their knowledge, their books, their talk, their homes and their treats. It was an extraordinary act by extraordinary women (and men). Simon Fraser University's Department of Co-operative Education, namely Nancy Johnston, granted me a research leave so that I could conduct my fieldwork. My colleague Marcia Shimizu had to work extra hard during this time, and often at other times throughout the project, and did so with good humour. Evelyn Hassen, Lucie Menkveld, David Murphy and Denyse Zenner at SFU's School of Communication must be acknowledged for their ability to simply get things done. This is especially so for Neena Shahani. Not only does she make sure we graduate students sign all the right forms, she also gives freely of herself. I am



most grateful that she introduced me to yoga and that she remains my good friend. Mount Saint Vincent University granted me time to analyse my data. My colleagues there, especially Brent King, Trudie Richards, Marie Riley, and Judith Scrimger, have been extremely supportive with kind words, intellectual stimulation and hugs, when necessary.

A special thanks to my new Halifax friends and colleagues Drs. Adriana Benzaquen, Karen Macfarlane, Karen Side and Randi Warne. Their wisdom inspires me. For her never-ending kindness, I thank Cathleen O'Grady. She and Gary Patterson were instrumental in keeping me sane and well-fed with Frivolous Fridays during the writing of Draft One. Thank you to Dr. Kevin Davison for the thoughtful readings of earlier drafts, and for the intellectual humour and PoMo musings on dreary winter days and during depressing writing blocks. Kerry Chambers gives expert research advice and his time, and I am thankful.

I am been blessed with good friends. For Donna Carswell, Stacy Damp, Gloria Freeborn, and Susan Tinker I am thankful. They did not think I was crazy to journey down this path and allowed me to complain along the way. My love and thanks to the tribe: Deena and Kevin; Robert and Birget, Sarina (brilliant writer in the making, who grew up while I conducted this project); Johnny WestCoast; Bert; Michelle; Paul and Alison (you are so missed). Thanks also to Dan and Shirra for never asking if I was done yet. Thank you, too, to my Dragon Boat team—The Totally Hip—who nurtured my competitive side, my body and my funny bone. I owe much to my theory-head reading group friends, Drs. James Compton and Diana Ambrozas, and to Natalie Coulter, another graduate student friend who shares unselfishly. Much love and appreciation to Doug Bolken, Susan Brook, Joy Gugeler, Eduarda Hodgins, Launa Maundrell, Benji Lucas

Showers and Jennifer Wah. Because they know me for who I really am and still never doubted the value of this work and my capabilities to do it, I will forever be grateful.

Late in the process of writing the dissertation, I met and became a research colleague of Dr. Danielle Fuller. Her ideas were instrumental in reshaping my own. She has given me the gift of motivation and I am looking forward to our future research and friendship. Thank you, too, to Dr. Ellen Balka for intellectual mentorship and support from the beginning. And to Drs. Janet Giltrow, Alison Beale, Kathy Mezei, and Catherine Ross for their careful reading and thoughtful comments on the dissertation. I owe special gratitude to Dr. Catherine Murray, my senior supervisor. She is known in our house as Saint Catherine for reasons too numerous to mention here.

Ever loving and supportive of my reading habit, my left-leaning idiosyncrasies and my inability to phone often, my mom and dad—Don and LaRue— and my brother—Michael—are exactly what a graduate student needs. They are loving, interested and inquisitive. I am happy they are mine.

And last, but not at all least, as the saying goes: Thank you Brent. Your wisdom is my being.

## *Table of Contents*

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Table of Contents	x
List of Tables	xiii
Chapter One Introduction	1
The Research Questions	6
Reading as a Contemporary Cultural Practice: in Renaissance?	6
Understanding the Social Act of Reading	13
Chapter Two “Reading” Reading: The Interpretive Community	16
Introduction	16
Literary Societies: Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Women’s Interpretive Communities	18
Book Clubs: Contemporary Women-Only Communities	22
Theories of Community	25
Introduction to Theories of Cyber Communities	27
Interpretive Communities	30
Theories of Reading and Reading Reception	38
Theories of active audiences	45
Chapter Three Studying the Book Club	53
Foundational Book Club Studies	54
Chapter Four Research Methods: Understanding the Experience	64
Introduction	64
Interrogating Women’s Experiences	66

The Study	72
The Ethnography	72
The Cyber Survey	83
Chapter Five Real Readers Really Reading: A Quantitative Study	89
Introduction	89
The Participants	90
Readers' Reading Practices	92
Reasons for Joining a Book Club, and for Remaining in One	95
Book Club Community	97
Club Reading	98
Differing Dialogue	100
Interpreting the Findings	102
Understanding the Participants	102
Attaching Meaning to Book Club Membership	110
Notions of Community	113
Book Club Processes	118
Chapter Summary	126
Chapter Six Seeking Wisdom, Seeking Community	129
Introduction	129
A Brief Introduction to the Book Clubs	130
Socio-Cultural Structures	131
Club Women's Private Reading Habits and Practices	135
The Dream of Wisdom and Community	143
Gendered Spaces, Gendered Dialogue	148
Defining Community	160
Exclusive Communities	166
Chapter Summary	168
Chapter Seven Negotiated Processes	171
Introduction	171
Creating Community Structures	171
Doing it "Right", but Doing it Our Way	175
The Eternal Quest, or "What to Read Next"	177
Negotiating What to Read	183
Considering Cultural Tastes	187
Resisting Oprah	193
What IS a Book Club Book?	197
Interpretation Processes	204
Dissecting Dialogue	209
Informing the Human Experience by Articulating Differences	216
Chapter Summary	221
Chapter Eight Conclusions	222
Book Club as Interpretive Community	227
A Space for Sisterhood	229
Book Clubs as Genres of Social Action	232
Book Clubs and Talk	235
Book Clubs and Social Status	240
Book Clubs and Badges of Wisdom	244
Books and Cultural Resistance	245

Book Clubs and Political Change	249
Where to From Here? A Research Agenda	253
Final Words	255
Appendix A Observational Protocol	256
Appendix B Member Questionnaire	258
Appendix C Interview Schedules	262
For Members of Non-participant Observation Groups	264
For Non-Joiners	265
For Cultural Intermediaries	266
For Publishing Representatives	267
For Globe & Mail, Vancouver Sun Reporters	267
Appendix D Book Clubs Participating in Research	269
Appendix E Broad List of QSR NUD*IST Coding Categories	273
Appendix F Complete List of QSR NUD*IST Coding Categories	275
Appendix G Cyber Survey	282
Appendix H SPSS Frequencies, Cross Tabulations, Significance Tests	293
Frequencies	294
Cross-tabulations and significance tests	302
Appendix I Titles Mentioned in Cyber Study	303
Bibliography	309

## *List of Tables*

Table 1 - Reading Groups in this Study.....	76
Table 2 - Gender Composition, by Group .....	91
Table 3 - Participant Ages .....	92
Table 4 - Reading in a Typical Week, All Readers .....	93
Table 5 - Reading in a Typical Week, Book Club Members.....	93
Table 6 - Gender Genre Preference Differences.....	95
Table 7 - Top Five Reasons for Joining Book Club .....	96
Table 8- Number of Years in Book Club.....	98
Table 9 - Most Satisfying Aspect of Book Club.....	98
Table 10- Last Three Book Club Books .....	99
Table 11- Genre Preference Differences between Book Club Readers and Non-Book Club Readers.....	100
Table 12- Processes for Choosing Book Club Titles.....	184
Table 13 - Titles Read During Fieldwork.....	199
Table 14 - Books the Women Identified as Good Book Club Books.....	201

## Chapter One

### *Introduction*

Each month many women across North America come together to discuss books. They meet in each other's living rooms, in pubs, in libraries and on the Internet. They share their individual interpretations, life experiences, laughter, food and friendship. Some may be drawn by having heard about Oprah Winfrey's book club—perhaps today's most well-known book club—which now has constructed a complex popular culture industry around this social practice. The appearance of book clubs in prime time television series such as *Bob and Margaret*, *The Chris Isaak Show* and *Ed*, suggest that the concept of book clubs is an important site of popular consumption. The book club appears as an episodic plot and joke in the UK series *The Savages*, and as the backdrop to an entire series in the British situation comedy *The Reading Group*, illustrating the trans-Atlantic extent of the phenomenon. Yet other women attracted to clubs are indifferent to Winfrey and the like and are certainly not moved by the desire to swim with the latest book fad. Why do women join book clubs? How do women young and old come together to *experience* books? What does this everyday practice of collective reading mean in their lives? This study seeks to explain why some might feel the need to interpret what they read together in a collective environment.

My introduction to the cultural form of the book club was not mediated through any TV popular phenomenon, but rather, through my immediate family at a gathering in the early 1990s. My cousin Carol told me of the women in her group and her experience of their book discussions. Together, the women were creating new ways of understanding the book they read. Through this process, they were forming strong community ties and friendships. Like me, Carol has always been an avid reader, so when she spoke of the group and their reading with passion and excitement, it became clear that something important was happening in her world. It also seemed that she was privy to something I wanted to experience.

Shortly thereafter I joined a group of women reading friends who became known as Lileth's Library. Our first book club read was *The Master and Margarita*, written by Mikhail Bulgakov<sup>1</sup> during the 1930s in Stalinist Russia. A deep, complex novel whose main characters are a disguised Satan and a talking black cat who wears a jockey's cap and cracked pince-nez, the book was received with mixed reviews by the club members. We vacillated between wonderment and a fear that we were in over our heads. But the divergent opinions, the laughter, the varied interpretations—and the then-new-to-most-of-us chai tea—suggested we were in for a lovely, long journey of discovery. Despite this rocky start marked by considerable group self-doubt, I gradually became more drawn into this community of readers. Yet my scholarly self began asking questions about what was happening to me and my book club mates. Why was this group so important to me, and what did that importance mean? Was my experience unique? How were we reacting to our life situations, and in what ways were we changing? If we were experiencing such

---

<sup>1</sup> The book was translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine O'Connor, and published by Vintage Canada.



deep joy of collective interpretation, why was I not reading about reading groups as a meaningful social practice in academic journals to help understand what was happening to me and my club mates?

Despite some isolated recent publications, the academy has neglected reading clubs as subjects worthy of study. Book club participation remains what seems a widespread social phenomenon about which little is known. I argue this very invisibility—or taken-for-grantedness—suggests the symbolic capital associated with it in a contemporary literate (or in an allegedly post-literate society) is uncertain. The blind spots may be due to the interplay of class and gender in the field of cultural studies. Usually, the more serious study of literature and ideas have been associated with institutions of higher education, or, in the renaissance of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, salons, whose members included mostly men.<sup>2</sup> Bridget Fowler (1997) argues that “the profound seriousness of the arenas within which men invest their energies enhance their dignity, while women’s cultural energies are forcibly divided,” which is “a necessary consequence of their culturally induced preoccupation with children and matters of life and death” (p. 137).

American sociologist Elizabeth Long (1987) believes contemporary women’s reading groups are an under-studied phenomenon because of an assumption that they are readers of “good” literature. Long’s argument reflects cultural studies’ contemporary emphasis on the “popular” and rejection of the ‘elite’ (McRobbie, 1978; Williamson,

---

<sup>2</sup> An interesting example of the re-emergence of the salon “movement” can be seen in a Simon Fraser University-sponsored series. The Philosopher’s Café is a series of debates held in locales around the Greater Vancouver Regional District that is meant to stimulate idea exchange among citizens. In its inaugural year, 1999, none of sponsored guests were women. One is left to contemplate gendered divisions: philosophers are men, readers are women.

1986). Although I am not convinced that the reading lists of contemporary clubs are perceived as Long's were when she first began her investigation some 20 years ago, even today book clubs are viewed as composites of the upper- to upper-middle class readers and therefore not worthy of analysis within the usually politically charged discipline of cultural studies (Gardiner, 2000).

In addition, I suggest the fact that most groups are comprised of mainly women members may explain why they have gone unnoticed by the academy until relatively recently. According to sociologist Dorothy Smith (2000), women are not central to the direction of "the talk" in sociology. This is echoed in Lauraine Leblanc's (1999) account of girl's punk rock subculture:

Whether in male-dominated youth subcultures, in schools, in the workplace, or in their communities, women's and girls' experiences have been largely ignored and their voices silenced. It is hardly surprising, then, that within the world of sociology, our experiences have been discounted as sources of knowing, our lives have not been the subject of research, and our perspectives have not contributed to the development of theory... As we know that women have been ignored in mainstream sociological theorizing, we know that such theories often cannot apply to the full discovery and explanation of women's and girls' lives and experiences. (p. 225)

This dissertation is an attempt to fill the gap that exists in the study of women's reading communities in Canada. Through an on-line quantitative survey of face-to-face and virtual book club members, and an ethnography of contemporary book clubs, the work is an attempt to give these particular women an opportunity to voice their experiences. Through their articulation, and my observations and analysis, the project, in part, addresses a need for cultural research methods that place "cultural participation in the context of everyday life and the meanings derived from it," as identified by Catherine

Murray (2003, pp. 2-3). By understanding better the social spaces of cultural participation in the form of women's book clubs, I hope to add to the literature of cultural participation a specific account of women's participation in the development of and participation in "self-formed cultural communities" (Crane, 2002, cited in Murray, p, 6). I am preoccupied with the symbolic and practical allegiances, dialogic exchanges, and manifestations of "wisdom" within these communities. What is the importance of reading? What are the roles of the texts and of the clubs themselves? I ask how might the club's interpretive practices and the valuation of them function as "badges"? My analysis of the women's articulated experiences will help to further academic research into everyday knowledge production, cultural consumption and participation, and the value women place on collective reading in our lives.

My view of women's reading groups is seen through what some might call a utopian liberal feminist lens. I am preoccupied with that which Trysh Travis (2003) has termed "the ephemeral contours of interpretive practice" (p. 136). I focus on social networks of groups, and less on the text. In this study, the talk about books is the text that preoccupies me, because as the feminist historian of rhetoric Lynette Hunter (1999b) has argued, "knowledge remains tacit until articulated, so the situatedness of knowledge is bound to the situatedness of the textuality that communicates it" (p. 237). Unlike Travis, Janice Radway (1991), Elizabeth Long (1986; 1987; 1992) and Linsey Howie (1998), this project does not concentrate on the individual, the self, or its place in the world. Rather, I pay particular attention to the community, the collective, and its place in the world.

### ***The Research Questions***

The purpose of the project is to explore the significance of book clubs in women's everyday lives. The single, over-arching research question is: Why are book clubs important sites of cultural forms and practices for women? The secondary questions are as follows:

- A. What are the social practices of these communities?
- B. How do the women negotiate cultural authority within the interpretive communities?
- C. In what ways are face-to-face clubs similar to or different from those that meet on the Internet? What does virtuality mean for the concept of interpretive community?
- D. In what ways does the interpretive community of a book club enable the women to recognise and affirm tacit knowledge, and create new knowledge, if at all? And to what consequences?

While this project has been underway for almost five years, it has been overtaken by changes in the cultural environment that cannot be ignored.

### ***Reading as a Contemporary Cultural Practice: in Renaissance?***

In light of the Harry Potter craze one assumes more kids are reading than playing video games (Trelease, 2003). The revolution in coffee house culture sees people sipping tall, no-fat, cappuccinos while reading the latest in literary offerings or the hottest new magazine (Sandra & Spayde, 2002). Television talk show host Oprah Winfrey has created a new market for middle-brow literature (Trachtenberg, 2002), and I assume has

people like my Aunt reading after having not picked up a book for more than 30 years. It appears we are experiencing something of a reading renaissance.

According to Corin Durstin (personal communication, July 15, 2003), head librarian for the popular reading section at the Vancouver Public Library (VPL), “the circulation of fiction in the department is going up, ... (the department) has the highest circulation in the building and it is climbing.” Durstin believes people are reading more because they “really want to make a connection with books. They also want to be challenged.” Mary Trentadue, a Vancouver book seller who has created a successful business catering to book clubs, and Margaret Bellmaine, a book club facilitator, also suggest people are reading more than in recent memory.

Is there any empirical basis for this observation of a renaissance in reading? As measured by individual book copy sales, the verdict is out. According to Joy Gugeler (personal communication, November 14, 2001), an editor at ECW Press in Toronto, there are no book industry figures in Canada to support the comment that reading is more popular now than say, ten years ago. However, US industry experts report an increase in book sales from 1999 to 2002. Howard Reese, president and COO of Levy Home Entertainment, a book and magazine supplier to mass merchandisers, grocery stores and drugstores in the US, released figures suggesting a “5%-10% sales growth in books. (In cases where stores ‘changed the way they present books,’ sales were up 25%-30%” (Booksellers, 2003). Aside from the downturn of the American economy over the past year, there has been a general optimism in the publishing industry that people are reading and buying more books in the US.

Yet sales of books may understate their implication in other media of promotional culture. The convergence of books and the other mass communication vehicles such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines and the Internet ensures that books are part of the public discourse. Book pages in major newspapers indicate there is a market for books; the space given to book pages in part represents the public's interest in and demand for books as a cultural product.<sup>3</sup> Mary Walsh's CBC television series *By the Book* or the television series *Book TV*, along with the CBC's *Canada Reads* and magazines such as *Book* (last issue published October 2003) and *Books & Culture* (published by Christianity Today) suggests that books and reading represent cultural enjoyment and prestige, and help create a mass culture in which books are valued—culturally, economically and symbolically. And as we have seen with the Potter phenomenon, books themselves lead to screenplays, to ancillary social events, products, popular TV shows, and toys.

On a national level, the CBC has used the idea of a book club (most likely influenced by Oprah Winfrey) to increase listenership, and to create a national community of readers meant to promote not only reading, but also pride in our nationhood, and respect for ourselves and our creative artists.<sup>4</sup> With what some might assume as different motives from those of the people's broadcaster, Canadian for-profit media outlets have also turned to the book club format to increase viewership. For

---

<sup>3</sup> This conjecture is made based on my view of the media's agenda setting ability. For discussions on this argument, see Bryant, J., & Zillman, D. (Eds.). (1986). *Perspectives on media effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>4</sup> This is my impression of the articulated narratives of *Canada Reads*' producers after an interview in February of 2003. Whether or not this is the result of the project, is debatable.

example, CTV airs an occasional book club segment on their morning television “news” programme.

Individual cities, and their municipal cultural policies and practices reflect the recognition that book clubs are important to the cultural fabric of the city and its citizens. For example, in conjunction with CBC’s Canada Reads program, Vancouver sponsors a city-wide book club called “One Book, One Vancouver” in an effort to support a Vancouver author by bringing the city’s readers together in an intimate setting with the particular author. Kitchener-Waterloo also sponsors a similar event. These initiatives are part of a decade-long evolution of publicly-supported cultural infrastructures, like libraries, that support reading communities by identifying individuals’ desires to be part of a social space that allows them to “experience” books and to be with other people.

These events also indicate the growing value of book clubs in the market. Authors speak to individual groups in grassroots-marketing efforts. Large domestic publishers, such as McClelland and Stewart and Random House Canada, employ personnel to concentrate on targeting these specific readers through print and Internet media products. One smaller house—Vancouver-based Beach Holme— has also identified book clubs as a specific market. In addition, some bookstores offer group discounts and train staff to act as cultural intermediaries. 32 Books in Vancouver caters exclusively to book clubs.

Perhaps it is the rise of this promotional industry that accounts for why reading as a leisure activity is being reported more so than it was 20 years ago. According to the latest major report of Canadian reading habits based on data collected by Statistics Canada (Duxbury, 1995), Canadians appear to be reading more today than in 1978. Accounting for the increase in population, and assuming the literacy rate remained

relatively constant, Duxbury reported that the number of Canadians reading books rose 48 percent between 1978 and 1991 (the last time such a longitudinal comparison in readership studies was made). But we should beware of any theories that the intensification of commodification in popular cultural industries today is causing a rise in reading. When I asked North Vancouver bookseller Mary Trentadue about her impressions of contemporary book reading and selling, she suggested that television has produced a renewal in reading activities. She said:

I believe that books have become much more mainstream. There's way more people reading books than ever. And people who weren't reading books before. And that's largely due to the Oprah book club and the media and all the publicity that there is out there about books. (personal communication, January 10, 2000)

In contrast, when I spoke with book club moderator Magaret Bellmaine, she argued that it is television's *lack* of appeal that enhances the push towards reading. She said:

With the proliferation of these channels, you're just awash with media and commercials and loudness and too much, and much of it is so banal and boring and intellectually very unsatisfying. Television in general is. And I think people have said let's go back to books. No commercials, they don't shriek at you. (personal communication, January 8, 2000)

What role does gender and age play in this perceived increase in reading activity?

Conventional wisdom is to assume more women than men read, and women tend to be more voracious readers than men—even though, on average, women have less free time (General Social Survey, 1998). It is not completely clear which age group reads the most, but it appears that not only the very young and the very old read. The findings of these reading-habits studies suggest that reading is a high cultural priority for women, and for women across all age groups.



By looking only at the numbers (and one notes the bias to methodological individualism in most conventional research on book readership), one might assume that reading is only a solitary past time, neglecting the social significance of reading in book clubs. What is the significance of group reading? Why are book clubs popular?

Although published figures estimate there are upwards of 500,000 book clubs in the United States and 50,000 in Great Britain (Hartley, 2001), no one really knows how many contemporary book clubs exist because there is no formal registry system, and the groups and membership are fluid. Considering the published numbers from the US and the UK in proportion to our population, I estimate that there may be more than 40,000 book clubs in Canada. With an average club membership of six to 12, there are potentially between 244,500 and 489,000 Canadian readers in book clubs. These numbers alone suggest the book club is a significant cultural site that demands scholarly enquiry, and yet to my knowledge there are no other empirical studies being conducted of contemporary Canadian book clubs other than this present research.

Book clubs are a complex and contradictory social phenomenon. The conflicting perceptions of what book clubs do and who makes up membership represent opportunities for analysing reading practices in the context of women's lives. Some media critics in the popular press suggest their practices are "what's wrong with reading today," meaning they take away from the personal pleasure of reading and are used only as a status symbol.<sup>5</sup> The sub-head to *Globe and Mail* reporter Elaine Daspin's article

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Daspin, E. Book-club lovers wage a war of words: Fighting tyranny. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved [1999, February 2], from <http://news.chaptersglobe.com/> (Not available.); Daspin, E. (1999b, January 19). Experiencing literary hell: Book club victims break the silence. *Globe and Mail*, pp. C1-2; Nolan, S. (June 21, 1999). Why I

“Book-club lovers...” reads: “Once a place to discuss good writing, reading circles have become literary pressure cookers, marked by aggressive intellectual one-upmanship and unabashed social skirmishing.” Responses to the *Globe and Mail*’s Stephanie Nolan’s denunciation of book clubs—in which she wrote that “the book group craze is an indication of a subtle, and sad, shift in the way that people are approaching books ... reading has become much like push-ups”—indicate, however, that readers can be passionate about their clubs. When I asked her what kind of feedback she received from her article, she said:

I received tons and tons and tons of letters. People telling me— they ran about two to one; twice as many from people in book clubs—that I was a narrow-minded, benighted, foolish, ill-informed person and I should come to their book club and I would learn how great it is. And then a lot of other people who said thank you so much for saying what you said; I stood up and cheered when I read it. (1999a)

Of course, it is simplistic and superficial to so clearly divide readers into book club members and non book club members. However, this vignette demonstrates some of the assumptions about readers in general and the contested value of book clubs, in particular. The denigrating articles illustrate one side of the public argument over the cultural value of book clubs. Other popular culture commentators see book clubs as unique sites for women’s empowerment and bonding (Adair, 1999). Some even see them for spaces in which to communicate political ideologies (Morgan, 2003). Important to note, however,

---

won't join the book club. *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved [June 21, 1999], from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/gam/Arts/19990621/TAAARG.html>

is that the latter two commentaries appear not in the popular press, but rather in a feminist magazine and on a feminist web site, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Understanding the Social Act of Reading***

If the empirical terrain of the dissertation is collective spaces and collective reading, then it is necessary to ground the project in the theoretical notion that reading is a complex social process (Fish, 1980; Hartley, 2001; Radway, 1991), as I demonstrate in Chapter 2. The focus of this theory repositions reading—moving it from an individual act to its social contexts—by interrogating the practices within specific interpretive communities. To begin, I set up critical notions of interpretive community derived from Stanley Fish, Janice Radway and Lorraine Code. I explore reading as a transactional meaning making process between the text and the reader (Bleich, 1986; Eco, 1979; Flynn & Schweickart, 1986; Leitch, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1978). Developing an argument for investigating women’s communal reading experience, I demonstrate how the feminist concepts of “the personal is political” and “Sisterhood” can act as figurative and pragmatic definitions of the contemporary book club. Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code’s theoretical notions of community and knowledge construction offer a critical paradigm for the study, which extends to cyber space.

Chapter Three then explores three foundational studies of reading clubs, to generate key hypotheses to guide the empirical portion of the study.

Chapter Four contains the rationale for using mixed research methods to investigate readers’ experiences in groups. Three levels of evidence are employed:

---

<sup>6</sup> These conflicting messages will be analysed more thoroughly in concert with an analysis of women’s reactions to the popular press’ treatment of book clubs in Chapter 7.

individual interviews, observations of collective group talk, and personal participation in group settings. The chapter outlines the theories that helped to plan and design research methods that would answer the research questions. Ethnographic and survey methodology is examined. The chapter also outlines theories that explain why and how I use feminist standpoint theory and thus researcher reflexivity in reporting the findings.

Chapter Five summarises the findings of an on-line survey that yielded 252 responses from readers who live primarily in the US and Canada. I argue that regardless of whether the readers meet in a face-to-face or a virtual environment, each brings with them their own specific, influential socio-cultural resources that determine how the clubs operate, biases which titles are chosen, and effects how the books are interpreted. The chapter outlines the uses of a book club, and demonstrates that differences are present, tolerated and encouraged in both settings, but to different ends. The structures and sentiments in the different contexts of contemporary virtual and face-to-face book clubs demonstrates that reading is an integral part of reader's lives.

Chapter Six introduces members of the five book clubs participating in the ethnographic portion of this study, and explains why these readers join book clubs and stay in them. What is their interpretation of "community"? How do we understand Code, Fish and Radway and interpretive community within the context of book clubs? The book club is a social structure in which the women are usually able to articulate and valorise their experiences. Through the women's voices, I demonstrate how they gain and use the cultural capital, a set of resources, necessary to be respected members of these particular groups. Not only is the need to gain new knowledge important to the women, I argue, but also the occasion to be in the company of other women. The book club community offers

to the women an opportunity to escape the social constrictions of work and family, and to experience life through literature and each other.

How these book clubs negotiate their reader processes is the theme of Chapter Seven. The methods of deciding when to meet, what to read, and how to discuss the books are different within each book club. In these collectively-structured spaces, each member brings her own life experiences and meaning systems to inform how the book club operates, which titles the women read, and how group interpretations proceed. However, the outcome is a collective or negotiated one.

Chapter Eight traces the conclusions to this study, and sets out future challenges.

My study of book clubs thus adopts an interdisciplinary approach in order to explain the complexity of collective text reception, which involves “representation, agency, valorisation, the control of meaning, status and symbolic value, etc” (Gardiner, 2000). The project is one in which the questions of power and authority are considered in the manifestation of a woman’s capacity for judgement and opinion within the reading community. I endeavour to explain why women join a book club, why they stay in clubs (or why they leave), and what meaning can be made through text choices and collective interpretation. I am concerned with how agency looks within the club, and in turn, what this might mean for how women negotiate with one another and in society. The women’s narratives render visible the complex cultural web of gender, ethnicity, power, economics and identity in book club spaces. To begin this exploration, I ask what insights can cultural, feminist and literary theorists provide?

## *Chapter Two*

### “Reading” Reading: The Interpretive Community

*“We are always much more than readers.”*

-Terry Eagleton

#### ***Introduction***

Throughout this thesis I use the notion of community as a critical paradigm for interpreting women’s book clubs.<sup>1</sup> The articulations and realisations of the creation, existence and practices of interpretive communities preoccupy me. The framework of this study is derived from several sources. The concept of interpretive community as theorised by literary scholars Stanley Fish (1980a; 1980b; 1981; 1989) and Janice Radway (1991) can act as a framework to analyse collective interpretation outside university classrooms, and in groups comprised primarily of women readers. Meanwhile the cultural practices of the women’s interpretive communities can be critically analysed using the ontological theories of community as presented by post-modern feminist Iris Young, and more specifically, the epistemological model of friendship and community as

---

<sup>1</sup> Please see Fuller, 2002. Fuller uses the notion of community as an extra-textual critical paradigm and a structuring device for the reporting of her findings.

“second person” knowing as argued by Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code (1991). The construction of knowledge within collective spaces is both the object and the subject of this project.

This empirical construction of community is derived from both the ethnographic and also the survey methods I used to investigate book clubs. That is, from the women’s standpoint, they describe themselves as a community. Through the investigative process, I determined that the book club women in this study seek communities of like-minded individuals who are generally at the same life stage as themselves, who generally have the same level of education, and who are generally from a similar socio-economic class. The women seek and find others who like to read, and who feel they have no other space in which to explore ideas found in the texts. In the book club community, the women access different textual interpretations and do so in an environment that they often perceive as judgement-free. Their quest for knowledge presumes a foundation in relationships, which includes “reciprocity, respect—and (in some cases) friendship—...” (Code, 1991, p. 273). The book club therefore represents a community of networks of interrelationships through which these book club women negotiate dominant ideologies and interpretations. Within the practices of reading, meeting, talking and interpreting, the women may challenge or accede to oppressive ideologies and structural inequalities that they find in their homes, work, and society. These book clubs can therefore be viewed as communities that fulfil a need for affiliation, and also as unique cultural forms that allow for differences at both ideological and practical levels. The definition of book community I develop throughout this thesis is thus descriptive, normative *and* ideological.

How do we understand reading as a cultural practice and book clubs as a significant cultural form? A result of academic training in an interdisciplinary School of Communication Studies, this dissertation project is broadly informed by literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, and feminist epistemological analysis. The chapter begins with an historical overview of literary societies and book clubs. A study of reading in groups presupposes we must explore social theories of face-to-face and virtual communities, cultural processes, and how communal tastes and preferences are negotiated within those communities. Yet much rich literature on individual reading reception and active audiences must also be discussed. Finally, no survey of the literature can be complete without understanding the gendered practices of reading alone or in social groups, so a feminist analysis is introduced. Feminist analysis provides techniques that help to better understand how gender both structures the social context, but changes the interplay of individual and group agency.

To begin, I turn to an historical overview of women's literary societies. Through these accounts, one begins to understand the complexity of women's reading experiences in a social setting. The women's literary societies of epochs past render visible the agency actualised in the spaces and textual interpretations the women made for themselves, and offer the researcher historical points from which to interrogate contemporary book club norms, customs and values, both articulated and assumed.

### ***Literary Societies: Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Women's Interpretive Communities***

The social history of the "literary society" of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is well explored (Blair, 1980; Firor Scott, 1991; Flint, 1993; McHenry, 1995;



Murray, 1999; 2003; Ruggles Gere, 1997; Sicherman, 1989). These eloquent and varied studies of North American literary-society women consistently demonstrate that the members were not only initially constituents of the wealthy class, but later were members of the ever-widening middle class. Under the guise of helping those in need, American and Canadian women overcame resistance from their spouses, society and their emotional consciences to form benevolent societies that often branched into reading circles (McHenry; Murray).

As in contemporary book clubs, literary society meetings provided the framework for a woman's sense of order and understanding; they were spaces in which the women's knowledge could be validated. The discussions "provided a common language and a medium of intellectual and social exchange that helped them define themselves and formulate responses to the larger world" (Sicherman, p. 209). Group membership and reading practices provided a framework for the exercise of community, which often connected women to other women in similar groups across North America and in Great Britain in a real or imaginary sense.<sup>2</sup> The space afforded to the women in the literary societies was not available elsewhere.

There were different motivations for these women to meet with other women. Some met to socialise outside of the confines of their domestic spaces; others to participate in the suffrage and or temperance movements; others to fulfil the determination of self-improvement. Literary societies often provided the community

---

<sup>2</sup> My own account of The Victoria Literary Society, along with Robert Snapes' work on the National Home Reading Union, and Ann Ruggles Gere's chronicle of various literary societies in the United States, demonstrate the communication networks between the different groups and introduce the notion of imagined literary community membership in a broader sense.

support necessary for women to create and distribute their own works of literature. For example, Christine Boyko-Head (1999) has revealed the rich literary contributions several women made that until recently have been unrecognised in the annals of Canadian literary history.

This process of stepping out into public space by means of a benevolent club represented an important extension of domestic feminism, as identified by Daniel Scott Smith (1974, cited in Blair). Domestic feminism, according to Scott Smith is feminism that viewed women as:

(more than) an atom in competitive society,... (it) viewed woman as a person in the context of relationships with others. By defining the family as a community, this ideology allowed women to engage in something of a critique of male, materialistic, market society and simultaneously proceed to seize power within the family.  
(p. 132)

Scott Smith argues that women were able to use the power they had gained within the family to step into the public arena. This argument is enhanced when considered in concert with the propositions of Mary P. Ryan (1997), who argues for an historical re-examination of Habermas' public sphere and the implication of the activities of women who were stepping out of the home and into the public arena. Ryan posits that nineteenth-century American women were able to carve out their own political identities by involving themselves in issues such as welfare and health that would be seen as "general issues" and hence ease their way into the public agenda and ultimately gain the franchise.

Indeed, some of the literary-society women began to address social issues of the times, such as food and drug laws, safe drinking water and the establishment of parks and libraries. Ruggles Gere estimates that by the end of the nineteenth century, there were

more than two million American women in literary societies. And Sicherman estimates that 75 percent of U.S. public libraries were founded by these types of women's groups. Although the literary societies may not have always directly resulted in new membership in the suffragist and temperance movements, they often acted as training grounds for the women who later did get involved in those movements (Blair). In addition, those who were involved reported becoming more active readers and writers (Ruggles Gere).

My own work (Rehberg Sedo, 2003) confirms that literary societies on the West Coast of Canada provided an opportunity for some middle- and upper-middle class women to experience community and learning opportunities that they were not afforded within the patriarchal formal education system. Through a case study of Margaret McMicking, a prominent pioneer woman in Victoria, British Columbia (BC), I argue that there existed a simultaneous resistance to and perpetuation of gender and social class boundaries specific to the Canadian frontier. As far as I am able to discern, McMicking's membership in the Victoria Literary Society led to leadership in at least 10 other community organisations. One might assume that her literary society provided her the space to continue her passion for learning and reading, to "train" her to be a leader, and to create relationships and friendships with others through the reading and discussions of literature.

The demise of the Victoria Literary Society and other women's reading groups is consistent with archival records or published studies after WWI. According to an informal content analysis of BC newspapers during the first half of the last century, it appears women became preoccupied with keeping food on the table, doing what they

could for the war effort and bringing the troops home safely.<sup>3</sup> During the war, women were pushed into the workforce, and then after the war, they were forced back into the home. There was little room to renegotiate independent gendered spheres.

Book clubs appear to re-emerge during the 1960s and the 1970s, which coincides with the rise of feminist consciousness-raising groups that were forming around North America at the time. In analysing these groups we begin to gain insights into why contemporary women's book clubs have regained popularity, which informs my later discussion of the Vancouver book club women who participated in the ethnographic portion of this study. An overview of the early social history of the feminist consciousness-raising groups also provides conceptual resources to better understand the gender composition of contemporary groups.

### ***Book Clubs: Contemporary Women-Only Communities***

The book clubs that began in the 1960s and 1970s may have been in response to the feminist consciousness-raising groups. As feminist Judith Harlan (1998) reminisces, these groups were the backbone of an informal, unorganised network that promoted women to meet together in spaces in which subjectivity could be discussed:

As the 1960s unfolded, feminists formed consciousness-raising groups, and these became the mode for women's

---

<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions were American groups initiated by The Great Books Foundation. See Davis, J. A. *Great books and small groups*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961. I suggest that perhaps the number of reading groups really did decline, but rather went out of popular press radar. Without substantial evidence this might be dangerous to conjecture. Future research on this epoch might demonstrate that the groups continued to function, simply without the fanfare. Anecdotal evidence from women about their mothers being in groups, and their mother's mothers belonging, also suggests that the groups continued. For example, I know of one woman in Vancouver who has been in a club for more than 50 years, and have recently been introduced to a woman whose club has been meeting for 45 years in New Brunswick.

meeting. In them, women talked freely about the frustrations and restrictions they faced in their daily lives; they discussed society's underpinnings of sexism; and they experienced a "click" as they suddenly understood the connection between society's sexism and the frustrations of their own individual lives.<sup>4</sup> Women who may not have identified themselves as feminists when they went through the doors into these groups were feminists when they exited. One by one, two by two, and finally by the thousands, women raised their consciousnesses and left the meetings ready to seek change. "The personal is political" became a watchword of what was becoming clearly identifiable as a woman's movement. (Harlan, 1998, p. 4)

Part of the "second wave" of the feminist movement, the consciousness-raising groups were part of the powerful grassroots feminist movement. In this context, the mantras "the personal is political" and "sisterhood is powerful" were born and continue to be important in collectivities of women today (Adamson, Briskin, & McPhail, 1988). "Indeed, their dominance is such that we would say they have formed a powerful ideological core for the grass-roots women's movement; they have played a key role in the shaping the analyses of grass-roots feminism and thus its direction and impact" (p. 198).

Both concepts—"the personal is political" and "sisterhood is powerful"—as ideology and practices have had a formative influence on feminist theory, and thus provide a theoretical framework to understand the motivation of group membership in this study. The conceptual supposition behind "the personal is political" is that "the overall direction of women's lives—including their ideas, behaviours, and choices—is primarily shaped by the particular way in which society is structured" (p. 199). This idea

---

<sup>4</sup> "Click" was coined by Jane O'Reilly in the 1970s; it means "clicking-things-into-place-angry."

articulates a link between women's personal lives and the public structures within which they live.

“Sisterhood” is another feminist insight that informs this project. “Sisterhood” also symbolically rejected the private, powerless experiences of women. As an idea, it suggested that women are connected to other women simply because they are women (Mitchell, Rundle, & Karaian, 2001). This conception has since been proven problematic to the feminist movement in its assumption that all women share the same experiences. In a plea for a conceptually enlightened sisterhood, bell hooks (1984) argues that although “the idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (p. 44), women can create powerful—both figurative and real—bonds once “divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them” (p. 44). In the context of contemporary book clubs, hooks’ work makes concrete the different negotiations and oppositional readings available to book club women, while suggesting that the collective textual analysis produced in book club communities may lead to political action, at least on a personal level, in some circumstances.

But perhaps hooks sets too high a bar in understanding collective feminine action. Prior to doing comes knowing. Key to the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s was the ideal that women could learn and create predisposition to change through each others’ own life experiences. The groups were considered crucial “in producing new kinds of ‘knowledge’ about those apparent commonalities” (Gray, 1997, p. 90). As Kate Lindeman (cited in Adamson, 1988) confirms, consciousness-raising groups were set up to encourage women to share knowledge:

First, the experience is more than communal, it is collective...Second, the group is dialogic and it is without a formal, appointed leader. Honest, mutual sharing without regard to status has been freeing and has generated keen insights for such groups. Third, the group emphasizes non-judgemental listening to the naming of personal experience by other members. All experience, as long as it is owned by someone, is worthy subject matter. Fourth, in the consideration of someone's experience, members respond with supportive, collaborative experience, or with questions to aid clarification or critical reflection. They do not seek to tell, to "narrate answers to another." (p. 209)

The next section outlines some of the complexity in conceptual and practical notions of community. These notions have foundation in theories of knowing, and are exemplified in the contemporary women's book clubs of this study.

### *Theories of Community*

The definition of, search for, and public debate over the worth of, community has been a preoccupation of citizens and social and political theorists since the 1800s (Miller, 1999). In part, the problem lies in the dimensions of community as a sociological category (Lowe, 1986). "Community" can indicate social relationships that operate within territorial or geographically-defined areas, as is evident with one book club I studied where the women all live in the same neighbourhood. Or relationships can exist at a more imagined, or ideological, level sufficient to define community as it would for other book clubs in this study. Moreover, technological advances have created opportunities for virtual communities to form and flourish.

At its most basic level, community implies a sense of belonging or a perceived belonging-state. That belonging-state may also imply boundaries of voluntary or involuntary membership; in-group and out-group status inclusion or exclusion; co-

operation or conflict; reciprocal or asymmetrical benefits (Jenson, 1998). Ideas about community, cultural citizenship and belonging have resurfaced in an era of rapid cultural globalization, a problem beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet it is interesting to see that the critical discourse questions “whether social cohesion within modern society (has) been damaged by the decline of community often accompanied by a debate over the very worth of the community ideal itself” (Miller, p. 386).

There can be little question that the women in this and other book club studies seek community and therefore represent civil society actors who would deny any decline of community (Long, 1992; Hartley, 2001). But is this necessarily a social good? Can community provide opportunities for social transformation? Iris Marion Young (1990), a post-modern feminist critic of the practical and philosophical notion of community, suggests not. She claims that the desire for community, which is enduring among women, can be problematic because community is not sensitive to the politics of difference. She argues that:

Community is an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is understandable, but politically problematic ... because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify. (p. 300)

Accordingly, attention to group norms in accommodating or negotiating of difference or ensuring inclusion must be central to any study of community. I will discuss Lorraine Code’s (1991) model of friendship or “close alliances” as an appropriate conceptualisation of the book club community below. However, because this study



investigates book club communities that are both geographically defined, and also those that are virtual, I now turn briefly to the existing literature of cyber communities.

### ***Introduction to Theories of Cyber Communities***

Recent figures suggest there are an estimated 259 million Internet users world wide, and a little more than 13 million users in Canada (Campbell, 2000). One might therefore assume that some of these users are looking for community in its descriptive, normative or ideological state. Scholarly proponents argue that the Internet “offers a safe space to build new communities in” (Bell, p. 97). But what is virtual community?

“One of the most prominent and controversial aspects of emerging cybercultures is the question of community” (Bell, 2001, p. 92). Howard Rheingold (1993b) defined virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). Jerry Michaleski (1995) defined an on-line community as a “set of ongoing social relations bound together by a common interest or shared circumstance” (p. 44). And Susan B. Barnes (2001) left the definition to the users themselves: “When small group members spend enough time together to build emotional bonds, the group can begin to consider itself a ‘community’” (p. 159).

And yet, to date no research, save my own (2003) and Long’s (2003) explores the notion of book club community on the Internet. Instead, the debates centre around the “promises” and “limitations” of community on the Internet; the relationship between “on-

line and off-line life”; and the question of community itself as I have outlined above. Few on-line scholars explore the conditions for the dystopian vision Young warns against.

While David Bell is careful to consider the problematics around communities on the Internet, early research reflected mostly the benefits virtual reality could offer. Consider, for example, the following generalising statement made by Rheingold (1993b), an early scholarly cheerleader for the Internet:

My direct observations of online behavior around the world over the past ten years have led me to conclude that whenever CMC (computer-mediated communication) technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms create colonies. (p. 6)

Rheingold and others (Babbie, 1990; Bury, 2000; Furlong, 1989; King, 1994) have claimed that Internet users are more likely to use the Internet to connect with others than for entertainment or information-seeking purposes. According to Rheingold (1993a):

What we are looking for, and finding in some surprising ways, is not just information but instant access to ongoing relationships with a large number of other people. Individuals find friends, and groups find shared identities online through the aggregated networks of relationships and commitments that make any community possible. (p. 59)

In the modern search for the ideal community, early research indicated that the Internet was free of social barriers that plague traditional communities. Some researchers maintained that members of virtual communities are classless, raceless, faceless, and genderless (Finn, 1999; Reid, 1991). Indeed, according to Finn, “online groups offer a greater degree of anonymity than face-to-face groups. Using pseudonyms, members place and receive messages without cues related to age, gender, race, and physical appearance” (p. 4). The flexibility of time, space and mobility also appeared to be other utopian

aspects of virtual communities (Healy, 1997). More recent studies, however, have demonstrated that gender and class are performed in different ways in the sometimes limiting space of virtual reality (Bury, 2000; Dawson, 2000; 2001).

Therefore, one might conclude that the conceptualisation of community remains as problematic and as ambiguous in cyberspace as it is outside of it. I argue that Rheinholt or Michaleski's definitions and ideals are too simplistic to adequately understand the political nature of communities in a face-to-face environment, much less communities in a virtual environment. They ignore the complexities of human relations in both cyberspace and in the physical world.

Rhiannon Bury's PhD study of a women's on-line fan community suggests that "one needs to turn to the 'real' spaces informed by a politics of identity and difference" (p. 239) to better understand how subjectivity is played out in a virtual space. She concludes that it would be just as difficult to create a virtual dream community as it would be to create a "real" dream community. Her study is helpful in that she concludes that "the dream of community can only take form and be sustained through exclusion and the containment of difference, however unintentional" (p. 238). My research will investigate whether or not this holds true for book club communities, where on the surface it appears that differences are desired and encouraged. Thus, this study hopes to contribute to the knowledge about both face-to-face and virtual interpretive communities, and will highlight the uniqueness of communities in which literature is the most obvious binding mechanism.

## *Interpretive Communities*

Book clubs are groups of readers within specific social locations who develop a complex process of interpretation (Long, 1992). Readers move from the private but culturally-influenced and reflective personal activity of reading, into a collective process. This activity usually encapsulates everyone in the community to create knowledge through dialogue.

Clearly, an interpretive community informs individual interpretation (Culler, 1980; Fish, 1980a). While each reader may have individual interpretations, consistent interpretations emerge as a result of the interactions within the interpretive community to which one belongs. Book club women, like all readers, belong to more than one interpretive community. Community members do not necessarily have to have formal ties, such as a family, for example. However, they do share common social, cultural, political lives—and thus *interpretive competencies* (Radway, 1991, my emphasis), if not experiences.

Literary and political theorist Stanley Fish (1980) argues that meaning cannot be made outside of the transaction of reading. Fish (1989) speaks to an interpretive community in which the reader is not an independent agent, but rather a reader whose learned strategies are part of a community. His definition of an interpretive community is outlined below. Although it is lengthy and complex, it is worth quoting it in full because of its importance to this study:

The notion of “interpretive communities” was originally introduced as an answer to a question that had long seemed crucial to literary studies. What is the source of interpretive authority: the text or the reader? Those who answered “the reader” were embarrassed by the fact of agreement. Why, if meaning is created by the individual reader from the

perspective of his (sic) own experience and interpretive desires, is there so much that interpreters agree about? *What was required was an explanation that could account for both agreement and disagreement, and that explanation was found in the idea of an interpretive community, not so much a group of individuals who shared a point of view, but a point of view or way of organizing experience that shared individuals in the sense that its assumed distinctions, categories of understanding, and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the content of consciousness of community members who were therefore no longer individuals, but, insofar as they were embedded in the community's enterprise, community property.* It followed that such community-constituted interpreters would, in their turn, constitute, more or less in agreement, the same text, although the sameness would not be attributable to the self-identity of the text, but to the communal nature of the interpretive act. Of course, if the same act were performed by members of another community - of some rival school of criticism informed by wholly different assumptions - the resulting text would be different, and there would be disagreement; not, however, a disagreement that could be settled by the text because what would be in dispute would be the interpretive 'angle' from which the text was to be seen... (Fish, 1989, p. 141, my emphasis)

According to Fish, then, interpretative communities do *not* represent just a group of people, but rather a bundle of strategies and norms of interpretation that readers have in common and that regulate the way a text is perceived. He suggests that the community simultaneously *enables* and *limits* the consciousness and self, and thus the meaning that is made.

While useful for its foregrounding of the collective, there are problems with attributing too much determinism to the regulatory norms in his model. First, Fish's readers might be characterised as imprisoned in communal norms of interpretation, coerced by their authority (Freund, 1987, p. 109). Secondly, the authority, according to Fish's outline, is usually androcentric (Schweikart, 1986, p. 50). Feminist literary scholar

Patrocinio P Schweikart's critique is an important one because she argues that by focusing on the processual as Fish's model does, we lose sight of the underlying social structural forces that may allow a preferred or dominant interpretive community/or reading to emerge, and a minority one to recede. Agency is always constrained by social structure, and the power of class in acculturation, as a range of theorists as different as Bourdieu (1984), Bennett, Emmison and Frow (1999) and DiMaggio (1986, 1987, 1996) can remind us.

Book clubs are comprised of individual book readers who bring to the group interpretations that are at once their own, but which are informed by social structures of the family, the education system, and the workplace. In other words, women members interpret texts as women occupying various social locations.<sup>5</sup> The formal education system influences the value women place on literature; their expectations of literary interpretation; and how cultural capital gained from the educational setting can be transferred into other settings (Bourdieu, 1986). It is no accident that the history of literary societies ties the early emergence of this social institution to the emergence of a female petit bourgeoisie, struggling for social recognition, and ultimately the right to

---

<sup>5</sup> Frank Parkin (1972) accounts for varied responses to different texts as a result of people's different social circumstances. The theory, labelled "meaning systems", identifies three broad categories of meaning systems that can be found in western industrialised nation-states. According to Parkin, the "dominant system" sanctions the current ruling structures of power within social, economic and political relations. The system produces deferential or aspirational responses in the subordinate class. The "subordinate system" accepts the class differential, according to Parkin, but allows for certain groups to demand a better position within the system, and allows for negotiated responses that often work to undermine the power held by certain groups within the dominant system. The third system outlined by Parkin is labelled the "radical system", which he argues rejects the dominant system, and produces oppositional responses. Stuart Hall et al. (1980) make use of Parkin's theory to explain how dominant hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings of texts are influenced by the social context people bring to the decoding process. This will be discussed further below.

vote. The “certified knowledge” status of school and familial relationships accord power and value to books (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 75). Although a variety of socio-cultural forces play a role in valuing books and reading, “education ... plays a significant role in cultivating a capacity to distinguish between the formal aspects of literary texts and their content, as well as a preference for the former over the latter” (Bennett et al., p. 161). In other words, not only does the formal education system influence the literary tastes of the book club women, the formal education the women have received also works to determine the importance of book clubs themselves to the readers, and to their cultural repertoire of interpretive frameworks. In addition, as we will see later, the formal education system and the resultant cultural capital gained and used in book clubs works in serving to distinguish the class position of these women from “the mass”.

DiMaggio (1986; 1987; 1996) and other cultural theorists (Bennett, Emmison, & Frow, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984) argue that social influences such as the family, the education system and the mass media support and perpetuate perceptions and formations of gendered cultural practices and class relations. The women in this and other studies of book clubs are generally well educated. In addition, a large proportion of the readers work in professional positions within the communication industry, in libraries and as educators. They are often what Bourdieu or Bennett et al. call “cultural intermediaries”. Therefore, it is helpful to be reminded of Bennett et al.’s (1999) argument that the professions and gender work to actuate class status and tastes, which influence but do not wholly determine the cultural practices of readers:

Literary forms of cultural capital are most strongly associated with professionals and managers in a manner which reflects the degree to which both the acquisitions and maintenance of their class position is dependent on the

certified intellectual competencies they have acquired through the education system... It is also clear ... that literary capital within the professional and managerial classes takes different forms for men and women, with the documentary and factual bias of men's reading in these classes being counterbalanced by the stronger interest of women class members in literary and aesthetic genres. (p. 169)

If literary capital takes gendered form in genre preferences as Bennett et al. suggest, it is necessary to introduce genre theory, which provides a foundation for understanding the consumption of distinct cultural artefacts.

Genre is generally viewed as a categorical or systematic label that assumes a necessary order to a socially-constructed system. However, according to American sociologist Paul DiMaggio (1987), because “genres are partially constituted by *the audiences that support them*” (p. 441, emphasis in original), it would be more useful to refer to genre as “sets of artworks classified together on the basis of perceived similarities” (p. 441). This conceptualisation of genre encompasses the books read in book clubs, but genre can also apply to the book clubs themselves and to the discussions about the books therein.

Charles Bazerman (cited in Alexander, 2003) outlines how genres can function as locations in which the women of this study make meaning:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (p. 7)



The book club women learn *how* to talk about books. As Janet Giltrow (1995) explains, genre “[takes] account of the social and political *contexts of knowledge*, and ... calculate(s) the degree to which the quality of statements about the world [depend] on who—in the world—[makes] the statement” (pp. 20-21, my emphasis).

David Morley (1981) and Carolyn Miller’s (1984) genre theories, from mass communication and rhetorical traditions respectively, question the cultural competencies that are learned because of certain social formations. They also account for how these competencies are reproduced and continue within and through multiple genres or discourses.

Miller suggests that through the social action of the community “we learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potential for failure and success in acting together. As a recurrent, significant action, genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality” (p. 39). Genre then is appropriated and redefined in collective interpretation.

An influential contribution to interpretive community and genre concepts comes from Lorraine Code (1991), whose work stems from feminist standpoint theory.<sup>6</sup> Central to Code’s work is her argument that there is credence in the dialectic nature of women’s community or friendships, for through sites of participative dialogue, power is articulated and made manifest. What power is evident in book club spaces? What can we assume is

---

<sup>6</sup> Code’s work is foundationally based in knowledge production by women in relationships of trust. At its core, “feminist standpoint epistemology emphasises the importance of beginning thought from the lives of people who have been excluded from dominant cultural practices” (Fuller, 1999, pp. 123-124). The theoretical arguments for using standpoint theory in this dissertation will be discussed in Chapter Four.

the recurrent, significant action in book club communities, and to what end? Is there a space for individual and/or collective agency?

Code agrees with Young's questioning the ideal of community, in that it can neither accommodate "a politics of difference" nor "make space for strategies of intervention" (Code, p. 281). However, she takes issue with Young's tendency to create dichotomies that create exclusionary constructs rather than ones that are complementary or interdependent. Young's critique, in Code's words, is problematic:

to an extent that prevents her drawing on the promise of community-oriented politics without assuming that she would thereby endorse its (admittedly) troubling consequences. Her construction of a stark independence/intimacy dichotomy is particularly salient. (p. 281)

Code's outline of the "epistemology of everyday life" defines community members as those who inform what we know and places all humans not as autonomous knowers, but instead as "second persons". By positing a model of community or friendship as a "second person" way of knowing and sense making, Code's framework allows for analysing women's everyday lives by means of friendships or "close alliances" that "(construct rich) possibilities for subjectivity and agency" (p. 95). Knowledge, according to Code, is a social construct produced and validated through dialogue.

Careful to acknowledge that friendships or alliances are informed by psychosocial structuring that is not always emancipatory in nature, Code argues that communities and friendships also have "empowering features" (p. 95) that are concretised over time by emotions of trust "in degrees of intimacy and levels of dependence and independence" (p.

96). These relationships draw on knowledge that is individually owned and propositional, evolving into shared knowledge that can be useful for the purpose of social change.

Once again we should be reminded of Miller's argument that through social structures, we learn how to react and act in any given context. This is not a static process, but one that is evolutionary and is informed by the specific situation. This concept is paralleled by Fuller (in press), who argues that our knowledge of a friend "is always partial and in the process of constant revision" (n.p.). The relationship, Fuller argues:

cannot be described as either fixed or purely 'objective' since it is mediated by the feelings and emotions shared between friends. These so-called 'subjective' aspects of the relationship are vital to a sense of mutual understanding and necessary to our interpretation of a friend's actions, motives and personality. Furthermore, as we engage in this act of knowing, we grant the other person a degree of subjectivity and autonomy by trusting and respecting *their* interpretations of their own actions and emotions.  
(emphasis in original)

Book clubs are comprised of other readers who meet in a space that ideally provides opportunities for articulating various textual interpretation, life experiences and knowledge. The act of moving from the intensely personal experience of reading to seeking knowledge in a book club suggests that the women are not self-sufficient or self-reliant as knowers. (Nor do they want to be.) Through this community, the work of collective dialogic textual interpretation becomes new, shared knowledge.

This dissertation is in many ways an exploration of the epistemic potential of the interpretive community. Can it be, as Code has argued, that the "tentativeness and instability" in a relationship, and the "necessary incompleteness" of the knowledge are the foundation for this space? Are differences accommodated, and is a space for change is created?

Any attempt at meaning-making in any number of different relations, events, or circumstances, including a book club community, illustrates the complexity of humans as interdependent beings or “second persons”. Although Code’s analysis emerges from her experiences working for political and social change on a local and systemic scale, it is influential to this study because her argument confronts common assumptions that hold “knowers” as isolated and self-sufficient (p. 268). These common assumptions of knowledge as an objective matter and process, according to Code, suppress the effects of class, race and gender, among other factors such as experiences and cultural position. Instead, recognising that knowledge is subjective—that is, to forgo ideas of knowledge as objective—is to make visible the conditions under which knowledge is made. Her framework allows me to demonstrate how the collective processes of book club membership are significant at both ontological and epistemological levels. By questioning “who is the knower and what can be known, what constitutes knowledge and how it is evaluated,” the “construction of knowledge is both the object and subject of investigation” (Fuller, in press).

### ***Theories of Reading and Reading Reception***

In this section, I outline theories of reading response criticism and reading reception theories from the New Criticism of the early part of the twentieth century, to post-structural theories that foreground the role of the *subjective* reader. My survey of reading theory emphasises that the study of reading cannot be only a critique of texts, but rather it should also include a cultural analysis of the locations or social exchanges of reading. I am limited in the capacity to explore the textual criticism in this study, but it is important to remember as Terry Eagleton reminds us, “We are always so much more than

readers” (p. 196). Individual subjectivities are unavoidably interwoven with the texts in multiple ways.

In 1938, transactional reading theorist Louise Rosenblatt wrote: “There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work...The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. xii). The reader is actively involved in building the text for himself or herself out of responses to the text, Rosenblatt argued. The reader has to build upon past experiences and select from various referents that have occurred to make meaning. While this may appear as logical analysis to contemporary reading response theorists, the transactional model of reading Rosenblatt advocated presented a sharp disjunction with the dominant literary analysis tradition of the time.

During the Romantic period and into the nineteenth century critics actualised a text’s meaning through its author’s stated intentions and/or biography (Tompkins, 1992). Yet the New Criticism of the early twentieth century in which Rosenblatt was trained, assumed that meaning was intra-textual. Associated primarily with I.A. Richards, the formalists of New Criticism assumed that a work meant what a work meant, regardless of the author’s intentions or the resultant subjective emotions of the readers (Freund, 1987, p. 37). But Rosenblatt and others (in particular, Walker Gibson, cited in Leitch, 1995) proposed that neglecting the reader left gaps in meaning construction.

Contemporary reader response criticism is a heterogeneous practice that has come to describe the works of critics who use the reader, the reading process and reading response as an area of investigation. Probing the practical and theoretical consequences of the reading event, reading response criticism asks what the relationship is between the

private and the public, or how and where meaning is made, authenticated and valorised, or why readers' interpretations are consistent or why they are not. Loosely sharing the idea that the text cannot mean, or even exist apart from its readers (Freund, 1987), reader response critics provide different theories of the reader. These theories include, but are not limited to, the implied reader, whose responses are in part determined by the text itself and solidified by the reader filling in gaps (Iser, 1980); the sign reader, who applies complex sign systems to interpret the text (Culler, 1981); and the model reader (Eco, 1979), who through the text, selects:

the right frames, to reduce them to a manageable format, to blow up and to narcotize given semantic properties of the lexemes to be amalgamated, and to establish the isotopy according to which he (sic) decides to interpret the linear text manifestation so as to actualize the discursive structure of a text (p. 27).

As a whole, literature response research recognises each reader's response as individual and multifaceted; *individual* studies of literature response, however, appear fragmented and limit the cause of individual differences to isolated reader attributes. For example, Norman Holland's (1980) reader is an individual subject who determines reading by his or her "identity theme." According to Holland, readers depend on "inner selves" to interpret texts and through these interpretations, one can find one's self "for we are all caught in the general principle that identity creates and re-creates itself as each of us discovers and achieves the world in his own mind" (p. 130). Similarly, according to David Bleich (1980; 1986a; 1986b), interpretation of literature is the belated re-creation and presentation of primary emotional response, consisting of personal perceptions, affects, and associations interacting in a complex psychological process. While generally removing the power of meaning from the text to the reader, these reading response critics

do not consider the economic, historic, political, or social contexts. They do not concern themselves with women readers as women.

Addressing this omission, feminist literary perspectives bring gender and politics to bear on reading criticism (Schweickart, 1986). Judith Fetterley's (1978) *The Resisting Reader* introduced feminist theory to reader response criticism by arguing that classic American literature was not universal, but masculine. Fetterley reasoned that women readers were unable to identify themselves in reading such literature, which required identifying with the text as man. Women could and do refuse to do so, Fetterly argued. This theory of a resisting reader considers psychological, sociological and political (power) structures in the act of reading, thereby suggesting that textual interpretation can both reflect and change society by operationalising reader agency. However, I argue that considering gender as the only individual attribute in reader reception limits a reader's agency, and furthermore tends to universalize, suggesting that all women interpret texts in the same manner, with the same results. Of course, "gender definitions, produced within specific social discourses and practices in which gender is made into a meaningful category... articulate what is considered to be feminine and masculine in culture and society. Different discourses produce different definitions within specific contexts" (Ang & Hermes, 1996, p. 334). Again, one must not assume that there can be one universal woman's experience. A reader's social conditions including class, education, and occupation are also interwoven into concepts of identity and thus interpretation. The question then becomes, do women "resist" or do they "appropriate" texts? Can they *use* their reading for their own purposes of providing, in part, a common language and as a

conduit for responding to the world, as I outlined earlier and as Barbara Sicherman (1989) has demonstrated of women reading in the nineteenth-century?

Assuming that reading involves a sort of confrontation between self (the reader) and the “other” (the text), co-existence can take a variety of forms (Flynn, 1986). The reader might dominate the text by resisting it (Fetterly), and so remains unchanged by the reading. The reader can submit to the text so much so that the self is replaced by the other. Or, the reader can interact with the text balancing empathetic involvement with critical detachment, and thus learn from the reading.<sup>7</sup>

According to Flynn (1986), the analysis of women’s subjectivity in reader response criticism demonstrates distinct patterns in gender-specific literary analysis in which women are better able to interact with the text. This finding hints at one reason why book clubs may be comprised primarily of women. Consider that according to Flynn, men generally detach themselves from the text, but women participate in it. In addition, patterns of dominating the text by resisting it and thus remaining unchanged by the reading are evident in the men’s responses but not in the women’s; women are better able to resolve tensions in the text and to form consistent patterns of meaning. Flynn suggests that women “more often arrive at meaningful interpretations of stories because they more frequently break free of the submissive entanglement in a text and evaluate characters and event with critical detachment” (p. 285). The tendency to dominate the text is similar to David Bleich’s (1986b) findings of men’s detachment from the text and to Holland and Leona Sherman’s (1986) study of men’s resistance to the gothic novel. Both studies found that women could “better” comment on the human relationships in the

---

<sup>7</sup> A view also developed by Stuart Hall (1980)



story and were more prepared to enter into the experience offered by the narrative. Such findings suggest that the relationship between gender and reading is neither casual nor incidental but quintessential. Is it then that men do not generally belong to book clubs because the genre of discussion in book clubs is one one for which men are not well socialised? Or do they not belong because the book club is recognised as feminine spaces? These are questions that may be beyond the limits of my study, but I will attempt to offer conjectures in later chapters. The findings outlined above, however, suggest that the women's activities of collective interpretation within the book club interpretive community support both Miller's genre theory and Code's notion of community, for the dialogic interpretations "need to be heard by a community that is capable of recognizing their value" (Fuller, in press), and thus their meaning.<sup>8</sup>

While Flynn's, Bleich's, and Holland and Sherman's studies interrogated individual responses in a classroom setting, this study is an analysis of the collective interpretive strategies of "voluntary" book clubs, and therefore considers "natural" inter- and intra-group importance, cohesiveness, and power relations that add to individual textual interpretations. I want to also suggest that while the communities might provide a space in which the subjective agency is supported, the interpretations are influenced by the economic, historic (such as early-life reading experiences, or as time together in a book club), political, or social backgrounds of the other communal readers. This will become evident in Chapter Five, where I discuss the interpretive processes of the face-to-face book clubs in this study.

---

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that Miller suggests genre is gendered.

By demonstrating the inextricable relationship between what we read and how we read, feminist criticism brings the text back into contemplation, forcing one to consider the social structures within which interpretation occurs. As Tony Bennett (1989) reminds us, texts can be acted upon in ways that differ from the ways of the literate elite. He recommends:

*not* the dissolution of the 'text itself' into the million and one readings of individual subjects... but rather its dissolution into reading relations and, within those, reading formations that concretely and historically structure the interaction between texts and reader... such interaction would be conceived of as occurring between the *culturally activated* text and the *culturally activated* reader, and interaction structured by the material, social, ideological, and institutional relationships in which *both* text and reader are inescapably inscribed. (p. 215-216, emphasis in original)

Thus, Bennett reminds us that the readers' economic, historic, political, or social conditions inform both the text *and* the reader.

Reader response theory generally assumes readers make meaning from the text and thus, readers have agency. The degree to which this agency is apparent reflects the structures within which readers read. One would assume then that the process of reading would result in only varied responses. According to Wolfgang Iser (1978), "the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" (p. 54). How is it then that different readers share common interpretation of texts?

## **Theories of active audiences**

Can any one of us know whether or not we are members of the same interpretive community? According to Fish (1980), we cannot know because any evidence to support the claim would in itself be an interpretation. The only confirmation of community membership, according to Fish, “is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community. ... I say it to you now, knowing full well that you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already agree with me” (p. 173). What significance can we place on the cognisance of membership in the reading experience? What role does membership play? And how does membership inform interpretive strategies? To begin to answer these questions, I turn to the theories of active audiences.

Within the social context of the home, Morley’s (1980) pivotal audience analysis, *The Nationwide Audience*, and the postscript study (1981) demonstrate that socially positioned viewers make meanings through negotiations and interpellations with the text. The polysemy of the text, however, is constrained by the reader’s age, sex, race, class and gender. So although the notion of a preferred reading may be null because there is no preferred reading when the viewers make all meaning (1981), “polysemy must not ... be confused with pluralism ... (because) there exists a pattern of ‘preferred readings’” (Hall, 1980, p. 134).

Hall reminds us that readers are restrained because “encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (p. 135). Readers can negotiate preferred readings or dominant readings, although they may be limited by the social, economic and cultural structures within which the texts were produced, distributed and consumed. As Fetterly (1978) and Hall (1981) have argued, some readers will resist preferred readings entirely.

Television viewers may watch programs much differently from what might be expected, and differently from one another, with varying levels of critical abilities (Ang, 1985). Sometimes, viewers may use the program to help them navigate through their own everyday lives, rejecting the dominant readings (Katz & Liebes, 1984). Similarly, women might read women's magazines for different reasons, with different results (Hermes, 1995); or, working class girls might challenge feminist critiques of the danger of girl children reading "oppressive" romances and comics, and use the texts to cope with everyday life (Walkerdine, 1990). And, similar to Janice Radway's (1991) romance readers, the social and cultural structures of the book club community might influence the women's readings of texts while working to create a space that the women use in different ways for differing reasons.

With her background in literary criticism and a foundation in feminist analysis, Radway considered the social *act* of reading, in conjunction with textual analysis. The study was similar to the research being done in media and cultural studies in Europe and the US in the 1980s, where one also finds relational theories of active meaning making outside the text. That is, subjective identities are constructed and reflected in the consumption of media during everyday life (Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1984; Morley, 1980; Walkerdine, 1990).

Radway's ethnography of readers' reception of romances in Smithton, a fictional American Midwest city, concluded that the women "use" the romance for a variety of purposes, including escape, learning and entertainment. Indeed, the romance readers "focused... resolutely on the significance of the *act of romance reading* rather than on the meaning of the romance" (p. 86, emphasis in original). Based on interviews of individual

women, who do not consciously belong to a group but identify with one, the study shows that the act of reading itself was important to these women. Reading “enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities” (p. 86). By reading romance novels, the Smithton women could escape from their continuous work as wives, mothers and housekeepers.

Radway’s work is significant to this study, in part, for its analysis of reading within the social context in which women readers read. In addition, Radway was careful to analyse not only the ideological assumptions made in the text, but to also attempt to interpret the ideological meanings that the readers make of the text. In literary theoretician Trysh Travis’s (2003) words, “the cultural studies lens empowered the subjects Radway ... viewed through it, and ennobled women historically overlooked by the feminist vanguard. Thus a mindless, bamboozled female public unwittingly contributing to its own oppression was transferred into active agents...” (p. 137) Radway demonstrated that readers can have dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings of the text, which are influenced by that social context. The women readers were thus recognised as active agents who could, according to Radway “resist, alter, and reappropriate” texts. As Travis points out, however, Radway admits the “partial and indeed ambivalent character of the ‘resistance’ her readers offered to cultural authority” (p. 138).

Still, the Smithton study was particularly influential for feminist media studies, and in particular to this study, for two reasons. First, Radway acknowledged what has become known as “the pleasure principle.” The readers in her study found pleasure in reading romance novels, yet they experienced guilt in doing so because romance reading

is often a culturally devalued practice. Relevant to this study then, one might question the cultural value placed on women's book clubs and how the women react to the socially-sanctioned merit.

Radway's study is also important because earlier reception analysis assumed an almost hypodermic needle model of the effects that media had on women (Ang & Hermes, 1996). Arguing that readings might simultaneously reflect and satisfy the women's everyday emotional and social needs, Radway countered what many feminists expected of the women's reading experiences. That is, although some standard narratives of the romance may appear to maintain patriarchal ideology, the Smithton women developed oppositional readings, refuting patriarchy. But they did so alone, without recourse to other women in any reading club as a social institution, although some made recourse to friends and family in loose social networks to 'talk' book talk.

Some book club women may use reading and the book club meetings much like Radway's romance readers in Smithton, who saw their reading as an escape from their daily duties as wives and mothers, and as a way to fight the loneliness that sometimes accompanies those roles. The Smithton women saw their reading time as their own, free of responsibilities. They recognised their social situations and identified their reading as necessary, although they often felt guilty for spending the time and money on the romances. The women dealt with the guilt and responded to criticism (usually from husbands) by empowering themselves, in part, by learning new "facts" from the texts. In addition, the women were able to demonstrate varying levels of textual criticism, identifying the romance genre and critiquing the books according to their own literary tastes.

The Smithton women saw themselves as members of an imagined exclusive community of readers, although they were not part of particular social groups in which they gathered together in specific locations. Indeed, according to Radway, the forces at work in a patriarchal society prohibited them from physically gathering together. Still, Radway enhances Fish's theory of interpretive communities by conducting ethnography in the private spaces in which the act of reading occurs: in the homes of the readers and in a bookstore where many of the women buy their books. Radway herself admitted that her study falls short in that "the concept (of interpretive communities) is insufficiently theorized to deal with the complexities of social groups or to explain how, when, and why they are constituted precisely *as* interpretive communities" (p. 8). Radway's study cannot explain the voluntary and imagined basis of interpretive community membership: "Thus it cannot do complete justice to the nature of the connection between social location and the complex process of interpretation" (p. 8).

In the social location of organised book clubs, however, one can evaluate the relationship between interpretive community members and collective interpretation. In addition, a study such as this one can add to the cultural studies literature. *Reading the Romance* evaluated the reception of a commonly-perceived "trashy" cultural artefact or "lowbrow" activity of romance reading. Contemporary book club books and communities, on the other hand, are simultaneously valued and devalued in society at large. Contemporary book clubs are at once considered "frivolous" and "stressful". The books the women read may be considered highbrow, middlebrow or sometimes, lowbrow. Women's book club interpretive communities, therefore, provide unique sites

to investigate interpretative strategies that are influenced by power relations both inside and outside the community.

During a book club meeting, the readers *share* individual interpretations with one another, which work to influence collective textual interpretation. Therefore, an analysis of book clubs necessarily means that one should turn to literature investigating the role of dialogic textual interpretations (a dimension that may be most closely linked to Code's world view). Interpreting texts through talk with others in our social contexts may be as significant as the individual interpretation process (Fiske, 1987). Talk may be about a recent movie, or the latest Survivor episode, or it may be about the book your book club has been reading. Whatever the text:

much of (the talk) is performing a similar cultural function to (the texts)... representing aspects of our social experience in such a way as to make that experience meaningful and pleasurable to us. These meanings, these pleasures are instrumental in constructing social relations and thus our sense of social identity (Fiske, ¶ 17).

So it can be within these voluntary communities of book clubs that women negotiate their own subjectivities and their place in society. The texts mediate these negotiations, and along with the dialogic interpretations, can represent sites of resistance, which would broaden Fish's notion of an interpretive community. For example, Mary Ellen Brown's (1994) ethnographic study of women's conversations about soap operas concluded that "the sense-making that people engage in when they talk about television may be as important as their actual viewing of the television program" (p. 2). Because, although the dominant reading of the soap opera genre is that it is unsophisticated and lowbrow, the women viewers in Brown's study analysed their roles as women, and created new interpretations of those roles through the soap opera discussions. Therefore the



“micropolitical” activity of talk has the potential to be emancipatory in that social change often occurs when marginalised groups articulate their experiences to one another.

The text and the dialogic interpretations that occur in women’s book clubs present the women with opportunities to gather together to use the text and the talk to create meanings that may be contrary to the preferred or dominant readings, but which always reflect the individual’s life experiences (Katz & Liebes, 1984; Tursi, 1996). As Fiske notes, “oral culture is responsive to and is part of its immediate community. It resists centralisation and the ideological control that goes with it...” (Fiske, ¶ 18). Therefore, “the dialogism *between* reader and text should not blind us to the social process *among* groups of readers collectively constructing given texts” (Boyarin, 1992, pp. 212-213, emphasis in original).

As I have outlined, the idea of the active “reader” is central to cultural studies. Within this perspective, theorists are “centrally concerned with the construction of meaning—how it is produced in and through particular expressive forms and how it is continually negotiated and deconstructed through the practices of everyday life” (Murdock, 1989, p. 346). While concentrating on methodologies that question traditional paradigms, cultural studies, however, tends to ignore books as a media form and instead prefers newspapers, magazines, television, and film. As Gardiner (2000) asserts, “in its determination to engage with ‘popular’ culture, it can appear to dismiss the book as a persistent élitist form, an encoding of ‘high culture’ which has had a dominance that the political intention of cultural studies aims to subvert”.

The following section introduces leading book club studies that also inform this line of enquiry. In discussing the works of Jenny Hartley (2001), Elizabeth Long (1986;

1987; 1992) and Linsey Howie (1998), I begin to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of book club analysis and the complexities of the book club phenomenon. Each study adds to the understanding of book clubs as a cultural form, and represents a shifting attitude towards the importance of investigating women's cultural and social activities. In addition, each study provides points from which to enhance knowledge about these cultural sites. Taken together, the studies confirm that reading can be viewed as a process of forming identity, and that book clubs play a unique role in the process. The studies also confirm my thesis that in the context of reading and making meaning the relationship between the private and the public is complex. To varying degrees, the studies of book clubs also introduce the simultaneous resistance to and compliance with dominant gender expectations and cultural authority within the book club interpretive community

## *Chapter Three*

### Studying the Book Club

Despite the evidence of a possible renaissance in reading, and the rise in the appearance of book clubs in popular culture, the academic study of women in book clubs is still relatively underdeveloped. Recent work critically analyses the literacy value of Oprah's Book Club (Hall, 2003), or compares university classroom and women's book club literary analysis competencies (Barstow, 2003). Travis (2003) argues a compromised view of late-capitalist patriarchy and women's critiques of it through fan sites and communities that formed around Rebecca Well's *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Her work suggests that the readers she studied have resorted to evangelical new wave spiritualism in their reading, reading response and reading experiences. Most informative to this project, however, were the ethnographic studies of Elizabeth Long (1986; 1987; 1992; 2003)<sup>1</sup>, Jenny Hartley's survey research (1999; 2001), and Linsey Howie's (1998)

---

<sup>1</sup> Long's *Book clubs: Women and the uses of reading in everyday life* was published three months before the final draft of this dissertation. I have noted where I believe her most recent discussions are relevant to this work.

combined survey and interview research. What can we learn from these precedents? The three studies from different approaches (descriptive, feminist and reception analysis) are outlined below. The important findings from them help generate hypotheses that will guide the empirical part of this dissertation.

### ***Foundational Book Club Studies***

Hartley's 2001 study of 350 book clubs mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States outlined their composition and processes. Hailing the rising popularity and significance of the clubs as "the reading-group movement,"<sup>2</sup> Hartley's *Reading Groups* was written for a non-scholarly audience in a trade paperback format. Through quantitative data, supported by qualitative insights provided on the surveys and analysis of clubs she visited, Hartley establishes several generalisations about book clubs that are helpful in introducing the readers and clubs in this study.

First, book clubs are comprised primarily of middle-class, well-educated women mostly over the age of 40. Hartley (2001) found four percent of the clubs in her research were groups of all men, while 27 percent were mixed-gender groups. Sixty-nine percent of the book clubs in her study were all-women clubs (p. 25). One could suggest that most of the readers in her study might have participated in the second-wave feminist movement or at least the ideals of the era since one-third of the groups were women in their 40s, another third in their 50s, 20 percent are in their 30s, one percent were under the age of 30, and 12 percent had varying age representation. Not surprisingly, considering Bennett et al.'s argument that education and work play a significant role in valuing books and reading, 88 percent of her survey participants reported having some

---

<sup>2</sup> Book clubs are commonly called reading groups in the UK.

sort of higher education (p. 33), and 67 percent of the club members report working in paid positions (p. 157).

Secondly, readers reported the search for new knowledge as a primary reason for joining and belonging to a club (pp. 54-55). Hartley notes that the readers seek the different points of view that are exposed through the collective interpretation of the different titles. This finding also suggests that Fish's notion of interpretive community does not fit so neatly in these communities. According to Hartley, the different reading responses enhance the social bonds that are formed within the groups. Although clubs operate differently from one another, the divergent dialogical and structural formats do not appear to impede the communities that are formed. That is, although the groups read different titles from one another and have different ways of interpreting the books, they report that they value the new knowledge they gain and the social bonds created with the other readers.

Thirdly, Hartley's book clubs read primarily fiction; 82 percent of the clubs surveyed reported reading fiction for the past six months. Careful to point out the large diversity of titles listed, Hartley also introduced an hypothesis that there may be a book club genre, but narrowed this to the text itself, without acknowledging the possibility of book clubs as a genre themselves. She dismissed the notion that reading groups in the UK read middlebrow fiction, noting that the text selections often reflect those chosen within the academy:

I think it is fair to say that literary elites and establishments have always defined themselves against the middlebrow. ... Reading groups, though, are often reading the same serious literary fiction (for example Atwood, McEwan, Morrison) as those literature departments which show so little interest in their activities; and their discussions aren't so different

from those in the seminar rooms either ... I have to conclude that 'middlebrow' is not a helpful label to describe this reading. (pp. 62-63)

Whether literary fiction or not, a book club book must evoke empathy and engagement from the readers. This ascription can be between the reader and character, between the author and character, or "between all the readers in the room" (p. 132). The book need not be written by a woman author (p. 67). And always, good book club books, according to the readers in Hartley's study, evoke passionate discussion, which is usually achieved by the different reading responses. The top ten reading group books in the study included common themes and patterns:

War and its aftermath (*Fugitive Pieces*, *Cold Mountain*, *Birdsong*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*; damaged childhood (*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Angela's Ashes*, *The God of Small Things*), and the overriding importance of a strong context—there is a lot of violence of one sort or another... Foreign words, or specialized and arcane terminology (in, for example) *Enduring Love*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, and *Fugitive Pieces* ... and groups in Britain currently enjoy what they call 'poetic' novels such as *Fugitive Pieces* and *The God of Small Things* (pp. 67-69).

Hartley's *Reading Groups* begins to identify the potential of virtual clubs; however, her discussion stops at the identification of their existence with the postulation that the largest influence the Internet has on book clubs is that it offers opportunities for face-to-face clubs' research efforts in seeking titles to read:

Altogether, although the internet may seem the opposite of what reading groups value (the face to face, the local), it can be welcomed with open arms as a wonderful resource: not a substitute but a supplement, and a good second best for the housebound or the isolated. (p. 4)

Although Hartley's primarily descriptive study begins to illustrate the complexity of book clubs, including their gender composition, their divergent title choices and discussion processes, and their sensibilities around community, she neglects one significant space that this study hopes to explore. Virtual book clubs provide a space in which some women feel more comfortable than in a face-to-face situation. They may also be the only option if a reader cannot find a face-to-face group. Or, a virtual club might enhance one's membership in a face-to-face club. The Internet might also provide space for specialised interpretive communities that are usually not readily available or deemed valuable in face-to-face clubs, such as romance, mystery or science fiction reading clubs.

Hartley clearly did not set out to present her findings for an academic audience, although her findings suggest that the authorities within the academy might need to readdress their perceptions of the groups. She supports her statistical findings with the voices of the book club members from the survey responses, providing rich data. Most of her participation in the reading groups was limited to one or two visits, which leaves questions about time and space unanswered. How does the community influence the interpretive community practices over time, and what does that influence look like? How, if at all, do the women consciously maintain a women-only space? What might this mean in the context of the readers' everyday lives?

Australian Linsey Howie's (Howie, 1998) more complex feminist work begins to address some of these questions. Different from Hartley's in that it was written as her PhD dissertation, Howie's study investigates women's subject positions within a book club. Conducting survey research and in-depth interviews with book club members of the state-sponsored Victorian Council of Adult Education, Howie's findings can be situated

within the literature of sociology, ritual theory of anthropology, philosophy, social geography, feminism and psychoanalysis. There are three salient themes in Howie's study, all of which influence this study. First, the "ritual" of the book club provides women with an escape and an opportunity to change within a safe environment, and to understand themselves in relation to the text and other club members (p. 71). In this sense, the *act* of reading, as Radway points out, becomes ritual in book clubs. Although Howie did not acknowledge genre theory as a way to understand book clubs as cultural sites, her readers demonstrated that indeed book clubs can be viewed as genres of social action. They did this by describing their book clubs as "a 'safe space' where members could be opinionated, passionate or silent, or show off possessions, knowledges and skills" (pp. 71-72). They viewed their book club meetings as a refuge, using words that suggested "freedom from the everyday obligations to social conventions, families, home and work" (p. 72). Howie also concluded that the women book club members experience 'journeying,' which, she argued, is an attestation "to an interpretation of group reading as spatialised ontology, a forum for members to map their developing self-identities through movement in fictional and real worlds" (p. i). Her third argument is that the intersubjective space of the group allows women to create different ways of being in their world. So although book club members in her study were socially homogeneous, "the text and ritual processes of book club encourage members to consider different subject positions and different self-understandings" (p. 237). She further concluded that "it is in this fascination with their differences, and their capacity to entertain new ideas, that the women ... reveal how they disturb confining self-representations and invite different ways of seeing themselves". According to Howie, this is why book clubs remain mostly



women only. They need these women-only spaces in which to interpret themselves. I intend to test the hypotheses presented by Howie, and ask if her findings can be justified with another set of data. This study investigates what I call organic face-to-face and virtual communities. Whereas Howie's groups operated under the auspices of that Council of Adult Education, the groups I studied formed voluntarily and independently, usually through pairings of friends. Such an analysis will provide opportunities to investigate interpretive communities from another perspective, and in particular, different levels of subjectivity through book choices, discussion methods, and club processes.

Although both Hartley and Howie are influential, this work is inspired most directly by Long's report of reading groups in Houston, Texas. Although conducted nearly 20 years ago, Long's analysis is relevant because it questions the distinction between public and private space while providing opportunities to critically analyse the "moral and ideological dimensions of social identity" (1992, p. 195).<sup>3</sup> Long is successful in furthering reading reception theories by undercutting the notion of a solitary reader. She persuasively argues that an individual's participation in a book club is based on a shared need that informs the individual's sense of identity, and contributes to the group's solidarity. Central to this study, Long argues that reading for a book club is transactional: not only between reader and text, but also between reader, text and group.

Long's work is an attempt to demonstrate women's collective interpretations of texts as an interpretation of their social lives. Based on brief participant observations, interviews and questionnaires of more than thirty groups, Long argues that members join

---

<sup>3</sup> Long's data set was updated in the early 1990s through questionnaires and interviews.

a group to fill a gap that society, or the members' social situations, has failed to fill.<sup>4</sup> Joining a book club illustrates members' "recognition of their own, often critical, position towards literary or social values" (1992, p. 198). Joining a group is thus an act of cultural and social definition; it is a critical reflection on society. Being in a book club "constitutes" social identity and solidarity. That is, through the social practices of a book club, and in particular, the discussion of books, in the words of Long, reading groups can have "transformative potential either for individuals or for the group as a whole" (p. 199). The meaning making that manifests through collective interpretation acts as "equipment for living" (p. 200).

According to Long, the cultural consumption of reading is a public act because it depends on the social infrastructure of the school both to learn to read and to build the appetite for the sustained study of books. These collective and institutional processes shape reading practices by authoritatively defining what is worth reading and how what is read is interpreted. In turn, this authoritative framing affects what kinds of books are published, reviewed, and kept in circulation in libraries, classrooms and the marketplace, while legitimating certain kinds of literary values and modes of reading. However, literature is not received as might be expected by cultural authorities, or by the "literary establishment" (1986, p. 609). Analysis of the ways in which readers "use" literature is imperative because "literature affects (the readers) differently (from the academy's expectations) because they appropriate it, or engage with it, motivated by a different set of needs ... ." (p. 609). Is the collective interpretation in book clubs so typically divergent? Is this the main social action of the genre of book club dialogue?

---

<sup>4</sup> Long's most recent work also includes discussion of brief observations of several virtual groups and on-line interviews with several moderators.

According to Long (1986), the collectively acceptable divergent interpretations negate book clubs as interpretive communities as defined by Fish (1980). She argues that because “whatever cultural resistance they express never becomes collective or institutional, or even systematically articulated” (p. 609), the groups cannot be considered interpretive communities. I ask, however, what an analysis of the clubs over an extended period might reveal about collective and articulated strategies and norms. And what might the readers themselves say about these practices? This study investigates the interpretive competencies that are historically created by each individual member who brings with her to the meaning making process her own social and cultural experiences, and which work to influence the community. Can they then not be considered interpretive communities?

Long’s research serves as a solid foundation for this study. There are, however, several significant differences in our work. While Long provides interesting textual analyses of interpretation, I adopt a communication perspective that focuses more on the social space of groups and the dialogic basis of their discussion. In other words, this study focuses on the norms around the book club culture, and the collective practices that arise out of interactions with the others and the texts. Another difference between our work reflects the nature of our investigations of virtual book clubs. Long’s inquiry of on-line environments is not from the perspectives of the readers but rather from the group moderators. And especially important to this study, the members of the groups Long visited tend to be comprised of primarily middle-aged, American men and women, constituent of the middle to upper-middle class. The book club members in my study are younger, less economically affluent, and predominantly Canadian.

The works of Hartley, Howie and Long when contextualised within the larger theories of interpretive communities and reader reception, provide this study with the foundation to create specific hypotheses. Specifically, I seek to explore the following claims:

(1) the book club women in this study recognise the cultural significance of books and use reading as a source of pleasure, a process for identity formation and a tool to gain cultural capital (Bennett et al.; DiMaggio; Radway);

(2) the women seek a communal space, whether face-to-face or on-line, and a participatory forum that supports and makes public the private, individual reading responses and that values their individual women's voices and experiences (Code; Hartley; Long; Smith);

(3) although these communities are comprised of individual women with different meaning systems, the women collectively renegotiate their own worlds in ways not achievable in private and in spaces not available to them in greater society (Code; Long)

(4) while these processes are empowering, the clubs necessarily experience conflict (Howie; Long);

(5) however, the collective meaning making that happens over time is negotiated, leading to sometimes unintentional exclusive community boundaries and consistent patterns in interpretation, suggesting that book clubs and the texts therein can be considered both genres and also interpretive communities (Code; Fish; Howie; Long; Miller).

To investigate the book club phenomenon with the intention of testing these hypotheses necessarily demands a method that privileges the women's reading experiences and the dialogue about and surrounding the interaction between the texts and the readers. The method also needs to bridge the individual and group experiences and evaluate the experiences over time and in the different environments. I chose to employ ethnographic and survey research methods, and explain my reasoning further in the following chapter

## *Chapter Four*

### Research Methods: Understanding the Experience

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter presents the research methods I employed to investigate women's book clubs. The research borrows from both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms by mixing methods of ethnography and survey research. In doing this kind of research I hope to add to what Canadian communication scholars Leora Salter and Alison Hearn (1996) have called "vitality" of modern universities and the research conducted therein. As was the theme in their argument for the benefits of interdisciplinary research, the goal of this project is not to "(confront)—the establishment, content, parameters and powers of disciplines and the prevailing approaches to research they engender" (p. 38); the goal is to investigate the experiences of Canadian women book clubs and their members using the research methods that further understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of communication studies, cultural studies, literary studies, sociology, and women's studies. The research is particularly informed by feminist standpoint theories.

Two main organising paradigms occur in social science research: quantitative and qualitative methods. This research project endeavours to use both to create what

interdisciplinary qualitative researchers Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (1995) call an investigative “process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human interactions” (pp. 15-16). Using both interpretive and positivist paradigms, the research seeks to explain, describe or explore the contours of interpretive practices of contemporary women’s book clubs.

To traverse these two paradigms, this study uses a multiple-method design. Usually termed triangulation, the goal of mixed method research is to achieve convergence of findings. According to W. A. Firestone (1987), employing both ethnographic and survey methods allows the researcher to criticise her own material, to identify its weaknesses, and to identify where to test further doing something different. My purpose is slightly different; I seek *complementarity* to enhance the interpretability of different assessments of the book club phenomenon. For example, the on-line survey provided “representative information” that was elaborated through qualitative data collected. Using the survey allowed me to test hypotheses generated through a pretest and the ethnographic fieldwork. The approaches can thus be viewed as “complementary.”

Using different types of methods helps to guard against and to correct for inherent methodological biases either for or against certain types of theories (Jick, 1983). The process allows for a more “holistic and complete portrayal” of book clubs. “Each method type uses different techniques of presentation to project divergent assumptions about the world . . . . Yet, they are not antithetical. They present the reader with different kinds of information and can be used to triangulate to gain greater confidence in one’s conclusions” (Firestone, 1987, p. 16). For example, the interpretations I make from the time spent in the book clubs improves the realism of the surveys I collected on line by

providing empirically grounded theoretical frameworks for survey research. On the same note, because the different methods I employed come from different theoretical traditions, combining them adds range and depth. In the same vein, I attempt to add breadth and depth to the analysis by combining theories and methods carefully and purposefully.

Maintaining that both qualitative and quantitative approaches have value, I might label myself as a situationalist (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). I reason that certain methods are appropriate for specific situations. In addition to labelling myself a situationalist researcher, I also consider myself a feminist analyst. Within the qualitative paradigm, this reflexive acknowledgement is generally acceptable. This may not be the case within certain positivist circles. However, to ignore my own position within my research neglects my own knowledge along with those who shared with me their texts, their interpretations, and their experiences. The next section of this chapter outlines the theoretical arguments of employing methods that consider a woman's experience—from a woman's perspective.

### ***Interrogating Women's Experiences***

Communication researchers Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1996) have called for an end to research that emphasises women's experiences, women's culture, and women's media consumption as *self-contained*, but as often internally differentiated entities. They acknowledge that "this is not to deny that there are gender differences or gender-specific experiences and practices, it is however to suggest that their meanings are always *relative to particular constructions in specified contexts*" (p. 333, my emphasis). Instead, the



theoretical questions that should guide research, they argue, should investigate “how gender—along with other major social axes such as class and ethnicity—is *articulated* in concrete practices of media consumption (pp. 333-334, emphasis in original). Textual feminist analysis without an analysis of the meaning making processes of the readers themselves runs the risk of “being reductionist ... in theoretical generalizations about gender and media consumption, a reductionism that stems from insufficiently distinguishing semiological and sociological levels of analysis” (p. 328). When interrogating women’s reading then, according to Ang and Hermes, the research must consider the specific articulated experiences of the women in context of their everyday lives.

To reiterate a point I made earlier, this research is an attempt to integrate different levels of analysis so that I might better report the different factors at play in the complex life experiences of these book club women as I understand them. I am not concentrating on individual reading response, but rather on the processes within groups, which is informed by collective meaning making. My primary concern is to better understand how the concept of community is articulated and actualised by the groups. Instead of investigating individual responses, collective interpretation club practices are analysed in a natural setting that is the book club. This is augmented by “artificial constraints” such as interviews and surveys. I label them artificial because it is outside the individual interpretation.

Much of my efforts to analyse the interpretive communities that form around the women’s reading experiences are influenced by feminist standpoint theory, and in particular by the feminist standpoint theories of sociologist Dorothy Smith. Smith (1987)

argues that “analyzing women's conditions from the *stand point of women* validates their experiential reality” (p. 38, emphasis in original). By utilising feminist standpoint theory, I hope to produce a sociological inquiry that highlights “the social relations in which (women’s) experience is embedded, making visible how it is put together and organized in and by a larger complex of relations” (1993, p.184). Smith argues that women’s discourse about their lives can illuminate “a distinctive form of coordinating activities among people in a system of relations mediated by texts” (p. 185). This means that both women and their “texts” are “socially organized practices” (p. 185) that can illuminate what she calls “the relations of ruling” that play a part in how women live their lives. Important in this methodology then is the role of the researcher, whose responsibility it is to listen and watch for the instances of women’s agency in and reactions to those relations that are made manifest through women’s accounts of their experiences.

According to feminist literary sociologist Danielle Fuller (in press), whose work on women’s writing communities and the knowledges created therein was in part influenced by Smith, standpoint theory “is not confined to the exploration of women’s lives and knowledge” (n.p.). Rather, its main preoccupation is explicating “the experiences and knowledge of non-ruling groups as they negotiate questions of value and action among relations of non-ruling power, and between the non-ruling and the ruling” (Hunter, 1999, p. 1, cited in Fuller, in press). This elaboration of the concept of power situates political, legal, economic and institutional structures that organise society as ruling relations of power. Non-ruling civic and domestic relations of power are those that are negotiated among and between individuals and groups. According to rhetoric historian Lynette Hunter (1999), the notion of “... non-ruling civic and domestic relations

of power argues that the subject is not only governed by ideology, and inflected by the contradictions of systematization that is analyzed by discourse, but is also constituted by local daily communications, discussions and negotiations” (p. 238). “Non-ruling relations of power are experienced within the course of people’s daily lives but they are not formally recognised through payment or named as socially valuable by the elite groups who are closest to ruling relations” (Fuller, in press). Furthermore, people may not always recognise non-ruling relations of power even though they may be participating and/or benefiting from them.

Although Fuller was interested in according value to texts by those who produce those same texts, her argument suggests the validity of using a methodology that takes into account the value accorded to texts by those who respond to the texts. Because book clubs tend to be all women, and especially because the groups in which I participated and observed are almost all-women, I attempt to explain the significance of their experiences through the women themselves. Yet I am cognisant of both Smith’s (1987) and Fuller’s (in press) careful cautioning that “daily experience alone, regardless of whose experience it is, is not sufficient grounds upon which to base theories and concepts of social and economic structures.” For while models of understanding and knowing as articulated by specific groups “generates valuable insights into the organisation and operation of power relations”, such experiential knowledge is always created from a particular standpoint. And as Fuller argues, “neither the standpoint or the knowledge generated from it is generalisable nor can one standpoint alone offer a complete explanation of social relations.”

Feminist standpoint theory thus enriched my mixed method complementarity by helping me to create an interrogative process that would allow me to make sense of the knowledges the women articulated in their conversations with me and each other, and which they realised in their collective processes. By employing feminist standpoint methods, I, as the researcher, necessarily become part of the investigative and reporting processes. As a visibly White, middle-class woman, and as a feminist researcher, I employ a particular standpoint. As a book club member, I employ a particular standpoint. I am therefore positioned within my own interpretive community with its interpretive strategies and limitations; I take into account my own subjectivity, and as much as I am able, my own history and my own commitment to the research project (Gray, 1997). By shifting between standpoints, this research method affected lines of inquiry, analytical insights, and in turn, created new ways of knowing. In the following chapters, and in particular the ethnography chapters, my own experiences are reflected and integrated into an analysis of the research process and the resultant report of findings.

I chose to use primarily ethnographic methods for this project because cultural studies research has traditionally, and audience research more recently, employed ethnography in investigating people's experiences. Radway (1991) convincingly rejects using only textual analysis and quantitative methodologies when attempting to determine how individuals make meaning and what those meanings look like. She argues that:

By reinstating those active individuals and their creative, construction activities at the heart of our interpretive enterprise, we avoid blinding ourselves to the fact that the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world increasingly dominated by things and by consumption. In thus recalling the interactive character of operations like reading, we restore time, process, and action to our account of human endeavour and therefore increase

the possibility of doing justice to its essential complexity and ambiguity as practice. We also increase our chances of sorting out or articulating the difference between the repressive imposition of ideology and oppositional practices that, though limited in their scope and effect, at least dispute or contest the control of ideological forms. (p. 221)

While the ethnographic methods may be criticised for an inability to generalise the findings and the past propensity to ideologically construct subjects (Grey, p. 95), there are substantial theoretical reasons for using them. According to Grey, “the very recalcitrance of ‘experience’ ... is the strongest argument ...” to do so (p. 99).

Ethnographic methods enable the researcher to seek: “representations and expressions of: direct personal participation in or observation of event; accumulated knowledge of the world in particular sets of circumstances; what it is like to live in these circumstances and the personal feelings and emotions which are engendered” (p. 99).

Cognisant of the benefits of mixing methodologies, I chose to also conduct an on-line survey of both virtual and face-to-face book club members, and readers not in clubs, to test some of the hypotheses that emerged after I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork and began analysing the data. Specifically, I began by creating questions that would investigate the cultural significance of books. I wanted to have a better understanding of the uses of reading. In addition, because I wanted to investigate on-line book club communities, I needed to go directly to where the readers meet. An interrogation of the survey participants’ perceptions of their own participatory on-line or face-to-face forum was necessary to show to what level the groups support and make public the private, individual reading responses. I wanted to better understand to what degree agency is observed in the different fora and how the participant’s subjectivity might be different in

the virtual and face-to-face communities. I will discuss my conclusions about the different methodology in the final chapter.

## *The Study*

### **The Ethnography**

Interpretive researchers study people as part of a group, as active participants in interaction (Denzin, 1989). Life is studied as it happens. Intersubjectivity in meaning and meaning making—the understanding of people within their social spheres, how they interact with one another, and the symbols created within those systems, on a day-to-day basis—is analysed. Central to interpretive research are the meanings people attach to their situations and the ways people construct their interactions with others. In other words, society is understood in terms of its people and through the people, and each individual is understood in terms of the societies in which they are members (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975).

As a participant observer, I participated to a different extent in each group, depending on the group norms. In all groups, I read the texts they chose to read. I offered interpretations of my reading in a manner that was appropriate for the interpretive community. For example, one group uses a round-table format in which each member offers points of view in turn. I was careful in this group not to speak out of turn. Only in my own group did I participate in the dialogue of choosing the books. In all cases, including my own group, I was cognisant of my position as a woman researcher and tried to be forthcoming about my research methods and analysis. The different dialogical methods will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

The ethnographic research portion of this project took place over an eight-month period. To locate the women themselves in the analysis of book clubs, I employed a triangulated ethnography of women's reading groups, using participant observation, intensive individual and focus group interviews, supplemented by individual questionnaires. The participant observation provided an opportunity to simultaneously experience the book clubs as the women do through reading their chosen texts, learning and participating in their cultural norms, responding in both a learned and natural way, and analysing those experiences as they occurred over a four month period. The individual and focus group interviews took place concurrently with the participant observation and continued four more months. "By combining observational and interview methods, ethnography presents researchers with a multi-methodological and thus highly reliable means to study people's lives" (Leblanc, 1999, p. 20). The interviews and questionnaires clarify and verify the participant-researcher observations, which results in rich objective and subjective "data" construction. As an ethnographer, I tried to establish enough of an understanding of what a stranger would have to know in order to picture what happens, or to participate, in the book clubs in a meaningful way. Using a funnel approach, which begins from a wide purview of the phenomenon to the narrow, I began by looking first at book clubs within the wider social context, and next as cultural field, and finally at the different individual experiences of the readers within these clubs. I employed the theories and processes of microethnography. Microethnography focuses "on the patterns of social interaction among members of a cultural group or among members of different cultural groups" so as to "specify the processes of interaction and

understand how these 'micro' processes are related to the larger 'macro' issues of culture and social organization" (Tesch, 1990, pp. 18-19).

Detailed description of groups and individuals, an analysis of the group by themes and perspectives, in addition to an interpretation of the groups' social interactions follow in the next three chapters. The narrative is supported by the women's verbatim words. The intent of this ethnography is to produce a holistic cultural portrait of book clubs that incorporates both the views of the readers and my interpretations of human social life from a social science perspective at this particular moment (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). The account is not entirely my own critical analysis, it is in part written by the readers themselves.

Before beginning to develop the ethnographic lines of inquiry, I conducted a pre-test. This consisted of a quantitative mail survey and participant observation of a Vancouver based mixed-gendered group for six months from February through July 1999. Following my experiences of the pre-test, I became a participant observer in five local groups for four months while remaining active in and studying the reading group I had been a member of for more than two years. I approached the groups through personal contacts: one through a member of the pre-test book club; one through my senior supervisor at the time; one through my partner's work; and one through a professional colleague. My tenure with the groups began in July 1999 and extended to February 2000.

I kept detailed field observation notes, and recorded each meeting, which included the first meeting of a just-forming book club. (See Appendix A for the observation protocol.) At the end of my tenure with each group, each member privately completed a questionnaire. (See Appendix B.) In addition, I conducted a group interview after our



final meeting together (See Appendix C.) The interview was guided by my experiences with the groups and their interactions with the texts and with each other, and did not always reflect the interview schedule as it was originally designed. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, the final interview appeared to be a fruitful experience for the groups, as it provided time for reflexive contemplation for the individuals and for the group as a whole.

Table 1, which can be found on the following page, briefly introduces the women with whom I read. The groups each met different week nights, which was convenient to my scheduling, recording and reporting. For the remainder of this dissertation, I refer to the group by the night of the week they met. I have changed the names of all participants in my analysis so as to protect their identities, but still retain their individuality. I chose to give the pseudonyms to the readers, although in retrospect I would have given the individuals the opportunity to do so. I tried to give names that would reflect the readers' age and ethnicity in addition to choosing names that would be easy for me to remember when reflecting on and analysing my experiences and the tapes.

The five ethnography groups range from the newly-formed to those who have been meeting since the early 1970s. Their gender composition is all women except for one group that has one man member. The number of members ranges from six to 12, and all members have some form of post-secondary education. They are predominantly Caucasian women working in the professions, and have a wide range of incomes. Their age ranges are also widely distributed. In those groups that have more aged members, the members generally have children and are in hetro-sexual relationships. The younger book club readers also tend to be in hetro-sexual relationships, but do not have children.

In addition to the five participant observation groups' final interviews, I conducted one focus group interview with five members from a book club in which I neither participated nor observed. (The table in Appendix D also presents known data about these women's clubs.) I approached one of the women through a fellow Dragon

**Table 1 - Reading Groups in this Study**

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wed.</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>How Group Formed</b>	Majority worked together, invited friends and family	Small group of friends with children	Several members worked together in prof'nal assoc., studied together	All are neighbours, all children attend same elemen. School	Two members worked together, invited friends
<b>Number of years club has existed</b>	Less than One	28	Five	Seven	Nine
<b>Number of members</b>	Six	Eight-12	11	Nine-12	Six
<b>Gender</b>	All women	All women, except one man	All women	All women	All women
<b>Ages</b>	21-28	46-60	22-37	35-50	29-65
<b>Education</b>	All have post-secondary	All have post-secondary	All have post-secondary	All have post-secondary	All have post-secondary
<b>Occupation</b>	Project admin., manager, student, editorial	Teachers, admin-istrators, consultant, librarian, nurses	Engineers, un-employed, consult., editorial, teacher, fiction editor, project mgr.	Librarian, artist, home-maker, student, teachers, social worker, business owner	Librarians, engineer, retired admin.
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Various ethnicities	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent
<b>Income</b>	Lower to middle (\$12k to \$60k)	Middle to upper (\$41k to \$100k)	Lower-middle to middle (\$25k to \$75k)	Lower-middle to upper-middle (\$30k to "plenty")	Unknown, presumably upper-middle
<b>Relation-ship Status</b>	None married, several partnerships	Mostly married or in partnerships	Several married, several partnerships, several singles	Mostly married, one single	Married, or in partnerships, one single
<b>Children</b>	None	Most have children	None	All have children	Several with children

*(See Appendix D for more detailed information about the participant observation clubs.)*

Boater, and was invited to the member's house for a meeting with women who are part of a book club of nearly 50 members. The focus group lasted nearly three hours, and provided an opportunity for both the readers and myself to exchange book club experiences.

Outside of the participant observation groups, and the focus group, I also conducted 15 individual interviews. These interviews included: two with book club women who were not part of the participant observation groups; five with readers who were not members of book clubs; two with book club facilitators (one was active in a book club of her own and the other was not); two with reporters (one who had been a member of a book club and one who commented publicly against them); one with an author who had visited book clubs; one with a bookseller who marketed directly to book clubs and who operated a book club out of her store; one with a librarian who was active in her own book club; and one with a publisher's marketing representative whose primary responsibility was targeting book clubs. These women were recruited by non-random sampling procedures; the participants were women I was introduced to through my own book club activity in the community, the book club women of the participant observation groups, or through my place of employment. I contacted the publishing marketing professional through a cold call. All of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face environment, except for two that were done by telephone. The interviews usually lasted from one and a half to two hours.

I transcribed all audiotapes of the interviews in their entirety except for one that was done by a professional transcriber. I verified this tape by listening to and confirming the transcription. These transcriptions, along with my field observation notes, became the

ethnographic data set. In addition, the readers in my participant observation groups and one club that participated in the focus group interview led to a total of 48 completed questionnaires.

Throughout the research phase, I kept notes of patterns and issues that seemed to be emerging, and would attempt to observe, address, and analyse those issues at the following book club meeting or interview. I also kept reflective personal observations, paying attention to my role as an outsider and as a researcher. In each field situation, I was cognisant of anthropologist Ward Goodenough's (1973) definition of "culture", which is a set of behaviours and beliefs that create "standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it" (pp. 21-22). From both my readings of the secondary research and my pre-tests, I had guiding hypotheses from which to begin my coding categories.

I began with the assumption that Fish's and Radway's conceptualisations of interpretive communities would be appropriate in a book club setting. These theories suggested that the women would find social, conventional and limited meanings in the texts based on their experiences in their particular book club. I also presumed that the readings would reflect Hall's, Eco's, and Radway's suggestions of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of the texts, and Fiske and Brown's arguments that the talk around the meaning making was as important as the text itself. My own experiences suggested the women were searching for a community and a place to talk about books with other women, a finding also presented in previous book club studies. I did not profess to be able to define "community", but the word was articulated in both the

literature and the pre-test groups and thus became an observational category. I also knew from experience that the book clubs created their own hierarchies of taste in the texts and dialogue, which influenced both individual and collective meaning making. And, finally, I hypothesised that book clubs were sites of social change as introduced by Long, but I did not know what “social change” might look like.

Goodenough’s “standards” became notable “classes” of things, persons and settings in my data set, and it was from these that I began identifying salient themes. As the research progressed, I looked for what Marshall & Rossman (1995) labelled as the “properties” (p. 114) that would define the said classes, and which would eventually become recurring ideas or language and patterns of belief that linked the readers and their clubs together. These properties became typologies, created by myself and by the readers themselves, to serve as categories for coding the interviews, questionnaires and observation notes.

Using QSR NUD\*IST software, which has a solid scholarly reputation for being able to assist the researcher to manage large amounts of qualitative data, I created “nodes” (in QSR NUD\*IST terms) or categories in which to file or place each paragraph, sentence or response from the field data (Tesch, 1991). In total, there were 28 broad categories. (See Appendix E for a list of these categories.) These broad categories became a total of 257 categories when extended to include all observable properties and files. (Please see Appendix F for a list of all coding categories, and notes about several nodes.)

While onerous at times, this method of analysis allowed me to become intimate with the data. Throughout the coding process I was able to note regularities, test the

original hypotheses as I outlined in Chapter Three, and to test emerging new ones. With each new paragraph, sentence, note or response, I challenged these hypotheses by searching for negative instances of the patterns that had begun to seem so apparent. Take, for instance, the following exchange from the exit interview with the Wednesday Night Group:

DeNel: Would you consider yourselves strongly feminist, feminist, or barely feminist?

Susan: Myself?

DeNel: This group?

Siobahn: Strongly feminist.

Alice: That would be Susan's opinion.

Susan: I wouldn't say this group is strongly feminist, no. Moderately aware.

DeNel: And why?

Susan: Why would I call it moderately feminist? We're forgiving of the man. I think. I think we cut our male characters a lot of slack.

Felicity: There's an assumption that there's only one kind of feminism, too, in that question.

Susan: There is. It's like, it's a stupid question.

Felicity: I don't think not forgiving a man is being less feminist.

Susan: You see when I think feminism, I think capital F Feminism. Where it's you know, (unintelligible) as privileged women and I think if we were really strong feminists, we'd really take a look at the women's position and how they are empowered and disempowered in the text. And we'd have discussion around the position, the location, the power of the woman. We've kind of lit on it,

you know, but I don't think we ever get into a sort of full-scale discussion about it.

DeNel: Does the book club reflect who we are then?

Susan: Yea.

DeNel: I mean maybe---

Susan: Yea, definitely.

DeNel: I mean maybe you're not strongly feminists by this definition of feminist.

Susan: I think of it in terms of academic feminism.

Felicity: Uh, hum. Because I think of feminism as a politic that always ensures choice for women.

Susan: Uh, um. Politics that isn't power.

Felicity: It doesn't delineate which choices.

Susan: Yea. It's not a politics that gives power or provides power.

Felicity: No.

Susan: It's a choice.

Felicity: It creates an environment in which empowerment is possible.

Susan: Yea. I believe. Yea, in that sort of academic feminist tradition of reading texts for where the woman, why the woman, how the woman. We rarely focus in on that. It's sort of, it's on the edges---

The analysis process would continue as follows. First, I took note of regularity.

Throughout the field research stage, I noticed that the women rarely used the word "feminism" or "feminist" when discussing the books. However, they often used what I would call elementary feminist criticism when collectively interpreting the texts. For

example, this particular group discussed the temporary and superficial reversal of gender power in *The Reader*. Keeping in mind that I cannot—and do not—profess to be an expert in literary textual analysis, the observations led me to begin with the broad categories of “Gender” and “Book Club Identified Practices” as original coding categories. The next step in the coding process, a test of the original hypotheses, demanded that I evaluate the hypothesis that the women would find social, conventional and limited meanings in the texts based on their experiences in their interpretive community. This led me to question the boundaries of the communities, which resulted in an expansion of the coding categories to “Gender/Discussion” and “Book Club Identified Practices/Dialogue/Cultural Diagnosis” so that I might create a new hypothesis that dialogue about womanhood within the book clubs might be both normative and also feminist. The interchange revealed that repertoires or frames of feminism are not consistent across individual experience, and created an awareness in myself that my own position as a feminist researcher informs my own processes of knowledge creation. The women’s exchange also led to the assumption that the boundaries of the book clubs are contested by the individual life experiences, in this case, literary analysis training and exposure to feminist ideology. This new hypothesis was then challenged whenever it appeared in other dialogic narratives or observations.

The reporting of my findings was evolutionary: I searched and determined plausible explanations for the links in the data, and began demonstrating how the explanation I offer is the most plausible of all by creating conceptual and theoretical coherence in comparison to the existing literature on book clubs. In the end, these findings became the outline for the following chapters. Before the ethnographic reporting



began, however, I had an opportunity to use my ethnographic experiences and analysis to create a survey that would reach a wider span of readers. It is to that research process that I now turn.

### **The Cyber Survey**

A primarily quantitative, 41-question survey was posted on a Simon Fraser University web site for two weeks in June and July 2001. The questions ranged from the role reading plays in a reader's life, to where readers get their books and how much they spend on them, to queries about participation in on-line or offline reading groups. (See Appendix G.) I created the survey using the basic outline of the ethnographic interview schedule, and adapted it to reflect the conjectures I was beginning to make as I transcribed the interviews and reflected on the observation protocols and notes from the ethnographic experiences. The construction of the closed-ended question responses was a result of that evolving knowledge. I do not profess that the response options were as exhaustive as possible because as has been argued by sociologist Earl Babbie (2002), I do not believe a researcher can predict all options. However, the response options were as complete as I could make them based on my knowledge of the literature and my experiences as a researcher, reader and book club member. The open-ended questions provided an opportunity for respondents to explain the meanings they attach to reading, and to their book clubs, in their own words.

The sampling technique I used is a non-probability sampling technique called snowball sampling, or network sampling. Network sampling, according to Thomas Stewart (2002):

Draws one element from a population or universe at the discretion of the researcher, much like purposive sampling. That element is then asked to provide the names of additional elements to be included in the study. Each of those elements recommends yet further elements, and the sample 'snowballs' to its anticipated size. (p. 60)

My questionnaire was actively promoted as a general reading habits survey to 24 people on my personal and professional e-mail lists, and recipients were encouraged to send it to theirs. In addition, I attempted to find on-line book discussion groups that differed in the ideology of the group, genre preference or member ethnicity. (These descriptors can sometimes be determined by the group's name; consider, for example, "Women Who Read Too Much," "The Post-Proustian Reading Group" or "The Sistah Circle.") Finding reading fora was not difficult. A simple search of "book clubs" on the search engine Google.com yielded 1,120, 000 hits. In addition, community access fora on large for-profit sites such as the iVillage.com or on Yahoo.com produced another deluge of choices. For example, using a keyword search with "books" and "reading" for a recent search on iVillage.com brought 13,183 "hits"; a further 110 hits resulted when I narrowed my search to include "women" within those reading discussion groups. Twenty fora were queried, and permission was received from the moderators to post a short invitation to participate on 13, including four listed on *Yahoo.com*, the *New York Times* reading group's general bulletin board, Radio 4 Book Club in the United Kingdom, *Chatelaine's* book group forum, and several independent groups whose addresses were located through the Google.com search engine.

The survey yielded 252 voluntary responses (and one duplicate). I was originally concerned that the response rate might be low as was predicted for on-line surveys by Diane Witmer, Robert Colman and Sandra Lee Katzman (1999), who suggest that

response rates may be 10 percent or lower when based on subscriber lists. I did not use subscriber lists as samples, and therefore acknowledge I do not have a response rate. I understand that the difficulty with this research is that the number of people who originally accessed the survey is unknown so not only is a response rate not available, the survey cannot be considered to have statistically reliable results, according to traditional probability theory. There are significant findings in the 252 responses, however, which provide insight into reading practices and book club practices, and which complement the finds of the ethnographic research of this project.

There are several factors that may account for the good response. After several years investigating reading group members, I find that readers apparently like to talk about their clubs and are generally quite passionate about informally analysing their reading practices. The survey may also have been successful because the questionnaire was formatted simply. Buttons were used for the choice options and unlimited space for the open-ended questions was provided. Fortunately, there were no technology malfunctions. And finally, a \$50 gift certificate draw for a virtual bookstore to anyone who wanted to enter their e-mail address was offered (the winner resided in Australia).<sup>1</sup>

The first section of the survey was intended to solicit individual reading practices. Using genre categories and response options that reflected the original survey pre-test and Lorimer's (1981) readership survey, I asked the respondents what they read most often, and what they prefer to read. I also wanted to determine if the reading was done for pleasure or if it was work-related, and attempted to do this by asking how much they

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the survey participants were guaranteed anonymity, I necessarily had to ask for e-mail addresses if the person wanted to be considered for the incentive gift. This was the only occasion I needed to acknowledge a participant's identity.

read, and where and when they read. I believed responses to such queries would elucidate the reasons for and the comfort levels one achieves with reading. This section asked the respondents to provide their own account of what reading means in their lives. As I explain below, the responses provided rich data from which to create coding categories that usually corresponded with the categories I had created already for the ethnographic data in response to this question. The general readership section ended with questions of how readers choose the books they read and where they get those books. I also asked questions of book ownership and the amount of money spent on books. I included these questions so that I might better understand not only links between book ownership and status, but also the economic links between readers and the book industry.

Section B of the survey separated the general readers from the book club readers through a contingency question. Those who were not and had never been part of a face-to-face or virtual book club were asked to finish the survey with basic demographic information and also perceptions of book clubs, the Internet and the marriage of the two. Book club members were asked what kind of book club they belonged to and for how long. They were then asked to respond to the rest of the questionnaire with that book club in mind. Although this was the most efficient way of conducting a survey where length and clarity are important factors in retaining the respondent's interest and thus completion of the investigative instrument (Babbie, 2002), it may have caused readers who were in both types of groups to confuse memories and recall. This point, of course, could be applied to all social science investigation where "truth" is an ideal.

The bulk of Section B of the questionnaire investigated book club processes. It was here that I asked for book titles so that I might determine the breadth of genres

chosen by the different types of book clubs. I also wanted to determine the respondents' levels and sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in title selection and discussion formats. By asking questions about discussion content, I tried to illuminate the sound or look of collective interpretation in the different book clubs. This section also asked questions of community definition and boundaries. These two latter themes—discussion and community—proved most problematic in the analytical process as the closed questions resulted in limiting opportunities for data interpretation. To compensate for the lack of clarification opportunities and the “rich” data I was accustomed to having from the ethnography, I was careful to analyse the open-ended questions that probed most satisfying and least satisfying aspects of the club, with the open ended question of the recall narratives of the readers' most enjoyable book discussion.

The final section of the questionnaire queried all respondents' attitudes towards book clubs. This question resulted in interesting data that helped me evaluate perceptions of both the Internet and its influence on book clubs, and communities in general. The demographic data collected was of course helpful in understanding social structural influence on reading patterns. I had decided to not include a question of income level on the questionnaire because I did not want the respondents to not complete the survey. In retrospect, I believe this decision was a mistake. Had a respondent decided to terminate at that point, I still would have had more complete data with which to work. Certainly some of the respondents would have answered the question, which would have resulted in better socio-economic analysis of the readers.

The statistical software program SPSS was used to analyse the responses, paying particular attention to the open-ended qualitative answers. (A list of the frequencies and

cross tabulations computed in SPSS is in Appendix H.) Occasionally, available on-line book club exchanges were observed to seek clarification for a theme as it emerged in data analysis. This data, however, was not used in reporting my findings because I did not seek ethical approval for such methods. When census data or readership surveys were available, findings were tested against those studies. Throughout the entire data analysis phase, I paid attention to the connections and comparisons between the ethnography and survey methods of research. The results of this process will be introduced in the next chapter, and a reflective analysis will appear in Chapter Seve

## Chapter Five

### *Real Readers Really Reading: A Quantitative Study*

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter is an attempt to create an overview of women's reading communities. The chapter provides the findings of a survey that was posted onto the Internet, and investigates the reading habits and experiences of both readers who belong to book clubs and those who do not. My intention is to interrogate the differences and similarities between face-to-face and virtual reading communities. What motivates readers to join a book club, be it on-line or face-to-face? What keeps them in the community? What does the talk look like? What is the role of the text in this process?

The chapter will begin with the findings of the research and end with my analysis of the data. I introduce ideas about how the Internet as an evolving communication technology influences readers who interpret books through group dialogue. Through both quantitative and qualitative data findings, I begin to demonstrate the consistencies that can be found in all readers who participated in the study, and also within the different environments of book clubs. The study also offers opportunities to evaluate whether mainly quantitative research methods are adequate explorative tools for investigating

reading reception of literature within book clubs, the relationships therein, and the constitutive denotations and influences of community.

### ***The Participants***

Of the 251 valid respondents, more than half (64%) are or have been members of a book club, and 36 percent of the readers are non-club members. Among the club members, there is equal representation from face-to-face only (36%) and virtual only (36%) groups. The balance (28%) are or have been members of *both* types of groups.

Most of the readers participating in the study live in Canada (47%) or the United States (45%). There were also a small number of respondents from the United Kingdom (7), Australia (5), Israel (2), Germany (2), Saudi Arabia (1), the Philippines (1) and Japan (1).

Eighty-five percent (208) of all survey respondents self-identified as female, 14 percent (34) as male, and two respondents, or one percent, chose not to answer.<sup>1</sup> In the book club population, 93 percent of the members were women. Of the women members, 53 (37%) participate in a face-to-face group, 50 (35%) in a virtual one and 41 (28%) belong to both types of groups. The respondents included nine men who were members of book clubs: five belong to a face-to-face group, three to a virtual and one belongs to both. (See Table 2.)

---

<sup>1</sup> While my survey instrument asked for gender and then provided biologically sexed options of male and female, I will use gendered terms throughout the remainder of the chapter for two reasons. First, in regards to this chapter in particular, previous reading habits studies and the data available through statistics Canada use gendered terminology. Second, this is a study of gendered reading practices.



**Table 2 - Gender Composition, by Group**

N=154\*

2001

In percentages

Type of Group	Women (144)	Men (9)
face-to-face members	37%	55%
virtual members	35%	33%
members of both	28%	11%

\*Missing one respondent.

Most readers participating in the on-line survey are young, as can be noted in Table 3. More than half (55%) are between 26 years of age and 40. The largest percent (22%) are 31-35-year-olds, followed by 26-30-year-olds (21%) and 36-40-year-olds (12%). Correspondingly, the book club members profiled also tend to be younger. The largest cluster of the face-to-face groups studied here range in ages from 26-35 (39%).

Nearly all readers in this study have at least some university-level education. Many have post-graduate degrees. The face-to-face members tend to have slightly more education than their counterparts in the virtual groups: 99 percent of the face-to-face members have university education, while only 90 percent of the virtual group members do. Of the 10 percent who have not gone to university, two virtual readers have not graduated from high school.

This study queried a respondent's occupation in her or his own words, which resulted in varying forms of self-disclosure and divergent job titles. The readers work mostly in communication (10% face-to-face; 8% virtual), education (12% face-to-face;

**Table 3 - Participant Ages**

N= 251

2001

In percentages

Type of Club	Age Category										
	< 20 n=2	20-25 n=22	26-30 n=52	31-35 n=55	36-40 n=31	41-45 n=16	46-50 n=24	51-55 n=18	56-60 n=9	61-65 n=9	>66 n=5
Face-to-face (33%)	0	2	17	22	13	7	13	10	6	7	
Virtual (28%)	1	14	19	17	10	10	11	7	4	3	2
All Readers	>1	9	21	22	12	6	9	7	4	4	2

\* Missing eight respondents, or three percent.

6% virtual), administration (6%; 11% virtual) and other fields (9% both face-to-face and virtual). Fifteen percent of the face-to-face members consider themselves students, while 11 percent of the virtual club readers do. These figures remain comparatively consistent when separating the book club members from the non-book club members.

### ***Readers' Reading Practices***

The participants surveyed appear to be voracious readers. When all readers are considered, the majority (58%) read five to ten hours per week; 32 percent read more

than ten hours; and 10 percent read one hour or less.<sup>2</sup> The 34 men surveyed report reading more than the 208 women: 91 percent of the men and 89 percent of the women read five or more hours per week. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4 - Reading in a Typical Week, All Readers**

N= 244\*

In percentages

	One hour or less	Five – 10 hours	More than 10
Women (208)	11	56	33
Men (34)	9	65	26

\*Two participants preferred not to note gender.

Separating the book club readers from the non-book club readers, the findings show that five percent read one hour or less, and 60 percent read five to 10 hours per week. More than one-third (35%) of the book club members report reading more than 10 hours every week. Interestingly, virtual club members report being heavier readers than their face-to-face counterparts. (See Table 5.)

**Table 5 - Reading in a Typical Week, Book Club Members**

N= 158

In percentages

	One hour or less	Five – 10 hours	More than 10
Face-to-face (84)	8	69	23
Virtual (74)	1	49	50

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there was a mistake in the questionnaire, leaving out an option of one to five hours per week.

The majority (86%) of all readers in this study report reading for pleasure rather than for work (14%). Most (67%) read in the evenings, followed by weekends (17%). Most often they read in bed (38%), or in a favourite chair or sofa (31%). The motives for reading vary, from a desire to increase knowledge (47%), to escape (39%), and to discover the world (34%). These findings do not change significantly when comparing book club readers to non-book club readers: the top three reasons for reading remain the same. In book club members they are as follows: increasing knowledge (44%), discovering the world (39%), and reading to escape (39%). More women (28%) than men (13%) report that reading is a necessary part of their day. Seventeen percent of the women readers said reading enables them to discover themselves, and 23 percent noted that reading helps them to interpret themselves. A small number of all the women (7%) and even fewer men (3%) surveyed said they read to fight loneliness. Eight percent of the book club members (10% of face-to-face; 6% of the virtual) cite fighting loneliness as a reason to read. For more than one third (34%) of all the participants reading has been part of their lives since childhood, and they consider this one of the reasons they read today. More women (36%) than men (24%) report this as a motivator.

Both virtual (81%) and face-to-face (83%) group members choose their books most frequently based on the recommendations of their friends or family. Second to these trusted others, the readers depend on a favourite author (76% for face-to-face and 82% for virtual readers). They also pick books that have been reviewed favourably in the mass media (67% for face-to-face and 63% for virtual readers). Of course, they often choose the books according to their own book club recommendation (63% and

66%). Readers in virtual clubs (20%) are more likely to use publisher-produced reading guides in choosing books than are those in face-to-face groups (8%).

The top five preferred genres by each gender group (Table 6) suggest gendered divergences in the categories of “other non-fiction” (this category was not clarified for the respondents) and “science fiction,” with men noting this preference more often than women. Within each genre of books there are a variety of differences, especially when readers categorise the books themselves.

**Table 6 - Gender Genre Preference Differences**

N= 244

2001

In percentages

Genre	Female n=208	Male n=34
Contemporary Fiction	88.0	73.5
Other Non-fiction	51.9	70.5
Classical Literature	48.0	47.0
Mystery	43.7	36.0
Biography	36.5	38.2
Science Fiction	24.0	44.1

***Reasons for Joining a Book Club, and for Remaining in One***

Reading is usually thought of as an individual activity, with real and perceived benefits. What, then, can a book club do for readers? Not surprisingly, based on reasons participants in this study give generally for why they read, members in both types of book clubs say they joined their group because they wanted intellectual stimulation (67% of the face-to-face members; 62% of the virtual members). (See Table 7.) This motivation is tied for most mentions with joining “to have fun”, and is followed closely by the response “to read books I wouldn’t normally read” (64% of the face-to-face members; 59 % of the

virtual members). Forty-one percent of the virtual club members joined because of the books the group was reading, while this was mentioned by only 22 percent of the face-to-face club members. Only four percent of the virtual club members joined as a result of an invitation from a friend or family member, whereas for face-to-face members, the percentage is considerably higher at 29 percent.

Nearly half (49%) of the face-to-face members report belonging to no other organised group outside of their book club. The same applies to virtual members (48%). Of those who do belong to other types of groups, the face-to-face members report participating most in social groups (23%) and athletic groups (23%). The virtual members, on the other hand, report belonging to on-line social groups (21%) and other on-line book clubs (10%). Considering all other group memberships outside of their book club, 30 percent of the face-to-face book club members and 58 percent of the virtual members report that they participate in on-line groups.

**Table 7 - Top Five Reasons for Joining Book Club**

N= 157

2001

In percentages

	Face-to-face Club n=83	Virtual Club n=74
Wanted intellectual stimulation	67	62
Joined for fun	67	62
To read books wouldn't normally read	64	59
To connect w/others like self	57	69
Need to talk about books	48	55

### **Book Club Community**

As Table 8 shows, most of the study's book club readers (80% of face-to-face and 96% of virtual) are relatively new to their clubs, having been members for less than five years. Twenty percent of the face-to-face book club members have been members of their club between five and 15 years, and less than five percent have been members for longer than that. Few (5%) of the virtual members have been members of their virtual club between five and 10 years. Some (26%) of the book club members report having left their clubs, and most report having left a face-to-face group (23%), not a virtual one (3%). When comparing the two types of groups, the reasons for leaving vary from the group disbanding, to scheduling conflicts, to dissatisfaction with the depth of the discussion. No one particular reason is easy to isolate.

Most face-to-face members (88%) of the on-line study consider the other members of their club very close or close friends. Sixty-seven percent communicate with other members outside of club meeting time. Not surprisingly, most virtual members (66%) consider the other members only acquaintances. However, not in all cases; a significant number (18%) of the virtual club members regard the other members as close friends. And 17 percent have met with other members off line. More than one-third (34%) of face-to-face book club members accordingly find the social bonds that are formed in their groups the most satisfying aspect of membership. Somewhat unexpected, however, is that 19 percent of the virtual club members also find this gratifying, second only to access to ideas about new books (24%). (See Table 9.)

**Table 8- Number of Years in Book Club**

N= 157

2001

In percentages

Type of Book Club	Years in the Club					
	<1	1-2	3-5	5-10	10-15	>15
Face-to-face n=83	19	36	24	10	7	4
Virtual n=74	36	34	26	4	0	0

Of the 144 women respondents who are in book clubs, only five (3%) made specific mention of finding satisfaction in being in a group with only women.

**Table 9 - Most Satisfying Aspect of Book Club**

N= 111

2001

In percentages

Type of Book Club	Top Five Responses				
	1	2	3	4	5
Face-to-face n=53	Social Bonds (34%)	New Ways of Looking at World (28%)	Intellectual Stimulation (15%)	Depth of Discussion (7%)	Like minded people (7%)
Virtual n=58	Access to New Books (24%)	Social Bonds (19%)	New Ways of Looking at World (21%)	Depth of Discussion (12%)	Intellectual Stimulation (15%)

**Club Reading**

The clubs reading lists are diverse: of the 193 titles listed, 52 (27%) were multiple mentions. (See Appendix I for a complete list of titles from the cyber survey). In both the



face-to-face and the virtual environments, the genre choices may vary from month to month (and sometimes week to week in some virtual groups) or they may remain consistent throughout the life of the club. Table 10 shows the genres book club members in the on-line survey read for their last three meetings. Contemporary Fiction is the genre of choice for most of the book clubs in this study. Within this category, the diversity of titles mentioned was great.

**Table 10- Last Three Book Club Books<sup>3</sup>**

	Face-to-face Groups	Virtual Groups
Biography	5	9
Mystery	1	11
Classical Fiction	8	9
Contemporary Fiction	54	53
Other Non-fiction	6	6
Romance	1	1
Western	0	10
Poetry	0	0
Science Fiction	3	7
Cartoon	0	0
Plays	1	0
Humour	2	2

Table 11 illustrates the relative similarities in genre preference between book club members and non-book club members.

---

<sup>3</sup> The genre categories included on the survey instrument reflect those based on the pre-test conducted, and reflect the genres as noted by those readers.

**Table 11- Genre Preference Differences between Book Club Readers and Non-Book Club Readers**

N= 251

2001

In percentages

Genre	Non-Book Club Readers	Book Club Readers
Contemporary Fiction	88.0	85.6
Other Non-fiction	53.6	50.8
Classical Literature	47.8	49.3
Mystery	43.2	48.4
Biography	36.0	39.6

### **Differing Dialogue**

The amount of time allotted to discussing books in a book club forum differs between the two different environments. Face-to-face book clubs normally meet for two to three hours every month, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. Virtual clubs, on the other hand, appear to spend more time discussing a book. That is, the data shows that the on-line book club members in this study log onto their computers often to discuss books. Thirty-seven percent of the virtual members in the on-line survey say they log on more than once per day, and 28 percent report logging on at least once a day.

The formats, methods and manners of collective interpretation for book clubs vary. The process differs depending on the diverse membership, the genres the club reads, and the structures and environments within which they operate. For example, 74 percent of face-to-face members report their clubs use “personal experiences” frequently to interpret the books; 24 percent say it happens occasionally; and two percent say it never happens. Virtual clubs, on the other hand, have a more even split: 51 percent say personal experiences frequently help interpret the books and 48 percent say it happens occasionally. The questionnaire did not query a definition of “personal experiences,”

which means different things to different people, as I argue in the ethnographic portion of this dissertation.

Face-to-face book clubs report less textual analysis than do virtual clubs. When asked how often discussion stays mainly on the structure of a book, 64 percent of the face-to-face groups say it is discussed occasionally. Another 18 percent report that the book's structure is never talked about, and another 18 percent note that it is frequently analysed. Meanwhile, 46 percent of the virtual club members report that the discussion frequently stays mainly on the structure of the book, and 52 percent say it does so occasionally. Only two percent say the discussion never stays mainly on the book's structure.

The participants were also asked how often book club discussion turns to social, political or environmental issues. The virtual club members report that talk about these issues enters less frequently into the discussion than for face-to-face groups. Fifty-five percent of the face-to-face groups say that book discussion frequently turns to social, political or environmental issues. Forty-two percent report that this happens occasionally and three percent say that these issues never enter the discussion. Only 28 percent of the virtual groups say discussion turns to these issues frequently; 63 percent report it happens occasionally, and nine percent say this never occurs.

Book discussion appears to be source of both enjoyment and reasons for dissatisfaction with club members, virtual and face-to-face alike. When asked to think about a book club discussion that they particularly enjoyed, and what it was about the discussion that made it so enjoyable, members from both types of groups most frequently (68% of both face-to-face and on-line) noted the sharing of different points of view. The

participants were also asked what is least satisfying about the group. The top three mentions for virtual members were as follows: off-topic conversation (23%); other responses (21%);<sup>4</sup> and arguments (17%). Off-topic conversation was noted as the least satisfying aspect by only 13 percent of the face-to-face members. The least satisfying aspect for the face-to-face members differed from their virtual counterparts. Forty-six percent of the face-to-face members note other reasons, followed by scheduling (15%) and the response “nothing” (14%).

The statistics provide an overall picture of the survey results, but what do they mean? Using the statistical data, along with the verbatim words of the respondents, the next section of this chapter draws out some of the explanations of the data as I see them.

## *Interpreting the Findings*

### **Understanding the Participants**

There are several findings in this portion of the research that introduce trends that I discuss more in-depth in the following ethnography chapters. Some of the findings confirm those found in the readership studies reported by Duxbury (1995) and Lorimer (1981). Some findings are consonant with the book club research findings of Hartley, Long and Howie introduced in chapter three. The imbricated findings include gender composition of the clubs, education levels of the group members, and member occupations that might be categorised as petit bourgeois. The data also indicate notable differences from the other studies. Most apparent are the ages of the participants, the

---

<sup>4</sup>This finding is a result of the varied responses given by the participants to the open-ended question.

wide-ranging group types, and the multiple book club membership of a large percentage of the respondents.

Duxbury's 1995 report on Canadian reading and book buying habits demonstrated that more women than men read. Correspondingly, one would assume more women than men belong to book clubs. The results of this survey confirm this assumption. The finding that 93 percent of the book club respondents are women supports Hartley's study's findings and also proposes that the perception that book clubs are comprised mostly of women members may in fact be true. This perception or fact may perpetuate group composition. That is, the disproportionate gender breakdown of book club membership reflects that book groups are a "female phenomenon" or a "women's activity", just as they are characterised in the mass media. In turn women readers might come to know that book clubs are women's spaces where they can be with others who have the same interests, and who will support their desire to "learn more".

Like both Hartley's (2001) and Long's (1986, 1987, 1992) findings, and similar to Canadian general readership studies (Duxbury, 1995; Lorimer, 1981) and the ethnographic findings that follow, the participants in this study are mostly well educated. Higher education is generally necessary for the occupations that these book club women have, which suggests that they may be using book clubs as a way to continue acquiring the capital that is necessary in their field, as Bennett, et al. (1999) have argued. There are also grounds for identifying Bourdieu's concept of habitus at work here.<sup>5</sup> The large

---

<sup>5</sup> This is an admittedly cursory reference to Bourdieu's rich body of literature outlining habitus. At its most basic level, habitus refers to the total ideational environment of a person, and can be known or unknown to that same person. The concept refers to a complexity in values, beliefs, attitudes and practices, and prefigures everything that that person may choose to do. Habitus challenges the concept of free will: there exists

percentage of participants working in the “cultural intermediary” professions of communication and education suggests that literature and book clubs may be a way of articulating a professional identity that is perpetuated by taste hierarchies that have been socially formulated through family and school.

As will become evident in the ethnography, the readers in this survey suggest that one of the pleasures of reading is learning, and that this emotion often begins in childhood. This notion can be observed in the words of another woman who wrote:

As far back as I can remember, I’ve been a voracious reader, fascinated by the fact that I could learn anything I wanted by simply ... picking up a book. ...I read everything I could get my hands on, and reading has had a profound influence on my life. ...Ideas, opinions, inspiration, empathy, understanding, political views, love of language, respect of diversity in cultures/viewpoints -- all of these qualities in my life have derived from reading.

As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the joy and status reading commands is sometimes inter-generational. This is not necessarily from mother (or father) to daughter (or son), but also from grandparent to grandchildren. One virtual book club member wrote: “My love of books is something I learned from my grandmother and will always carry with me.” However, while reading may conjure feelings of love and intimacy with family members for some, for others, reading may provide escape from familial discomfort. One woman wrote:

Books were a means of escape to me when I was growing up, from my real world. My parents’ home was not the place to be if you were a child, so I escaped the anguish,

---

flexibility in a habitus, but neither is there complete free will, because according to Bourdieu (1968) “... as a principle of a structured, but not structural, praxis, the habitus—internalization of externality—contains the reason of all objectivation of subjectivity” (p. 706). Habitus is imprinted and encoded in social and learning processes that begin in early childhood.

hostility, and whatever by reading books, because they (books) offered me a better world. Being one who embraces wisdom and knowledge, books are a major source for gratifying my appetite. I live in the world of books. They're magical, they're my friends. They've helped me through some awfully rough times.

This respondent demonstrates how books provided escape from a negative situation as a child, and have come to take on new meaning as an adult while simultaneously providing the comfort she found as a child. Through the experiences offered in books, this reader and the others to follow appear to have learned to cope with difficult life situations.

Perhaps not one particular book, but books in general have multiple benefits for readers.

The book club members profiled in this study tend to be young. They are younger than those studied by Long and Howie, and are also younger than those who participated in Hartley's study. The relative youth of the survey participants, with more than half (55%) being under the age of 40, might be a reflection of the personal and professional networks from which the sample originated, or it might correspond with the age categories of Internet users in general. Whereas the largest cluster of the face-to-face groups in this study range in ages from 26-35 (39%), the groups in Hartley's tended to be in the 40+ age range (66%), 20 percent were in their thirties, and only one percent were under 30 (p. 154). This study's findings defy the stereotype that book club members are only middle-aged women, an image that is sometimes represented in the mass media. They may also suggest that the Internet as a research tool provides larger access to a broader spectrum of readers.

The far-reaching capability of the Internet allowed for wider representation than did the ethnography or Long's research, for example. This resulted in inclusion of participants in various countries, albeit most were from North America. More than half

of the women and men participate in a face-to-face group, yet because they received and replied to the questionnaire on-line, one might assume that those who did not participate would be even more likely to belong to face-to-face clubs. However, with 28 percent of the participants reporting that they belong to both virtual and face-to-face book clubs, one might begin to speculate that the Internet provides a space that allows some readers to seek multiple reading community experiences to satisfy different needs.

By analysing the participant responses to my query of why and how much they read, I can begin to conjecture that book club membership provides something that the readers are not able to get from private interpretation. The participants in this study do read a lot. The questionnaire asked for number of hours in a week spent reading, and more than half (58%) reported reading five to ten hours a week. This finding suggests that the readers in this study read more than the average Canadian, who, according to Statistics Canada (1998b), spends on average 2.2 hours per week reading. Book club members in this study read more than those who are not members and virtual club readers read more than those who are in face-to-face clubs. (The latter finding supports my argument that the Internet might offer additional interpretive opportunities for some readers.)

These basic findings taken into account with some of the comments made by several of this study's respondents begin to illuminate how important reading is to some of the readers. For example, one woman who is in both types of book clubs, wrote that reading has "always been a primary focus" in her life. She explained that she



never goes anywhere without a book in case she is waiting in line and can take advantage of delving into her current read. She wrote:

I listen to audiobooks in the car while driving to/from work. I either read or listen to audiobooks while walking the dog. I read while I watch television, and shy away from hobbies that require use of the hands since I can't read while doing them. I read three books a month for an on-line book discussion group, and another for the library's monthly evening group. I wish I didn't have to work so I could participate in their two daytime groups. I often have two or three books going at once, and usually finish about ten in any given month.<sup>6</sup>

Although this woman's reading habits are not reflective of most of the readers participating in the study, it does demonstrate that for this woman, reading is obviously an important activity in her life. What we cannot understand, however, is why she feels the need to read so much. Does the reading provide her with opportunities to escape? What kind of pleasure does it bring? What does her membership in book clubs offer her that she cannot get out of her individual reading experience? Assuming that she reads a variety of genres as implied through her different reading practices, the woman does represent the readers in this study who, like the readers in the ethnography, can be considered omnivorous readers.

Other qualitative responses provided opportunities to speculate why these readers read so much and so widely. Some women were able to articulate how reading informs their identity and offers instruction on how to interpret and perform in their every day lives. One respondent eloquently demonstrated this point. She wrote:

---

<sup>6</sup> Although I am committed to giving participants in this dissertation a voice, and the reporting narrative may seem impersonal without a name attached, I cannot provide names nor pseudonyms in this portion of my analysis because the survey was anonymous. Pseudonyms would seem superficial, arbitrary and dishonest.

I think that reading, though a solitary activity, keeps you in touch with the rest of the world, with humanity. All the crises and milestones of life, -love, death, illness—have been written about, and when you read about these things happening to others, it is less devastating when it happens to you; you've already been there. John Irving writes about reading in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and this is one of his points. The other point he makes is that it is amazing to read the thoughts of someone who has figured out a way to see the world, who has tried to come up with reasons and explanations for the vagaries of our existence.

The complexity inherent in meaning making in texts can also be observed in the following response from a 44-year-old woman who lives in the US and works as a financial services executive:

Reading liberates me from the moving box of my day-to-day responsibilities. It grants me insights into different perspectives, experiences, and cultures that I might never gain first hand. It also expands my understanding and appreciation of the world I live in. It magnifies my sense of the majesty of creation and the wealth of knowledge that is available to the inquisitive and industrious mind. It augments my sense of the absurd, and tickles my sense of humor. It gives me perspective by illustrating that my troubles are temporary, and my triumphs ephemeral. Our progress, our poverty, our pre-eminence and our panics are all temporal. But sharing them, understanding the ways in which similar circumstances have effected others, or could influence the behavior of others, puts our segment of reality—our moment in time—in perspective for us. We are lonely, but not alone.

The textual interpretation and the act of reading has different meaning for this women. Her words demonstrate that reading is an act of escape from her daily life, and provides opportunities to experience metaphorical journeys. We are also able to observe that pleasure is intrinsically intertwined with learning. In addition to the references to the emotional clarification this woman appears to find, she also hints at her quest for knowledge. The two concepts do not necessarily need to be considered separate from one

another, for here we begin to better understand the epistemological nature of this project. The articulated responses qualify self-identification and individual knowledge.

Not every participant provided sophisticated analysis of what reading means to them, but by questioning their reasons for reading, I was able to make several assumptions. Of course, all of the readers surveyed have individual reasons for reading. There are, however, significant similarities between book club members and those who are not in clubs. The findings also correspond to other readership studies in reasons for reading, in which the two top reasons given for reading were to learn and to escape. Again, as can be noted in the following response, it is sometimes difficult—and perhaps not necessary—to separate the two:

Reading has enabled me to visit places I would have never imagined possible. It has allowed me to discover qualities in myself, which I may have never uncovered. Reading has also been refuge for challenging times, and yet, it has strengthened and shaped me into an individual who is better able to deal with those challenges. Reading has been a constant when life has been inconsistent.

The qualitative nature of these responses begins to confirm the importance of including “voice” in our interrogations of reading experiences. By providing opportunities for readers to articulate the different processes of creating new knowledge, we begin to understand how, in reader-response theorist Vincent Leitch’s words, “the emotional experience of literature can produce new understanding of oneself—not just a moral here and a message there, but a genuinely new conception of one’s values and tastes as well as one’s prejudices and learning difficulties” (Leitch, p. 46). But Leitch is primarily concerned with individual responses to literature, and the narratives that preoccupy me concern women’s articulation of the collective interpretation process. How

does the collective influence the individual, if at all? Why would some readers join a book club, on-line or otherwise if readers read for the same reason?

The American woman who works in financial services wrote that what she enjoys most about her virtual book club is “its diversity, intellectual integrity, openness to alternative opinions, careful consideration of new perspective, and willingness to mentor the intellectually curious neophyte.” And yet, she wrote that she feels least satisfied with her ability to keep up. In her words: “in some measure I feel inadequate to the level of intellectual discourse by virtue of inexperience—but since I’m honest about what I don’t know, and the group is more forgiving of ignorance than it is of stupidity, I don’t feel excluded.” It appears, then, that although membership seems to enhance the individual interpretation by adding different perspectives to the interpretation, there are also entropic pressures in the book clubs. What is it about her interpretive community that allows her to articulate her “incompetence” and still feel part of the whole? The following section begins to contemplate the book clubs as safe spaces in which to articulate and create knowledge.

### **Attaching Meaning to Book Club Membership**

Most of the book club members identified the book club as a place where they can gain new knowledge: 67 percent of the face-to-face members and 62 percent of the virtual members reported that they joined their clubs because they wanted to intellectually stimulate themselves. One woman, a member of both types of groups, said that what she likes most about her virtual club is that there are a “wide range of people involved, from different countries. Discussion is informed, but not intimidatingly

academic. Moderator is present, but not oppressive.” Obviously, some readers appear to see the on-line environment as the best place to do this. Not only are virtual clubs free of geographic and time boundaries, but like the face-to-face readers in the ethnography, some cyber club members see the virtual book club as comfortable space in which to increase their knowledge outside of formal institutional systems. In the words of an articulate 23-year-old Canadian member of a virtual club, gaining new knowledge is extremely important to the book club members. Through the Internet, she wrote, readers might be able to fulfil some of these needs:

I think that with the act of reading becoming more a part of pop culture (rather than something we did in closets a hundred years ago), book clubs are designed to cater to the common, yet critical reader. In the age of Oprah’s Book Club, reading has become an interactive activity. It’s not enough to be reading these days. Talking about a book is almost mandatory. In my opinion, reading is pointless without the intention to talk about what you’ve taken in. The internet offers every class the avenue to discuss books. Some people, particularly middle-class housewives, may not have the time or resources to join f2f book clubs. And what with Oprah encouraging literacy from the comfort of her soundstage, the internet is the ideal companion. Also, the internet allows readers to move beyond locality and (perhaps) a particular mindset. Issues in books are discussed from different point of views, rather than subjected to homogeneous interpretations.

Of course, not all classes of people have access to computers and to the Internet. And not all people are computer literate. It is interesting, however, to observe ideals of the Internet. As another woman who has only some university wrote of her virtual club, “...it is anonymous – less need to be shy :)” For some, perhaps the ideals of the internet book club community are real.

A notable reoccurring theme in the qualitative responses is that of continuing one's education. One college-educated respondent claimed this is part of the reason virtual book clubs are popular. She wrote: "there is a need to continue studying in some form...It (the Internet) is the perfect tool." However, the "need to continuing learning" response can only explain a portion of the book club experience. As I will demonstrate in the following two chapters, the dream of community appears to be at play. Consider for example, the words of one woman who has some post-graduate education: "(the Internet) brings together a more eclectic group of aficionados. The geographic, age, gender, experiential, race, age, and cultural boundaries are blurred to some extent. (This) fosters a more open and forthright exchange of ideas."

Such comments reiterate the problematic notion of community as outlined by Young and demonstrates how Code's framework is a more appropriate paradigm. On the one hand, the club members come together with a common desire to learn more. They enjoy reading and feel that the book club is a place where they can see different points of view from people in disparate parts of the world. On the other hand, some of the respondents feel there is a need to maintain anonymity, to be free of identity and they can do this while still feeling like community members. Is the desire for anonymity fuelled by intolerance of different interpretations of the book? Why would a reader feel the need to remain anonymous? Can a person remain anonymous when interpreting books when—as I argue throughout this thesis—she or he uses individual meaning systems to respond to the texts? To grapple with these questions, I turn to the ideals of and normative activities within the book club communities as I have interpreted them from the survey respondents.

## **Notions of Community**

As mentioned above, both types of book club members joined their groups for intellectual stimulation”. This motivation was tied for most mentions with joining “to have fun”, suggesting that collective interpretation is considered fun when it is conducted in an environment that feels non-judgmental to the participants. The close rankings of “seeking intellectual stimulation” and joining “to read books they wouldn’t normally read” indicates that the readers feel the need to learn and to be well informed. The pressures may be self-inflicted but may also reflect the cultural capital that is given to intelligence in the specific work settings of the women, and in society at large.

The findings suggest these book club members desire human contact. For some, this is in a face-to-face setting, for others it is on an electronic forum. For a significant number of others, both types of book clubs are needed to satisfy whatever need for collective interpretation that they have. The desire for the membership implies that the readers are not getting what they want or feel they need in their everyday lives. For example, one 34-year-old Canadian scientist who had been in her face-to-face book club for less than a year wrote the following:

Getting together to discuss books gives you the framework to get together with a group of people, hear other people’s point of view and make new friends. This is also centred around taking the time to do something relaxing and enjoyable for oneself. These are things I think are missing in our society—hence the popularity of bookclubs. They are a way of creating a community.

Book clubs, then, are seen as a “basis for building a community,” as a US face-to-face member wrote of her 5 – 10-year-old book club. The ideal of community does not appear to be a gendered ideal in this portion of my research. Only five women referenced the women-only space of their club. Three of those who responded as such were members of

a virtual club. One wrote about the dialogue in her group: “Keep in mind this is an online group of women! I feel we are all very bright, and we express ourselves easily. So personal matters enter in, and that is okay.” Another virtual member from Israel identified the joy she feels from interpreting books with other women, and articulates and realises what I interpret as an elementary explanation of Code’s “second-person” way of knowing. The woman wrote that she enjoys being presented with different interpretations which sometimes confirm her own. When I asked what she enjoyed most about her club, she responded:

... when someone describe how she feel concern something she read in the book, and I feel exactly like that, or if someone talk about her perspective and its so different from mine, or I can’t describe exactly how I felt about it, and someone describe it so good. I like to read what other women think too.

One other respondent, who is a member of a face-to-face club and two virtual clubs, demonstrated that the vague, yet self-determined, parameters of on-line community through books supports Code’s warning against dichotomous analysis of community and caring relationships:

I like our discussions on the iVillage Mystery/Suspense Board because we all have a good sense of humor and enjoy our books, but we don’t get too terribly serious about the discussion...It is a fun group. And none of us really know each other at all. And yet I feel all these women are my friends. I know. Strange. But I love it.

This notion of friends in a book club community is different from my ethnography findings, where the book club women do not necessarily consider each other friends. As the reader of this dissertation will note in Chapter Seven, the women in my ethnography tend not to think of the other women as friends. Instead, they think of them as members



of the community. They still respect and care for each other, but they do not consider each other friends.

None of the respondents joined their club because it was women only. From the data available to me through this survey, I cannot compare these findings with those of the ethnography in which it appears that although the women may not choose a group that is women only, they grow to revere that space. However, the comments from one 34-year-old communication specialist from Canada might help explain the complex relationship between the apparent search for similarity that can be found in the interpretation of literature, and womanhood. She wrote the following in response to the question of what she enjoys most about her club: "Being able to get together with articulate women who are equally or more passionate about books and reading and to hear their insights and share my insights and laugh."

In a face-to-face setting, the experiences and perceptions of community and the practices therein appear different from the virtual environment. The face-to-face experiences of these survey respondents encompass the social processes of eating and drinking, and being with others one trusts. The face-to-face interaction is essential. One 31-year-old corporate librarian from the US responded to the question of the Internet's influence on book clubs with disdain. She wrote: "I wouldn't find an online book club appealing at all. I'm on the computer all day and look forward to having a face to face conversation over wine and munchies. It's the book club experience that is appealing." The experience of the book club, and the desire for affiliation appear to operate with the same level of importance to the face-to-face members. To illustrate, consider the sentiments of a 26-year-old communication specialist from Canada who said that what

she enjoys most of her face-to-face club is “the wine, the food, the feeling of being with good friends who have the same interest as myself. And the chance to discuss a really good book.” This notion of similarity in community is also perceived by readers who are not members of clubs, as was evident in responses from non book club members in the ethnography and as can be observed by the response of one 35-year-old non-book club member from the US. This woman, who works as a web designer, wrote:

I think book clubs have become more popular because of changes in our society. Because of time constraints and family and work demands, people are looking for more structured activities and there seems to be fewer opportunities for spontaneous discussion and information gatherings. There also seems to be more difficulty in connecting with those who share similar interests. Book clubs allow individuals with a shared love of reading to plan time together and focus on a common purpose. Friends of mine who are involved in book clubs have also mentioned that a book discussion provides a “jumping off point” for more personal and political topics, strengthening the camaraderie of the group.

Nearly half (49% of the face-to-face and 48% of the virtual) of the book club respondents report belonging to no other group, which suggests that book clubs appear to satisfy the desire to belong to a community. Community, as I outlined in Chapter Two, can fulfil a need for affiliation and also be a space that allows for differences at both ideological and practical levels. Considering that 30 percent of the face-to-face book club members and 58 percent of the virtual members report that they participate in on-line groups outside of their book club, one might conclude that the Internet enables some people to satisfy their community desires.

Several important distinctions arise between face-to-face and virtual clubs when considering why people join. First, virtual members (23%) like the flexibility in

scheduling that the virtual clubs offer, whereas only six percent of the face-to-face readers consider flexible scheduling a priority. As I will outline in Chapter Six, scheduling is usually negotiated after a face-to-face reader joins the club, not before. In addition, flexible meeting time is not a commonly-perceived factor of face-to-face clubs, but it is in a virtual environment. To illustrate, when I asked all respondents what role they think the Internet plays in book clubs, the most frequent responses included overcoming geographical barriers (35%), access to like people (25%), and time flexibility (21%).

As I mentioned above, a little less than half (41%) of the virtual club members joined because of the books the groups were reading, while this was mentioned by only 22 percent of the face-to-face club members. Only four percent of the virtual club members joined as a result of an invitation from a friend or family member, whereas for face-to-face members, the percentage is considerably higher at 29 percent. Perhaps face-to-face clubs depend more on interpersonal affiliations? Face-to-face clubs rarely have more than informal lists of the titles they read. On the other hand, the Internet provides virtual members both broad access to information and also to selective communities. That is, readers looking for specific communities of readers have many options if they have a particular genre interest, such as mystery reading groups, romance reading groups or CanLit reading groups. Importantly, the clubs are almost always open to new members. This would be especially important to people who are in areas where there are no face-to-face clubs, and also to people who shy away from them, or to readers who have very specific interests. For example, as one reader wrote:

The internet is a blessing to me. I live in N.C. I don't have family who share my love for books, nor does any of my

friends. I wouldn't have anyone to discuss books with if it  
weren't for the internet. I have not been able to find an  
African American bookclub in my city.

This reader's virtual book club offers both an opportunity to discuss books she is reading, and access to a community of readers with whom she presumably feels the need to connect. For another woman who lives in another area where there are no face-to-face clubs, the virtual club "gives those of us with specific interests a place to meet, exchange ideas and interact." However, for this woman, this is not ideal. She said: "the relationships are more superficial than in the real world."

I want to turn the reader's attention to the practices within book clubs as they appear in the survey data. Although the findings might not specifically confirm what the relationships within book clubs look like, the specific practices of book selection and collective interpretation do imply that there are differences in virtual and face-to-face book club practices. In turn, there are differences in how those experiences are interpreted by the book club members themselves.

### **Book Club Processes**

The readers in this study select the books they read differently from those in Duxbury's report. The respondents in that report recall the most important reasons for purchasing a book as follows: subject (65%), author (40%), recommendation from others (22%), price (19%), and title (19%). The "motivator" categories presented in this study were different from the 1991 study; the readers were asked *how* they choose the books they read, not *why* they purchase the books they do, so the comparisons should be made with caution. Buying a book does not mean one reads it; similarly, choosing a book doesn't always mean reading it, either. The book club readers in this study seem to

depend on their social networks more so than general Canadian readers, and the media plays a much larger role in the decision making process. This finding confirms the findings of those in the following ethnography. Both virtual and face-to-face group members choose their books most frequently based on the recommendations of their friends or family. Second to these trusted others, the readers in the on-line survey depend on a favourite author, whereas the readers in the ethnography choose their books based on media reviews. This option was the third most mentioned by the on-line survey participants. The only notable difference in choosing books between the two different types of club members in the survey is that virtual clubs are more likely to use publisher-produced reading guides in choosing books than are those in face-to-face groups (20% versus 8%, respectively). This might be explained by the assumed comfort the virtual members have in using the Internet. The guides are more available on-line than they are in hard copy, which might make them more available and usable to those who know where to find them.

The search for new titles is omnipresent in this research. I have termed it “The Eternal Quest”, and will discuss this phenomenon in detail in Chapter Seven as it appears to be more important to the readers in the ethnography than it does for the face-to-face readers in my cyber survey. For virtual book club members this pursuit is satiated within club membership itself. When asked what is most satisfying about their group, the second most frequent response for the virtual club members (24%) noted access to new books as the most satisfying, while only four percent of the face-to-face club members reported this as a significant benefit of belonging.

Contemporary fiction is the genre of choice for most of the book clubs in this study, both for the virtual groups and for the face-to-face. This finding corresponds with that of the ethnography and also with those of Hartley, Howie and Long. The high readership of mysteries and westerns in virtual clubs is an interesting finding because no other book club study, my own included, has found any indication that reading of these genres is commonplace in face-to-face groups. The idea that these book readers have access to others who read the same genres is another indication that the Internet is providing space for specialised communities for some readers.

The survey findings suggest both similarities and differences to other research findings on reading genre preferences according to gender (Bennett et al., 1999; Duxbury, 1995; Lorimer & Shaw, 1983), although the categories differ slightly. The most obvious difference can be found in the category of “contemporary fiction.” This appears to be the genre of choice for both genders, which might indicate that the readers of this study are reading differently from Bennett et al.’s Australian readers. In that study, men read more “sports and leisure,” “scientific,” and “political” books, while women read more “romances,” “historical romances,” and “cooking books” (p. 150). Lorimer and Shaw’s (1983) study of Canadian readers is consistent with Bennett et al.’s in that they found that more men than women read “history”, “documentary”, “current events”, and “science fiction,” and more women than men read “religion and philosophy,” “biography,” and “personal information books,” and “romances.” Duxbury reported that the top three genre choices among men to be “self-help and how-to”, “history, documentaries, current events, war, politics and science”, and “mystery” (pp. 26-27). The top three genres for women, according to Duxbury, were “self-help and how-to,”

“romance,” and “other fiction.” Fourteen percent of all the women readers in my study listed “romance” as a genre they like to read most, but it was not mentioned enough times to make it into the top five preferences. Again, it is important to understand that within each genre of books, there are a variety of differences especially when readers categorise the books themselves.

There are at least two implications of these genre findings. First, one might assume that the genre-specific virtual clubs are spaces that gather and consolidate those who want to read and interpret a specific genre. For example, while I am familiar with face-to-face groups who choose only titles by one specific author, I have yet to hear of a club whose members read and discuss only westerns. Indeed, I am not familiar with many people who talk about the westerns they read. Second, the genres that women prefer have an “interpretive opportunity” on several levels.

The findings help me to begin to illustrate the contiguous nature of literary and rhetorical genre theory as conceptualised by Alexander (2003), Giltrow (1995) and Miller (1984), among others. Consider, as way of illustration, Alexander’s argument, in reference to a feminist literacy worker’s project titled *Wandering Books*, that the “rhetorical action of a discourse community assists its members in identifying with, and becoming the participants of a genre and its intentions”.<sup>7</sup> According to Alexander, because the women knew how to respond to the *Wandering Books*, the project fits broadly into the description of genre of social action. The argument works well to help me introduce the idea of book clubs as genres of social action insofar as the texts women read in book clubs “(resemble) familiar forms that women unconsciously (know) how to

---

<sup>7</sup> The project included genre forms familiar to feminist communities, such as chain letters, journals, testimonials, personal narratives, and speaking circles.

respond to. Genres typically emerge from need and recurrent use and then they evolve into stable social forms such as ‘texts’” (Alexander, p. 7). Genre then might also include the dialectic interpretation of the texts.

Face-to-face book clubs normally meet for two to three hours every month. Virtual club discussion, on the other hand, appears to be more fluid. Most virtual members in the on-line survey (37%) say they log on more than once per day, 28 percent report logging on at least once a day. Unfortunately, I cannot determine how much time they spend in total on book discussion but the data imply that a virtual book club might be a more integral part of a person’s daily life than it is for someone who belongs only to a face-to-face group. One woman who belongs to both types of clubs said the camaraderie and repartee in her face-to-face group is what gratifies her and allows her to learn more about the books, but pointed out that there is a lack of time to delve deeply into the book in a face-to-face setting. She does this in her virtual group where meetings can occur over from two to four weeks, rather than only two hours. The virtual meetings appear to allow the reader to transcend physical, geographical and time boundaries, enriching her interpretations of the book. She can become as involved as frequently and as intently as she wants, and at her convenience. One might conclude then, that those readers who belong to both types of groups use the different groups to get what they do not get in one or the other, and that both groups are necessary.

The data indicate that face-to-face and virtual collective interpretation look different. As mentioned above, the face-to-face report less literary analysis than do virtual clubs, and the virtual club members report that talk about social, political or environmental issues enters less frequently into the discussion than for face-to-face



groups. Off-topic conversation was noted as the least satisfying aspect of their club by the virtual members, but did not show up as salient in the same way for the face-to-face members. I cannot note from the data, however, whether this is an indication of actual less off-topic talk or greater tolerance of off-topic talk. The data did indicate that there were divergent reasons of discontentment among the face-to-face members. Face-to-face club members seem to be more tolerant of shared personal experiences than those in virtual clubs. Virtual groups are more formal in the way books are discussed. This may help to illuminate why virtual clubs use publisher's reading group guides for discussion (50%), more often than face-to-face clubs do (43%). I suspect some of the groups expect a certain "level" of dialogue or certain interpretive competencies as Radway (1991) has identified, depending on the norms of the interpretive community itself. The intimate, physical and continuous space afforded in a face-to-face group seems to better nurture opportunities for alternate readings. This finding, however, is problematic because without analysis of the dialogue, one cannot make conclusions beyond the responses provided by the participants. A researcher must ask how valid these responses might be; how does a reader critically analyse the amount of time her book club discussion turns to certain topics?<sup>8</sup> In addition, I found in doing the field research for the ethnography that the textual interpretation of the book of the month can be non-linear. Often, deep textual analysis will be interspersed with connection and or commentary on character or setting. Then, the discussion might switch to a personal story or an article someone has read, for

---

<sup>8</sup> It may be helpful to the reader to note that the survey participants were asked to check "frequently", "occasionally" and "never" in response to "How often does your book club discussion turn to social, political or environmental issues?"; "How often does your book club discussion focus mainly on the structure of the book?"; and "How often do your book club members use personal experiences to interpret the book?" (Please see Appendix G.)

example. If I were to appropriate amount of time labels to the discussions I participated in, I, too, would have a difficult time doing so.

What might the suspected channelling away from social, political and environmental issues mean for virtual interpretive communities? Concentration on textual analysis of the books in moderated virtual clubs might imply a preference for “deep” textual analysis, or an aversion to politics on-line. This is not to say that textual analysis is not enjoyable. One virtual member wrote that her favourite book club discussion was about Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*: “We were in a heated debate over some of the symbolism and I laughed so hard I cried.” However, without observing the dialogue, it is difficult to determine what discussion and resistance might look like in a virtual book club. An ethnography accompanied by textual analysis of the dialogue and the specific texts is necessary to create a better understanding of this virtual space that is often referred to as democratic, free and ideal dialogic space.

Whatever the collective interpretation does look like, book discussion appears to be source of both enjoyment and reasons for dissatisfaction with club members, virtual and face-to-face alike. This finding is consistent with the ethnography, and the questions that prompted these responses were often as passionate as those I elicited from the interviews. When asked to think about a book club discussion that they particularly enjoyed, and what it was about the discussion that made it so enjoyable, one is again reminded of Code’s notion of an ideal community comprised of differences treated with respect. Members from both types of groups most frequently (68% of both face-to-face and virtual) noted the sharing of different points of view. One 62-year-old, Canadian face-to-face club member who works as a teacher, wrote this of her favourite discussion:

“I thought the book an entire waste of time, others found it totally absorbing, humorous and well worth reading. How can people with the same amount of intelligence find so many differences in one work?”

Code’s theory of knowledge created through other persons is realised in some of the open-ended responses. Another Canadian face-to-face book club member of 15-20 years remembered this:

Recently, the discussion post Apartheid issues raised by *Disgrace*, particularly as one of our members is South African and still has most of her family living there, in fact had just returned from a visit. Similarly, one of our members is the daughter of parents who were foreign missionaries, so the discussion around *The Poisonwood Bible* was lively, as there were very divergent views on that issue.

She continued:

The best books for discussion are not the ones we all enjoyed reading the most, but the ones that challenged our ideas and assumptions, particularly if we were not in agreement. And the ones that have challenged us intellectually (like Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*).

Group dedication or loyalty appears to be different for a virtual group than for a face-to-face club. The ability to not participate in a month’s discussion—or even several months—is possible in a virtual club where people often sign on through chat rooms, or list serves. Here, if the cultural tastes or the cultural competencies of the interpretive communities are not in line with, or if the discussion is not at an appropriate level for, a particular reader, she does not necessarily need to negotiate with her club. She simply leaves or does not participate for a time. For example, one virtual club member says of her group’s selections:

It seems that we have gotten into a rut with the type of book that is being nominated. We're bordering on 'Oprah-like' and I don't care for it. Consequently, I have bowed out of the last couple of discussions.

Leaving aside this woman's comments about the "type" of text chosen in her group, I want to highlight that group membership fluidity would not work in a successful face-to-face interpretive community. While a woman might not participate in a virtual discussion for several months, she can still consider herself part of the virtual club. On the other hand, if she did the same for her face-to-face club, she might feel the pressure from herself or others to quit the club if she finds the title choices not to her liking.

### ***Chapter Summary***

The Internet provides for some a convenient way to connect with other book readers, without obvious class, age, racial, geographical, or time barriers. Face-to-face groups arise out of tight-knit networks of friends, family, or co-workers and might not be amiable to new members. The fluidity and the facelessness of the virtual groups allow all readers access to these communities. More than 28 percent of the readers in this study belong to both types of groups, which suggests virtual book clubs are a channel for heavy or very heavy readers, to use Duxbury's terms, to gain frequent access to community and variation in their interpretive community.

Contemporary clubs appear to be informal in their format, but club members still value their discussions as opportunities to be exposed to ideas that are new to them. Book discussion, which is based mainly on contemporary fiction but which can include other genres, provides an interpretive community for the readers. Face-to-face environments seem to be more tolerant of shared personal experiences than are virtual clubs. Virtual

groups are more formal in the way books are discussed. This could be a reflection of the genre-specific nature of the on-line groups examined for this study, or because many of the virtual clubs are moderated. It may also mean that the acquisition and negotiation of cultural competence looks differently in virtual communities, which in turn suggests that virtual interpretive communities are more closely bound by interpretive strategies.

Whatever these communities “look like”, they appear to provide some women an opportunity to create new knowledge. The results are real to the women. They claim they learn new ideas, and they are able to feed their passion for reading. They also form emotional bonds with the other women. The access to new book titles as a benefit of belonging to a book club is only second to the strong social relationships for virtual clubs. For face-to-face groups, this is the most important purpose of club membership. To varying degrees, both face-to-face and virtual book clubs are locations in which women can demonstrate agency through the literature and each other.

Whether face-to-face or virtual contemporary groups, the participants’ responses provide insight into the importance and power people—and in particular women—attribute to new knowledge, literature and reading, knowingly or not. This on-line study suggests that the role education, gender, and occupation play in the formation and practices of a micro-system or a cultural field reflects the larger society in which the women and men live. Studying book clubs also gives us a glimpse of the passion behind both individual and collective interpretation.

Although useful in introducing differences between face-to-face and virtual book clubs and also preceding some of the ethnographic conclusions I make later in the dissertation, I feel that this portion of this research is limited in two significant ways.

First, I was able to augment the quantitative findings of this study with the reader's own words, but too many questions are left unanswered using numbers alone. Second, the quantitative data describing the social spaces, places and structures is superficially treated using only frequencies and cross tabulations. I could not see the social codes that develop, and therefore cannot fully appreciate what resistance might sound like, or how the group norms are established and understand how they are realised.

While I did not conduct an on-line ethnography and cannot answer these questions here, I did conduct an ethnographic study of face-to-face reading groups. The next two chapters outline my findings of that portion of this project.

## Chapter Six

### *Seeking Wisdom, Seeking Community*

*“One of us will begin her reading and read a few chapters to all the others present so as to hold them and fix them permanently in our memories.”*

*Fifteenth-century spinner in Évangiles de quenouilles*

cited in Alberto Manguel (1996)

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter begins the ethnographic portion of this dissertation. The analysis is a nuanced outline of the composition of those groups in which I was a participant observer. To better contextualise the question of why women join book clubs instead of other types of groups, I explain what reading itself means to the women. Through the words of the women themselves, I explore the notion of community and sisterhood to explain how a book club offers these women opportunities they are not able to find in other areas of their lives.

### ***A Brief Introduction to the Book Clubs***

As readers of this dissertation will note in Appendix D, the book clubs in this study are predominantly comprised of middle class women. The group members are younger than those found in Long's study, and are not as economically affluent. They are readers who range in age from their early 20s to late 80s. The age diversity within each group I studied is minimal, although some clubs have membership age ranges that are quite wide. The age constitution seems to reflect life stages in my groups, and also the circle of friends/colleagues/acquaintances that form the core of the club at its beginning. For example, the membership of the just-forming group—the Monday Night Group—is a book club of twenty-somethings who work together, none have children but all are in relationships. The Tuesday group are all women (with the exception of the one man) who are in their 40s and 50s with grown children or teenagers. This group has been together since their children were young. The Wednesday Night Group began with several people in the same industry who knew one another through their work. None have children, but some are married and others are in relationships or are seeking them. Thursday's club is a group of neighbours all living within a six-block radius of one another. All are married except for one and all of their children attend the same school. And, finally, the Friday group also began from work relationships with the members being in their late 40s and early 50s, except for two members in their 30s.



**Photograph 1 - The Researcher and several members of The Monday Night Group**  
(Image used with permission.)



The participant observation portion of this doctoral research was conducted with all-women groups, except for one group that is all-women and one man. The size of those groups ranged from six members (the Monday Night Group and the Friday Night Group) to 12-15 members (the Tuesday Night Group, the Wednesday Night Group, and the Thursday Night Group). In total, I read and talked with 35 women in the participant observation groups

### **Socio-Cultural Structures**

Corresponding with both Long and Hartley's findings, the readers in this study are clearly well-educated. All have completed university or college, and some have or are pursuing graduate degrees. This factor and their passion for reading appear to be all the women have in common. The women teach, consult, nurse, paint or build computer systems for a living, and are mostly what some have termed the petite bourgeoisie. Their

incomes range from \$12,000 a year to “plenty” according to one respondent. As might be expected, the younger in age the group members, the less their income. Some rent, some own. Some live in the West End, the downtown centre of Vancouver that is racially diverse and that has a reputation as being home to a large gay population. Others live on the West Side, which is an up-scale area of the city, and still others in East Vancouver, a rapidly gentrifying area that in the past has been home to the city’s new immigrants. Several live in another part of the city that is also known as a desirable place to own—the North Shore. One club is a neighbourhood group in the suburb of New Westminster, which is known for its heritage neighbourhoods. Other groups have members who come from different parts of the city, sometimes travelling almost an hour to meet with their clubs. Some are married with children and grandchildren, others are single and some are single parents. Again, the younger group members tend to be without children and those who are older in age tend to have at least one child.

Some of the women are members of other types of organised groups—especially if they are retired from paid work, but most feel they have not enough time and make jokes about the idea of “free” time. Of the small number who do participate in other groups, very few are clubs and if they are, they are garden clubs and a few bridge clubs. Several other women belong to choirs or church groups. However, for most of these readers, if they participate in activities outside of the home other than a book club, it is a professional association or an athletic activity.

Most of the groups I met with were women of European descent, except for a young, newly-formed younger group (the Monday Night Group) whose ethnicity is quite diverse and is reflected in their reading choices. The book clubs that I am aware of in

British Columbia tend to be comprised of Anglo-Canadian women. This is not always the case and seems to depend on the integration of immigrants into North American society as a whole; it also tends to reflect modes of integrating women's community into local culture. For example, Vancouver has large pockets of new residents from Asian and Southeast Asian countries, and yet few groups in my study have women who were born in these areas. I am not aware of any groups in which the membership is entirely comprised of women from these regions. All of the women in the Monday Night Group, and the few women of colour in other groups, were born in Canada or were young when their parents immigrated here.

Talking to the groups about diversity of membership produced interesting results. Those clubs that were seeking new members or "wanted more diversity" in the membership did not refer to ethnic diversity, but rather to age or economic status, within their own ethno-cultural group. The following quote is from Georgia, a member of the Thursday Night Group, a club that was formed 16 years ago on the West Side of Vancouver:

...I'd say 40 to 55 is our age group, and I'd actually like to get some younger people or some older people. We all have very similar backgrounds and we've all got at least one degree, maybe two. We're all married with children, or divorced, no nobody's divorced, or some were divorced but are remarried. And, most people don't have to work. They're affluent. You know, it's a pretty homogeneous group.

When I asked about the homogeneity of the Thursday Night Group, I was reminded that a lack of representation from different ethnic groups does not mean a group is necessarily a homogeneous group. Diversity means different things to different people, the group argued:

Georgia: Well, I can only speak for myself. Ok. I think [in] economics we're not homogenous.

Deena: Politically, we're not homogeneous.

Georgia: And philosophically, about that whole, the whole left-right kind of idea. I wouldn't want to test the waters. Yeah. I think if you looked at our birth certificates and you look at our faces, uhm, you know, there's a similarity and we all sort of live on the west side of Vancouver and what not. We're probably more similar than we think we are if we just had to fill out a tick here tick there, that sort of thing, but knowing us as individuals as well as we do, I think that's the beauty of this group, too.

Whether young or old, married or single, rich or not, book club women bring a variety of different life experiences to their groups. On the surface they do appear to be homogeneous: White, middle- to upper-middle class, mostly middle-age, working women with ample education. However, my analysis of the book club collective interpretation, and in-depth probing in interviews exposed differences in political, religious, and social ideologies. As I argue in Chapter Seven, each woman brings with her to the club readings and meetings different experiences that influence the club's processes and work to create the club's culture, which may or may not accept or tolerate differences of individual ideology.

Why do women read? What can they find in books that they cannot find in their everyday lives? And why do some women choose to move from the private sphere of interpretation to the interpretive community of a women's-only book club to read and discuss books? As I have argued in Chapter Two, reading response theorists have established that an individual's identity is in part created by what she reads. How do these women articulate differences when talking about their private reading practices to me, and what might these narratives tell us about how the women's reading is influenced by

their locations to dominant power structures? What role does that proximity play when it is transferred into the collective space of a book club? Before exploring book clubs as a cultural form in which one might expect active negotiation of women's differences insofar as they are realised in literary tastes, textual analysis and ideologies, I want to discuss the individual reading habits and practices that play a part in that negotiation.

### ***Club Women's Private Reading Habits and Practices***

For some of the members with whom I have read and talked, reading seems to be a necessity. In some cases, the women feel reading gives their lives meaning. In almost all cases, the women identify themselves as readers.

The desire to and love of reading seems to have started when these readers were young children. Reading was supported within their family, if not expected. As Vera said, "the importance of reading and books was stressed in my family. So from an early age, reading was an important thing to do." Or, as Eduarda noted, "reading (was) important, like, I was always brought up to be somebody who read and just for the knowledge, you know what I mean?"

When I asked readers when they began to read, most have vague memories. They do not recall exactly when they learned to read except for the older women who told me they learned to read in grade one or early in their elementary education. While it is difficult for most to remember exactly when they began reading (they remember always reading and sometimes without me prompting them to recall), some make reference to their early childhood reading in conjunction with their mother. Jessie, who now works as a librarian, said:

I learned to read before I went to school, mostly by

listening to my mother reading over and over the books that were in our home. She also taught me basic phonics. By the time I was three, I could “read” some of my books by saying the text while looking at the pictures. At four I could read the weekend “funnies” on my own. As a result of this background, when I started school at 5 3/4, the teacher decided I could be in Grade 2!

The memories of some of the women can be quite poignant, with specific titles etched vividly into their memories. Susan, from the Wednesday Night Group, remembers one of my own childhood favourites that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s: “My mother read to us when we were young. She read the Pipi Longstocking series out loud, sitting in the hallway, so that all of us could hear it from our bedrooms while we were falling asleep.”

The bonding a parent and a child experience with books continues once a reader has children, nieces, nephews or grandchildren of her own. Georgia, a woman from the Thursday Night Group, said reading in her house is a family affair:

We had an episode this, oh, two or three times in the last week where there was, I have a 15-year-old daughter, and the three of us, my husband and I and my, our daughter, are sitting reading a book and the phone rings and we stop reading and we looked at each other and everybody goes back to their book!

Like Georgia, many of the women speak in tender tones when they speak about reading with their children or grandchildren. They sometimes even refer to books in the same way one often speaks about comfort food, wanting to share that experience with loved ones.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity to read out loud and to see the excitement on a child’s face or hear it in her or his voice once she or he starts reading is a source of joy: the passion is passed on.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reading as comfort food is a second level typology that emerged from the QSR Nud\*ist data analysis. The metaphor is my own.

Some of the women read with their partners. Jessie attributes the success of her 23-year relationship to reading while eating together: "I read alone most always, except during meals when both my partner and I read (one of the reasons our relationship has lasted 23+ years)." Almost all of the other readers who answered the questionnaire find reading an extremely private activity. One reader explained the deeply personal role books can assume for individuals, even in a close mother-daughter relationship. While reading was part of the family dynamics, Eduarda learned that there were boundaries that she could not cross with her mother. As she grew older and discovered her own personal connections to reading, she was able to appreciate her mother's emotions derived from reading. She explained this during one meeting:

My mom like never lent me her books, because she's like, this is MY book. Like, "I've written all over it, I don't want you to read." I'm like, "OH!" I was really insulted. I'm your daughter. And, she's like, "yeah, but this is mine." Yeah, you know, and I felt like, "well, why can't I, you share everything with me." But I think for my Mom, her books were her little sacred thing, Right? So she never shared that aspect of her life with us. She shared everything else with us.

In Eduarda's mother's case, the book acts as not only a shared object and a teaching tool, but also represents a private artefact: an aesthetic *thing* in which to deposit personal thoughts and interpretations. I learned through my research with Eduarda's group that her mother was an immigrant to Edmonton from Chile and that she left her husband when Eduarda was a young child. Like they are for other women in this study, Eduarda's mother's books may have been her solace from daily routines, and from loneliness. In her case, however, the books function more as an open diary text too painfully private to

share, whereas her daughter has chosen to move from this private space and activity to one where her thoughts are shared with others.

The women in this study told me that they read primarily for two reasons: for entertainment and to learn. This does not necessarily mean that there is a simple dichotomy between entertainment and learning. From families and schools, they are taught to recognise that literature is to be revered and has cultural value. From their own experiences, they recognise this process as entertaining.

Reading is an integral part of the lives of these women, and their reasons for reading cannot be easily separated from one another. From “opened new worlds, affirmed feelings, dreams, gave me a place to escape to,” to “reading has allowed me to both lose, and find, myself,” to “it is impossible to capture the extent of it,” reading both creates and informs self identity. The women said they wanted to expose themselves to new ways of thinking, to be taken to another land, to learn about different customs, and to learn new things about themselves. Vera, a reader since childhood, is a breast cancer survivor and turns to books for life instructions and inspiration. She, like many of the readers, does not separate entertainment and learning but rather sees them one in the same:

I guess (I read) to extend my, the world of ideas and wonderment, the ah ha, the issues that are a challenge, for one, on life's journey. I love it. Reading something that gives you a whole new take on something, a new way of looking at it, or a new problem and a new issue, struggle completely, an understanding of those struggles, those of people here and elsewhere. So (I read) for, you know, it sounds very pretentious, but to say, enlightenment, that I'll end my journey with a better understanding of the world I lived in than I started.

What genres do women read to experience the “enlightenment” and “the world”?

Although the women report reading primarily fiction and contemporary fiction, I believe



it is dangerous to posit that the women read only within one genre, and that they read each book with the same intensity. Reading seems to fulfil different needs at different times. Similar to Long's (1987) book club women, it is more important to the women to claim distinction as a reader instead of say, a television or film buff, than it is to differentiate between the types of books they read (p. 22). In addition to fiction, the women read biographies, mysteries, poetry, literary criticism, and political commentary. These women might be considered "serious readers", according to the interpretation given by Janice Radway in her article "The Book-of-the Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction." According to Radway, a "serious book reader is not one who reads serious books only—Proust, Rilke, Dostoevsky. A serious book reader is one who buys loads of books a year, most to be educated and entertained, but sometimes to be uplifted" (p. 529). The readers might also be considered to have "omnivorous" cultural preferences as they have been presented by Bennett et al. (1999), who challenged traditional high/low cultural stratification. Like their Australian findings, the women in my study do not "confine their cultural tastes and practices to the traditional or elite art forms" (p. 184), but rather take pride in and gain cultural capital from knowing about all genres. An omnivore is someone who prefers all genres, at different times and for different reasons at any given time.

Generally, the women read on a daily basis. Their questionnaires report that while they read mainly fiction for book club, on an independent level, they read a variety of different genres while maintaining their own preferences without much concern for the cultural establishment. I am assuming that if the women were concerned about reporting that they read outside of the established literary canon, they would not have done it on a

questionnaire that was for this study. One book club member articulated the omnivore nature well. She said she reads “anything and everything most often—from a history of bookshelves, to nature writing, to romance, to a great deal of non-fiction. I don’t read mysteries, though.”

The readers appear to use the opinion leaders in their local networks of trusted friends and family members, people in their sphere of “personal influence,” to choose which books they read. Confirming early communication research (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981), as one reader said and echoing most of the readers in this study:

But friends are the ones whose opinions matter most, who have the strongest weight with me. And particular friends. Actually my Mum, who reads a lot, ... and doesn't like a lot of what she reads. So if she raves about something, I know that it is going to be absolutely outstanding.

I call these influential people “trusted others”. When I asked the women how they choose the books they read on the questionnaires, friends and family were always mentioned most frequently. Next, the women wrote that they depend on media reviews and specifically those in the *Globe and Mail* or *Quill and Quire*. The women also identified that they choose books they hear about on the CBC, but they did not clarify if it was CBC radio or television.

“Subject area” appeared quite frequently and was most often associated with non-fiction selection. And, of course, the women choose the books their book club is reading. The women told me less frequently that they also have favourite authors they will look out for, and even less often they said they will choose books based on book jacket copy, book samples, and award winners.

Speaking to the women in an interview situation enabled me to get detailed information about their individual title selection processes, more so than I was able to glean from the questionnaires. In a one-on-one situation, I was able to probe for names of publications or people they trust, and there was not the opportunity to do this with the survey answers. Not surprisingly, the non-joiners and the leavers both said they also turn first to friends and family for recommendations and then also to reviews in the *Globe and Mail*, the *Vancouver Sun*, the *National Post*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. It is interesting, however, that this group of women is more likely to choose prize winners, read Oprah picks, search for titles in virtual book stores, and lurk in cyber book clubs than are their contemporaries in book clubs. This finding might be an indication of book club readers' need to identify or "recognise" legitimate works of literature. It also suggests that non-book club members show less resistance to cultural authority than do book club members. The book club women learn to depend on the cultural taste hierarchies that evolve through the collective—an act of agency that moves the resistance to cultural authority from one establishment to another.

Although reading is a personal relationship with books, it is also a relationship that can be influenced by a community of readers. By articulating their private interpretations the women are valorising them. The readers often told me that the book club enhances or enriches their individual reading experiences. I observed that through the collective interpretation process, the members form bonds with one another that reflexively influence private interpretation of the book, and community cohesiveness. This process is anchored in the dialogue around literature.

Some women in this study readily admit that they find the social aspect of book clubs more important than the books. However, more often, the self-identified impetus for belonging is the interpretation of literature that is enhanced by each member bringing her ideas to the community. The focus on literature interpretation is why the women join book clubs instead of Bunko (a dice game that has become popular among women in American cities) groups or bridge clubs.<sup>2</sup> Jessie and Fiona of the Friday Night Group demonstrate this point when I asked them what it about their book club that differentiates this social activity from others:

Jessie: Yeah, so I guess that's the thing, it's a framework for getting together that isn't playing cards or---

Fiona: Or, and has a purpose. It has sort of topics that you can discuss, rather than just talking politics or religion.

Jessie: Yeah.

Fiona: Or sex, or whatever. They're all good subjects.

(Laughter.)

Jessie: And you can talk about all of those things in----

Fiona: In between.

Jessie: In relation to the book.

(Laughter.)

Fiona: In between, too.

As Fuller (in press) has aptly demonstrated of the role of the text in women's writing communities in Newfoundland, so, too, does the book act as the conduit for the women in

---

<sup>2</sup> See Latus Musick, J. (2001, April 3). The friendship game. *Woman's Day*, 128. The subtitle of this article is "I barely knew my neighbors until a silly dice game made me realize what I was missing."

this study to articulate “social agency that operates at the interface of ruling and non-ruling relations of power” (n.p.). I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapter, but first turn to the notion of community as these women articulate it. This is necessary because it appears that the dynamics of the interpretive community need to nurture a space in which the women feel safe before any talk of resistance becomes apparent. As Page (2001) has argued of the knowledge that can develop in a learning community of women, “what is most necessary for its development is the provision of a safe space in which differences can be articulated, dialogue can take place and relationships of trust develop.” Together, the women negotiate their own spaces.

### *The Dream of Wisdom and Community*

I found two prominent reasons for joining a book club in the data. First, there is a desire to read more, and to read “better”, and more broadly, which are needs that may be addressed in book clubs. Second, the women want to be with others in a collegial environment that supports their desire to acquire or enhance their cultural competence. This is evident across the groups, and in all age groups.

When I asked the women in an interview situation or on the questionnaires about their motives for joining their club, I did not anticipate that it would be difficult for some to remember those reasons. It was, and especially so for those who started meeting more than 20 years ago. I also did not anticipate that the members might not be able to differentiate their reasons for joining with the reasons that they enjoy the club as much as they do. When asked, many gave seemingly superficial answers, such as “oh, a friend invited me” or “it seemed like a fun thing to do.” Others provided more telling responses.

Take for example one comment from The Friday Night Group by a woman in her late 50s:

One friend talked to me about forming a group after she heard someone talking (about them) on the Peter Gzowski radio program and at the time I needed, I felt, some regular gathering with friends to compensate for a very stressful time at work.

We can thus begin to better understand why some women might join a book club. As with many of the readers, this woman needed space outside of the responsibilities of her daily life. We might also assume by her comment that she perceived a book club as a way to escape to a more pleasant environment than the one she found herself in at work. There is also an implication in her labeling the book club as “a regular gathering” that she perceived the book club as a scheduled activity, a prioritised meeting which she could depend on to be with others who she considered friends.

In addition to escape, the life stage of a reading woman might influence her to join a book club. Ruth, similar to many of the women in this study in their 40s and 50s, started a club 28 years ago to “intellectually challenge” herself when her children were toddlers and also to meet with other women in the same situation. When I prompted her by questioning the influence of the consciousness-raising groups on book clubs at the time, she said that she believes second-wave feminism clearly had an influence on her choice to form a book club. She said: “I know women who weren’t working felt that very keenly, that they were not keeping up somehow and needed to do something to keep themselves alive.” All around her women were making choices and those who chose to become mothers—and maybe were forced to leave work—felt the need to stay informed and connected to other women, new ideas and society. Vancouver book club moderator

Maragaret Bellamine agreed. She referred to her own group and others that began in the 70s as “havens” from everyday monotony of being with only children. Some of the book clubs these women referred to continue to today, others are defunct for various reasons. But of those women who were in groups in the 70s and early 80s that no longer meet today, three women—Ruth, Sheila, Vera—have joined other groups in recent years because they have memories of the club filling a need they had at that particular stage in their lives.

In the clubs I have had access to, the women’s ages are relatively similar to one another within each group. The concept of life stage might help explain not only why women readers join book clubs, but they might also help us to better understand the levels of bonds that form within the community. A group usually forms from a pairing of one or two friends who are usually the same age, and also at the same life stage. As the women go through the phases of career, marriage or relationships, motherhood, caring for aging parents, retirement, they bring to the interpretation and discussion relevance to the book and to other members. The importance of life stages was evident after only four meetings with the Monday group:

Eduarda: ...Like, we all seem to be learning at the same pace because we're at the same learning age, I guess. You know, so I mean, it'd be interesting if we had someone that had a little more knowledge or a little less knowledge or whatever. I don't mean knowledge, but you know what I mean, just different age.

DeNel: Experience?

Eduarda: Yeah, like their perspective, and what would they add to our conversation. You know, that would be really interesting.

Sangita: ... And, that would be interesting to bring

somebody else, you know, maybe an older person who has more wisdom and experience.

In this exchange we can see also how the Monday Night Group perceived their club as a learning space. They wanted to soak up wisdom from women who had already gone through the various experiences they were going through. They were seeking instruction.

Almost all of the participants in the focus group with an off-shoot of a local service group book club (Service Group Spin-Offs), who have been meeting for 25 years, told me that they joined the club to improve their reading skills. (Please see Appendix D for more details about this group.) Interestingly, they told me this only in the private questionnaires, not in the group interview. It may be that the women felt embarrassed about their desire “to improve their reading skills” in an interview situation. I am uncertain if they believed change in their level of literary analysis is an effect, or a result, of all these years reading together or if indeed this was the real reason they all joined. One woman wrote that she joined “To read more, read different types of books, (to have) intellectual conversation, hear other points of view, become a better reader (more critical), social aspects.” Another woman claimed she joined because of the “Social aspect of sharing books, and to read books that I might not usually read, and read more thoroughly, paying attention more so I can talk about it.” After spending an evening with this group and analysing the transcript and their questionnaire responses, I believe that this group has created a club culture in which a high level of literary criticism is expected. It has become a group norm. Over the years, the women have created a space for themselves in which it is safe to “try on” these competencies, but there appears to be inherent pressures in doing so.



The findings from the non-group readers interviews illuminate interesting perceptions of clubs. These perceptions confirm my suggestion that women join clubs for a variety of reasons—not the least of which is to educate themselves and in turn create a new, more intelligent persona or a persona that the women would define as “more intelligent”.

Karla, an honours graduate who is well-spoken and well-read, has never belonged to a reading group and although she was not opposed to the idea, she had misgivings about ever belonging:

Part of it may be that I don't tend to have a good background. Like maybe you need to be real literary giant to be able to sit on these clubs. You know, they're going to have discussions that are too lofty for my brain or something, or my knowledge base. So part of it might be an inadequacy issue and then the other one is just time.

The same can be said for Andi, a high school English teacher, who was invited to join her neighbour's book club. She had resisted doing so because she felt the pressure would take away some of the emotional rewards she got from reading:

But, I guess on the one part, with theirs anyway, I'm really intimidated. They are really, really intellectual, brilliant women and they read some fiction, they read some nonfiction. And they have super in-depth conversations and I think that I would feel pressured almost. And I don't know that I would enjoy the reading as much. I'd be reading it almost as if I was reading it for a university course rather than for pleasure. You know, my God, maybe I missed a symbol here, or some sort of prominent theme or something.

Not only does Andi see the group as cultivating aptitudes, she also see the women as having cultural capital and she is not certain she has the required literacy or repertoire to accommodate the group norms.

At the other end of the spectrum of self-confidence, I discovered among the leavers (those who were in a book club and who have left for one reason or another) and the non-joiners: a resistance to community; to persuasions of alternate readings; and to influential interpretations. Charlotte is a successful business owner and an avid reader. She readily admitted that she does not join a book club because she cares nothing what others think about a book. Or rather, she seeks out opinions from people she trusts and respects on her own schedule; she wants to control shared interpretations and feels she could not maintain that control “in a room full of strangers.” Dawn, another strong, smart woman had similar reactions: “I’d rather process my thoughts from a book on my own—maybe because I’m not really interested in what other people think. I form my own opinions and reactions... The purpose of our conversation (with friends and family about books) is to compare and make suggestions about WHAT we read, not about what we think about it ... .” And so it is that some of the very reasons the non-joiners have decided *not* to join a book club and some have decided to leave, are the exact reasons book club women have articulated as their enthusiasm *for* their group.

### **Gendered Spaces, Gendered Dialogue**

The decision to make time to participate in the book club community is a conscientious, personal one and is an important analytical point in my research. The concept of time reflects the importance the women attach to reading and meeting, and will also be addressed later in relation to the dedication and commitment the women have to their groups. For the young women of the Monday Night Group just beginning their book club, the pressure to read differently was motivation to join the club, and making time in their schedules was considered a valuable investment not only to their intellectual

selves, but also to the opportunities of creating a circle of women with whom they would enjoy spending time. When asked why she joined this book club, Faye implied the formality of meeting to discuss books with the group of women would provide a space she felt she was lacking. She agreed with the rest of her group that she missed the intellectual stimulation and critical thinking that was part of her recent university experience:

Ah, I ah, I feel pretty much as every body does. That, uhm, I'm interested in setting aside the time to read because I don't and I think that the pressure of meeting folks and talking about it, I'll do more of that.

And, uhm, so I'm interested in that and I'm interested in, in talking about how our perspectives of the book as well and seeing how other people are reading into it or whatever.

And, uhm, the social aspect of it. Hanging out with these girls. We don't see each other otherwise.

For some of the women, a book club is an extension of their university experience. For others, the benefits are the same, but in a less stressful, more informal environment. For almost all, it is an “education in an environment where we feel comfortable to learn and to make mistakes along the way,” as one long-time member commented.

Some of the women feel isolated at work, or in some ways not stimulated in a manner that brings enjoyment and liberty to say and do whatever they want. “I also think that you can only be in your head so long,” said Renae, who was a member of a book club, but left because she felt she wasn’t able to find the books in her local library and had just started a new business that did not give her much discretionary income to buy books. “And by the nature of what I do for a living, I'm with people all the time but I don't — infrequently do I have an intelligent conversation.”

Many of these women feel they work in environments and within structures that leave them feeling as if they do not have spaces in which they can explore ideas and/or articulate them without being judged. And while most groups do not self-describe as feminist groups nor do they identify the women-only space as a reason for joining their clubs, they recognise that the book club environment they have created themselves is a space where they can self-realise and are free to be themselves. This is an interesting point considering that bell hooks (1993) has argued that women who have shared identities and communities rarely feel the need to articulate a feminist identity and lifestyle.

The opportunity to learn in a non-judgemental environment is important to the women. For Marcia of the Wednesday Night Group, her book club gives her an opportunity to discuss literature in a manner that is not possible in her daily life. She is an engineer and is one of a few women in her office. When I asked her if she has conversations with others like the ones she has at her book club, she responded with this:

Well, with my friends probably, kind of intellectual discussions but to sit and discuss a novel with the guys I work with, I mean, no. No, it would never happen. They've never even heard of a book like this let alone read it and be willing to discuss it. Not a chance.

Not only does book club discussion satisfy Marcia by providing a different kind of talk, it provides an opportunity to contemplate ideas. Marcia's occupation was not representative of most of the women in the study; however, her response to my query about the kind of talk in her book club was. Book clubs offer these women a forum in which their opinions are listened to, and where they can work out ideas for themselves. It is a space in which they feel they have control, as Eduarda from the Monday Night Group, demonstrated:

I think (what's most important) to me (is) the whole learning thing. I learn so much stuff that it's beyond my control at work, things I'm forced to learn, that I enjoy learning. But this is a choice that I make to learn a new culture or a new whatever, you know what I mean? So, to me this is a choice to learn about a specific culture or about a specific whatever. You know, where as... to me this is total freedom to me. We read what we want, I learn what I want, I talk about what I want. Whereas, a lot of my life at this point in time, is just a lot of stuff beyond my control.

Not only is she free to do what she wants, the book club becomes a space of empowerment for Eduarda.

In each of the groups, at least one woman mentioned to me that her membership in the book club was somehow ridiculed by the man in her heterosexual relationship. The men in their lives might mock their book club, but it might also be simultaneously valued. Ruth told me of a group of men in her modest North Vancouver neighbourhood who have decided to start a salon. They choose a topic and they generally go to a restaurant somewhere and discuss the topic over dinner. What was the impetus behind this, I asked. "Because I think they're kind of suspect," she responded. They may have even been jealous, according to Ruth. From the beginning of her book club 18 years ago, husbands were criticising their wives for being in the book club, attributing the time as frivolous and as time away from home. The women were accused of ganging up on the men, of sitting around discussing men during the meeting. "Which is about as far from the truth as is possible," she said in her very proper lingering English accent with disgust in her tone.

Even though male partners might be the source of ridicule, the women will continue to go to book club—sometimes, only to be with other women. This was

particularly evident in the Monday Night group as they talked about inviting new members to join:

Eduarda: I personally like that it's just girls 'cause I need, honestly, I need time with girls. Like, at work we can't really talk, but in my personal life I spend time with my partner and I don't have that many friends here because I just moved here, so I need girl time.

Sangita: I love having girl time, and yeah, I think that's one of the real reasons that I like it. Like you, after I leave home, like most of the time, like with guys and even friends are mostly guys. So, I really like to just to talk with girls.

Socio-linguist Jennifer Coates (1993; 1996; 1998) has argued that women speak to one another differently than men speak to one another. While this study did not analyse this question, the women in these book clubs share this perception. In interview situations, the women provided vivid illustrations of how they think men and women talk differently with one another. For example, one woman told me a story about her husband's business partner's wife becoming ill with cancer. She said her husband was not even aware of the illness although the sick woman's husband was "the guy that he worked with every single day, fifty hours a week, the guy he plays squash and golf with ... ." Another woman brought up her relationship with her hairdresser, reflecting on how close she has become with her over the years, and adamantly arguing that she was certain that her husband did not have the same relationship with his barber. Of course, it is over-generalising to say that women have closer, more intimate relationships with other women than do men with other men. What I propose instead is that for the women in this study, intimacy *looks* different from men's. And, in a book club situation, in an all-women book club, the intimacy is realised through dialogue, through interpretations of literature.

The book club provides a space for a woman's voice in a world where "(men) are invested with authority as individuals, not because they have as individuals special competencies or expertise, but because as men they appear as representative of the power and authority of the institutionalized structures that govern society" (Smith, 1993, p. 358). Those groups who have decided to keep the gender of their membership marked "women-only" pointed to how conversation would change if a man or men were present. Although most of the women I met would be considered learned, intelligent and well-read, holding their own during debates, the idea that men dominate social interactions still exists for these women. As way of example, consider the practices of The Friday Night Group. They always began the evening with a pot luck dinner in which the husband of the hostess (they met at the same member's house every month) joined in, but he left as the dinner finished and the women eased into conversations about the book. When I asked about this, Fiona told me her husband is welcomed by the other club members because "He's not, I don't think he's like the usual male. He doesn't have any need to dominate the conversation."

I believe it is important to highlight the pattern of perception that men tend to dominate conversation. In my analysis of the collective interpretation and the dialogue of the book club meetings I attended, the talk remains in domains that could be considered quite comfortable for men. For example, the dialogue did not usually include stories of menstruation. What was important to most of the women, however, was that if this topic were to come up, or anything else that seemed personal, it could happen. The book club space needs to be free to say what they want to say, which the women seem to feel is

absent in other locations of their lives. Felicity from the Wednesday Night Group articulated her trust of her book club members:

...because I really privilege this. I think that this forum is a safe one and it's a fun one. And it's one where I feel really comfortable, and I think there's enough sort of shared ground that when you say something, you're not going to necessarily always have to justify it. Or explain it. Or necessarily be CAREFUL how it is put out there.

Not only does this statement suggest that Felicity feels that the presence of men causes women to police their performances and language, it also begs the consideration that perhaps the conflict is not about having conversations where there are only women present. It may be about the expectations women have about womanliness around men. Felicity, who is a successful editor in her early 30s, echoed the sentiments of women who feel the book club provides a safe haven in which women can be themselves.

Of those groups whose membership are all-women, some comment on the desire to add men to the group, but there is opposition from the majority of the other women. While some of the women feel that men dominate the conversation in mixed groups, others feel that they themselves would be less comfortable in a mixed group—even if the group feels they are strong women. My own group discussed bringing in men for the second time in our history when I broached the subject during our group interview:

Maggie: Well, it would certainly change the dynamic. I mean, just thinking about it, I would be more reticent than I already am. ...But I think, um, if it starts out that way as a mixed group and a fully mixed group, not one or two men, you know---

Alison: Because one man in this group wouldn't make a huge difference.

Felicity: He'd be like a pile of shavings at the end of the night.



So although as a group we feel we are strong women, there is some irony in the fact that my group, once again, decided against asking any male friends to join. We considered having a mixed meeting with one of the members' brother's all-male, all-gay group. Some of the members expressed a desire to be in two clubs, both to get a male's interpretations and to remain in the one we have.

The all-women environment offers the women comfort, shared ground and a fun environment in which anything that is said is not judged by the opposite sex, which for some is obviously a concern. Felicity was concerned about needing to watch what she said if a man was present. "... I think we have to do all of those things in our working world and it's relaxing not to have to do that, not to have to work so hard at a shared vocabulary." My group is similar to all other groups that have questioned inviting men to join. They chose to keep their groups exclusively women because the dynamics and comfort of an all-women group were solid and to disrupt these conditions by having men in the group was not worth the cost of adding men's perspectives to the dialogue.

As I have mentioned, the Thursday Night Group has one male member.<sup>3</sup> I was able to ask the women what they felt when Georgia asked the group to allow him to join. Because their response is telling, I include it in its entirety:

DeNel: I know this club was all female until Daniel came. Can you just explain a bit for me what the conversation was like?

Georgia: I brought the name up. And---

Deena: At a time when it was a well-attended book club and I think you did an excellent job about making sure that

---

<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, Daniel was late for my final meeting with the group, which began with the group interview.

each of us spoke to what our feelings were, that we didn't just say whatever.

Erika: Yeah, they went around the whole room, and Shelly thought it'd be great to have a different point of view.

Georgia: And he's a nurse, and he's gay. He's open about that. Whether that makes any difference to anybody one way or the other, but you know. I just found him, you know, as a valuable contributor to, you know, he loves the books. And I didn't know, I mean, there was nothing about what we do that suggested we were locked into anything. I mean---

Launa: Yeah, it just had never come up before.

Georgia: No.

DeNel: You mean bringing a male in?

Launa: I guess never had really even met anyone that had---

Georgia: An interest.

Launa: Had an interest in joining us. And when Georgia suggested him, I think it just flowed quite easily into it happening.

Kathleen: When Georgia brought up the idea of having Daniel here, I really didn't want him and I thought, "ah, geez, this is going to ruin everything."

Launa: Not Daniel specifically, but just having a male.

Kathleen: Yeah, and I was feeling apprehensive about it, and then when there was a survey done, and everybody decided it wouldn't be a problem, and I thought, "well, this is my problem, it's not Daniel's problem, and I'll have to get over it." And I haven't noticed any difficulty at all.

Launa: I mean, I think we're as raucous and crazy as we ever were.

Kathleen: Yeah, but I certainly did feel some apprehension, I wasn't keen at all.

Erika: I might have been apprehensive.

Kathleen: And, I've just never given second thought to it since he's been here.

Georgia: You need to be given credit for taking the risk.

This exchange demonstrates how the women negotiate their protected space even after several years. Not only is the negotiation process—or as Long has described it, a “cross-cutting tendency towards egalitarianism”—evident, but there is also an implication that because Daniel is gay and works in a traditional woman’s career, he’s “safe”. Perhaps he’s not a “real man” to the women of the group so they don’t need to be careful what they say, nor do they need to worry about how they act.

For the Tuesday Night Group, adding Daniel did not change the dialogue according to the members’ memories:

DeNel: Has the conversation, do you think it's influenced at all because there is testosterone in the room? I mean, do you think---

Deena: More testosterone in the room than with us?

DeNel: More testosterone. I'm just joking, I'm trying to--- I'm trying to see if your conversations have changed because there's a male in the room.

Shelly: I honestly don't think so.

Meredith: He's, I love having him.

Erika: You sort of feel like you could say anything to him. Maybe it's the nurse part.

These conversations illustrate the complexity of gender perceptions. The women may be comfortable with Daniel because of his profession. Or perhaps his openness about his sexual preference allows the women to assume there are no sexual tensions with which to

contend. As a gay man he may not have a lot invested in controlling women and women do not have to perform femininity in such a way so as not to threaten their heterosexual position in relation to straight men. Whatever the reason, he communicates in a way in which the women feel comfortable. He does not intimidate them, and this is the group whose discussion procedure is to go around the circle to provide each member with an opportunity to talk.

According to another member of this same group, their book club is a forum in which she is able to be herself and to lay her ideas out on the table without the fear of being judged. She said:

... one of the ways that I operate is that I am who I am, and that you must never ask me to change. I mean, you have to take me the way I am. I change on my own, but it's a fight all my life to be the person I am, and I'm not a people pleaser and I'm not out there to do what other people would like me to do...And I know, whenever I've talked to anybody about the group, I have to say, you know that one of the things that there's always that sense of acceptance. That I've never felt I've had to curb anything I've thought. Or adjusted anything, that it has been, you know, I'm allowed to BE.

It appears that Georgia wants to do whatever she wants and be whomever she wants and often feels she is not able to do that. Her book club allows her the space to be.

Some of the women I met with felt strongly about including their male partners in their experiences, but they felt apprehension about how this would work because they perceived the dynamics of the dialogue would change too much. Some mentioned that they would like to start a new club with their partners. However, among the women I interviewed the perception is that mixed couple groups are not serious enough. This perception was confirmed by Ruth's experience. She noted that the men in her mixed

group do read, but she believed, ironically, that essentially the club represents a social opportunity complete with dinner ordered in and informal conversation about the book of the month. (I say ironic, because it was her husband that was hassling her about her book club.) For Ruth, it was disappointing that she was not able to demonstrate to her husband that, in fact, her women's book club should be taken seriously. "I was quite pleased Gerald (her husband) came to this book club, because at least he could see that we're not sitting around except that they don't discuss the book very often." When I commented on the irony, and pointed out my understanding that the women's group took reading more seriously and that they approached books more intellectually, she answered affirmatively. However, she still had difficulty legitimising the rigour of the group, almost apologising for the fact that the women are no longer in paying jobs and hence had the time to put more effort into the book club meetings.

In discussing book club composition and the sentiments around the composition, it would be remiss to not discuss the notion of community. At the heart of the debate as I have interpreted it is the question of sameness and difference among the community members. The discussions and analysis of the age, income, political, ideological and gender dialogues demonstrate that book clubs do not fit so neatly into the ideal of community. Yet there appears to be a constant struggle between differences and similarities so as to protect one's comfort level while protecting the community itself. In the next section, I explore these complex situations.

## ***Defining Community***

*One of the things I like about a reading group is that it brings together such disparate people whose only common factor is love of reading, and that over a course of meetings they recognize each other's differences, which they have to respect and which can be confronted. I have this theory that the parties in the Irish peace process should form a reading group.*

*-Anonymous book club member in Jenny Hartley's *Reading Groups**

One would assume that if you met with the same group of women for more than 25 years, 12 times a year, for a grand total of 300 meetings and approximately 900 hours, you would become intimate friends with them. However, this is not always the case. As an example, the women I met with from the service group have been meeting for more than 26 years, and only two of the members reported on their questionnaires that they know only three of the members "very well". The rest of the readers said that they know the other women only "somewhat well". Perhaps, then, it is more appropriate to theorise book clubs as communities rather than as friendship circles.

The differentiation between community and friendship is an interesting one. Many of the groups begin with one, two or three members who are friends or who know each other in different social contexts, and may be considered close friends and meet outside of book club. As time progresses the ebb and flow of the group membership changes, and it is not uncommon for club meetings to be the only times when the women see each other during the month. Ultimately, and only superficially, the only commonality the women share is their love of reading. This passion is the focal point that cements the community, as Georgia from the Thursday night group emphasised when we were discussing the difference between community and friendship in the exit interview. She said:

I mean when I came into this group, I didn't know anybody. I knew Deena's husband. And, I don't know how that worked, I mean it just seems like a little miracle to me how that worked out because nobody came in after that! Uhm. So, in that case it was community. It was just the interest. My interest in books, their interest in books. It wasn't based on anything else that we would have had in common except books.

Ruth, who has been a book club member of an all-women group for 18 years, is also a member of a mixed-gender group in North Vancouver. She tried to explain to me why she does not specifically consider the other members friends:

DeNel: Do you consider them friends outside?

Ruth: Some of the people, yes. In the women's book club, a lot of them are very good friends. And they travel together. I'm sort of on the outside of that.

DeNel: Even after 18 years?

Ruth: Because I work, a lot of them are retired now. I'm marginally younger than a few of them, and they all live over in Vancouver. (Laughs.) Way over in Vancouver. There are a couple of them that I do see socially.

So what is it about these clubs? Are we as committed to our communities as we are to our friendships? What is it that would make a responsible, professional educator like Jeanne from the Thursday Night Group go on record amongst gales of laughter saying, "I don't have time to be here tonight, and I don't---I'll fake it. I will cheat on my marking rather than miss this!"? I can begin to explain it with the preface of Jeanne's statement, which was: "And ... with working, I feel so disconnected." Meeting with a group of women each month fills cultural, intellectual and social gaps in these women's lives that goes unfulfilled in their day-to-day experiences.

Sir Raymond Firth (1999) wrote in the preface to *The Anthropology of*

*Friendship:*

It is clear that friendship in any developed sense can be of genuine support to individuals. Apart from any material benefit obtained from a friendship, the tolerance, trust, sharing of private thoughts offered by a friend can be of great value in helping to strengthen a person's sense of identity. (p. vx)

While some of the women may not consider the other members friends, but rather part of their community, the benefits Firth identifies in friendship appear to parallel those the women feel they get from their book club community.

This became evident in my exit interviews, which was one of my favourite experiences during my field research. It was a time when the reflexivity afforded by ethnographic research appears to benefit the subjects as well as the researcher. At this time, the women were able to articulate to me, to one another and to themselves what the club means to them. I do not believe many had been given this forum ever before.

“(I come) to listen to Ann’s voice. To listen to Jennifer's humour. To listen to, I mean everybody. I like that. I just really admire everyone here. They have so many talents and strengths,” Elizabeth of the Thursday Night Group. In this group, similar to all of the others, this articulation of connection permeated boundaries between friendship and community and made me realise that one is not more important than the other to the women, and may help us all to better understand the concept of a woman’s book club community. Here is a piece of our final conversation:

Barbara (a new member of the Thursday Night Group):  
Can I ask a question, DeNel, because I don't know these people. I'm learning to know these people but ARE you all friends?



Lisa: Nope.

Jeanne: No, we are the book group. Some of us are really close friends and some of us, obviously, we're more acquaintances but having a bond. Like, part of what I see here is community. Like, I feel if I were to drop dead, a lot of you would help. You know, that kind of stuff, that kind of a bond. That's part of it, and lots of other things, too.

DeNel: So, that's different than friendship? Community is different than friendship?

(Agreement.)

Ann: Yeah, and how many people can you be intimate with?

DeNel: I'm sorry?

Ann: How many people can one person be intimate with? I think intimacy is a very deep process.

Muriel: It also takes time. For me to have really close friendships with everyone in this room. In fact, I don't have one with anyone, but I just wouldn't have the time to invest the time that it requires.

These women may view the group as an escape, as a diversion from their work and family. Ultimately, however, it appears that the connection they have made with one another is what holds the community together

While trying to determine what it was that kept Kathleen of The Tuesday Night Group coming back month to month for 22 years, I was reminded once again in this ethnographic process that the women themselves are best able to demonstrate why and how this cultural form operates:

Kathleen: I think I have some emotional attachment with the group. I think that over the years, off and on, when I've felt that life was just getting overwhelming, like I was working too much and I was doing this too much. And I would maybe grumble to myself, "why am I reading this

book, when I would really want to read this one?" but, and I thought about quitting from time to time, but not seriously and one of the reasons why I never do is because we have a lot of history together. So, I think there is that emotional attachment, too.

I think I like, I think that having a book club forces us to read, or gives us the opportunity to read all kinds of things that we wouldn't necessarily read and so that's a good thing. But also, I think that there is that emotional attachment, as well. Like, all these people are important to me, even though I don't see myself, you know, really, really good friends with some of them. But, they have an importance in our life and I think that we have shared a lot of history together and it would be sad to stop. Like, I'd wonder after I'd quit, "geez, I wonder what they're doing in book club."

(Laughter.)

Natalie: It'd be like stopping smoking. No matter how long after you've quit, you've always got the desire!

Or for another group:

Maggie: Even if I can't come, or if I'm feeling totally depressed or miserable, and don't come, I miss it.

(Several Huhmmm.mmms)

Maggie: Same with the other book club. It's there on the calendar and that's it. It is totally affordable time.

DeNel: But why?

Maggie: Because. Well, it's books. It's discussion. It's cappuccinos. You know it's part of the social because these guys I don't see otherwise.

Marcia: For me, this club and the books and reading them is such complete departure from what I spend, you know, eight, 10, 12 hours a day doing. I just COULDN'T give it up. I'd just go NUTS without that little bit of diversity. You know, without this, I don't read.

The emotional attachment is found not only in a group that has a long history together; groups that have only been meeting a short while also have a sense of responsibility to their fellow readers, a commitment to one another and to themselves. Through the processes of interpretation, even the shy or quiet women may come to trust one another enough so that they feel comfortable to voice their own thoughts. According to one woman, Jessie, the comfort comes after learning expectations from one another. She told me that she has learned to accept the other members for who they are: "Yeah, I guess because, well, we know enough about each other to know that each other wouldn't be shocked or surprised or taken by, taken aback by anything that we might mention." This comfort level seems to be more prevalent in the smaller groups, but individual readers from all groups mention that ease with one another has evolved since joining the group. Although they do not always consider each other friends, the book club provides a space in which the readers feel comfortable and confident. As Fiona from Jessie's group added: "(It is) like a relationship that goes way back, it's sort of like family, you know, family that sort of understands because you go way back and sort of like that."

The personal satisfaction that comes from involvement in the group is at the core of each individual's motivation for remaining in the book club community. Whether the women work for a living or are retired or work in the home only, their book club and the reading they do for it are something they do for themselves, as Deena articulated:

But I read all the time, anyway. I find, it's purely selfish mode for me, I find that my reading experience is so enriched by this group whether I like the book or not, whether I feel that it was a particularly good discussion or not. It enriches my experience of the book, and so that I think is key to me because I've been in this book club a long time like a lot of these people have and uhm I really, I enjoy the people in it and happily I see numbers of people

in other contexts as well, but I really think it's a selfish thing for me. That this, that my reading experience is a broader one that I, uhm, fully put down to what this group, whoever the members are, gives to me.

Reminiscent of the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 60s and 70s, book clubs offer different women different things, but the connection to other women is at the core of a group's structure for the book clubs I studied. However, the comfort that Deena alludes to in a book club is sometimes put to test when the group realises that the number of members are dwindling or the discussion is getting stale, or a member wants to invite a friend. These times can be disrupting to the members as the question of differences surfaces again.

### ***Exclusive Communities***

As the community grows, it creates its own unique culture and process to which new members are sometimes not welcomed. The following exchange is with two members of the Friday Night Group. I met with this group twice and then was asked not to come back. Of course, I was quite upset thinking that I might have offended one or some of the members. I remember feeling uncomfortable with this group, and in particular with one woman, but I had not imagined that I would be asked to leave. What I did not realise at that point in my research is that this group had formed a particular community culture and cultural practices that a researcher could not access. I had disrupted the balance, and in retrospect, I am sure it was a difficult situation for Jessie, the woman who had invited me in the first place. Through e-mail, she wrote: "Dear DeNel, We've talked over our thoughts about participating in your study and decided that we would rather not continue as a group. We find that participation affects our gatherings

more than we had anticipated. I hope you can sympathize with our decision.” I did eventually meet with her and Fiona, but neither were forthcoming in providing any more detail than the above. I did note, however, that the newest member of their club had been with the group for more than five years.

For the clubs I studied, adding new members could disrupt the trust levels established in the community, and to some of the women, that possibility is not worth the price of gaining new perspectives. The Monday Night Group discussed adding new members to their young group, but the proposal was disturbing to some of the members:

Holly: You know, and that's just the thing is that if we did invite other people in, and I know all your personalities so I know pretty much your friends would be cool, as well. But I wouldn't want to have to be leaving, uhm, something that's supposed to be fun and social and leaving upset or---

In another group that recognised the need to bring in new members, past experiences of dislodging established group norms manifested in apprehension to invite someone else:

Joy: We had a bad situation once. One of the women, I invited her to join and yeah, but anyway she, things always got very personal and she would attack people personally for their opinions. There were people (older group members) who refused to come back.

The women seem to form closed communities that are impenetrable at first to newcomers. If new members are invited, it appears that they might be scrutinised closely for how they “fit” with the group. Do they adhere to the group norms, for example? Do they finish the book, if that is important; do they voice their opinions in an appropriate manner; do they respect the other members? In addition, much like the pressure of suggesting an enjoyable title, members who put forth a friend’s name are anxious that the established group might not accept their friend, and absorb some of the emotions the new

member might feel. I remember suggesting a friend to my own group several years ago. The particular friend had a new baby and she enjoyed reading and the discussions she and I had about books. She told me that she would really like to take her reading to a new level and get out of the house, so I suggested she join my club. When I presented it to the other women at the next meeting, I was quite surprised and disappointed that the women questioned the cultural status of my friend (who was known to one member in a different social context) and ultimately asked me to rescind my offer. The established community strives to protect the comfort they feel and the cultural competency and status they have established. They will negotiate among themselves to ensure this happens. Sometimes this means that membership stagnates for years. Sometimes it results in a new person being asked not to come back, or an elected (formal or informal) leader will be asked to talk to the new person. Infrequently, long-time members will leave the club. Sometimes the new member simply does not come back on her own accord. Occasionally, though, a new member will join and will be a welcome change to the group. During the interview stage of the research, two of newest members in the groups I visited remembered what it was like to be new. To describe their experience, they would use the words “nervous” and “intimidated”. But they also said they frequently felt “welcomed” and mostly “excited”.

### ***Chapter Summary***

Julia Wood (1994) has argued that boys are socialized to be in competitive groups, and generally men can be found with their friends on the golf course, or in a sports bar, or playing cards. Women, according to Wood, generally seek out a private, non-competitive space that is afforded within a group of women, and men are not always

welcome in those spaces. This appears to be true for the book club women I studied. The women enjoy reading and read a lot, and through friends and the media they have learned that book clubs are a place where they can share that passion. They have sought out the dream of community as outlined by Young (1990), but instead of being exclusively constrained by differences as she proposes, the women seek them out or at minimum, identify them. Although the book clubs tend to be homogeneous in age, and socio-economic and ethnic identity, the differences and commonalities can be found in their identities as women. They seek a communal space and a participatory forum that supports and makes public the private, individual reading responses and that values their individual women's voices and experiences (Code; Hartley; Long). The women want to read and discuss literature with others whom they can trust and respect, and with others who are therefore "like" them. These others tend to be women.

I am not convinced that only gender determines the comfort level in the communities of book clubs. The gendered composition of the groups *works* to create the sense of sameness, but the same might be said for the other socio-cultural factors of the women themselves. They are usually at the same life stage as each other, and to some extent they share the same cultural heritage and education levels. They share similar reading histories and cultural competencies. These factors cannot be ignored as the question of community is explored because, as Young has argued, the ideal of community is problematic because "those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves" (p. 300). Community can therefore be both supportive and repressive (Miller, 1999).

The book club women in this study recognise the cultural significance of books and use reading as a source of pleasure, a process for identity formation and a tool to gain cultural capital (Bennett et al.; DiMaggio; Radway). In this chapter, I have confirmed that the women do indeed use reading as a source of pleasure. Whether a group of young women coming together to recreate the learning environment they experienced in university, or a group of women in retirement meeting once a month to discuss "serious" literature, the women want to educate themselves and they want a fun and non-judgmental space in which to do it.

The book club *enhances* or *enriches* the individual reading experiences for the women. Through collective interpretation processes, the members form bonds with one another that reflexively influence private interpretation of the book, and community cohesiveness, which ultimately leads to the formation of a normative community. This community reveres the sameness it has created, which includes its gendered composition and all that is performed through reading and interpreting texts as women. The result appears to be so sacred that the community will sometimes exclude any new members. At the heart of this sense of community is the place the women create for themselves, a space in which individuals feel safe. In the next chapter, I will outline the clubs' normative processes that allow these spaces to be what they are to each individual reader and demonstrate how the readers use their book club as a way to confirm and acquire cultural capital available through books and book clubs.



## Chapter Seven

### *Negotiated Processes*

#### ***Introduction***

Through dialogue, book club women determine an appropriate time and space for all members to gather and discuss books. Every month they share interpretations, ideas and life stories that proliferate from the books they have chosen based on existing individual tastes and negotiated group tastes. Through the negotiation process of text selection we are able to better understand how cultural authorities such as those in the education system, the family and the media influence taste and, in particular, literature selection. More importantly, we can determine to what extent some women depend on cultural authority to determine the cultural products they consume.

#### ***Creating Community Structures***

If one were to take a quick glance, all of the book club structures studied would generally appear quite similar. The groups usually meet at a member's house once a month, and most often in the evenings. Older or retired club women often meet in the morning or over lunch and into the afternoon. Whenever they meet, it is most likely the

result of a process that took into account each woman's job, family, and other activities, and is a time that all members have set aside as a priority.

Depending on the club's norms of discussion, preparing for a meeting may be as simple as reading the book or it may mean doing research and writing a synopsis about the author, setting or context for at least one member of the club. The amount of time a woman spends in the month before the meeting depends in part on how much time she has to read the book. For some women, there is never enough time. I had assumed this would have reflected where a person was in her career, in her life stage, but this is not the case. Women prioritise the book clubs differently. For example, the mixed group that I met with for six months in my pre-test meets once a month on Saturday afternoons, and when I mentioned this to one of the non-joiners, she clearly expressed distaste. She felt to meet on a weekend would be too much of a sacrifice to her personal time. But for the group, the Post Proustians, their book club is part of their personal time, and for them is indeed time well spent.

Whatever day of the week that is chosen for the group meeting, it is decided upon by all members and usually accommodates the busy—or not—schedules of all the members. Dates can change month-to-month, but usually are set for a year in advance. This formality is important to the women, who will often treat the group meeting day as scheduled time for themselves, rearranging other events to adjust to the book club. Scheduling the meeting and concretising it with a published schedule validates it for one woman and the clubs she's involved in. She said: "I think it is really important in helping to keep the group together because it's proof that it exists, that it has an agenda... enjoy it, come, be part of it, you know you can make it part of your life."

Meeting in a member's living room or great room creates an intimacy in which the readers feel comfortable. It also demands that the hostess shares part of her personal space, which as Long (1987) has identified, can seriously influence the bonding process of the group. Preparation for hosting seems to be an important and telling part of the book club cultural process. Sometimes, the stress that hosting causes for some of the women reflects a normative feminine ideology of the need to provide a clean, well-decorated house that is left over from the pre-women's-movement era and which is perpetuated by the women themselves. I occasionally heard comments about working women staying home for the day or an afternoon to clean and prepare for the meeting, or someone saying they couldn't possibly host a certain meeting in a particular month because they had other things going on and wouldn't have time to prepare. The pressures of cultural status and competence become obvious when we look at the reason one woman noted this as her least satisfying aspect of her club saying: "I dread having to host in my funny little house and have to suggest a book selection."

Running anywhere from two hours to four hours, book club meetings usually begin just after the dinner hour to accommodate those who care for families and/or professionals who tend to work late. The meetings *always* include food and drink of some sort. The ritual of eating and drinking—whether it is a theme dinner and wine according to the book choice of the month, or simple desserts and coffee—acts as an escape from daily duties for some women, and from the monotony of eating alone or in the office for others. In informal groups, food and drink flow freely throughout the meeting, in others there is time set aside for eating, drinking and talking either before or after book discussion.

The amount of time spent “socialising” can be problematic for individual group members with differing ideals and expectations of how much time should be spent outside of book discussion. The Tuesday Night Group told me that they negotiated time that seems to work well for the group. After “getting off-track several years ago,” they were able to create a structure that worked for the group as a whole and to ensure that there would be sufficient time to discuss the book:

Shelly: We ... got off track..., and then we actually wrote up the parameters of the book club.

Erika: And that was just because we were all so nice that nobody wanted to yell at everybody.

Shelly: Yep, exactly. And, everybody kind of...

Erika: Ok, enough of the talk. But, I mean, that was a very congenial conversation.

(Agreement.)

What do you think, and how are we gonna work it out? And, it didn't take us very long to figure out that this sounds reasonable, and we can do it with half an hour of social time.

Shelly: I think that it all boiled down to the fact that we all did want to discuss the book.

Meredith: Exactly.

Deena: Yeah, and I think that's the community that you're talking about. We like each other, we like talking about all sorts of different things, but the point of THIS gathering, is talking about the books.

This group, by far, is the most formal, most organised group of any that I encountered in my research. Some of the members are friends outside of book club, as is usual in almost all of the clubs, and they save their friendship intimacy for other spaces. To them, their book club is a place to talk about books (although, as noted in the last chapter, Kathleen

from this group points out that it is the emotional attachment to the people that defines her dedication to the group).

Other groups also set aside time for social dialogue. The Friday Night Group always had a pot luck dinner, sometimes a theme dinner, and gradually eased into discussion of the book while having after-dinner coffee. Some groups add theme music to accompany the food, drink and book, adding to the entire experience. Those groups that have been running longer than others, except for the Thursday Night Group, tend to set aside very specific time for eating, drinking and talking on dyadic levels. As far as I could tell, this discussion was intimate, and did not generally include discussions of the book or more formal levels of discussion about the text. Rather, the women appeared to be using this time to “catch up” with one another. But whether time is set aside apart from book discussion or not, the opportunity to bond with one another and exchange stories of self, family, work or neighbourhood, is an important part of the experience in all of the clubs.

### ***Doing it “Right”, but Doing it Our Way***

Throughout my participant observation experiences, I was presented with copious queries about my research and what I was learning from the other groups. As part of an ethnographer’s responsibility, I believed it was my responsibility to reciprocate the kindness, acceptance and commitment to the people who allowed me access to their lives. I felt extremely grateful to the many readers who after only initial introduction through a mutual acquaintance or an e-mail requesting access to their book club, invited me into their homes, their books, their processes, and their lives. I felt the one way I could repay them was to provide answers to their questions, and all of them had many questions.

There appears to be a pressure for book clubs to “do it right” or to do it as other clubs might, something Bennett, et al. (1999), called “regimes of value.” As if there is some sort of universal manner in which book clubs should operate, book club members seek “those normative organizations of the proper which specify what counts as a good object of desire or pleasure; a good relation to or use of it; a proper mode of access or entry to it and an appropriate range of valuations” (p. 260). Inquiries commonly included questions about how other groups operate, what books they read, how their group could improve or change. This was not only the case in the groups in which I participated, but also with the women I interviewed (even the non-joiners and the leavers) and with women I met through book functions in the community. Mary Trentadue, a bookseller who caters to book clubs, told me she also often gets these same questions.

This search for cultural competence, or the pursuit for the dominant ideal, was especially evident in the Monday Night Group. The young women told me that as they started their club, some of them thought it was “overwhelming” trying to decide how books were chosen, what nights they would meet and how often, and how the meetings would “operate”. However, the suggestions I offered or the process ideas I shared with them—and indeed, with all of the groups—were only sparingly implemented. Instead, the women listened to what I had to say and then negotiated the guiding principles to what would and would not work in their groups. Their resistance to my advice was telling for as Fiske (1987) has argued, “the dominant value system works towards homogenisation, ... a powerful reactionary force, for the value system that it tries to universalise is always that of the socially powerful. The power to be different, then, is a crucial ... stance of resistance” (¶ 27). Like the book club readers in Hartley’s study, it was abundantly clear

that the women were determined that their group was different from all other groups, and what might work in one surely would not work in theirs.

The questions most often asked of me can be compartmentalised into two broad categories: choosing titles and improving or changing dialogical format, level or style. Below I discuss what the processes of book selection looks like for these book clubs, and what factors should be considered when analysing these procedures. I also analyse the dialogue format and content of the interpretations.

### ***The Eternal Quest, or “What to Read Next”***

“People are like cattle,” Canadian singer Jan Arden recently said in an interview after appearing on Canadian comedienne-cum-televised-book club-facilitator Mary Walsh’s new CBC-produced television book discussion program, *By the Book* (Cooke, 2001). “[They] go to the top 30 books and think that if everyone else thinks something’s good, then it must be good, and they buy it,” she continued in her analysis of Ian MacEwan’s *Atonement*, which was a best seller and short-listed for the Booker and Whitbread prizes. She may have characterised these book club readers appropriately; however, the issue is not as black and white as she paints. I vacillate between wanting to present the analysis of the readers’ interest in titles simply as the readers’ desire to read good books that they’ll enjoy, or as the readers’ impetus for gaining cultural capital. Either and both are appropriate, and both notions can be characterised within and as an Eternal Quest because of its prevalence in any book club discussion or meeting. Arden’s interesting insights, and Hartley’s generalisation that book club readers “want to read what everyone else is reading” (p. 38), may have some merit—in some groups and with some readers. But perhaps the selection is because the readers read or heard that it might

be an appropriate book club book. As Long (1987) explained, text selection is a process to “legitimate choices and to predict the outcome of their reading experience.” Text selection can determine levels of particular interpretive experiences:

Reading group members, like readers of formulaic fiction, do what they can to ensure they will be satisfied by each book, but since they cannot rely on the security of a formula, they must discover by some other means what kind of reading experience to expect. (p. 17)

The group’s “legitimate choices” and the expectations, as Long describes, look differently in each group, and evolve over time with the group’s history of selection and experiences in interpretation.

There is counter evidence in my research that far from mimicking main stream taste, some readers want to distinguish themselves from everyone else by reading titles that are obscure and that do not appear on other people’s lists. And so, the book clubs or book club readers cannot be easily categorised, but rather should be considered as active agents who are influenced not only by their personal meaning systems, but also by their clubs’ histories.<sup>1</sup>

These book club readers might indeed bring preferred or dominant title choices to the book selection process, but more so the women will resist and employ their own personal methods of reading selection. Publishers who are conscious of the purchasing power of book clubs count on the idea that readers will “want to read what everyone else

---

<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that I am using Parkin’s theory of meaning system: the “dominant system” sanctions the current ruling structures of power within social, economic and political relations; the “subordinate system” accepts the class differential, but allows for certain groups to demand a better position within the system, and allows for negotiated responses that often work to undermine the power held by certain groups within the dominant system; and the “radical system”, which he argues rejects the dominant system, and produces oppositional responses.



is reading” and produce readers’ guides to accompany books that either an editor or an author thinks might be an appropriate book club book. Libraries compile lists of reading group books; and cyberspace contains hundreds of sites readers can go. In addition, there are a plethora of books providing book club reading lists.<sup>2</sup> However, there does not appear to be consistent patterns in the data that suggest the women choose titles based on specific lists. Unlike Long (1987), who found booksellers and university professors the most influential in group title selection process, I did not find that the women look to the academy for titles on what to read. In fact, university influences were not mentioned by any of the women.

The Vancouver Public Library (VPL) can be considered a cultural authority that book club members might turn to for book club reading choices. This was not so for the women of my ethnography, but based on an interview with Corin Durstin, the head librarian of VPL’s Popular Reading section, there are readers who do turn to librarians for direction for their decisions on what to read and how to read. The library has offered start-up workshops and at one time organised a now-defunct Book Club Club. Durstin also designed book club kits that provide lists for clubs to consider and also includes documentation of the “proper” way to interpret a novel, in addition to other information that is intended to be helpful for clubs.

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Burns, M., & Dillon, A. (1999). *Reading group journal: Notes in the margin*. New York: Abbeville Publishing Group.; Heft, H., & O'Brien, P. (1999). *Building a better book club*. Toronto: Macmillan Canada.; Laskin, D., & Hughs, H. (1995). *The reading group book: The complete guide to starting and sustaining a reading group, with annotated lists of 250 titles for provocative discussion*. New York: Plume; McMains, V. G. (2000). *The readers' choice: 200 book club favorites*. (1st perennial ed.). New York: Quill.; and Pearlman, M. (1999). *What to read: The essential guide for reading group members and other book lovers*. (Second ed.). New York: HarperCollins.

The library also has 37 complete sets of 10 books and collateral material for clubs to check out for up to six weeks. (Seven of these sets are Canadian titles.) Durstin, along with book club moderator Angela Deery, chooses the titles included in the library's sets. She told me she feels a responsibility to include Canadian titles and looks for books with a strong theme, and what she has determined to be "enough threads and character and meat, I think, to discuss." She said she analyses the writing style of the book and the way in which it is written, using her own club experiences to help her make her decisions for book clubs, while still including books that might be different from that with which the borrowers might be familiar: "You know..., it is hard to choose books in some ways for these sets because you want things that maybe haven't been done before, but yet you want titles that have been successful, that you know book clubs have done." Durstin acknowledges the power she wields in choosing titles for clubs to read, and told me she listens to patron feedback and has added non-fiction titles and books that might appeal to different levels of readers.

In discussing *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* as a possible title to add, Durstin claimed that this title might be a good addition because "We're getting comments, especially from some of the older women who are using them, that the books have been a bit too heavy." In addition to themes, layers, style, setting, and author nationality, she must be cognisant of the same financial constraints faced by all public cultural institutions in Canada today. The number of sets available is limited, and the books must be in trade paperback. This means the titles chosen usually are those which are older.

None of the groups I visited used the kits or the sets. However, according to the library catalogue, each kit was checked out in early November 2001, and each has at least one hold with some having up to four holds, with the exception of Jose Saramago's *Blindness*. Obviously Durstin's choices have an influence on what women in some Vancouver book clubs are reading.

Similar to Dot in Radway's Smithton, bookseller Trentadue has cultural influence that extends to more than 50 book clubs in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, including several individual readers I met. If the members do not deal with her directly, there are many book club readers in the city who know of her, either through other book club acquaintances or through the several mass media articles that have been published about her.<sup>3</sup> According to Trentadue, she built her reputation as a book club book seller several years ago by going into individual homes to talk about titles at book club meetings. She fully identified the economic potential of book clubs, and also recognised her cultural authority and her role in the political economy of the clubs, at least in Vancouver and in particular, on the North Shore. I asked her about this:

DeNel: How much influence do you think you have over what these book clubs do?

Mary: Pretty huge. I would say that every time a book club comes in, and I introduce them to say 12 books, they usually choose at least half of them, if not more. Because people are willing to be told what to read.

Or, is it because women trust her as a cultural authority? And if so, what does she determine the cultural hierarchy?

---

<sup>3</sup> See Daniels, A. (2000, December 30). From pink gin to pink slips: Entrepreneurs faced boom and bust in 2000. *The Vancouver Sun*, pp. C1, 2.

I base my decisions on what I've read. And what other book clubs are reading. What's available. And I try to choose things that are a little more controversial, a little more thought provoking. I don't try to choose a book where everyone's going to go, "Oh, that was a nice book, I liked it." I try to choose a book that will offer a little more for discussion. Like, what are you going to talk about about this book? And I also do not suggest best sellers to most of my book clubs. Most of the books I'm telling them about, they've never heard of and that's how I like to do it. They can read best sellers anytime, but in a book club, I think it's better to read something a bit more unusual....I try to push BC authors. I try to push Canadian authors. I just try to bring them to people's attention. I try to push first-time Canadian authors as well because I think that's interesting for people to read someone's first work and then determine whether this author is likely to go anywhere with it or not.

Although Trentadue, Bellmaine, and Durstin have some power over what some clubs read, the overall findings in this research dispute Long's (1987) conclusion "... that most reading groups accept *unquestioningly* the systems of classification and evaluation generated by traditional cultural authorities" (p. 18, my emphasis). As I have concluded, the trusted other is most often a reading woman's friend or family member whose book judgement she values. Indeed, of all the questionnaires, only one reader did not mention that she chooses what she reads based on recommendations from friends or family. These people also often include book club members outside the woman's club, supporting Hartley's that word-of-mouth is "the powerful and distinctive engine of the reading group movement" (p. ix). Readers will often exchange lists with friends in other regions, provinces and countries looking for books that "really worked well for ... book club this year." Book club women, then, in addition to being part of a larger book club community, become their own cultural intermediaries and authorities. It is important to remember,

however, that although the reader might bring these titles to her group, it does not necessarily mean that her group will choose them.

### ***Negotiating What to Read***

Long (1987) identified four group methods for title selection that “tend to bring groups into different kinds of dialogue with agencies of cultural authority” (p. 15). They are: 1) formal, or committee choice; 2) consensual choice; 3) direct voting; and 4) individual member choice. (An example of the latter might mandate that the hostess of the next meeting choose the group read.) Although the women I read with depend less on cultural authorities than those Long studied in Texas, her analysis of the modes of negotiation are worth noting because it reflects the processes of other groups with which I am familiar. In each of the different participant observation groups, there is a different process. All of the groups I read with can be generalised as consensual choice makers. (See Table 12).

Book club processes change occasionally, and the clubs seem to continually struggle to find ways to improve the process within the group itself. A “cross-cutting tendency towards egalitarianism” may arise because “reading groups are voluntary associations that can continue only as long as their members find them pleasurable” (Long, 1987, p. 14). On a functional level, the only consistent stipulation is that most groups require the book to be in paperback and that there must be sufficient copies available for every group member. Most groups are conscious of the cost of books for those who purchase them, but more important is availability. If a book is not available to all members, it can create great frustration and may mean the death of discussion. If a book is too long, some of the groups feel the time pressure to finish it takes the

enjoyment out of reading. This might also be an indication that reading for book club demands scheduled reading and the women do not want to create additional pressure that

**Table 12- Processes for Choosing Book Club Titles**

Club	Process	Availability stipulations	Consistent since inception?	My observations about process
Mon	List created at formation meeting; titles added monthly on the suggestion of individual members; vote taken month to month.	Must be in paperback unless democratic vote to buy hardback. Shouldn't be a book someone has already read.	Yes	Because the group is a new club, they are experiencing a bit of conflict amongst themselves in choosing from a large list, and in learning a club cultural taste.
Tues	Titles are chosen for four months at a time, suggested and informally approved by members. For the past several years, the club chooses themes for the year.	Must be available for all members and must be available in paperback.	No. In the past, the woman leading the discussion could choose the book she wanted the rest of the group to read.	The dialogue during the process was congenial although there were several with strong opinions. Some members seem content with reading whatever titles were put on the table.
Wed	Books are chosen on a month-to-month basis based on suggestions brought to meetings. Hostess for next meeting gets ultimate say.	Must be in paperback.	Yes.	Although reticent to change, the club recognises the process is unsatisfactory as is.
Thur	Most often choose month-to-month based on member suggestions.	None.	No. They have occasionally chosen several months in advance.	Book titles chosen causes some discontent among members, but most seem happy enough to go along with whatever is chosen. One member is very unhappy.
Fri	Chooses month to month, based on member suggestions.	None.	No. In the past, they choose three months ahead and are trying to do this again with each member bringing three suggestions.	Choosing books by theme was unsuccessful because of divergent ideas about theme. The group compromised and decided to try individual suggestions.

might diminish the satisfaction they find in reading for book club. In addition, some group members (and the leavers I interviewed) feel uncomfortable coming to book club if they have not read the book in a particularly busy month. If a book is inordinately long,

chances are a member will have difficulty finding time to finish. This “rule” and this commitment to finishing a book is not evident in every club, but did come up in conversation often enough for me to question the sentiments behind it.

From the table, it is obvious that the groups can be contested cultural sites. The method of choosing books can sometimes cause conflict based on individual tastes and expectations, which sometimes leads to feelings of unfairness or displeasure. Separating the process from the title choice itself is difficult because the two are constitutive of one another, and the women often have difficulty differentiating book choices from book selection processes.

We spoke about the book selection process in all of my interviews, but the potential problems became particularly evident in the focus group interview with the Service Group Spin-Offs book club. This 50-member group elects a committee to choose the year’s books, but it is difficult to satisfy all members as a result of differing personal tastes and expectations of a book club:

Ann: I think there are different objectives in the group, too, amongst the 50 members. Some want to be educated, some want to be entertained and some just amused.

Courtney: Yea, that probably causes more dissension than anything else.

Ann: How to choose the book. ...

Shelly: I think the problem with this year, my personal opinion about this year with the American Cousin, is that it's a bit too broad. And if we'd had stuck maybe with a theme, like if we'd taken an idea say of racism or alienation it doesn't matter what, and did an American slant on it and a Canadian slant on it. Then, it would be easier to compare that. I'm feeling that this is just a bit too big.

The dialogue from the Thursday Night Group exit interview demonstrates that the value of qualitative research when investigating group ideals, processes and tastes. This dialogue was not confrontational, but the interview with this group quickly took on the essence of a forum in which some of the women felt comfortable enough with each other and with me to bring up some frustrating practices. Jeanne, an original member of the group, voiced her concerns about how the group accommodate each other's reading preferences:

You know something that used to, well, it still does bother me. In fact, I might have mentioned it to my Cap 10 class. Uhm. How nicey nice we are. We tend to be very accommodating to one another, and somebody says, "Oh (high and shrieking) let's do this book." And we go "Oh (same way), yes we will." And then have half of us don't read it because we were never interested but wouldn't say that to the group. You know, so I think we lose a lot by not having some constructive--- (debate cut off).

While Jeanne's opinions were forthright in the group interview, most other members from the various clubs shied away from articulating how the group determines taste agendas in this context. I noticed on the individual questionnaires, however, that dissatisfaction with the method of choosing books was mentioned more often. Interestingly, while a reader wants to "read books I wouldn't normally read" as indicated in reasons for joining a club, this also seems to be an area of frustration. Ruth summarised it quite well when I asked her about her least favourite aspect of her group of 18 years. She said: "Sometimes it's reading things I'm not really interested in reading. You know after a little way through, that 'Oh, my God, I'm not going to like this one,' but you do read it. So I suppose that's a combination of plus and minus."



But beyond the simple reading of books you wouldn't normally be interested in, personal emotions around certain themes or topics of books also influence book selection. During a period when contemporary fiction seemed to produce many stories of incest and dysfunctional families, Jessie felt uncomfortable with her book club's choices:

Well there was stretch where we were reading, I guess it was last year and the year before, a lot of new novels came out which were, which had this incest thing, and that, I, I mean the first one, fine, but it began to be quite annoying for me partly because I never had, I shouldn't say I never had but it's been, none that I can remember, did I have a feeling of real authenticity behind the story. It was more as though these people were cashing in on something. And that was really bugging me. And bugging me also because there was an experience close to me where someone was affected by this bandwagon, and so every time I had to read this in the book, it you know made me, I mean was all the time thinking about the experience close to me which was very upsetting for me. And so I just didn't want to read anymore of those books but I didn't know how to say that I didn't.

She eventually told her group how she felt and said she was satisfied with the outcome. Jessie's discontent is a good example of the relationship an individual reader has with the books they read and how the processes of choosing the books in a book club reflects the individuals themselves, their own cultural tastes and the tastes of the interpretive community. Her articulation of her frustration also demonstrates how differences can be accommodated within trusting relationships.

### ***Considering Cultural Tastes***

As a participant in the first meeting of the Monday Night Group, I was privy to the early stages of a book club's creation of collective cultural tastes. When trying to determine the next several months' titles, the group demonstrated how the different

literary tastes, educational experiences and life histories work to inform a group's normative process. The young women were sensitive to one another's feelings, but they also articulated definite ideas about what they wanted to read. Some wished to revisit classical literature, others to read as much Canadian literature as possible, and others did not care. The excitement they felt about future reading experiences was obvious by the copious amount of "over talk" and the volume of the dialogue. Different book titles were flying around the room, and as lists were being made, the women shared reading experiences near and dear to them. There was nothing short of electricity in the air. It was obvious the formation of their book club offered these young women opportunities to read books that they feel are important to their Canadian and local identities, but which they haven't experienced for some reason or another in high school, college or university:<sup>4</sup>

Eduarda: I'd like to read local artists, too, I don't know anything about local Vancouver writers.

Holly: Me, too.

Eduarda: It'd be great. Like, I don't know very much about Canadian literature, but that's why I want to start with Robertson Davies and then Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields. All the big ones.

---

<sup>4</sup> One of the non-joiners I interviewed is an English teacher in the Greater Vancouver Regional District. When we discussed Canadian literature reading assignments in her high school course, she said "Yes, it's tough. I mean, I try to push, push it but the kids—Canadian lit is wonderful, I love it. I read a lot of it, but it's too dry and dark for them. I get a few kids through *Stone Angel* a year, and that's all I can do." For a discussion of Canadian Literature in high school classrooms and the impact it may have on Canadian publishing and national identity, see Joy Gugeler's unpublished PhD thesis, *Telling tales in school: Re-imagining literature for the classroom*.

The group eventually decided to read Rebecca Well's *Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood* for their first book after looking at a reading guide from HarperCollins among some of those I had collected and brought with me. This title is not Canadian, but it was deemed to be a "fun" book for the group to begin with based on the promotional quotation from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which is highlighted on the guide. The title was a safe choice for the young women who, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, were concerned about "doing it right". That is, while the women were interested in reading books that would be considered part of the Canadian literary canon, they also did not want to begin their club discussions with a "risky" title. The idea of sisterhood was exciting to the young women; the book's iconic promises reflected the emotions and ties that they were hoping to form and or enhance through the book club.

As I have mentioned above, I believe the book clubs' search for what to read next can be called the Eternal Quest. I also believe it can be a process in and of itself. The groups formulate their own tastes as an interpretive community, which not only integrates each individual's preferences, but also works to shape them. Each book club appears to create their own specific book club genre. In other words, the readers learn a certain cultural taste based on the history of books chosen by the group, and will look for those types of books to read both as an individual, and often for the group.

Mary Trentadue, the bookseller, believes book club readers in general are inert when it comes to searching for club reads. She said in our interview: "...I'd say largely most of them don't really care what they read as long as long as they're reading some good fiction, as long as that is what they want to read. But most, a lot of people, want to be told what to do." Although I have seen some situations that confirm her comments, I

am not convinced readers want to be told what to read. I believe the situation is much more complex. Some readers may not have time to research, and will seek advice from trusted others, who certainly can include booksellers. Another reason for taking direction may be that the women are participating in a culture in which it is important to give to one another and to share emotional experiences. In this situation, the cost of disappointing the other reading women is tolling on a woman's sense of ability to participate in the emotional exchange. More probable, however, is that at play are Smith's notions of social agency that operates at the interface of ruling and non-ruling relations of power. On the one hand, the women want to demonstrate their cultural capital by choosing books that are viewed by cultural authorities as "worthy" literary titles. On the other hand, the women actively consider the tastes that have been collectively determined within their book club.

Recommending a title that will be well-received by the other members in a book club can be stressful for some women. Perhaps it is because taste and interpretation of books represents a woman's identity, as is implied in one group's discussion with me about the topic of recommending titles:

Bonnie: I think the only area people feel uncomfortable in is if they've suggested a book and other people don't like it.

Ann: Everybody hates it.

Cory: That does happen! Some take it personally.

Bonnie: Somebody will bring this book, and obviously they love it because they want everybody to share it and everybody, and we've had that certainly happen where somebody has brought a book that they loved, and the rest of us had not loved it. Then you feel a little awkward. But I think everybody works really hard.

Although differing opinions usually make for more lively discussion, members will often speak to other specific, trusted members outside of meeting time to confirm their selection choices before presenting them to the group. For example:

DeNel: But if you were on the committee to choose the list, and if somebody had said something negative, how would've you felt? What would have you felt?

Ann: Well, I got a kind of nervous about *Felicity's Journey*, right?...

Shelly: It was so dark.

Cory: Oh, I loved that one.

Ann: Yea, and I read it and I read some other William Trevor, and I thought, geez, I wonder if these guys'll really like this. I mean, maybe it's, maybe it's too close to a murder mystery, maybe it's not intellectual enough, maybe we won't have enough to say.

This process of prior testing is a confirmation of the member's interpretation of the club's cultural competence and tastes.

Book club moderator Margaret Bellmaine confirmed my idea, while articulating the conflicting nature of cultural tastes of the groups with whom she works:

DeNel: Is it laziness, or perhaps I want to be seen as an intellectual woman, I want to talk well about books that other people have read? Perhaps if I ask you what you're reading or what other book clubs are reading, then I'm going to fit in better? You know, then I'm on the top of culture, I'm not reading obscure books, I'm not wasting my time. Do you see what I mean?

Margaret: Yea, I think that that's a factor. I would say, in my two older groups it's not so much a factor, that they have the time to look around and read and they bring a wide range of suggestions. In fact, we have to select 10 books from a list of 35, 40 suggestions and each person is supposed to put in a little blurb about where it's set and what it's about and how many pages. Is it available in

paperback? Are there copies in the VPL? And how much does it cost? And not everybody does all of those things but we get a very wide range of suggestions and I think it's because these women don't, I think again it's because of the cultural community that they have in common that they see books outside the sort of WASP, North American media system... Last year, at least 50 percent of our reading list was either by Jewish authors or was a Jewish theme. And that wasn't on purpose, it was simply because Philip Roth's book *American Pastoral* was really well reviewed. And *Barney's Version* of course came out and everybody wanted to read that, and I suggested the Cynthia Ozick and there were a couple of others that had Jewish content.

The book club women Bellmaine is referring to seemingly desire to read outside the popular, or at least what they perceive as popular. They want to differentiate themselves from the dominant experience—that of the white, middle-class Anglo-Saxon. They seek out books that might be slightly uncelebrated, but still fit within their club's hierarchy of taste and speak to their own life experiences. Unfortunately, I was not able to ask how these particular women choose the titles that they suggest to their peers. I assume they turn to their own trusted others and media reviewers, and because these particular groups are affiliated with a national Jewish women's council, those reviews would be from outside the "North American media system", as Bellmaine suggested. And while the women's lists did not include *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, some titles did appear on best seller lists, namely *Barney's Version* by Mordecai Richler and *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* by Frank McCourt. Yet the list also included titles such as *News From a Foreign Country Came* by Alberto Manguel, *The Puttermesser Papers* by Cynthia Ozick, and *The Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* by Hugh Trevor-Roper.

### ***Resisting Oprah***

As a book group facilitator, Bellmaine could be considered a cultural authority, but her title suggestions are not always welcome in two of the older groups she facilitates. Instead, Bellmaine acknowledges that these women tend to resist her authority, asserting their own cultural tastes by rejecting her propositions:

(Initially) I made suggestions of things that I thought people would like to read. I submit maybe now four or five, I don't submit a lot because--- and they don't always select what I wanted them to read. I suggested *Elizabeth and After*, Matt Cohn's book, two years ago because I thought it had a story and characters that would be very close to these women's lives, but nobody seemed to be very interested in it. But now that he's died and there's been so much publicity, maybe someone will suggest it.

The most obvious examples of resisting dominant cultural tastes, however, are not in the examples provided by Bellmaine, or Trentadue or the VPL. They are in conversations about Oprah's book club and the titles she chooses. Although the women often attribute contemporary book club popularity to her, and some admit to never having heard of clubs before her, they are adamant about distinguishing themselves and their practices from hers.<sup>5</sup> To read Oprah picks represented for the Vancouver women, a symbolic declaration that the club reads low-brow literature, literature that is similar to "tv movie of the week novels," in the words of one woman. Important to the women, then, is the ability to articulate their distinction from the popular:

---

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Franzen, author of *The Corrections*, was honoured with the accolade of the first author to ever be uninvited to visit Oprah's book club following comments he made about his concern of having the Oprah book club logo on his book's cover. The event spurred public debate over the value of Oprah, the titles she chose and the practices of her book club. See, for example Lippert (2001). Some popular press commentators suggest this debate was the impetus for the demise of the original Oprah's Book Club. Indeed, the new iteration of the show includes only classic literary canon titles. The public debate reflects the internal debate articulated by the women I studied.

We didn't specifically choose not to read Oprah's picks because they were Oprah's picks. We didn't want to read best-sellers, we didn't want to read things that everybody was reading, whether it was really popular in the newspaper or reviews or---- and so Oprah's books tend to be those books.

The clubs feel the need to read "better" than what Oprah's titles offer:

DeNel: What influence did Oprah have on YOU joining this book club?

Nancy: None. Not at all.

Alice: None. We were started before then.

Maggie: We are a different level.

Nancy: Oprah sort of popularised the idea, right? I mean it makes it sort of acceptable for every person out there to think, "oh you know, that's great," so if it encourages people to read.

Siobahn: I think she sort of validated, well, I don't know if it's the right word for book clubs, but for reading. I mean she's done a lot.

Other groups feel content with their choices, no matter where they come from, but still

resist being labelled as an Oprah Book Club wannabe:

Eduarda: But I had this argument with someone yesterday. The person I talked to yesterday, they're like, "Oh, Oprah's Book Club blah, blah, blah. That's all you're doing, you're mimicking Oprah." And I'm like, "No, we read our own books, we've only read one---"

Sangita: We come up with our ideas on how we want run--

Eduarda: Yeah, exactly. But at the same time, it's like I never---

Holly: I never knew that some, that any of them, well I knew one of them, was like the first book was an Oprah



book. I had no idea, and I mean the other ones weren't. I don't really care.

(As I discussed above, the Monday Night Group's first choice was *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, a title that was never an Oprah pick. However, their second choice, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison—a novel with high status in elite and academic circles—was.)

The point here is not to argue the literary merit of Oprah's list, but instead to demonstrate how book club members felt it necessary to disassociate themselves from the Oprah list, even while choosing some of the same books she had chosen. Two of the ethnography groups chose Oprah titles while I was with them: the already mentioned *Song of Solomon*, which was chosen by one group because one member said, "it just sounds as if it'll be a great book" The Wednesday Night Group, whose discussion about being at "a different level" is highlighted above, read and discussed *The Reader* by Bernard Schlink one month before it was aired on Oprah. The woman who suggested the title told the group that it was an Oprah pick, but that it "got a great review in the office, and it's different from most of hers." (This woman worked for a literary not-for profit organisation.) In addition, two Oprah titles were on the book club lists of women I interviewed outside of the participant observation. One was *Stones from the River* by Ursula Helgi, which was chosen by two different groups. The other was *This Much I Know is True* by Wally Lamb.

So it is evident that some groups do choose Oprah picks. Perhaps this is so because Oprah's books have a reputation for focusing human interaction. This may be because, as one woman generalised, "women gravitate towards" these stories. However, most groups in this study were adamant that they do not want to include Oprah's choices

on their lists. According to the women, her choices fit into the best-seller category and thus were not appropriate for their clubs.

The women's perceptions of Oprah titles may be a result of the trusted others from whom they seek title selections. I have argued that the Vancouver women choose what they read primarily from two different sources: friends and family, and though the media. Their perceptions of Oprah and the dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow literature are validated in media products such as newspaper articles, advertising and in-store bookstore promotional pieces.

*Globe and Mail* reporter Stephanie Nolan epitomises the distinction people attempt to create for themselves once a phenomenon is perceived as mainstream, or part of popular culture. As a reporter or cultural commentator, her comments demand analysis because of the value the women in this study give to the media in influencing their reading choices. The comments she made during our interview express the cultural superiority some media representatives feel:

DeNel: How much do you attribute the popularity of book clubs to Oprah and other so-called cultural élite?

Nolan: Oh God, I don't know if I'd call Oprah a cultural élite. If Oprah is a cultural élite, we're all in trouble. ... if she gets people reading at all, I think that's commendable and obviously she has the ability to reach people. I mean, I guess the people who are so fascinated by the Oprah book phenomenon are the people, who by definition, tune in to watch afternoon television. Right? ...I mean there are a couple of books, Toni Morrison's work or a book like *Sula*, no it was *Song of Solomon* that she had people read. That is just NOT a book people would have been going out and buying. That part's wonderful. The rest of the time, I mean I'm not sure she's done a lot for the literary culture in the United States. (Nolan, personal communication, November 23, 1999)

These prejudices were reflected in a piece Nolan wrote for the *Globe and Mail*, which was commented upon by some of the book club women I interviewed. I suspect that Nolan's animosity towards book clubs eventually—directly or indirectly—influenced some of the women's title choices.

The books that the groups read while I was with them cannot be neatly categorised. As is evident in Table 13, some titles such as *The Magus*, for example might be considered highbrow, while *Memoirs of a Geisha* may be more middlebrow. There are only a few written by women authors. The content, settings and authors are quite international, and do not reflect the impetus to read Canadian as much as The Monday Night Group articulated in their first meeting, nor as much as Canadian cultural authorities might hope. At a preliminary glance, it would appear that any book would fit into the category of a book club book. Is there then a book club book?

### ***What IS a Book Club Book?***

The title selection decisions the women make and their sense of the meaning of those decisions confirm Fish's (1980) argument that "the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature" (p. 11). They depend on each other to confirm the choices, because a title will be accepted as a worthy read "only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it" (p. 11).



**Photograph 2 - The researcher and one of her groups go on "A Trip Around the Mediterranean"**

(Image used with permission.)

As I mentioned above, I did not participate in the dialogue when the groups chose their books, except for in my own. The Monday Night Group's titles were selected from an on-going, ever-growing list produced during the first meeting and added upon each subsequent meeting based on the members' suggestions. Tuesday Night Group's list was centred around a theme, the only list among the participant observation groups to do so. The list reflected a "Trip Around the Mediterranean" theme, and was adopted at the beginning of the year. It included books by two Canadian authors, Bronwyn Drainie and Nino Ricci. The titles chosen by Wednesday's Group are those that the members suggested at each previous meeting and are not part of any theme. The group has a norm that excludes any books that have been already read by a member. However, during the

research phase, the group decided to read a John Fowler title as requested by a member who read it more than ten years ago, in her early 20s, and who wanted to re-read it with the group. Interestingly, the titles read by the Thursday Night Group are entirely non-fiction titles. I say this is interesting because I interpreted this group as the most informal, social group of all those I investigated. The Friday Night Group's list was an eclectic one of both popular and little-known works.

**Table 13 - Titles Read During Fieldwork<sup>6</sup>**

<b>Mon</b>	December 1999 <i>Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood</i> by Rebecca Wells	January 2000 <i>Song of Solomon</i> by Toni Morrison	February 2000 <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> by Arthur Golden	
<b>Tues</b>	November 1999 <i>Lives of Saints</i> by Nino Ricci	December 1999 <i>My Jerusalem</i> by Bronwyn Drainie	January 2000 <i>Captain Corelli's Mandolin</i> by Louis de Bernieres	February 2000 <i>Palace Walk</i> by Naghib Mahfouz
<b>Wed</b>	October 1999 <i>Mombo Kings Play Songs of Love</i> by Oscar Hijuelos	November 1999 <i>The Sorcerer's Stone</i> J.K. Rowling	January 2000 <i>Hanna's Daughters</i> by Marianne Fredriksson	February 2000 <i>The Magus</i> by John Fowles
<b>Thu</b>	October 1999 <i>Color of Water</i> by James McBride	November 1999 Any of: <i>Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls</i> by Mary Pipher; <i>Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood</i> by William S. Pollak; <i>Boys Will be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence</i> by Myriam Miedzian; and <i>Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys</i> by Daniel J. Kindlon	December 1999 Any childhood favourite	January 2000 <i>Under the Tuscan Sun</i> by Frances Mayes
<b>Fri</b>	July 1999 <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> by Arthur Golden	August 2000 <i>Remains of the Day &amp; Plain View of the Hills</i> by Kazuo Ishiguro		

<sup>6</sup> This list does not include titles read during my cyber research.

Nolan suggests a book club book is: “a sort of small, non-threatening-looking paperback with a sort of breathless, intriguing, exhilarating quote inspirational, whatever. It's sort of lifted from a review on the cover and it'll have a strong female protagonist and it's just very non-threatening looking” (personal communication, November 23, 1999). Not only is Nolan's definition belittling to the women of this study, the evidence from my data refutes her claim. For the most part, women will not even see the book before it is presented for negotiation during the selection process. The only person who will have seen the book is the woman presenting it to the group, and then it is usually up to her to articulate why it is that this would be an appropriate book for her club to read. There was no indication in the data that would suggest the book had to be “non-threatening-looking” or that it would have a strong female protagonist although the titles chosen might need to speak to the women's experiences. For instance, The Thursday Night Group read non-fiction titles about boy and girl children and The Tuesday Night Group chose books set in the Mediterranean because they wanted to travel with book club mates via the books.

Long (1987) identified three characteristics of judgement book club readers use that enrich, while simultaneously refuting, what Nolan has outlined as a book club book (p. 20). First, a book is valued for its literary worth, which I believe is dependent upon what was learned through school/university, as cultural theorists maintain (Bennett, Emmison, & Frow, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987). Second, other book clubs and trusted others (my term, not Long's) such as the media have determined its position high on the hierarchical literary ladder. And finally, the book needs to speak to each individual's life. Table 14 illustrates the collection of all titles identified as “good book

club books” by the women themselves during my fieldwork. There are few overlapping titles, reflecting the wide diversity of books discussed in clubs.

**Table 14 - Books the Women Identified as Good Book Club Books**

Title	Author	Multiple Mentions
<i>Cold Mountain</i>	Charles Frazier	
<i>Away: A Novel</i>	Jane Urqhart	
<i>Regeneration</i>	Pat Barker	
<i>Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Homefront</i>	Judy Barrett Litoff (Editor), David C. Smith (Editor)	
<i>The Child in Time</i>	Ian McEwan	
<i>Enduring Love</i>	Ian McEwan	
<i>Green Grass, Running Water</i>	Thomas King	
<i>The Handless Maiden</i>	Loranne Brown	
<i>Elizabeth &amp; After</i>	Matt Cohen	
<i>The Birthday Letters</i>	Ted Hughes	
<i>Walk Through the Woods</i>	Bill Bryson	
<i>The White Bone</i>	Barbara Gowdy	
<i>Smilla's Sense of Snow</i>	Peter Hoeg	
<i>Sixteen Pleasures/A Novel</i>	Robert Hellenga	
<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>	Charles Dickens	
<i>Middlemarch</i>	George Eliot	
<i>Paper Shadows</i>	Wayson Choy	
<i>Midnight's Children</i>	Salmon Rushdie	
<i>Alias Grace</i>	Margaret Atwood	
<i>Map of the World</i>	Jane Hamilton	
<i>Tobacco Road</i>	Erskine Caldwell	
<i>Angle of Repose</i>	<b>Wallace Earle Stegner</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<i>Behind the Scenes of the Museum</i>	Kate Atkinson	
<i>The Sea, the Sea</i>	Iris Murdoch	
<i>The Reader</i>	<b>Bernhard Schlink, Carol Brown Janeway (Translator)</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i>	<b>Arthur Golden</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<i>Stones from the River</i>	<b>Ursula Hegi</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<i>The Color of Water</i>	James McBride	
<i>Captain Corelli's Mandolin</i>	Louis de Bernieres	
<i>Old Books, Rare Friends</i>	Leona Rosenberg and Madeleine Stern	
<i>The Improvised Woman</i>	<b>Marcelle Clements</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<i>Bonfire of the Vanities</i>	Tom Wolfe	

The books fit well into a category that Radway's (1997) Book-of-the-Month editors identified as "appropriate" serious fiction:

On the one hand, (there is) the assumption ... that fiction should be technically complex and self-consciously *about* significant issues. On the other, ... such fiction should be pleasurable to read, a stipulation that differs little from that made regularly by readers of best-sellers and genre fiction who desire always to be entertained. (p. 528, emphasis in original)

In other words, the book club books need to be challenging, or at least considered somewhat "highbrow". They *also* need to be pleasurable to read. Although none of the books on the list would be considered lowbrow, the books chosen as good book club books reflect the "omnivorous" taste introduced in the last chapter in that the books permeate the highbrow/middlebrow classification boundaries.

Although some of the titles might occasionally overlap from group to group, and most were likely chosen based on one of the methods outlined above, literary reception differs from woman to woman and from group to group. The same book might be successful in one group and a horrible disappointment to another group based on each group's collective experience. Fortunately, this happened during my research and I was able to witness it first-hand. *Memoirs of a Geisha* was chosen by both The Monday Night Group and also by The Friday Night Group. The latter group members were uniformly unimpressed, questioning both the authority of a man writing a woman's memoir and especially a man writing a cultural experience so different from his own. One member brought to the meeting a PhD dissertation that was an anthropological account of the Geisha lifestyle; this book was given more value and contemplation than was the fictional



account. The young women of the Monday Night Group, however, revelled in the story, without questioning the author's gender or experiential authority. They appeared excited about "learning something new", and the discussion concentrated on being exposed to a culture they knew nothing about. This suggests a gap in taste and competencies between a group of middle-aged, highly-educated women and a group of women in their twenties who are only beginning to formulate their own norms. This finding also suggests that the women of the Friday Night Group have less of a "neutral or transparent veil over objective reality" than did the readers in Long's study (1986, p. 604). That is, this group of women did not readily accept the "facts" presented in the text as true, which I suggest might be a result of their education, age and their club's interpretive histories. Both group responses illustrate the women's desire to use the book club as an opportunity for learning.

Because the titles chosen differ in the many different book clubs, it might be difficult to generalise or easily identify a book club book, especially as Nolan has done. On the other hand, there are similarities even in my small sample, and a few of the same titles appear on lists provided to me during my field work. It may be, then, that "[just] as populations of persons can be partitioned into groups on the basis of the works of art they like, so populations of artworks can be partitioned into groups, or genres, on the basis of the persons who choose them" (DiMaggio, 1987, p. 445). Of course, as there are differences within the book club women, there is variance within what we might begin to call the book club genre. However, as DiMaggio argues about cultural artefacts in general, within the specific groups, genre boundaries are more readily visible because as the groups form and solidify, members are more likely to share similar status positions

and the group forms its own cultural tastes (p. 449). While helpful in understanding the potential of a book club genre, DiMaggio made no provisions for book clubs themselves, nor the talk within them.

### ***Interpretation Processes***

Like book club structures and book club books, club discussion processes of the different groups are also specific to the individual clubs. As Fiske (1987) reminds us, “the conventions of talk vary as widely as the social situation or social group within which that talk operates ... ” (¶18). The collective interpretation works to activate and circulate meanings of both the books being discussed and community itself, which “resonate with the cultural needs” of each community. One group I visited drove me crazy with the chaos between the ten to 12 women speaking at once during the entire meeting, during the four months I visited. And while it might have been frustrating for me (if only because I was afraid I would miss some important part of the dialogue on my tapes) it was a common practice for these women. It was also one that they recognised:

DeNel: Ok, this last thing, does it not bother anybody else that there's 16 conversations going on at one time?

Ann: It always has.

(Lots of over talk, still.)

DeNel: --- because it's 15 people.

(Laughter.)

Ann: We decided not to give up Elizabeth.

(Laughter and over talk.)

Barbara: But that doesn't happen during discussion of the book.

(Over talk about whether it happens or not.)

Beth: This is an example of your question, isn't it?

(Lots of laughter and continued over talk.)

Natalie: --- five conversations. See we come together so infrequently that it's electrical---

Lisa: It's also way too big.

(Lots of over talk.)

Elizabeth: Do you know the song in the Music Man, cheep, cheep, cheep.

(Laughter and over talk.)

Jeanne: You are doing it again, you guys. I feel your pain, I teach high school.

I am not sure if I was completely successful in communicating that it was not about me, that I was not there to judge how dialogue worked in the group. I tried to explain that I was trying to understand if this practice was all right with all of the members. I think that they were able to be themselves and answer the question in the same manner they interpreted the books is a positive indication that my presence did not influence the dialogue of the group.

Completely opposite to this group, The Tuesday Night Group was extremely formal in its dialogue format, beginning the meeting precisely one half hour after coffee, tea and dessert. One member presented background material on the country in which the book was set or information about the author, and then each member was given an opportunity to speak. The routine was similar to the concept of the "talking stick" circle. In some of the groups I learned about through the interviews, a designated woman gives a presentation on the author and her interpretation of the book. The conversation then

opens to all members, and closing with the designated woman providing a wrap-up or a synopsis of what has been interpreted.

The groups that operate dialogue in this formal manner have been through a process to accommodate members who felt they were not given opportunities to speak. Ruth's group had to learn the hard way. After one woman's monopolisation of the conversation, another woman spoke up loudly and said, "I have something to say!" According to Ruth, that was an indication that the process of dialogue needed to change. Now, they go around the circle to listen to each woman's interpretation and ideas in turn:

DeNel: That's very interesting. The group that has been meeting for 25 years does that too. Maybe that is a tried and true thing?

Ruth: Maybe. It gives everyone a chance to say something.

DeNel: Yes, like the old talking stick rule.

Ruth: That's right and it puts you on the hot seat. You know, you've got to have read the book or at least be a very good bull shitter.

So not only does the formal circle provide equal opportunities to voice interpretations, it also holds members accountable to read the books and actively participate in the interpretation in clubs where this is part of the cultural norm. As I discuss below, some groups do not expect members to finish the books, a requirement that is obviously important to Ruth's, or at least to Ruth herself.

Most groups fall somewhere between the two ends of the formal-informal dialogue spectrum, and seem to continuously work to make it a process that fosters good conversation that is satisfying for all members of the club. Even the formal group voiced

concerns during the exit interview that this system might not be as altruistic as they had hoped—and this group has been meeting for more than 25 years.

None of the clubs in this ethnography use a professional book club facilitator, but such facilitators do warrant mention because a new industry seems to have sprung up in the past few years. Hartley even suggests that one of the reasons the book lists of British and US groups are so different is that “America is the land of book group consultants, advisers, ‘enhancers’, and therapists” (p. 117). However, even in those groups who have decided to bring in a professional facilitator, there may be opportunities to resist authoritative interpretation.

For each group she works with, Bellmaine gives a “sort of lecture but it’s not a formal lecture”. She provides information about the author and the author’s background, and attempts to contextualise the time and place in which the story occurs:

... the reading I do for the book club I take the step further. I go to the library. I read the critical things. I get the art books out to take to show support. In a way I do treat it, a little bit, in the same way I would if I were teaching literature. But it’s not something that they have to...it’s not something that’s going to be on an exam. It’s just for fun. It’s just to kind of expand the whole, the whole world around this particular experience in the book.

Themes and their development, in addition to Bellmaine’s interpretation of what the author is attempting to communicate, are also part of the presentation. According to her, “that idea is really clear to everybody and other times, it’s not. You know, in modern literature, in twentieth-century literature, some of it’s very obscure, you know. So, it takes a long time to go through all the little steps.” In her older groups, although the women will often bring in bits of information relevant to the book, the women will not speak up if they disagree with her, but will sometimes approach her afterwards. According to

Bellamaine, the women might say to her: 'You know, I didn't really like this book very much. It's nothing to do with you, dear, you know, but you know it wasn't one of my favourites, I just couldn't get into it.' Or infrequently a woman will say to her, 'I read two-thirds and I didn't finish it.' Bellamaine's younger groups, on the other hand, will often confront her if they disagree with something she's presented. According to Bellamaine, the younger women might say 'Oh, but wait a minute, how about when this happened? It was the opposite of what you were saying.'

I do not assume these differences are generational because I am not certain that the twenty-somethings of The Monday Night Group, for example, would disagree with a facilitator (although they did not strike me as a group that would keep quiet if they disagreed with someone). In addition, across the age groups, there is ample evidence that some of the women enjoy doing for their book club what Bellmaine does for her four. Instead, I am arguing that different clubs will have different norms based on their histories and these will guide the women's reactions.

Some groups and some women obviously feel the need to have a facilitator, or to seek advice from an "expert". Angela Deery facilitates book club orientations for the Vancouver Public Library, and has worked with nearly 80 readers during the past several years. In her workshops, she includes sections on "how do you critically discuss a book" and works through one with them. Several people have even returned for repeat sessions even though the library's intention was to get groups comfortable enough to branch off into their own groups.

None of the groups I know of use publisher's guides during their dialogic interpretations, nor do they turn to the how-to brochures available through the public

libraries, nor the many books available from both Canadian and American publishers.<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that they do not look to this collateral material outside of group meetings. They might well do so, but by all of my accounts, the women resist this and instead look within themselves and to *each other* for the authoritative voices.

### ***Dissecting Dialogue***

After participating in a book club panel for Word on the Street, Canada's national book and magazine fair that takes place in major urban centres around the country, I was approached by local Vancouver reporter Marg Meikle to do an interview. Although the article she wrote did provide interesting observations about book club books and mixed-gender book club meeting formats, the tone was set with the title: "Book club blues: When your reading circle becomes a therapy session, it's time to regroup." "Those so-called literary adventure nights had turned into encounter groups," Meikle wrote about her own book clubs, "focusing readings and discussions on various members' current life difficulties." Was this really the case, I asked when it was my turn to interview her. Was her group really so totally divergent from the clubs I had encountered? Her response? "I mean I basically made the whole thing up. It was kind of a hook to do this article." So, an article that appeared as a cultural commentary was fabricated as a hook to reel readers in. Unknowingly, Meikle influenced my research: every club I met with confronted me with their outrage and confusion at their meeting following the publication of the article.

---

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Fineman, M. (1997). *Talking about books: A step-by-step guide for participating in a book discussion group*. Chevy Chase, Maryland: Self-published; Flood, J., Diane Lapp, and Wendy Ranck-Buhr. (1996). *Literature discussion groups guidelines for goderators--A book club approach* [Microfiche]. Athens, GA Washington, DC: National Reading Research Center ; U.S. Dept. of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement Educational Resources Information Center; and Heft, H., & O'Brien, P. (1999). *Building a better book club*. Toronto: Macmillan Canada.

Because I was quoted about my knowledge of early literary societies, the women thought I had provided Meikle with fodder for her other accusations. I believe I was able to use these concerns as starting points for discussion about the groups' level of literary interpretation, but I still wonder how much influence that article had on the women's attempts to legitimise themselves to me as intellectual groups, as they often do with friends and family who are not in book clubs and perceive them to be a time when women just get together to gab.

The questionnaires and transcripts suggest some indication that a few women are unhappy with certain aspects of their group, which includes the dialogue. The frustration usually surrounds, as I have mentioned before, the choice of books or the way the books are chosen, which are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate the two. Occasionally, however, there is an indication that the women are discontented with one or several individuals who dominate the conversation. Most of the conflict in book clubs lies with the struggle for the women to find a place where the *level* of conversation is what they hoped. Most likely, the dissonance lies in the clashes of different expectations and skills in literary criticism, the norms of the group, and the amount of educational, social and economic capital each woman brings to the club. The following exchange demonstrates the different factors that create the complexity of book club dialogue:

Shelly: But there are some people in our book club who are, we're not at the same level. Some of us are beginners, some people are more intellectual, some people are ---

Cory: Read more than others.

Shelly: Read more than others. I mean, I think that---

Ann: And are striving for more.



Bonnie: More, yea.

Shelly: Which is ok, which is ok.

DeNel: And so does the group nurture that and look up to people like that?

Shelly: Well, I don't know that we look up to them. It's just different.

Courtney: I think it's interesting.

Cory: Well, we kind of revere someone that comes out with a few---

Shelly: And we kind of count on them.

All: huh huh, yea.

Cory: to kind of elevate.

Shelly: Yea, to bring it up a notch higher.

So although most of the women have the same level of education, they may not have taken the same courses, they may not have learned in the same way. They depend on each other for that new knowledge.



**Photograph 3 - The Wednesday Night Group, with invited guest author Loreann Brown**

(Image used with permission.)

Reading reception theories explored in Chapter Two tell us that readers can interpret books in the same way or in different ways. In addition, some women may perceive themselves as having more cultural competence, more literary capital. Others may feel insecure in their interpretive abilities. A woman may or may not have more economic capital than the others in her group. She may also be at a different stage of her reading experience; she may be growing in her capacity to tackle more difficult works. She may want to get past talking about the characters' experiences or the plot, or she may feel the conversation is too "academic", too demanding. All of these factors influence a woman's satisfaction with her club's collective interpretation. The women are subjective agents that are all part of a whole that is the interpretive community. So while one may be dissatisfied, she will work to change the situation with the rest of the club's members. On rare occasions, she will leave.

Struggling to find an “appropriate” level of conversation became a concern for The Monday Night Group as they tried to negotiate an equitable place for all members, to satisfy their desires to learn and to validate their emerging cultural competence. Notice how the women attempt to negotiate interpretation to accommodate all members of the group, while also accommodating a perceived “right way” of interpretation, when I asked in my exit interview if the book club dialogue was what they expected and wanted:

Maggie: I pretty much envisioned it to be exactly what it is, you know, discussing. I thought it might be a little bit more in-depth. Uhm. But, no, I mean, it's pretty much on track.

Holly: How do we get to that deep place?

Sangita: Yeah, I really felt that today we weren't organised or something. You know, our thoughts or---

Holly: I don't know how you do it.

Sangita: Are we supposed to like think of like questions before we come, and like---

Eduarda: Maybe those things, you know, that you had---

DeNel: The reading guides?

Eduarda: Yeah, maybe that might help.

Holly: Have questions that we can answer.

Maggie: Well, I just thought there'd be some discussion about not just the content, but also maybe the style of writing, or you know, that sort of---

Sangita: We haven't even discussed that.

Maggie: But, uhm.

Sarah: I think it would be more about structure, you know talking about the plot.

Holly: That's what Faye thinks.

Sarah: And the characters.

DeNel: That's what you were hoping it would be?

Sarah: I think that's what I was expecting it to be.

DeNel: Oh, you were expecting it.

Holly: The plot, the setting, the characters. You know, like English class.

This discussion demonstrates three important points. First, it illustrates the intra-member conflict over the level and type of discussion. Second, it opens up questions of the authoritative powers of the educational system's ability to direct what and how the club women "should" be reading. Instead of simply accepting the discussion as it occurs, the women are in a quandary over whether or not they are doing it "right". Their learned expectations of how to interpret the literature influence their expectations. Third, the dialogue might also suggest that the women enjoyed their high school and university courses and were searching for ways to reconnect with those experiences.

When talking to me about their groups, most were hesitant to admit that personal discussion is part of book interpretation. However, by the very nature of textual interpretation, whether the women articulate it up front or not, they reveal a bit of themselves and their emotions, values, feelings, and hence, politics. As I have written, the best book club books are those that evoke different readings of the book and on the emotions those readings might invoke, creating passionate talk and divergent interpretations from all the members. In book clubs, the personal is public and political. Discussion can be as personal as each person defines it to be, the public as public as is

comfortable for each individual, and the political as political as each group's values allows it to be.

For some women, a very personal level of discussion is comfortable, others feel the conversation is too superficial. Vera attributes the inability to get deep into the issues of a book to gender. According to her, the books her group reads delve into contemporary social problems that could act as focal points for pointed discussion, but her group is unwilling to go there, at least to a level she would like to see:

I asked the question I think under what conditions do you think one has a right and a responsibility to intervene against someone's wishes. Well, that raises everything from euthanasia and whatever else, but that book raised that question for me, and people side-stepped it...

I'm not positioning myself without them. I think being women, that we tend to avoid real conflict, differences of opinion, we're consensus seekers, more than [pause], but we haven't read anything that would divide us among political lines ...

In each of the groups I visited, there was at least one meeting in which we discussed political issues that may or may not be identified in the books. The young women of The Monday Night Group discussed racism in Canada when the book club discussed *Song of Solomon*. There was unanimous anger with the overt sexism in Oscar Hijuelos' *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* as The Wednesday Night Group contemplated Cuba in the 1960s and the 1990s, and the Cuban community in Canada. Several members of The Tuesday Night Group shared personal travel experiences before the intefadeh while deliberating on *My Jerusalem*, which sparked a dialogue of personal interpretations of the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East. And the women of The Friday Night Group debated the ability of a male author to write about a woman's experience, as was the case

in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. However, The Thursday Night Group, while struggling with the concept of intimacy and how to define “personal” in our group interview—like Vera—suggested that their group’s discussion was perhaps more superficial than some would like:

Elizabeth: ... Intimate may mean many things, but do we ever talk about politics? Or religion?

Lisa: Yeah, we're real careful around certain issues.

Elizabeth: Because I remember some full-fledge pre-school walking down. I remember Cathleen O’Grady and if we had guns, we would have killed each other talking about that last, no it was even before that---

Jeanne: I have some conflict resolution information I can help you with.

Elizabeth: About Reform versus Liberal and Socialist and I think we were both taking the most polarised view just to get our point across. It was fun though, I mean she still sort of talks to me. Once in a while. I don't know if I want to find out if Lisa is a communist, however.

As this conversation demonstrates, it is difficult for some of the women to delineate the boundaries and definitions of personal and political. This same group discussed the personal politics of raising boy children during one of our meetings together. However, as can be noted above, they do not readily recognise these conversations as “political” or “personal”.

### **Informing the Human Experience by Articulating Differences**

My data shows that for non book club joiners, discussions about books with friends and family seems to remain on a superficial level of “I liked this, or I didn't” and

“I found these characters are believable” or not. It is much the same as mentioning a movie or a television program in quick passing. The dialogue will remain vacuous, such as “I found this story is gripping and I found that it was beautifully constructed” or “I found the ending was hollow.” Rarely does the dialogue reflect references to issues resonating within the readers themselves, according to the few non-joiners I interviewed. In the book clubs I studied, however, personal disclosure through textual interpretation is necessary to the culture, although the women themselves do not necessarily recognise it.

Responding to emotions or situations in literature that grasp individual experiences is at the core of the reading experience for book club women. Through book club discussion, the perspectives that books evoke are filtered through the personal. These responses are voiced, considered and resisted. Over time, the experiences become the building blocks of a community. As Jonathan Boyarin (1992) wrote, “One becomes related to those with whom one shares stories. In this way, the shared experience of reading fosters a nonauthoritarian intimacy that many who contrast literacy and orality... implicitly deny” (p. 221). Although the women read the books individually, they come together to share their interpretations and reasons for those interpretations. Critique of the book looks differently in each group and in each meeting. The women may empathise (or not) with the characters, resist (or not) the plot, celebrate (or not) the style. Through dialogue, each person’s response to the literature changes in some way through the dialogue with their respected and trusted peers. New knowledge is created. Interpretation of the book is not complete until the women have *discussed* it. The varied interpretations allow the women to observe the world through the eyes and hearts of their fellow club members’ opinions:

Courtney: But I remember Anne, she really lit into all of us and she was absolutely right. We were talking about wartime experiences and I forget what the book was but the fact that what people do in war. And she said, you people, you're just all so spoiled. You've never lived through this. You don't understand what it's like. People behave very differently. And she was dead on. And she just really socked it to us.

Shelly: I've found that I've noticed that people don't necessarily talk about their personal reactions but more on where they've lived. Like in Montreal, we would have done this. In England, yes, I remember doing that.

Bonnie: So it's more like observations.

Shelly: Yes, only once in all my years ... (do I) remember people getting into really personal details.

Courtney: But your observations *are* coloured by your experiences.

Or as another group articulated, articulated personal experience differences of the different group members do not necessarily cause individuals to change their values:

Felicity: ... There's probably an assumption that we would prefer to embrace all opinions whether we agree with them or not. But, when it comes right down to it, if it's something that really pushes our buttons, we may or may not do that.

Maggie: Well, I think we certainly embrace everybody's opinion in that we'll allow it to be spoken and we can agree with it or disagree with it but, we don't--- every single one of us has different views on different issues. And we don't embrace a particular thing just because it's brought to book club...The gun issue. I mean, we certainly, we talked about it and but I don't think that probably changed any of our opinions. We didn't embrace it and take it away.

Holly, from the Monday Night Group, confirms this: "And you can just say like, 'let's agree to disagree because I'm never going to change'."



Occasional periods of differences over opinions or life experiences are revered by some of the women who do value debates, who enjoy the conflicting opinions. Indeed, the clubs hope to avoid situations in which all women enjoy the book, or one in which they will have “a boring discussion because everybody agreed.” For most of the women, their most memorable meetings were those in which there was passionate discussion, based on differences of opinion. They may not have articulated to me that the discussion was personal and/or political. However, I would categorise them as such. Note below how one woman recalls her most favourite book club discussion. Many of the women I interviewed or read with echoed the tenor in this woman’s response to my query:

Gloria: (The book is) called *Women*, oh I can’t remember, I can probably find it, but it provoked an incredible amount of argument and discussion.<sup>8</sup>

DeNel: Really?

Gloria: And it got in to the whole, you know, some of the members of our groups were really obsessed with their figures and diet and what have you, and others of us obviously aren't. But there is this real, you know, sort of difference [laugh], and we got, this whole thing about advertising and being manipulated and you know about image and its affect on our daughters and on other people we know, I mean it got off in to all kinds of things but it was a really incredible discussion 'cause it got, brought in so many cultural things that we are pressured and exposed to all the time, and that was one of the most heated discussions we've had.

The conversation I had with Gloria about this particular book discussion demonstrates how the women in her book club use a book’s theme as a focal point for questioning and interpreting social circumstances that affect their everyday lives. The conversation that

---

<sup>8</sup> The book was *The improvised woman: Single women reinventing single life* by Marcelle Clements

ensues reflects the women's comfort with one another, providing a safe space to articulate resistance.

In the groups I studied, the conflicts within group discussion propelled the women to identify their own prejudices or preconceived notions. The collective interpretations presented new ways to think about their first impression, and appeared to be almost always welcome. The differing of opinions seemed valued as necessary for the group's ability to challenge themselves. In this sense, the women's ways of interpreting were constitutive; "at every moment, making meaning, and then, at every subsequent moment, making it again" (Fish, 1980, p. 176). When I questioned Eduarda about a meeting in which it was obvious that she had very divergent ideas from a fellow member about the issue of subsidised housing that was introduced in discussion of the book *The Song of Solomon*, she said:

I'm OK with it, because I feel like it was a learning experience and we agreed to disagree and that's ok. And, I think that because of the level of relationship that we have we're respectful of each other and I don't think it'll ever get out of hand and I enjoy having somebody, you know, clash with me and say, "well, no, this is my perspective." I find that really stimulating. I mean it makes you think, you know.

The discussions do not always need to be antagonistic to be enjoyable, they only need to bring up ideas new to the readers, such as an historical context or issues that the women feel are necessary to talk about. Depending on the book, the issue might be "about First Nations and reserves and racism and assumptions and the economics of that and the historical implications of it and so on," as one woman from the Wednesday Night Group reminisced. Or discussion might include issues such as the dynamics of sexuality and

power or gendered familial roles, for example. As Maggie, who is in two groups, says of her club meeting the night previous to our closing interview:

Like last night, for example, with *One True Thing*, we probably discussed the book for 45 minutes, but we were there three hours discussing the roles of women and daughters and you know, all sorts of other things come into the discussion.

### ***Chapter Summary***

Throughout this chapter, women's articulations show how book clubs are subjectively created spaces. Through a process of working together, the women determine a place, time and process that is agreeable to almost every member. The women of this study have prioritised reading, and especially collective interpretation through their book clubs. The experiences of the book club meetings—including the time spent preparing and reading for the club, readying the intimate space of one's home for the other members, eating and drinking, and partaking in social talk—provide opportunities to demonstrate that the club members create normative interpretive communities that have their own limits and boundaries. Although individuals create the culture, the club norms become guides for how the club chooses books, and what books they choose. These book club women are influenced by general society's cultural influences and the literary tastes learned in classrooms, but only to a point. They are subjective agents who determine their own hierarchy of taste, created and influenced within their respective communities and reflective of the tastes of trusted others.

## Chapter Eight

### *Conclusions*

The book club members in this study are passionate about the time spent in their book club. Rather than being only another charm on a cultural status bracelet, book club membership becomes an important cultural, emotional and social activity for the readers. On a personal level, the women find trust, bonding and validated knowledge that comes with collective interpretation and women's socialisation. This does not necessarily change their lives. The experience *enhances* their lives. As one woman wrote:

I LOVE the discussions, the choice of books, the fact that I am reading more regularly, seeing people's homes, talking with women (my house is FULL of testosterone) and the snacks. It has become the highlight of my month.

I began this study because I felt it important to understand why other book club women and I are passionate about reading groups. There was also an obvious absence of scholarly work on this cultural site and practice and particularly on contemporary book clubs in Canada. By employing feminist standpoint theory, the research is meant to give the women I studied a voice. Hopefully, it also contributes to the study of the cultural

practices in gendered locations, and to the experiences and interpretive spaces of women. The study, however, is not meant to generalise all women's experiences.

Analysis of the spaces that support these cultural forms allows for a better understanding of what creates the need for such a cultural form, and the factors that support it. In answering the broad question of *why* book clubs are significant sites of cultural form and practice that demand our attention, we necessarily must consider the complex web of factors that work together to determine who we are as individuals and how we operate within society. A person's gender, ethnicity, age, social status, and economic status all work together to influence our identity, the power we wield, and the power to which we yield. Book clubs as communities are microcosms of a larger society in which new forms of information exchange are both supported and evolving in both public and private spaces.

It is thus worth reviewing, as I set out in Chapter Two that the definition of book community I develop throughout this dissertation is descriptive, normative *and* ideological. The book club women in this study seek communities of like-minded individuals who are generally at the same life stage as themselves, who generally have the same level of education, and who are generally from a similar socio-economic class. The women seek and find others who like to read, and who feel they have no other space in which to explore ideas found in the texts. In the book club community, the women access different textual interpretations and do so in an environment that they often perceive as judgement-free. Their quest for knowledge presumes a foundation in relationships, which include "reciprocity, respect—and (in some cases) friendship—..." (Code, p. 273). The book club therefore represents networks of interrelationships through

which these book club women negotiate dominant ideologies and interpretations. Within the practices of reading, meeting, talking and interpreting, the women challenge oppressive ideologies and structural inequalities that they find in their homes, work, and society. These book clubs can therefore be viewed as communities that fulfil a need for affiliation, and also as unique cultural forms that allow for differences at both ideological and practical levels.

In Chapter Three, I questioned Long's (1986) suggestion that the collectively acceptable divergent interpretations negate book clubs as interpretive communities as defined by Fish (1980). My analysis of the clubs over an extended period revealed collective and articulated norms, practices and strategies that suggest that indeed they can indeed be considered interpretive communities.

This finding is perhaps the largest departure from Long's. While she argues that the club's text selection and collective interpretation clearly plays a role in defining the club's identity, she does not recognise any potential for interpretive communities to emerge or alternative modes of knowledge production to prove constitutive in valuing the club experiences. Book communities are special types of interpretive communities. To summarise, theories of interpretive communities help to define the social locations of book clubs. Through the complex process of culturally-influenced private interpretation that moves into a community setting, the book club women in this study articulate their tacit and experiential knowledge in a way they are not able to do outside of the community. While the interpretive communities offer opportunities to make real a women's agency, their experiences and interpretations are influenced by dominant gender

expectations and cultural authority that is informed by their educational, professional and gendered experiences.

This study of book clubs asks three questions within the framework of interpretive communities. As I have already outlined, the first question asks how the interpretive communities enable the book club women to recognise and affirm knowledge. Secondly, how do the book clubs empower the members by validating their experiential knowledge to create new knowledge? What are the social practices that influence this process? And, finally, how do the women negotiate with cultural authority within the interpretive communities? In the earlier chapters, I presented a framework that considers the individual's experiences in the context of a community. I argue that while the women's different life experiences, and thus their textual interpretation, are varied, the community works to create collective interpretive competencies. These competencies have foundation in each woman's educational level, familial experience, and occupation. Although the women of this study negotiate within their interpretive community to create a forum where all experiences can be articulated and validated, external social forces such as gendered expectations and cultural authority cannot be erased. The forces are *part* of each woman's subjectivity.

To explore the elements of this argument individually, this chapter reviews the secondary research questions that stem from the broader, primary line of investigation. To reiterate the questions are as follows: What are the social practices of these communities? How do the women negotiate cultural authority within the interpretive communities? In what ways are face-to-face clubs similar to or different from those that meet on the Internet? What does virtuality mean for the concept of interpretive

community? In what ways does the interpretive community of a book club enable the women to recognise and affirm tacit knowledge, and create new knowledge, if at all? And to what consequences?

Throughout my discussions, I will consider the hypotheses I set out in Chapter Three, which were based on the literature survey and the foundational book club studies by Hartley, Howie and Long. To reiterate, the hypotheses were as follows:

(1) the book club women in this study recognise the cultural significance of books and use reading as a source of pleasure, a process for identity formation and a tool to gain cultural capital (Bennett et al.; DiMaggio; Radway);

(2) the women seek a communal space, whether face-to-face or on-line, and a participatory forum that supports and makes public the private, individual reading responses and that values their individual women's voices and experiences (Code; Hartley; Long; Smith);

(3) although these communities are comprised of individual women with different meaning systems, the women collectively renegotiate their own worlds in ways not achievable in private and in spaces not available to them in greater society (Code; Long)

(4) while these processes are empowering, the clubs necessarily experience conflict (Howie; Long);

(5) however, the collective meaning making that happens over time is negotiated, leading to sometimes unintentional exclusive community boundaries and consistent patterns in interpretation, suggesting that book clubs and the texts therein can be considered both genres and also interpretive communities (Fish; Howie; Long; Miller).



### ***Book Club as Interpretive Community***

Fish's (1980a; 1980b) conceptualisation of interpretive community is not necessarily inappropriate to describe these book club communities. The boundaries he creates, however, do seem to be too rigid and static. These women do not necessarily have the same interpretive repertoires when they begin, nor do they grow to be more homogenously similar in outlook over time. Certainly collective literary tastes, strategies and norms are formed—yet part of the experience the women revere occurs when the interpretations differ.

Like their Victorian counterparts, the contemporary women of my study search for learning, but the formal education they were privy to in university is not necessarily what they want.

With the demands of work and family, formal education is not always an option for book club women. For some, it is not even a preference. Instead, the women in this study turn to books and other women. Most of the women are very heavy readers, and they read for a variety of reasons. Books offer them an escape from daily duties. They also give the women access to the information, knowledge and experience they feel they want and need to have. Book clubs act as an extension of the desire to learn, to enhance their reading and various life experiences. For those in an on-line book club, it also provides convenient access to a woman's community of readers at a time and level that she dictates.

Although almost all of the women joined their book clubs so that they could “learn new things,” women's book clubs themselves seem to be some kind of reaction against (or idealised extension of) the experience of a university education. We must remember, however, that the women in this study generally do not feel the learning

process is the primary benefit of belonging to the book club. That accolade is saved for the bonds that are formed in the group through the books they read. Women learn, in part, through supportive media, that book clubs offer a space in which to learn and *also* to form communities with people who share their interests, starting with desire to read and to talk about books. Important is the mutual respect and trust the reading groups provide.

Maybe these observations should stand as a reminder to us of what universities are good for—providing setting and context for people to come together, to read, and to think.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps they should be given credit and help the contemporary university remember the role of developing our own critical views of the world while recognising that knowledge might look differently for different people.

It appears the women recognise the value of knowledge as early as the toddler years when a woman's mother or her primary school teacher (usually a female) teaches her to read. The life-long learning process in order to gain cultural capital is not a burdensome task in a woman's life. Quite the contrary: the women of my study enjoy the learning process. The readers coexist with the other women and with the text for the duration of book discussion. Like Flynn's (1986) readers, these women participate with the text. Doing so in a collective environment adds new dimensions to the interpretive process.

They seek safe spaces such as book clubs to learn comfortably and informally. What is also quite clear is that they do seek socially homogenous communities of learners. And this tendency may be in fact higher in a face-to-face environment than a

---

<sup>1</sup> This conclusion was suggested to me by my colleague Dr. Alison Hearne after I debated with her about the value of women's book clubs to the women themselves and to society in general.

virtual environment, where my study suggests that similarity in education level might not be quite as important.

Finally, this study suggests there are similarities in book clubs on and off line. The gathering spaces in both face-to-face and virtual environments act as havens in which women feel more likely to be heard. The women themselves articulate perceptions of ruling relations of power at work in society where they are consistently and systematically denied a voice—whether that be in a mixed-gendered classroom or in a workplace, for example—women will turn to other women for opportunities to gain and share knowledge, affirm life experiences, and for bonding opportunities. They will also react to, and create their own, non-ruling relations of power within their clubs, and work to exclude others when they feel it necessary.

### **A Space for Sisterhood**

The groups I studied can be considered sisterhoods for several reasons. Like members of the consciousness-raising groups of the last century, the women create and learn to revere women-only spaces so that they feel more enabled to speak out. The book club communities I studied can be considered a sisterhood because it is in these environments that the knowledge they glean from the texts and each other's interpretations is considered real. It is knowledge that is respected and valorised. As Code (1991) has argued, the women's experiences are not objective, and there is no desire for them to be so. Each woman's subjective textual interpretations are considered, and contemplated, and they inform the other women's interpretations.

These readers seek a community of sisterhood in which knowledge, interpretation and friendship are shared and reciprocally exchanged. Once a woman is a member of a

book club, the membership itself becomes part of her identity, or rather, the membership shapes her identity. She has joined a group of women who are most likely the same ethnicity as her. They are more or less at the same life and career stage as her, and make roughly the same amount of money as she does. They have predominantly one thing in common: they share her passion for reading. For all their self-conscious homogeneity, however, each reader has different histories, life stories and individual knowledge that she brings to the collective.

The women build a special kind of intimacy. In virtual clubs, they consider one another friends more so than do those who participate in face-to-face clubs. Although they meet together month after month, sometimes for years, the face-to-face members do not necessarily consider the other members personal friends.<sup>2</sup> Because of the nature of the interrogative tool used to investigate the cyber groups, I cannot make assumptions about this finding. I can conclude, however, that for the face-to-face groups, Code's conceptualisation of a caring relationship—friendship—is appropriate for most of the women I studied. A sisterhood of women readers forms a place where each individual is respected for who she is, and where articulated differences are tolerated and expected. In this sisterhood, differences and commonalities can be found in their identities as women. It is here that they celebrate with one another their passion for reading, their excitement around living different lives through the various characters, their joy of being in another place and sometimes in another time. The intimacy is of an intellectual kind where women tolerate difference of opinion—they expect and even thrive on it, and they learn

---

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Side (1999) problematises the term “friendship” in Making and breaking women's friendships in feminist theory. In R. A. Symes, Ann Kaloski, Heloise Brown (Ed.), *Celebrating women's friendship: Past, present and future* (pp. 57-78). York, England: Raw Nerve Books Limited.

from it. Agency is actualised in these spaces and through the interpretations the women make for themselves. Through book clubs they experience personal and collective growth. As genres of social action, they are broader than sisterhood, but they are creatures constituted by it.

The clubs I studied might also be labelled as non-sisterhoods in an essentialist sense. The clubs are rather homogeneous. They do not explicitly seek controversy. And they do not align themselves against patriarchy, or capitalism, or any other social issue. In pursuit of this “dream” of community, these women seek to be with others who feel the same need to talk about books that they enjoy reading and/or to be exposed to books that other trusted women suggest. The women seek this otherwise unavailable forum to discuss books and ideas without having to perform their gender. Importantly to the women themselves, they spend time with other women whom they trust and respect. The readers challenge themselves with literature that has been defined within the group as “good” through an evolutionary process that is distinct to each individual club. This may be considered problematic because the women appear to be hindered by the cultural boundaries that are informed by their habitus as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1990). In other words, there is a conflict between their culturally-derived dispositions and practices, their ideas and perceptions of pleasure, and their individual skills and competencies. On the other hand, the differences that are articulated through interpretive talk do not necessarily cause the community to disintegrate. Young’s (1990) definition of community suggests that communities do not accept differences and yet these women seem to thrive on these differences—and even struggle to accommodate them—as long as they are within the comfort boundaries that the group has determined for itself. The

groups tend to keep themselves quite homogeneous, but this might be a reflection of their need to have at least one space that is comfortable or safe or enabling for them. This, albeit on a very personal and small-scale level, may be what emancipation means at the turn of *this* century.

### **Book Clubs as Genres of Social Action**

Relevant to this study, then, one might ask: What does it mean that book clubs are mainly comprised of women members? Is there a certain type of book club book, and can the books the women read be considered a genre unto itself? What is the main social action of the genre of book club discussion? Can book clubs be classified as genres of social action? Although using standpoint theory negates generalisations, the consistencies I found across the ethnography groups suggests that yes, they can. And this is certainly so within each group.

Book club processes, tastes and preferences might be explained by understanding their reading choices as representing “socially constructed organizing principles that imbue artworks with significance beyond their thematic content and are, in turn, responsive to structurally generated demand for cultural information and affiliation” (DiMaggio, p. 441).

Their collective talk renders visible how book club women identify with, and become participants in an interpretive community. Book clubs can be viewed as genres of social action, in part, because these women are able to “use” book clubs to hear ideas new to them, and to discuss them. As Carolyn Miller (1984) reminds us, cultural competencies are learned because of certain social formations. The talk that occurs in the book club

accounts for how these competencies are reproduced and continue within and through multiple genres or discourses.

Miller suggests that women create their *own* ways of knowing within their community. Through the social action of the community “we learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potential for failure and success in acting together. As a recurrent, significant action, genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality” (p. 39). The women are able to be themselves and to talk freely, but only within the community norms as the other members have defined them. The women are exposed to differing views and learn to work with one another for the benefit of all.

Each book club has its own distinct process that the members have negotiated for themselves. Through the rituals of successive meetings, the women work out methods for meeting, choosing books and discussion. Groups continually try to ensure that the process works so that each woman's voice is heard. It is in this non-confrontational, non-competitive space that women feel welcome and safe. The book club community thus affords opportunities to explore interpretations of books, and of selves.

The surprise of this study is that while it is useful to examine the book club as a genre of collective women's action, it is also worthwhile to examine the “book club” type title, as a new form of social expression. This is something intuitively appreciated by certain booksellers, but still not recognised in academic circles.

“Genres typically emerge from need and recurrent use and then they evolve into stable social forms such as ‘texts’” (Alexander, 2003, p. 7). By analysing the different titles appearing on the lists of different book clubs, then, we begin to notice a pattern that may suggest there is a book club genre. The book club readers themselves, instead of the

academy or other literary institutions, will determine this definition. Because different genres of literature have different social codes and values attached to them, the books the women recommend to one another for a book club may be different from group to group, however, there is a certain type of book club book, as Hartley has already proposed. A book club book is (usually) a novel that has been deemed serious fiction by either a personal contact or by a respected cultural intermediary. The book is characterised by some technical complexity and focused on significant social issues, as can be observed by several of the titles chosen during my tenure with the clubs: *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, *Color of Water* by James McBride, or *The Magus* by John Fowles. A good book club book evokes empathy from the book club members. In addition, it is pleasurable to read. A woman need not write it, nor does it necessarily have a female protagonist. The plot does not necessarily centre around a dysfunctional family, as so many critics seem to believe. Although a book may be deemed a good book club book in one group, it may not be so in another. These conclusions depend on the cultural resources, education, and literary capital appropriated by the different women. A “good” book club book will always initiate conversation.

While the classification systems may be different within the book clubs themselves in this study, the patterns of concurrence suggest a new interpretation for middle-brow literature may be necessary. Popular press cultural commentator Stephanie Nolan and others, including the academy, perpetuate the early twentieth-century classification of “middle-brow” as something to be distinguished from “high-brow” (or “low-brow,” for that matter). As such, book clubs might be identified as a “middle-brow” institution, in which women read “middle-brow” books. The women themselves may



even see the book clubs as such. They join a book club as an opportunity to gain cultural capital and mobility and to do it in a safe space, but in the end, the personal satisfaction they get from the reading and the collective interpretation is what is most important to them. Yes, they still desire to be distinct, but instead of searching for the validation of taste hierarchy as determined by cultural authorities, they themselves will seek literature that reflects collective club tastes and processes.

### ***Book Clubs and Talk***

The exclusive, gendered space of a book club is an intentional effort determined by the women themselves. Because women are negotiating a man's world, whether at home, at work or at school, the space determined to be women's-only is sacrosanct. Even in clubs that do consider opening membership to men, they fear male membership might change the level of intimacy, freedom of talk and level of comfort experienced. After all, as the research has shown us, women's reading responses generally differ from those of men (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986). The non-authoritarian intimacy revealed in the book club environments in this study (and reflected in Long and Hartley's work) nurtures these differences. Although the dialogue cannot conclusively be labelled "women talk," which I defined as talk that might make a man feel uncomfortable, it is talk in a space that women have created for themselves. The space is one that they feel excludes the over-talk they commonly associated with male conversation patterns, one that excludes the self-consciousness the women feel they experience in the presence of men, and one that ensures others will "understand where you are coming from".

This returns me to a reconsideration of Fish's interpretive community, which is also inadequate to define the book clubs in this study in that it does not consider the emotions of the members and how these are realised through textual interpretation in the form of talk. I suggest there is epistemic potential in the emotions shared by the book club women, and turn to Lorraine Code's (1991) conceptual notion of "close alliances" or friends as "second person" way of knowing in relationships of trust. Code's model of community offers a framework that allows the researcher to analyse the power relations within a community, but provides the flexibility to acknowledge that the members of the community still retain agency. Her model suggests that the women "identify themselves by their position within a material, structural network of relations out of which meaning can be constructed and acted on" (p. 293). Non-essentialist in nature, the model allows me to recognise that the women's subjectivity is to some extent produced by the individual's experiences of participation in their interpretive community. Book club communities can be viewed as constructs centered around common interests and concerns of texts and learning. According to Code, such groups require "mutual responsibility and interconnectedness of people, environments, and events" (p. 275). Moreover, Code nominates the skills and practices necessary to maintain a community. In the cultural space of a book club community, one finds "the trust, respect, and caring that are essential to a good friendship ..." (p. 278). Although the participants in this study do not always consider the other book club women as friends, participation and mutual concern for one another are nevertheless paramount. One manifestation of this mutual concern and friendly behaviour is that conversations of different opinions are viewed as

conversation, not confrontations. Additionally, the goal of the book club community is to encourage mutual support and a “nonoppressive ambiance”.

Just as Page (2001) concluded of international development feminist communities, knowledge in book clubs arises “from the relationship, through dialogue motivated by an emotional engagement with something outside itself” (p. 213). Important to these book club women is their mutual respect for each other, their respect for differences of opinion, and their appreciation of similar life circumstance. Identifying this emotional attachment to the community plays a significant part in recognising the social potential of book clubs: as Fuller (in press, citing Hunter, 1999) argues, “learning to respect someone as a ‘second person’ rather than as a ‘third person’ individual is a crucial part of learning to engage responsibly with others.” The women in this study recognise and revere “the specific needs and talents of individuals” within their clubs. They are not necessarily friends, but exhibit a level of caring and respect that is nurtured within the community where new knowledge is created. The power of these women’s experiences lies in the fact that within the cultural form of book clubs and through the practices that are realised therein, they both draw on and contribute to a wider understanding (Page, p. 213).

It is important to recall Marion Iris Young’s reservation about these idyllic dialogic democracies. In the “dream” of a book club community, women may seek to be with others who feel the same need to talk about books that they enjoy reading and/or to be exposed to books that other trusted women suggest. The women seek this otherwise unavailable forum to discuss books and ideas. As the book club evolves and the social relationships concretise, bonds form that the women revere and protect. For Young, these

acts of protection are problematic. For as the community boundaries are built, the women work to protect their comfort level at a cost of sometimes quelling differences of opinion among themselves and almost always excluding others with whom they do not identify—namely men.

According to Young, the ideal of community is deterministic as it “presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects” (p. 302). In addition, Young’s argues, the ideal community cannot accommodate differences because it “totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life” (p. 302). Young’s ideal community denies difference in and between individuals, which would suggest that the book clubs I studied are not the ideal.

However, the book clubs in this study—both in the ethnographic portion and in the on-line quantitative project—suggest that Young’s ideal cannot fully define book club communities where differences—of opinion, at least—are tolerated and even desired in some cases. The book club women I studied are constrained by neither another member’s interpretation nor the collective interpretation. There is no constant in the new knowledge that is made. Rather, as I emphasise in Chapter Six, the book club interpretive community supports an individual’s interpretations and the resultant talk enhances other community members’ interpretations. This finding suggests the need for a more flexible and appropriate concept of community in the making, as has been presented by Code (1991). As she reminds us, conceptualising “communal sentiments and loyalties out of a theoretical apparatus that makes little space for explicitly ‘second person’ relationships ...,” obliterates the “potential for constructing places where differences can be clearly—narratively—articulated and understood” (pp. 281-282).

Code's recognition of formal and informal social relations also enables the researcher to ask questions about the extent and operation of power within those environments. These ruling relationships of power are rendered visible in the problems that occasionally arise in a book club, and which seem to appear around expectations of text selection, and the depth of the talk. These expectations are usually learned and appear to be a result of a woman's social position. To better understand how these expectations influence book club community practices, some adaptation of Fish's model is also helpful because, as he argues, interpretations of texts are encoded in language and institutionalised, and pre-exist the act of reading. In the context of this study then, the book club women are coming to the collective interpretation sessions not as "blank slates", but rather as active social beings whose meaning making processes are at once informed by and form the worlds in which they live. These worlds include the book club community, which do not emulate greater society, but are informed by it.

Perhaps the most serious question of all arising from Young's critique and Code's counter argument is whether the social scope of the groups studied in this dissertation afford sufficient latitude to support dialogic agency. The answer, I believe, is in line with Code's argument that "while claims for common goals and values are part of the glue that holds the relations together, they can avoid coming unstuck precisely in their efforts to negotiate, debate, discuss differences, maintain them in tension, work within them" (p. 282). That is, the groups do support dialogic agency, but this agency is informed by ideologies of the ruling and non-ruling relations of power that may be perceived by the researcher as limiting, but which are invisible or considered negotiable—and in some instances, as desirable—to the book club women.

## *Book Clubs and Social Status*

Even though there are instances of negative social stigma attached to book clubs and book club women, through the media but particularly through friends, family and work mates, the women in this study learned that book clubs are sites in which they might become more learned. The clubs do provide the women with access to cultural capital—in a way many believe they cannot obtain elsewhere. While this is empowering, it is not entirely without conflict. Consider Long's (1987) finding:

Books appear to be important not only in and of themselves, but as signifiers of critical thinking, reflective conversation, and a discourse at once abstract and morally informed... Describing oneself as a reader is a way of claiming that the dichotomy between books and other kinds of culture is more crucial distinction than between different kinds of books... Reading, which has traditionally been associated with education and affluence, brings inclusion in the world of conceptual privilege. It is power, and power of a particularly important kind in a highly information-laden economy such as ours. (pp. 13, 22, 26)

Fuller (2002) reminds us that any conscientious joining of a community is itself a historical and social personal response. The women in this study are similar to Fuller's women's writing groups in Newfoundland in that the women I studied also contribute to "the self-conscious owning of one's position and membership within a community because a book club community) nominates forms of privilege and/or exclusion. It thereby ensures that articulation always proceeds from somewhere, that is, from a specific locatable situation, and that is speaks to the realities of that situation" (p. 164). Once a member of a book club, the women I studied make an effort to distinguish their club from other clubs, from Oprah's Book Club or from the common perception of book

club frivolity. Efforts to include new members were few. These spaces were relatively closed, but delicately sustainable because of that closure.

The cultural status women gain by being members of a book club is complex. On the one hand, doubting and ill-informed friends and family—and indeed elitist segments of society—view their membership as frivolous and indulgent and thus dismiss the membership. Others see book clubs as excessively regulated, restricting, or limiting literature interpretation. However, inside the book club culture, each individual woman is viewed as someone who understands the emotional and intellectual benefits of book club membership. A woman's need to increase her knowledge so that she might become more learned—and hence improve her cultural status—is directly influenced by the women with whom she reads, the books they read, and the knowledge she gains from reading the books and interpreting them with her book club members.

Within semi-fluid boundaries of appropriate textual criticism, these interpretive communities demonstrate that book clubs cannot be generalised as either élitist or populist. They should instead be viewed as sites of constant struggle between the two. The books women choose to read collectively also offer opportunities to reopen discussions of high-, low-, and middle-brow literature. Instead of approaching the question from inside the academy and from an individual perspective, this study considers how the women readers themselves label and use the books. As such, middle-brow literature takes on a new, populist definition that includes consideration of a reader's definition of valuable literature instead of only asserting these boundaries from within cultural institutions.

No conversation of social class status should be silent about Bourdieu's habitus, which ties to Smith's notion of ruling and non-ruling relations of power. Most of the women in this study learned to read in grade one, or were taught before elementary school by their mothers. Many learned to recognise the value of education at home. Clearly, schooling and family life is pivotal to the early formation of reading habits and the acquisition (or not) of literary cultural competencies. From these institutions women learn the value of reading, "how to" read "properly" and what is considered good reading. As a woman moves from high school to university, it becomes clearer what cultural values are placed on literature, but these may not correlate with what women see as valuable to their own reading pleasure. These normative negotiations evolve as women move from the formalised education system into their careers. Many of the readers in this study are educators, managers, communicators and librarians. They themselves are cultural intermediaries who recognise the power of knowledge, and know that within the space of their book clubs they can continue to learn, and gain new knowledge. They can do this while at the same time finding pleasure in the process.

Because they are readers, book club women turn to literary cultural intermediaries who possess cultural capital to provide title recommendations. Sometimes, they are members of the media (print, broadcast or Internet), or someone who works in the book distribution system (bookseller, librarian, publisher's website). The trusted others, however, most often are friends or family members, and other book club members, who the women have learned to respect. This finding suggests that the Canadian model of consumption in book clubs is different from Long's US model. To illustrate this point, consider Long's argument that book club women turn to the socially sanctioned sources



of cultural authority for book title selection, and then consider that the women I studied more so turn to trusted friends and family. The hierarchies of taste appear more fluid than Long's and are determined less by those who are considered cultural *élite*. This may reflect the post-Oprah timing of my study or the different social compositions of book clubs in Canada. The findings may also reflect different levels of formal education in middle class Canada, which my study cannot conclusively determine, but which offers opportunities for further investigation.

The book club women I studied can be considered predominantly part of the economic middle class. Unlike Long's women, however, there seems to be more fluid class boundaries in my groups and especially so in the virtual clubs. Through book club-supportive friends, family and the media, women have learned alternative perceptions of book clubs that say they provide spaces for intellectual growth. General conclusions then would lead us to believe that book clubs are vehicles for class mobility—that women might join book clubs because they are a way in which one might better herself. But this provides only partial explanation of the phenomenon. The club members recognise they are part of a larger community of book club members but seek to distinguish themselves from others either through their reading choices or through their book club practices.

The last dimension of social status to be addressed is the functioning of social taste as reflected by the titles selected as 'worthy' of group deliberation. The hierarchical value of genres varies from club to club, but is influenced by each member's ideologies that were learned in formal education and greater society. As the club solidifies, distinct values form. The classification systems of the genres also seem to vary according to the membership, and most importantly, the genre boundaries are flexible and permeable and

determined by the clubs themselves. This hierarchy of taste in which aesthetic value is placed on breadth or diversity of reading choices is evident in the face-to-face groups. However, on-line groups appear to be more rigid in genre preference. This is a result of the virtual reading community's ontological foundations. Membership is fluid: a woman (or man) simply leaves if the reading tastes of the group do not reflect their own expectations and tastes.

Whether a group—virtual or face-to-face—chooses the reading titles by the month or by the year, and whether they have a committee or a moderator choosing the books or elect by democratic processes, each individual reader's reading experiences and tastes are reflected. Often, the readers want to share books that have had a profound influence on them or one that has done the same for someone close to them. They do not necessarily need to be viewed as intellectual by the other women. Rather they were genuinely touched by the book and want to share that feeling with the other women. Again, this speaks to the epistemological potential of emotion, for these giving and sharing sentiments contribute to the evolutionary community formation, and in part, work to influence the reading lists for the groups.

### **Book Clubs and Badges of Wisdom**

In many dissertations, the author finds recourse to metaphor rather than analysis as a better means of understanding. Throughout my study, "badges" kept recurring as a way for me to organise my thoughts about reading and the importance of reading clubs. It is through this process that books function as badges. They are badges of identity acting as symbolic social locators. The books one reads and the manner in which the texts are

interpreted by the group prove to oneself and to others who 'we' are. Each reader shares her experience and shares her identity. She shares her love of reading and seeks to validate her own experiences through texts and collective interpretation. The subsequent connections between the community members become stronger. The women have common—but varied—understanding about textual interpretation. Through talk, the badges become more powerful as the women's experiences are valorised and articulated. Through evolutionary processes, the community creates cultural norms that may be tacit or not. These norms further reinforce the symbolic badges that facilitate membership in other interpretive communities outside of the book club. But as we have seen, there is no triumphal "high cultural status" associated with the badge. Instead, there is ambiguity about its status. This conceptual notion of badges must reflect and distil both the positive and the negative discourse and perceptions of book clubs and their practices.

### ***Books and Cultural Resistance***

Like Holland's (1986) readers, the women are able to talk through their interpretations by identifying or not with the characters. By entering into the experience offered by the collective experiences, the women are able to learn about themselves and their world, or at least their interpretations of it. Through the book club meetings themselves, the women might be considered "resisting readers" (Fetterly, 1978).

Like the readers in Radway's (1991) and Long's (1992) studies, these book clubs would not be considered "resisting". To reiterate what I argued in the first portion of this chapter, I found the clubs to a large degree homogeneous in ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, education levels and in ages (especially within each group). They neither

explicitly seek controversy, nor do they align themselves against patriarchy, or capitalism, or any other specific issue. However, I argue that the book club itself is a resistance. The priority the women place on meeting with the community represents their articulated need to escape their daily situations, which include performing gender or work, or whatever reality they live. The women articulated the desire for a women-only space as an enabler of individual learning and self improvement, but one that is not in the kind of evangelical mode as proposed by Travis (2003). In addition, these women seem to resist any sort of cultural intermediary's authority—unless it has been appointed within the group.

I argued in Chapter Seven that within the individual book clubs themselves the group's collective tastes and competencies take precedence over an individual's. I do not mean that the individual does not matter, but rather that the whole is more important than the individual. I also do not mean that the groups are not influenced by cultural authorities. They are, to an extent. There is an assumed book club "regime of value", an idealised view of the "right way" to run a book club, the "right way" to choose the books, the "right" books to read, and "the best" way of interpreting them. Book club members will seek out advice from trusted others and cultural authorities. However, while "the dominant value system works towards homogenisation..." (Fiske, 1987, ¶ 27), book club work to prove to themselves and others that they are different. This is most evident when it comes to the titles that are chosen and the dialogue around that process. The book clubs will ultimately make decisions according to the book club norms, and may or may not be "different" from other clubs. However, this articulated process, according to Fiske, is a crucial stance of resistance.

My study reinforces the obverse of guilty pleasure found by Radway (1991). These women do not experience guilt. Although, like romance reading, the cultural practice of book club meeting is sometimes devalued, the women resist the denigration by continuing to meet. These women find pleasure in coming together, and in learning together. The valued badge is wisdom. It is the pleasure of wisdom. They evaluate and interpret literary works in relation to the world in which they live within the context of connections between the readers. Long painted a view of book club discussion as reminiscent of a university English classroom, but my participant observation experiences counter this assertion. Instead, while the women articulate the desire and need to intellectually stimulate themselves, they seemed to reject the confines and authority of the formal education they remember. This finding might reflect how formal university education has evolved. If you'll recall, the Monday Night Group women, who were all very young, were more interested in recapturing the structure and spirit of the classroom than were the other, older groups. In retrospect, I should have asked more about their formal educational experiences. As it is, I am left questioning whether it was their desire to recapture a positive experience or the intense desire to operate their book club "properly".

Tolerant of, and expecting, differences of opinion, book club women seek the contemplation of greater social issues in the books they read and in their collective interpretations of the books. My quantitative findings suggest on-line book clubs adhere to more structural interpretation of the text, but the participant observation tapes contain talk that includes social and political issues that may or may not have been introduced in the book. For example, consider again Monday Night Group's discussion of social

housing and racism, Tuesday Night Group's contemplation of the Israeli/Palestinian situation, and Wednesday Night Group's criticism of a sexist author.

Collective interpretation may not always include explicit resistance to external political power structures like patriarchy, for example. Through discussions that may reflect the experiences of a particular character in a book, or a plot of a particular novel, or a contextual setting of a poem, the women can empathise with each other (or not) and with the book and its author (or not). This necessarily means that the women talk about the environment, the social system, and political values. This process reflects the agency given to the women in each individual group, and will thus vary from group to group depending on the formed cultural norms.

Resistance to dominant readings is more evident in the face-to-face groups that I studied than it is in an on-line environment. There, to resist is to deregister, or to disappear and find a new group. It is not to stay to work it out.

The intimate, physical and continuous space afforded in a face-to-face group seems to better nurture opportunities for resistance. This could be a reflection of the genre-specific nature of the on-line groups I looked at, or it could mean that the acquisition and negotiation of cultural competence works differently in virtual communities. The shorter length of time that a member is part of a virtual club suggests that perhaps the members are not able to gain interpersonal social capital to negotiate, which is different from those norms that result in face-to-face groups that have been meeting long. I also suggest that the younger ages of virtual members plays a part, for the younger club members have not had the number of life experiences of the older members and might have a more difficult time articulating resistance. Because many of

my on-line respondents were from the United States, this anti-resistance theory might also suggest that the education the readers received is different from that which the Canadian readers receive.

### ***Book Clubs and Political Change***

This work, like many others in cultural studies, runs the risk of making the political invisible. Why is that? Partly the problems are due to a problem in understanding when small “p” is political as I discussed in Chapter Two. In the contemporary book clubs examined in this study—as in consciousness-raising groups—the private and personal becomes public and political. In the private and personal act of reading, the readers’ life experiences are mediated through the text. That mediation is extended through the discussion and sharing of ideas within a book club. The collective talk produces something that the women cannot get as an individual reader. The new ideas about a character, a setting or a context, or any multitude of images from the text enhance the women’s individual interpretations.

The book clubs I studied, like the consciousness-raising groups, give the women “the authority of experience”. The power of the community works to politicise the personal through the creation of knowledge. The *new* knowledge is produced through the articulation of individual tacit knowledge and the putting to words both individual and shared experiences. The private and personal textual interpretation process experienced within the women’s own homes is enhanced and validated by and through the interpretations of the other women in a shared space. In other words, the meetings are meant to be neither therapy groups, nor are they meant to be discussions of theories and oppression. Rather, the meetings act as places where women share *personal*

*interpretations* of texts, theories and gender oppressions. The sharing and learning together becomes a political act—if not a Political Act—in itself.

While the contemporary book clubs in this study do not explicitly work to make social change, the texts selected and the acts of collective interpretation mediate members' personal and public lives. The group processes inform individual and group agency. Moreover, the space that is created by the members represents a place where the women can make change on a personal level. The process is a political one although the women do not explicitly “learn” that through group membership and collective interpretation the personal is political. The clubs and the processes therein are themselves political acts.

I am arguing that although the political action in book clubs may not manifest on a grand societal scale, the processes of the clubs should be considered political action because there are mechanisms of power and politics implicated in all processes of knowing. As Code (1991) reminds us, “these mechanisms are visible as much in the kinds of knowledge that an epistemological position legitimates or finds worthy of analysis, contrasted with those it excludes, as in assumptions about the people who qualify as knowers” (p. 267).

But, as is often the case in doctoral research, this finding may not represent what we think we should set out to do. My groups sometimes asked me why I wanted to do a social history of women's book clubs. Why not book clubs in general, they asked? “Well,” I responded, “they *do* tend to be all women. And that interests me.” For some, this was enough explanation. For others, it opened dialogue into what feminism is, and how the definitions differ. Most were extremely interested when I told them about the



free African American and African Canadian women who joined literary societies to improve their reading and writing skills, and thus their positions in society. They were impressed to know the women of Toronto Women's Literary Club later led the suffrage movement in that city. When I asked if their club had ever taken social action, the women answered almost ashamedly that they hadn't. I would sometimes have to struggle to ensure then they shouldn't feel badly about this, and would often turn the discussion to feminism because it would get the discussion going again.

Early in my ethnography, it became evident that the book clubs I was studying were *not* feminist groups but rather women-only spaces. Could I settle for this? Different from the nineteenth-century literary societies, these book clubs themselves *do not carry out political work*. What do I mean by this? I suggest that while the books themselves offer opportunities to discuss feminist issues, the members do not see their groups as feminist groups. Similar to much third-wave feminist discourse, the women view their groups as spaces in which they are free to express their views, share their experiences, and learn new ideas in a collaborative community.<sup>3</sup>

While some groups have been meeting for more than 25 years, and may have started with the ideology of consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, the groups have in large part lost that feminist flavour and are less concerned with emancipatory outcomes. The newer groups, similar in many ways to their more established counterparts, struggle to define feminism. Some groups even seem to distance

---

<sup>3</sup> For excellent accounts of third-wave feminism from young feminist's perspectives see Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (2000). *Manifesta: Young women, feminism, and the future*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Mitchell, A., Rundle, L. B., & Karaian, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Turbo chicks: Talking young feminisms*. Toronto: Sumach Press.

themselves from feminism, but always celebrate being women. They recognise the women-only space that a book club affords, if necessary: a space to discuss political ideologies associated with systematic sexual discrimination, environmental degradation, economic inequities, and contested national boundaries, which are all on established feminist agendas.

From this perspective, *book clubs are political spaces*. I do not believe that the clubs necessarily need to be revolutionary to change society. For it is within these feminine spaces that a woman gains confidence to communicate about issues important to her, her community, her nation, and her world. None of the groups I looked at said they, as a group, responded collectively to an issue that was brought up in book discussion. However, they all have distinct memories of a club meeting in which the dialogue was intense and the differing of opinions embraced. They were able to share their opinions, and to look at the book—and the world—from a different point of view. The women told me how their book club has made them read differently, how they read more astutely and more broadly. The book clubs empower the women to gather with people they want to outside of their work and home situations, to be with other women with whom they feel comfortable. They choose what they want to read, when they want to read, and how they want to read. The clubs are environments that bring joy to learning. I believe these are liberating results of book club practices. They may, therefore, contribute to citizenship, if not political action.

Through the confidence they gained, the networks they established, and the knowledge they accumulated, many nineteenth-century literary society women become active in social movements such as women's suffrage, the women's temperance

movements and social and political reform (Firor Scott, 1991; Ruggles Gere, 1997).

Contemporary groups are unlike their predecessors. Book clubs themselves in this study are not vehicles for systematic social change. There is no collective goal to seek the franchise, right injustice, or exert new cultural citizenship. Yet as Hannah Arendt (1991) has written about women's friendships as a form of solidarity, the book clubs: "are grounded not in claims to victimization but ... in the convergence of shared perspectives, shared competencies and shared pleasures" (pp. 102-103, cited in Code, p. 103).

Perhaps we are not living in revolutionary times. Or perhaps revolution looks different from that which we are used to. As we experience what has been coined the third-wave of feminism, we need turn to new ways of analysing how feminism is defined and how it looks. Within these groups, I see that feminism looks different from one group to the next, but it always includes a women-only space in which feminism in all its forms and manifestations is allowed. Feminism as social practice—and negotiated sisterhood—is alive and well. If we move from this remarkable confidence at the micro political level, what lies beyond?

### ***Where to From Here? A Research Agenda***

I believe Canadian researchers would benefit from a follow-up study of Canadian reading habits on the model of James Lorimer's 1978 and Nancy Duxbury's 1991 studies. A reproduction of these studies, augmented with the qualitative methodology from different standpoints—and one that acknowledges the collective spaces within which knowledge is actively produced—will provide more current, and relevant, data of book reading habits. Such a study will also necessarily investigate Canadian's opportunities for cultural participation with consideration of both ruling and non-ruling relations of power.

Book history and cultural studies scholars should not only investigate how cultural tastes and power structures are created and maintained in both face-to-face and on-line environments, but also to what extent. Sociological analysis combined with a political economy of literary cultural institutions could better illuminate the relationships between locally produced agency and the broader, social and economic situations. Such a study should interrogate the validity of Travis' (2003) claim that "increasingly precise and efficient marketing techniques have curtailed readers' abilities—individual as well as collective—to win a space of freedom for themselves within the web of commercial print culture" (p. 143).

An ethnographic study of on-line book clubs, including analysis of off-line conversations, would improve our understanding of agency in cyber reading communities and the distinct spaces created by the readers.

Most urgently, I believe it necessary to critically analyse the tape recordings of the interpretive dialogue I collected while participating with the groups. Although I highlighted significant themes in this work, it is necessary to return to the data to better determine book club norms that emerge through the texts in relationship to the canon of literary criticism. A literary analysis of the specific texts read by the women, combined with an analysis of the women's collective interpretation, would provide specific cases of women articulated resistance through texts from individual standpoints. This project would fill a gap where my project falls short, namely, in what Long (1992), Radway (1991) and Travis (2003) have identified as readers' delimited capacity for resistance: realist hermeneutic.

### ***Final Words***

Book clubs have broad implications for culture in Canada, and for Canadian print culture in particular. No feminist ideology fits neatly with my findings. However, the title of this work, “Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for Being,” reflects two major themes that have run throughout my project that inform how we can think about feminism. First, book club membership is a badge. Membership in a book club, and the experiences of collective reading and discussion, provides these women with opportunities to validate and valorise understandings themselves, of their world, and their places in it. Secondly, but to no lesser degree of importance, the women in my study find pleasure in and from their reading groups. It fulfils their desires to read more, to read differently, to discuss what they're reading, and to interpret works of literature together with the people they trust and respect. These members love to read, they recognise the value of reading, and want to challenge themselves in this way. The social bonds that are formed within both the face-to-face and virtual club enrich their lives. Women negotiate a space for being within in a book club that extends to and reflects their experiences as a woman, mother, daughter, partner, — and even, student of communication.

Appendix A  
*Observational Protocol*

Observational Protocol\*

TIME	Who?		
Theme			
Volume, Tone, Silences, Intensity, Over-talking			
Doing what with hands, body?			
Critical detachment from text?			
Identifies with characters- to what extent?			
Resisting text?			
Resolving tensions in text? How?			
Consistent patterns in meaning?			
Other interpretations of text			
Other discussion			

\* Original on legal size paper, horizontal layout

Appendix B  
*Member Questionnaire*



Written Questionnaire for all Members

Reading Information

1. When did you learn to read?
2. What kinds of books do you read most often?
3. Do you read alone?  
with your family?
4. How often do you read?  
when?  
where?
5. Why do you read?
6. How has reading affected your life?
7. Where do you get the books you read?
8. How do you choose the books you read? Why?
9. How has where and how you buy books changed since joining the group?
10. How often do you buy hardback? paperback?
11. Why did you join this group?
12. What is most satisfying about your group?

Least?

13. What other activities do you do with your group?

14. How many book club members did you know very well,  
somewhat well,  
and not very well at the beginning?  
and how many do you think you know well now?

15. Would you say you are very close, close, not very close or not at all close reading  
friends?  
friends for other things in life?

16. Think about your best friend. How would she/he tell me you have changed since  
joining this book club, if at all?

17. Please write a brief promotional piece for this book club.

## II. Personal information

Sex?

Age?

Marital status?

Children? How many? Ages?

Occupation

How long? Ever worked in the home only?

Spouse's occupation, if applicable?

Approx. family income?

Own or rent?

Education level?

### III. Leisure Patterns

Do you belong to any other groups or clubs? Which? Why?

What are your hobbies?

What else do you do in your spare time?

Appendix C  
*Interview Schedules*

For participant observation groups

### **I. Appropriation of books**

Would you say you embrace or discourage controversy?

What about encouraging or discouraging intensely personal disclosure?

I have been asked by several new book clubs to come in and explain how "to do it right."  
What advice should I give them?

Think about a book club meeting that you particularly enjoyed. Why did this meeting come to mind?

### **II. Group Membership**

What are the skills or knowledge someone would have to have in order to participate fully in a book club? What about your book club?

Can you share with me the discussions you had around admitting a man into your club?  
What kind of impact has it made?

Would you consider yourselves as strongly feminist? soft feminist? or not feminist at all?  
Why?

If I met you at a social gathering, and asked you about your book club, how would you describe it to me?

How many friendships are carried on outside of the club?

Why do you stay in this group?

### **IV. Outward impact**

Think about your best friend. How would she/he tell me you have changed since joining this book club, if at all?

What effect has this club had on your life?

How do you explain the popularity of book clubs?

### ***For Members of Non-participant Observation Groups***

#### **I. Book selection/ book purchasing**

How does your group select the books you read in book club?

#### **II. Appropriation of books**

I have been asked by several new book clubs to come in and explain how "to do it right." What advice should I give them?

Think about a book club meeting that you particularly enjoyed. Why did this meeting come to mind?

#### **III. Group Membership**

What are the skills or knowledge someone would have to have in order to participate fully in a book club? What about your book club?

If I met you at a social gathering, and asked you about your book club, how would you describe it to me?

Why do you stay in this group?

#### **IV. Outward impact**

Think about your best friend. How would she/he tell me you have changed since joining this book club, if at all?

Have you ever been moved to take action on an issue after reading a particular book?

How do you explain the popularity of book clubs?

## ***For Non-Joiners***

### **I. Reading History**

1. Why do you read?
2. Kinds of books that you read?
  - Which author?
  - How often?
  - When?
  - Where?
4. Where do you get the books you read?
  - How do you choose the books you read? Why?
  - Frequency of purchasing hardback? paperback?

### **II. Reading Discussion**

1. Do you talk about the books you read?
  - Why? With whom?

### **III. Book Club Avoidance**

1. You've told me that you do not want to belong to a book club. Why is that?
2. What do you think goes on in book clubs?
3. What sense do you make of their popularity?

### **IV. Personal information**

Sex?

Age?

Marital status?

Children? How many? Ages?

How do you spend your day?

Occupation?

How long? Ever worked in the home only?

Spouse's occupation?

Approx. family income?

Own or rent?

Education level?

## **V. Leisure Patterns**

1. Do you belong to any groups or clubs? Which? Why?
2. What are your hobbies?
3. What else do you do in your spare time?

## ***For Cultural Intermediaries***

(Book club facilitators, booksellers, librarians)

### **I. Appropriation of books**

I have been asked by several new book clubs to come in and explain how "to do it right." What advice should I give them?

Think about a book club meeting that you particularly enjoyed. Why did this meeting come to mind?

### **II. Group Membership**

What are the skills or knowledge someone would have to have in order to participate fully in a book club? What about your book club?

If I met you at a social gathering, and asked you about your book club, how would you describe it to me?

Why do you stay in this group?

What other experience do you have with book clubs?

### **IV. Outward impact**

Think about your best friend. How would she/he tell me you have changed since joining this book club, if at all?

Have you ever been moved to take action on an issue after reading a particular book?



How do you explain the popularity of book clubs?

Anything else?

### ***For Publishing Representatives***

#### **Your role**

1. What is your job title?
2. How is it that you became involved with book clubs as part of your job?
3. At what point in the publishing process does a book get "targeted" as a potential book club book?
4. What role do you play in the process?
5. What significance do book clubs have to the publishing process?
6. What significance do they have for Canadian publishers?

#### **Book clubs, in general**

1. What experience do you have with "real" book clubs?
  - b. how about with virtual?
2. What makes a successful book club?
3. What do you think goes on in book clubs?
4. What sense do you make of their popularity?

### ***For Globe & Mail, Vancouver Sun Reporters***

#### **I. Book Club Existence**

1. What experience do you have with book clubs?
2. How do you explain book club popularity?

3. What do you think of the new accolade given to Oprah?

(For Nolan) 4. In your article, you say that book clubs have become like push-ups, reading as become a add-on to our already busy lives. What do you say to your friends who have been in clubs for more than five years, and wouldn't miss one for the world?

5. What about the people who look forward to interpreting the books with the help of people that have come to know as friends? Is there some sort of safe space that is afforded to women, in partiular?

## **II. Book Club Dynamics**

1. What do you think goes on in book clubs?

## **III. For Publishing/bookselling**

1. What significance have book clubs had to Canadian publishing?

2. How do they influence your job?

Anything else?

Appendix D  
*Book Clubs Participating in Research*

	Monday Night	Tuesday Night	Wed. Night	Thurs. Night	Friday Night	Service Group Spin-off	Ruth's Group	Vera's Group	Joy's Group	Gloria's Group	32 Books Group
Women Inter-viewed*	Eduarda Holly Sangita Maggie Faye Sarah	Erika Launa Shelly Kathleen Georgia Deena Daniel Meredith	Siobahn Isaak Alice Maggie Felicity Marcia Nancy Susan	Jeanne Muriel Ann Elizabeth Jennifer Lisa Barbara Beth Natalie	Jessie Fiona	Shelly Bonnie Ann Cory Courtney	Ruth	Vera	Joy	Gloria	Mary (owner)
How Group Began	Majority worked together, invited friends and family	Small group of friends with children	Several worked together in prof'nal assoc., studied together	All are neighbors, all children attend same school	Two worked together, invited friends	Off-shoot of local community service group	All friends, except two	Neighbors	Neighbors	Several worked together, invited friends	Mary started it in her store
Years club has existed	Less than One	28	Five	Seven	Nine	25	Womens 18; mixed nine	Four	10	8	Two
Number of readers in club	Six	Eight - 12	11	Nine - 12	Six	48, divided into two	Womens 9-10; mixed 6-8	9-10	Unknown	12	8-14
Gender	All women	Women, one man	All women	All women	All women	All women	One all women; one mixed	All women	All women	All women	All women
Ages	21-28	46-60	22-37	35-50	29-65	58-68	W: late 50s-60s; mixed 40-65	38-73	40-45	45-55	20 - 68

	Monday Night	Tuesday Night	Wed. Night	Thurs. Night	Friday Night	Service Group Spin-off	Ruth's Group	Vera's Group	Joy's Group	Gloria's Group	32 Books Group
Education	All have college diploma or university degree	All have college diploma or university degree; several w/ graduate degrees	All have university or graduate degrees	All university graduates; one with master's level	All have university or graduate degrees	All with post-sec., some graduate degrees	Unknown	Unknown	All have university	All have university; some graduate	Unknown
Occupation	Project admin., manager, student, editorial	Teachers, administrators, consultant, librarian, nurses	Engineers, Unemployed, consultant, editorial, teacher, fiction editor, project mgr.	Librarian, artist, homemaker, student, teachers, social worker, business owner	Librarians, engineer, retired admin.	Teachers, fundraiser, conference co-ord., retired, social workers, homemaker, manager	W: mostly retired, homemakers; mixed lawyers and other business professionals	Unknown	dentists; family doctor; business women; in-house; engineer	Librar'ns; business women; university administrators; civil servant	In-house, business women, retired
Ethnicity	Mixed heritage	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Predom. European descent	Predom. European descent
Religion	Mixed	Unknown	Mixed	Mixed	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown.
Region	Burnaby, Westend	West-side	West-end, Westside	New West.	Burnaby, Westside	Varies	Both vary	North Van.	West-side	Varied	North Van.

	Monday Night	Tuesday Night	Wed. Night	Thurs. Night	Friday Night	Service Group Spin-off	Ruth's Group	Vera's Group	Joy's Group	Gloria's Group	32 Books Group
Income	Lower to middle (\$12k to \$60k)	Middle to upper (\$41k to \$100k)	Lower-middle to middle (\$25k to \$75k)	Lower-middle to upper-middle (\$30k to "plenty")	Unknown, presumably upper-middle	Unknown, presumably upper-middle to upper	Unknown, presumably upper-middle to upper	Unknown, presumably upper-middle to upper	Unknown, presumably upper-middle to upper	Unknown, presumably upper-middle to upper	Unknown
Relationship Status	No married, several partnerships	Mostly married or in partnerships	Several married, several partnerships, several singles	Mostly married, one single	Married, or in partnerships, one single	Unknown, presumably mostly married, some divorced, some widowed	Unknown, presumably mostly married, some divorced, some widowed	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Children	None	Most have children	None	All have children	Several with children	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Several with children

\*The names have been changed to protect the women's identities.

Appendix E  
*Broad List of QSR NUD\*IST Coding Categories*

Authors  
Book club practices  
Book club membership  
Book club rituals  
Book selection processes of the club  
Book selection processes of the individual  
Characteristics of book club books  
Characteristics of Community  
Club membership performances  
Club membership socio-economic characteristics and membership length  
Conflict in group dynamics, in text and discussion  
Clubs as vehicles of social movements  
Discussion processes and properties  
Gender  
Group dynamics  
Individual subjectivity  
Literacy  
Media channel convergence  
Place  
Reading practices  
Researcher's influence, observations, feelings  
Interview information  
Monday night's interview  
Tuesday night's interview  
Wednesday night's interview  
Thursday night's interview  
Friday night's interview  
Questionnaire responses



Appendix F  
*Complete List of QSR NUD\*IST Coding Categories*

1= Index Tree  
 2= /Club Mbrs::;GCM1|2|Memo for node (1) in the beginning, this is all demographic information I know about respondents.;;GCE.;;GCR1|2|2  
 3= /Club Mbrs/Age  
 4= /Club Mbrs/Age/Less than 20  
 5= /Club Mbrs/Age/20-30  
 6= /Club Mbrs/Age/31-40  
 7= /Club Mbrs/Age/41-50  
 8= /Club Mbrs/Age/51-60  
 9= /Club Mbrs/Age/61-70  
 10= /Club Mbrs/Age/Older than 70  
 11= /Club Mbrs/Gender  
 12= /Club Mbrs/Gender/Female  
 13= /Club Mbrs/Gender/Male  
 14= /Club Mbrs/Gender/Unknown  
 15= /Club Mbrs/Education  
 16= /Club Mbrs/Education/High school  
 17= /Club Mbrs/Education/some University or college  
 18= /Club Mbrs/Education/University or college diploma  
 19= /Club Mbrs/Education/Some graduate  
 20= /Club Mbrs/Education/Graduate degree  
 21= /Club Mbrs/Profession  
 22= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Own Business  
 23= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Student  
 24= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Health Care administrator  
 25= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Communicator  
 26= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Teacher  
 27= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Librarian  
 28= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Author  
 29= /Club Mbrs/Profession/Administrator  
 30= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity  
 31= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity/Unknown  
 32= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity/Great Britain Descent  
 33= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity/European Descent  
 34= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity/Asian descent  
 35= /Club Mbrs/Ethnicity/Scandinavian descent  
 36= /Club Mbrs/Region  
 37= /Club Mbrs/Region/Vancouver  
 38= /Club Mbrs/Region/Vancouver suburb  
 39= /Club Mbrs/Region/Other Canada  
 40= /Club Mbrs/Region/USA  
 41= /Club Mbrs/Region/Europe  
 42= /Club Mbrs/Region/Australia  
 43= /Club Mbrs/Income  
 44= /Club Mbrs/Income/Unknown

45= /Club Mbrs/Income/Upper Class  
 46= /Club Mbrs/Income/Upper Middle Class  
 47= /Club Mbrs/Income/Middle Class  
 48= /Club Mbrs/Income/Lower Middle Class  
 49= /Club Mbrs/Income/Lower Class  
 50= /Club Mbrs/M. Status  
 51= /Club Mbrs/M. Status/Married or equivalent  
 52= /Club Mbrs/M. Status/Single  
 53= /Club Mbrs/M. Status/Unknown  
 54= /Club Mbrs/Length in club  
 55= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/Less than one year  
 56= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/One to two years  
 57= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/Three to five  
 58= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/Six to ten  
 59= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/11-15  
 60= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/16-20  
 61= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/21-25  
 62= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/More than 25  
 63= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/Not a member  
 64= /Club Mbrs/Length in club/Never a Member  
 65= /Club Mbrs/Children  
 66= /Club Mbrs/Children /Yes  
 67= /Club Mbrs/Children /No  
 68= /Club Mbrs/Other club membership  
 69= /BC Genre::;GCM1|69|Memo for node (2) Describes how members determine which  
       books were or are good book club books.;;GCE.;;GCR1|69|69  
 70= /BC Genre/multiple layers  
 71= /BC Genre/sub layers  
 72= /BC Genre/aesthetic  
 73= /BC Genre/level: lt.  
 74= /BC Genre/level: heavy  
 75= /BC Genre/importance: social  
 76= /BC Genre/importance: internal culture  
 77= /BC Genre/creates dialogue  
 78= /BC Genre/Books identified as good  
 79= /BC Genre/Books identified as bad  
 80= /Community.;;GCM1|80|Memo for node (3) Those explanations given for being part  
       of this group.;;GCE.;;GCR1|80|80  
 81= /Community/Uniqueness  
 82= /Community/love  
 83= /Community/shared interests  
 84= /Community/Interpret society  
 85= /Community/Interpret world  
 86= /Community/feminine solidarity  
 87= /Community/trust  
 88= /Community/Age - generation

- 89= /Community/Self help
- 90= /Community/Friendship
- 91= /Community/Bonds
- 92= /Community/Mediation
- 93= /Community/Mediation/Computer
- 94= /Community/Mediation/Print
- 95= /Community/Mediation/Telephone
- 96= /Book Selection::;GCM1|96|Memo for node (4) That which is important to group members about choosing books to read for group.;;GCE;;GCR1|96|96
- 97= /Book Selection/Trust
- 98= /Book Selection/In research phase
- 99= /Book Selection/Eternal quest
- 100= /Book Selection/Cultural authority
- 101= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Group pressure
- 102= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Academy
- 103= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Publishing: Guides
- 104= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Publishing: Web
- 105= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Media: TV
- 106= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Media: Newspapers
- 107= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Media: Radio
- 108= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Media: Magazines
- 109= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Media: Web
- 110= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Retail outlets
- 111= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Library
- 112= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Oprah
- 113= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/High vs. low
- 114= /Book Selection/Cultural authority/Award winners
- 115= /Book Selection/Friends and family
- 116= /Book Selection/Gender issues
- 117= /Book Selection/Process
- 118= /Book Selection/Genre
- 119= /Book Selection/Aesthetics
- 120= /Book Selection/Author
- 121= /BC Practices
- 122= /BC Identified Practices::;GCM1|122|Memo for node (6)That which the members identify as part of the book club rituals.;;GCE;;GCR1|122|122
- 123= /BC Identified Practices/Social
- 124= /BC Identified Practices/Learning
- 125= /BC Identified Practices/Reading out loud
- 126= /BC Identified Practices/Expectations
- 127= /BC Identified Practices/Cultural competence
- 128= /BC Identified Practices/Dialogue
- 129= /BC Identified Practices/Dialogue/cultural diagnosis
- 130= /BC Identified Practices/Meeting frequency
- 131= /BC Identified Practices/gender of club
- 132= /BC Identified Practices/Number of members

133= /BC Identified Practices/Length of club existence  
134= /BC Identified Practices/Club Ethnicity  
135= /BC Identified Practices/Club Ages  
136= /BC Identified Practices/Cultural, interpretive authorities  
137= /BC Identified Practices/Responsibility  
138= /Reading Practices  
139= /Reading Practices/Individual  
140= /Reading Practices/Individual/Learning  
141= /Reading Practices/Individual/Entertainment  
142= /Reading Practices/Individual/Lifeline  
143= /Reading Practices/Individual/Reading Space  
144= /Reading Practices/Individual/Private time  
145= /Reading Practices/Individual/Escape  
146= /Reading Practices/Individual/Types of books  
147= /Reading Practices/Individual/Frequency  
148= /Reading Practices/Individual/Passion for reading  
149= /Reading Practices/Individual/Relaxation  
150= /Reading Practices/For Group  
151= /Reading Practices/For Group/Learning  
152= /Reading Practices/For Group/Entertainment  
153= /Reading Practices/For Group/Lifeline  
154= /Reading Practices/For Group/Reading space  
155= /Reading Practices/For Group/Private time  
156= /Reading Practices/For Group/Escape  
157= /Reading Practices/For Group/Types of books  
158= /Reading Practices/For Group/Frequency  
159= /Reading Practices/For Group/Passion for reading  
160= /Reading Practices/For Group/Genre expansion  
161= /Conflict  
162= /Conflict/Within Book  
163= /Conflict/Oppositional readings  
164= /Conflict/Within club membership  
165= /Discussion  
166= /Discussion/Personal  
167= /Discussion/Structural  
168= /Discussion/Other  
169= /Gender  
170= /Gender/Discussion  
171= /Gender/Reading level  
172= /Gender/Impetus for belonging  
173= /Gender/Group safety  
174= /Gender/Binding Mechanisms  
175= /Group Dynamics  
176= /Group Dynamics/Power struggles  
177= /Group Dynamics/Intimidation  
178= /Group Dynamics/Unspoken standards

179= /Authors  
180= /Authors/Production Process  
181= /Literacy  
182= /Literacy/Liberty  
183= /Literacy/Power  
184= /Literacy/Reading is not dead  
185= /Membership in Club  
186= /Membership in Club/Cultural Capital  
187= /Membership in Club/Dedication  
188= /Membership in Club/Fills gap  
189= /Membership in Club/Sociocultural resources  
190= /Membership in Club/Why belong?  
191= /Place  
192= /Place/Setting  
193= /Place/food  
194= /Place/Ritual  
195= /My Research  
196= /convergence  
197= /convergence/Online  
198= /convergence/Web use  
199= /convergence/community constructs  
200= /Vehicles for social movements  
201= /Vehicles for social movements/Outside social activity  
202= /Obtaining Books  
203= /Interview information  
204= /Interview information/Individual  
205= /Interview information/group interview, same club  
206= /Interview information/Group interview, different club  
207= /Interview information/Individual, cultural authority  
208= /Interview information/Individual, not a member  
209= /Interview information/Group interview, cultural authorities  
210= /Interview information/Individual, never a member  
211= /Lileth's Questionnaires  
212= /Junior League Questionnaires  
213= /Friday Group's Questionnaires  
214= /Thursday Group's Questionnaires  
215= /Tuesday Group's Questionnaires  
216= /Start-up's Questionnaires  
217= /Questionnaire Responses  
218= /Questionnaire Responses/Learn to read  
219= /Questionnaire Responses/Kinds of books  
220= /Questionnaire Responses/Read alone  
221= /Questionnaire Responses/Read with family  
222= /Questionnaire Responses/How often read  
223= /Questionnaire Responses/When read  
224= /Questionnaire Responses/Where read

225= /Questionnaire Responses/Why read  
226= /Questionnaire Responses/How reading affects life  
227= /Questionnaire Responses/Where gets books  
228= /Questionnaire Responses/How books are chosen  
229= /Questionnaire Responses/How choosing books has changed  
230= /Questionnaire Responses/How often buy hb  
231= /Questionnaire Responses/How often buy pb  
232= /Questionnaire Responses/Why joined group  
233= /Questionnaire Responses/Most satisfying  
234= /Questionnaire Responses/Least satisfying  
235= /Questionnaire Responses/Other activities with group  
236= /Questionnaire Responses/Knew very well before  
237= /Questionnaire Responses/Knew somewhat well before  
238= /Questionnaire Responses/Knew not very well before  
239= /Questionnaire Responses/Know well now  
240= /Questionnaire Responses/How close reading friends  
241= /Questionnaire Responses/How close life friends  
242= /Questionnaire Responses/How person has changed  
243= /Questionnaire Responses/Promotional piece  
244= /Questionnaire Responses/Gender  
245= /Questionnaire Responses/Age  
246= /Questionnaire Responses/Marital status  
247= /Questionnaire Responses/children  
248= /Questionnaire Responses/Occupation  
249= /Questionnaire Responses/Length in occupation  
250= /Questionnaire Responses/Work at home  
251= /Questionnaire Responses/Spouse's occupation  
252= /Questionnaire Responses/Income  
253= /Questionnaire Responses/Own or rent  
254= /Questionnaire Responses/Education  
255= /Questionnaire Responses/Other clubs  
256= /Questionnaire Responses/Hobbies  
257= /Questionnaire Responses/Spare time

Appendix G  
*Cyber Survey*



## Survey for Virtual Book Club Members

Dear Reader,

I am conducting a conducting a short survey about reading and on-line book clubs as part of my PhD project. Your participation is greatly appreciated! The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete, and when you are finished, you simply need to push "submit" and your survey responses will be sent to me. (Be sure to note at the end if you would like your name entered into a draw for a \$50 gift certificate from an on-line book store!)

My university, SFU, and I subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

You may register any comments you might have about the project with Dr. Catherine Murray, Chair of Graduate Studies, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. Her telephone number is (604) 291-5322, and her e-mail is [murraye@sfu.ca](mailto:murraye@sfu.ca).

You may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting me at:

DeNel Rehberg Sedo, The School of Communication, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, or at [dsedo@sfu.ca](mailto:dsedo@sfu.ca).

*Section A*

In percentages.

1. Which of the following kinds of books do you read most often? (Check as many as apply.) n = 250

36__Biography	54__Other non-fiction	8__Poetry
19__Humour	48__Classical Lit.	27__Sci. Fi, Fantasy, Horror
7__Plays	43__Mystery	2__Western
12__Romance	3__Cartoon	86__Contemporary Fiction

1a. Which one do you prefer most? (Check one response below.) n = 251

4__Biography	12__Other non-fiction	.5__Poetry
3.5__Humour	10__Classical Lit.	8__Sci. Fi, Fantasy, Horror
--__Plays	10__Mystery	--__Western
4__Romance	--__Cartoon	51__Contemporary Fiction

1b. Is the majority of your reading done for work or pleasure? n = 248

14__Work	86__Pleasure
----------	--------------

2. On average, how much do you usually read for pleasure in a typical week? (Check one response below.) n = 250 (one category missing: not used in analysis)

10__One hour or less
58__Five to ten hours
32__More than ten hours

3. When do you read for pleasure most often? (Check one response below.) n = 250

- 6\_\_\_ In the mornings
- 8\_\_\_ In the afternoons
- 67\_\_\_ In the evenings
- 17\_\_\_ On the weekends
- 2\_\_\_ On my work breaks

4. Where do you read for pleasure most often? (Check one response below.) n = 250

- 38\_\_\_ In Bed
- 3\_\_\_ In the bath
- 31\_\_\_ In my favourite chair/sofa at home
- 2\_\_\_ At my desk
- 1\_\_\_ In a private space at work
- 18\_\_\_ Doesn't matter
- 7\_\_\_ Other (Please specify\_\_\_\_\_)

4a. Do you prefer to read alone or with others? n = 248

- 68\_\_\_ Alone
- 3\_\_\_ With others
- 29\_\_\_ Doesn't matter

5. What role has reading played in your life? (Feel free to write up to 250 words.) n = 218

\_read since child 34; reads for entertainment 19; reads for escape 40; reads for relaxation 21; reads to discover world 34; reads to discover self 19; reads to interpret world 23; reads to interpret self 24; reads to improve how others view her or him 7; reads because it's a life line 26; reads to fight loneliness 7; reads because reading is an indulgence 8; reads to increase knowledge or vocabulary 47; prefers books to tv 5; propels writing 5; reads to expand imagination 12; reads for other reasons 23.

6. How do you usually choose the books you want to read? (Check as many as apply.) n = 248

82\_\_ Friends/family recommend

64\_\_ Newspaper, Magazine, TV, Radio or Web Reviews

17\_\_ Oprah's choices

38\_\_ Prize winners

34\_\_ I like the cover or jacket copy

43\_\_ Book club choices

32\_\_ Bestseller lists

79\_\_ Favourite author

30\_\_ Gifts from people

10\_\_ Publisher's reading group guides

\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify): school needs 2; similar genre 3; on-line book club recommendation 2; bookstore recommendation 1; on-line book club read 2; other means 11.

7. Where do you most often get the books you read? (Please check only one.) n = 247

37\_\_ Chain bookseller

14\_\_ Independent bookseller

28\_\_ Library

7\_\_ Borrow from friends/family

1\_\_ As gifts

\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify): all of the above 4; direct from publisher/author 1; on-line bookstore 5; other 3.

8. Approximately how many books do you have in your personal library? (Please check only one.) n = 248

--\_\_ Less than 10

10\_\_ 10-50

17\_\_ 50-100

73\_\_ More than 100

9. Of the books in your personal library, how many have you read? n = 248

2\_\_ Hardly any of them

12\_\_ Some of them

68\_\_ Most of them

18\_\_ All of them

10. In a typical year, how much money do you spend on books? n = 249

1\_\_ Less than \$25

4\_\_ \$25 - \$50

7\_\_ \$51 - \$75

10\_\_ \$75 - \$100

21\_\_ \$101 - \$200

17\_\_ \$201 - \$300

8\_\_ \$301 - \$400

8\_\_ \$401 - \$500

24\_\_ More than \$500

*Section B*

11. Are you or have you ever belonged to a book club? n = 249

64\_\_ yes 36\_\_ no (If no, skip to Section B, Question 30)

11a. If yes, is the book club a book club where members meet in person, meet on-line, or have you been a member of both types? I am a member of a

36\_\_ "real" book club

36\_\_ virtual book club

28\_\_ both types of book clubs

n = 160

***For the remaining questions: If you are or have been a member of more than one club, answer with the club that you participate(ed) in most frequently in mind.***

12. Is this club a "real" book club or a virtual book club? n = 158

52\_\_ "real" book club

48\_\_ virtual book club

13. How long have you been or were you a member? n = 158

27\_\_ Less than one year

35\_\_ 1 – 2 years

25\_\_ 3 – 5 years

7\_\_ 5 – 10 years

4\_\_ 10 – 15 years

2\_\_ 15 – 20 years

--\_\_ More than 20 years

14. Why did you join this book club? (Check as many as apply.) n = 158

34\_\_ I liked the book(s) they were reading.

62\_\_ I wanted to connect with others like me.

10\_\_ I need motivation to read.

51\_\_ I feel the need to talk about books I'm reading.

61\_\_ To read books I wouldn't normally read.

34\_\_ To "meet" new people.

18\_\_ A friend or family member invited me to join.

65\_\_ To intellectually stimulate myself.

65\_\_ For fun.

14\_\_ I like the flexibility of the scheduling.

6\_\_ I wanted to be in a book club, but didn't want to belong to a "real" one.

2\_\_ I enjoy(ed) my "real" book club, and wanted to try something new.

\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify): to learn about other books 4; wanted to form own group

5; no real one in area 4; other reasons 6

15. Are you still a member of this group? n = 159

86\_\_ yes 14\_\_ no

16. If you have left the group, why did you leave? n = 26

\_\_scheduling conflict 8; discussion too superficial 15; unsatisfactory book choices 19; rude members 4; group became defunct 11; too busy 23; moved 24; other reasons 15.

*(After finishing this question, please skip to Section B, Question 30)*

17. What were the last three books you read for your book club? n = 122

Bio 12; Mystery 10; Classical fiction 14; other non fiction 10; romance 2; western 8; poetry 0; science fiction 8; cartoon 0; plays 1; humour 3;

18. Do you, or have you ever, used the reading group guides provided by some publishers for your club's discussion? n = 125

47\_\_ yes            53\_\_no

19. If you are a member of an online club, how often do you (or did you) log on to discuss your club's book selection in the last month? n = 84

33\_\_ More than once per day

29\_\_ Once per day

18\_\_ Several times per week

5\_\_ Once per week

12\_\_ Several times per month

3\_\_ Once per month

20. Think about a book club discussion that you particularly enjoyed. What was it that you most liked about this? n = 107

lots of discussion 20; in-depth discussion 19; different points of view shared 68; polite discussion 4; feelings of friendship 1; just because I loved it 1; point of view changed 8; questions clarified 4; personal experiences shared 8; honesty 1; other reasons 19; fun and laughter 8

21. How often does your book club discussion turn to social, political or environmental issues? n = 126  
42\_\_Frequently 52\_\_Occasionally 6\_\_Never
22. How often does your book club discussion focus mainly on the structure of the book? n = 125  
33\_\_Frequently 58\_\_Occasionally 9\_\_Never
23. How often do your book club members use personal experiences to interpret the book? n = 126  
62\_\_Frequently 36\_\_Occasionally 2\_\_Never
24. What is most satisfying about this group? n = 112  
new books 14; social bonds 26; new ways of looking at world 24; meeting new people 4; fun/humour/wit 8; intellectual stimulation 13; non-judgemental 5; depth of discussion 12; like-minded people 10; anonymity 1; other reasons 29
25. What is least satisfying about this group? n = 101  
rude people 12; arguments 11; tech problems with software 1; inability to “hear” 4; lurkers 2; book choices 8; lack of men 4; pressure to finish book 3; scheduling 10; off-topic conversation 18; number of unsubscribers 1; other reasons 32; nothing 15.
26. Do you keep in touch or communicate with any members outside of discussing the book? n = 127  
68\_\_ Yes 32\_\_ No
27. If you are in an online book club, have you ever met another group member in person? n = 87  
17\_\_ Yes 83\_\_ No
28. Would you consider any of the other members as friends? n = 122



- 14\_\_ Yes, very close friends
- 33\_\_ Yes, close friends
- 44\_\_ No, they are only acquaintances
- 9\_\_ No, they are not friends

29. Do you belong to any other groups or clubs? n = 116

49\_\_ Yes. If yes, what type(s)?

professional association 16; social 27; athletic 16; self-help 3; writing group 4; book club 9; on-line self-help 6; on-line book club 7; on-line social 14; religious 7; other 33

51\_\_ No

29a. Are any of these online? n = 80

46\_\_ Yes      54\_\_ No

#### *Section B*

30. How do you explain the popularity of book clubs? n = 214

people want to regain community 26; Oprah 10; chainstore/publisher marketing 1; share ideas 48; no idea 7; other reasons 41

31. What role might the internet play in this? n = 207

access to like people 25; overcome geographic barriers 35; time flexibility 21; anonymity 12; community 8; no influence 5; access to books 12; no idea 11; other 34.

#### *Section C*

32. Gender? n = 244

85\_\_ Female

14\_\_ Male

1\_\_ Prefer not to answer

33. Country you reside in? n = 246

Canada 47; USA 46; Australia 2; UK 3; Isreal, Phil., Germany 2

34. Age? n = 243

less than 20 1; 20-25 9; 26-30 21; 31-35 23; 36-40 13; 41-45 7; 46-50 10; 51-55 7; 56-60 3; 61-65 3; 66-70 2; 71-75 1

35. Occupation? n = 239

home 4; medical 3; library 2; education 12; legal 1; civil 3; writer 7; self 2;  
communication 14; administration 10; retired 5; student 20; finance 5; other 12

36. Education level? n = 242

1\_\_ Some high school

4\_\_ High school diploma

18\_\_ Some university/college

42\_\_ University/college degree

10\_\_ Some post-graduate

25\_\_ Post-graduate degree

~~~~~

If necessary, can I contact you for clarification?

\_\_\_ Yes. If yes, what is your e-mail address?

\_\_\_ No

As a token of my appreciation, I am offering a gift certificate to a Canadian on-line book store. Would you like your name to be put into the draw for a \$50 gift certificate from Indigo.ca?

\_\_\_ Yes. If yes, what is your e-mail address?

\_\_\_ No

Thank you very much for your participation!

Happy Reading!

Appendix H  
*SPSS Frequencies, Cross Tabulations, Significance Tests*

***Frequencies***

- |                                             |     |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Top three types of books read most often | Q1  |
| Bio                                         |     |
| Mys                                         |     |
| Class. Lit.                                 |     |
| Cont. Fic.                                  |     |
| Other                                       |     |
| Romance                                     |     |
| Western                                     |     |
| Poetry                                      |     |
| Sci. Fi.                                    |     |
| Cartoon                                     |     |
| Plays                                       |     |
| Humour                                      |     |
| No Answer                                   |     |
| 2. Top three preferences                    | Q1a |
| Bio                                         |     |
| Mys                                         |     |
| Class. Lit.                                 |     |
| Cont. Fic.                                  |     |
| Other                                       |     |
| Romance                                     |     |
| Western                                     |     |
| Poetry                                      |     |
| Sci. Fi.                                    |     |
| Cartoon                                     |     |
| Plays                                       |     |
| Humour                                      |     |
| No Answer                                   |     |
| 3. Reason for reading                       | Q1b |
| Work                                        |     |
| Pleasure                                    |     |
| No Answer                                   |     |
| 4. Amount of reading each week              | Q2  |
| 1 hour or less                              |     |
| 5-10 hours                                  |     |
| More than 10                                |     |
| No Answer                                   |     |
| 5. When they read                           | Q3  |
| Mornings                                    |     |
| Afternoons                                  |     |
| Evenings                                    |     |
| Weekends                                    |     |
| Workbreaks                                  |     |
| No Answer                                   |     |
| 6. Where they read                          | Q4  |

- Bed
  - Bath
  - Favourite chair
  - Desk
  - Private Space
  - Doesn't matter
  - Other
  - No Answer
7. With whom do they read Q4a
- Alone
  - w/others
  - Doesn't Matter
  - No Answer
8. Role of reading in person's life. Each vector Q5
- Read since childhood
  - Entertainment
  - Escape
  - Relaxation
  - Discovery of world
  - Discover of self
  - Interpretation of world
  - Interpretation of self
  - Perception of person (it is important to respondent how others perceive her/him)
  - Reading is a "lifeline"
  - Fight loneliness
  - Indulgence
  - Increase knowledge
  - Preference over television
  - Propel writing
  - Expand imagination
  - Other
  - No answer
9. How books are chosen Q6
- Friends/family recommend
  - Newspaper, Magazine, TV, Radio or Web Reviews
  - Oprah's choices
  - Prize winners
  - I like the cover or jacket copy
  - Book club choices
  - Bestseller lists
  - Favourite author
  - Gifts from people
  - Publisher's reading group guides
  - School
  - Similar genre
  - On-line bookstore recommendations

- Bookstore recommendations  
 On-line book groups  
 Other  
 No Answer
10. Where do they get their books Q7  
 Chain bookseller  
 Independent bookseller  
 Library  
 Borrow from friends/family  
 As gifts  
 All of the above  
 Direct from publisher/author  
 Other  
 No Answer
11. Number of books in personal library Q8  
 Less than 10  
 10-50  
 50-100  
 More than 100  
 No Answer
12. Number of books read in their library Q9  
 Hardly any of them  
 Some of them  
 Most of them  
 All of them  
 No Answer
13. Amount of money spend on books Q10  
 Less than \$25= 1  
 \$25 - \$50= 2  
 \$51 - \$75= 3  
 \$75 - \$100= 4  
 \$101 - \$200= 5  
 \$201 - \$300= 6  
 \$301 - \$400= 7  
 \$401 - \$500= 8  
 \$More than \$500= 9  
 No Answer
14. Book club membership in the past Q11  
 Yes  
 No  
 No Answer
15. Type of book club membership Q11a  
 "Real"  
 Virtual  
 Both  
 No Answer

16. Type of club they refer to for remaining q Q12  
 "Real"  
 Virtual  
 Both  
 No Answer
17. Length of membership Q13  
 Less than one year= 1  
 1 – 2 years= 2  
 3 – 5 years= 3  
 5 – 10 years= 4  
 10 – 15 years= 5  
 15 – 20 years= 6  
 More than 20 years= 7  
 No Answer
18. Reason for joining Q14  
 I liked the book(s) they were reading  
 I wanted to connect with others like me  
 I need motivation to read  
 I feel the need to talk about books I'm reading  
 To read books I wouldn't normally read  
 To "meet" new people  
 A friend or family member invited me to join  
 To intellectually stimulate myself  
 For fun  
 I like the flexibility of the scheduling  
 I wanted to be in a book club, but didn't want to belong to a "real" one  
 I enjoy(ed) my "real" book club, and wanted to try something new  
 To learn about other books  
 Friend/family invited me to join  
 I created my own book club  
 Other  
 No Answer
19. Still member? Q15  
 Yes  
 No  
 No Answer
20. Why did those "Nos" from 19 leave? Q16  
 Scheduling Conflict  
 Talk too superficial  
 Unsatisfactory book choices  
 Rude people  
 Uncomfortable environment  
 Group defunct  
 Too busy  
 Other  
 N/A

21. Genre of last three books read Q17  
 Bio  
 Mystery  
 Class. Lit.  
 Cont. Fic.  
 Other  
 Romance  
 Western  
 Poetry  
 Sci. Fi.  
 Cartoon  
 Plays  
 Humour  
 No Answer
22. Use of publisher's guides Q18  
 Yes  
 No  
 No Answer
23. Length of log on times Q19  
 More than once per day  
 Once per day  
 Several times per week  
 Once per week  
 Several times per month  
 Once per month  
 N/A
24. Sources of enjoyment Q20  
 Lots of discussion  
 In-depth discussion  
 Different points of view  
 Polite discussion  
 Feelings of friendship  
 Fun  
 Love it  
 My point of view changed  
 My questions clarified  
 Personal experiences shared  
 Honesty  
 Other  
 N/A
25. Discussion type Soc/Pol/Env. Q21  
 Frequently  
 Occasionally  
 Never  
 N/A
26. Discussion type Structure Q22





- Yes, close friends  
 No, they are only acquaintances  
 No, they are not friends  
 N/A
33. Other group membership Q29  
 No  
 Prof. Assoc  
 Social  
 Athletic  
 Self-help  
 Writing group  
 BC  
 On-line Self-help  
 On-line BC  
 On-line social  
 Religious  
 Other  
 N/A
34. Online group membership Q29a  
 Yes  
 No  
 N/A
35. Book club popularity explanation Q30  
 Regain Community  
 Oprah  
 Chainstore Mrktg  
 Share ideas  
 No idea  
 Other  
 N/A
36. Internet's influence Q31  
 Access to like people  
 Overcome geographical barrier  
 Time flexibility  
 Anonymity  
 Community  
 No influence  
 Access to books  
 Other  
 No idea  
 N/A
37. Respondents' gender Q32  
 Female  
 Male  
 Prefer N/A  
 N/A

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| 38. Respondents' country of residence | Q33 |
| Canada                                |     |
| USA                                   |     |
| Australia                             |     |
| UK                                    |     |
| Israel                                |     |
| UAE                                   |     |
| Phil.                                 |     |
| Germany                               |     |
| Other                                 |     |
| N/A                                   |     |
| 39. Respondents' age                  | Q34 |
| Less than 20                          |     |
| 20-25                                 |     |
| 26-30                                 |     |
| 31-35                                 |     |
| 36-40                                 |     |
| 41-45                                 |     |
| 46-50                                 |     |
| 51-55                                 |     |
| 56-60                                 |     |
| 61-65                                 |     |
| 66-70                                 |     |
| 71-75                                 |     |
| Older than 75                         |     |
| N/A                                   |     |
| 40. Respondents' occupation           | Q35 |
| Home                                  |     |
| Medical                               |     |
| Library                               |     |
| Education                             |     |
| Legal                                 |     |
| Cival                                 |     |
| Writer                                |     |
| Self                                  |     |
| Comm.                                 |     |
| Admin.                                |     |
| Retired                               |     |
| Student                               |     |
| N/A                                   |     |
| 41. Respondents' education            | Q36 |
| Some high school                      |     |
| High school diploma                   |     |
| Some university/college               |     |
| University/college degree             |     |
| Some post-graduate                    |     |

Post-graduate degree  
N/A

***Cross-tabulations and significance tests***

1. Women/Men      X      All of the above
2. Book club members/non-book club members      X      All of the above
3. Online book club members/face-to-face book club members/both type members (Q 11, 11a, 12)      X      All of the above

Appendix I  
*Titles Mentioned in Cyber Study*

*A Child Called It*, David J. Pelzer  
*A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens  
*A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess  
*A Closed Book*, Gilbert Adair  
*A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, Terry McMillan, **3 mentions**  
*A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry  
*A Game of Thrones*, **George R. R. Martin, 2 mentions**  
*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers  
*A Passage to India*, EM Forster  
*A Patchwork Planet*, Anne Tyler  
*A Prayer for Own Meany*, John Irving  
*A Widow for a Year*, John Irving  
*Ahab's Wife: Or, the Star Gazer*, Sena Jeter Naslund  
*All the Pretty Horses*, Cormac McCarthy  
*Anil's Ghost*, **Michael Ondaatje, 5 mentions**  
*Anyplace But Here (2)*, Ellen Suitzer/Jack Coroy and Arna Wendell  
*Autobiography of Henry VIII*, Margaret George  
*Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcom X  
*Away*, Jane Urquhart  
*Ayala's Angel*, Anthony Trollope  
*B is for Burgler*, Sue Grafton  
*The Bear's Embrace*, **Patricia VanTighem, 2 mentions**  
*Bee Season*, **Myla Goldberg, 4 mentions**  
*Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott  
*Birds of America*, Lorrie Moore  
*Birdsong*, **Sebastian Faulks, 2 mentions**  
*Blackbird: A Memoir of Childhood Lost and Found*, **Jennifer Lauck, 2 mentions**  
*Bleak House*, Charles Dickens  
*Blind Assassin*, **Margaret Atwood, 12 mentions**  
*Blindness*, Jose Saramago  
*Business as Unusual*, Anita Roddick  
*Captain Corelli's Mondolin*, **Louis de Bernieres, 2 mentions**  
*Cannery Row*, John Steinbeck  
*Catch-22*, **Joseph Heller, 3 mentions**  
*Cat's Cradle*, **Kurt Vonnegut, 2 mentions**  
*Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood  
*Chocolat*, **Joanne Harris, 2 mentions**  
*Choke Hold*, Todd Babiak  
*Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier  
*Crazy for You*, Jennifer Crusie  
*Crossing to Safety*, Wallace Earle Stegner  
*Daughter of Fortune*, Isabel Allende  
*Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash  
*Death by Darjeeling*, Laura Childs  
*Democracy in America*, Alexis de Toqueville

*Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee  
*Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, Rebecca Wells, 3 mentions  
*East of Peculiar*, Suzann Ledbetter  
*1876*, Gore Vidal  
*Eleni*, Nicholas Gage  
*Elizabeth and After*, Matt Cohen  
*Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card  
*Evening*, Susan Minot  
*Fabulous Hell*, Craig Curtis  
*Face Down in the Marrow-Bone Pie*, Kathy Linn Emerson, 2 mentions  
*Falling Leaves*, Adeline Yen Mah  
*Final Jeopardy*, Linda Fairstein, 3 mentions  
*For the Love of Money*, Omar Tyree  
*Forever*, Timothy McCann  
*Fortune's Rocks*, Anita Shreve  
*4 Guys and Trouble*, Marcus Major  
*Fugitive Pieces*, Anne Michaels, 3 mentions  
*Gift from the Sea*, Helen Jacobs or Ruth A. Abbey (Out of print)  
*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tracey Chevalier, 8 mentions  
*God Don't Like Ugly*, Mary Monroe, 2 mentions  
*Happily Ever After*, Trisha Thomas  
*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, J.K. Rowling  
*Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad  
*Hemingway's Chair*, Michael Palin  
*Henry Esmond*, William Makepeace Thackeray  
*Here on Earth*, Alice Hoffman  
*Ida Mae*, Delores Thornton  
*I Captured the Castle*, Dodie Smith  
*I Know this Much is True*, Wally Lamb  
*I See through Eyes*, Eric Payne  
*Is he Popenjoy*, Anthony Trollope  
*Immortality*, Milan Kundera, 2 mentions  
*In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez  
*Into the Forest*, Jean Hegland, 3 mentions  
*Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison  
*Isabel's Bed*, Elinor Lipman  
*It's a Thin Line*, Kimberla Lawson Roby, 2 mentions  
*Jew vs. Jew*, Samuel Freedman  
*John Adams*, David McCullough  
*King Leopold's Ghos*, Adam Hochschild, 2 mentions  
*Ladder of Years*, Ann Tyler  
*Letters from Yellowstone*, Diane Smith  
*London*, Edward Rutherfurd, 2 mentions  
*Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandella  
*Master Georgie*, Beryl Bainbridge  
*Memoirs of a Geisha*, Arthur Golden

*Merrick*, Anne Rice  
***Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, John Berendt, 4 mentions**  
***Miss Garnet's Angel*, Salley Vickers, 6 mentions**  
*Miss Julia Speaks her Mind*, Ann B. Ross  
*Motherless Brooklyn*, Jonathan Lethem  
*My Antonia*, Willa Cather  
***My Dream of You*, Nuala O'Faolain, 11 mentions**  
*My Family and Other Animals*, Gerald Malcolm Durrell  
***My Soul to Keep*, Tananarive Due, 3 mentions**  
*No Logo*, Naomi Klein  
*No Strange Fire*, Ted Wojtasik  
*Noble House*, James Clavell  
*Not a Day Goes By*, E. Lynn Harris  
*Orchestrated Death*, Cynthia Harrod Eagles  
*Persian Pickle Club*, Sandra Dallas  
***Plain Truth*, Jodi Picoult, 2 mentions**  
*Plainsong*, Kent Haruf  
*Possession*, A.A. Byatt, 2 mentions  
***Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow, 2 mentions**  
*Quieter than Sleep*, Joanna Dobson  
*Rumors of War*, Ron Haggart or Phillip Caputo  
*Salem Falls*, Jodi Picoult  
*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Richard Bach  
***Shadows on the Rock*, Willa Cather, 3 mentions**  
*Sisters in the Wilderness*, Charlotte Gray  
*Sophie's World*, Jostein Gaarder  
*Soul Mountain*, Gao Xigjian  
*Step Change*, Georgina Boyes  
***Stones from the River*, Ursula Hegi, 2 mentions**  
*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, E. J. Oxenham  
***The Alienist*, Caleb Carr, 2 mentions**  
*The Black Daliah*, James Ellroy  
*The Body Artist*, Don DeLillo  
***The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Amy Tan, 3 mentions**  
*The Color of Water*, James McBride  
*The Education of Little Tree*, Forrest Carter  
***The Empty Chair*, Jeffrey Deaver, 2 mentions**  
*The Go-Between*, L.P. Hartley  
*The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck  
***The Good Soldier*, Ford Madox Ford 4 mentions**  
*The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, Melissa Bank  
*The Gumshoe, The Witch and the Virtual Corpse*, Keith Hartman  
*The Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene  
*The Hearts of Men*, Travis Hunter  
*The Hero's Walk*, Anita Rau Badami  
***The House of Sand and Fog*, Andre Dubus, III, 2 mentions**



*The Ladies Auxiliary*, Tova Mirvis  
*The Liar's Club*, Mary Karr  
***The Living Blood*, Tananarive Due, 3 mentions**  
***The Long Goodye*, Raymond Chandler, 10 mentions**  
*The Maintenance Man*, Michael Baisden  
*The Mammy*, Brendan O'Carroll  
*The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Oliver Sacks  
*The Man with a Load of Mischief*, Martha Grimes  
*The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco  
***The Pact: A Love Story*, Jodi Picoult, 2 mentions**  
*The Peppered Moth*, Margaret Drabble  
*The Pilgram Hawk*, Glenway Wescott  
***The Pillars of the Earth*, Ken Follett, 2 mentions**  
*The Pilot's Wife*, Anita Shreve  
***The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver, 7 mentions**  
*The Queen of October*, Shelley Fraser Mickle  
***The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant, 12 mentions**  
*The Samurai's Garden*, Gail Tsukiyama  
*The Saving Graces*, Patricia Gaffney  
*The Scarlet Feather*, Maeve Binchy  
*The Shipping News*, Annie Proulx  
*The Sparrow*, Macy Doria Russell  
***The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman, 3 mentions**  
*The Spyglass Tree*, Albert Murray  
*The Talmud and the Internet*, Jonathan Rosen  
*The Tree of Man*, Patrick White  
***The Vintner's Luck*, Elizabeth Knox, 4 mentions**  
*The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides  
***The Warmest December*, Bernice McFadden, 2 mentions**  
*The Weight of Water*, Anita Shreve  
*This Side of Eternity*, Rosalyn McMillan  
***To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, 2 mentions**  
*Train Whistle Guitar*, Albert Murray  
***True History of the Kelly Gang*, Peter Carey, 15 mentions**  
***Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom, 2 mentions**  
*Two for the Dough*, Janet Evanovich  
*Undaunted Courage*, Stephen Ambrose  
*Unredeemed Captive*, John Demos or Clifton Johnson  
***Waiting, Ha Jin*, 3 mentions**  
***We were the Mulvaney's*, Joyce Carol Oates, 3 mentions**  
***White Teeth*, Zadie Smith, 2 mentions**  
*Whiteway Colony*, Joy Thacker  
***Who the Hell is Wanda Fuca*, G.M. Ford, 3 mentions**  
*Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, Gregory Maguire  
*Wild Stone Heart*, Sharon Butala  
*Wilma Loves Betty*, Scott Brassart, Julie K. Trevelyan (eds.)

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert Persig*

*Unconfirmed (I could not verify title/author):*

*A Richer Part of Life*

*An Artists Way of Life*

*An autobiography by Anne Butler*

*Game of Thorns*

*Hippopotamus, Steven Fry*

*Lost*

*My Day, Eleanor Roosevelt*

## Bibliography

- Adair, A. (1999). Women of words: What joining a book club can do for your life. *Horizons*, 12(4), 27-29.
- Adamson, N., Briskin, L., & McPhail, M. (1988). *Feminist organizing for change: The contemporary women's movement in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, K. (2003). *Hearing voices in textual spaces: Exploring the power of women's voices in the speech genres of the Feminist Literacy Workers' Network*. Paper presented at the The Canadian Association for the Study of Women and Education, at the Canadian Congress of the Social Science and Humanities, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS.
- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching "Dallas"*. London: Methuen.
- Ang, I., & Hermes, J. (1996). Gender and/in media consumption. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society*. London: Arnold.
- Arendt, H. (1978). *The life of the mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Babbie, E. (1990). *Survey research methods*. (2nd. ed. ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Babbie, E. (2002). *The basics of social research*. (second ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Barnes, S. B. (2001). *Online connections: Internet interpersonal relationships*. Crskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.
- Barstow, J. M. (2003). Reading in groups: Women's clubs and college literature classes. *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Winter, 3-17.
- Bell, D. (2001). *An introduction to cybercultures*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, T. (1989). Text, readers, reading formations. In P. Rice & P. Waugh (Eds.), *Modern literary theory: A reader* (pp. 218-219). London: Edward Arnold.
- Bennett, T., Emmison, M., & Frow, J. (1999). *Accounting for tastes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Blair, K. (1980). *The clubwoman as feminist: True womanhood redefined, 1868-1914*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc.
- Bleich, D. (1980). Epistemological assumptions in the study of response. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seventh ed., pp. 134-164). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bleich, D. (1986a). Gender interests in reading and language. In P. P. S. a. E. A. Flynn (Ed.), *Gender and reading : Essays on readers, texts, and contexts* (pp. 234-267). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bleich, D. (1986b). Intersubjective reading. *New Literary History*, 17, 401-421.
- Booksellers (2003). At PW Summit, Levy's Reese charts a difficult rear. *Publisher's Weekly*. Retrieved [May 8], from <http://www.publishersweekly.com/index>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (Richard Nice, Trans.). (1979 ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The aristocracy of culture. In R. Collins, J. Curran, N. Granham, P. Scannell, P. Schlesinger, & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Media, culture and society: A critical reader* (pp. 164-194). London: Sage Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boyarin, J. (1992). Voices around the text: The ethnography of reading at Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem. In J. Boyarin (Ed.), *The ethnography of reading* (pp. 212-238). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boyko-Head, C. (1999). *Stay at home writers: The Women's Literary Club of St. Catharines*. Paper presented at the Popular Culture Conference, San Diego, CA.
- Brown, M. E. (1994). *Soap opera and women's talk*. London: Sage.
- Bryant, J., & Zillman, D. (Eds.). (1986). *Perspectives on media effects*. Hillsday, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Burns, M., & Dillon, A. (1999). *Reading group journal: Notes in the margin*. New York: Abbeville Publishing Group.
- Bury, R. C. (2000). *Performing gender on (the) line: A case study of the process of community making among members of a women-only electronic mailing list*. Unpublished PHD, University of Toronto, Toronto.
- Campbell, K. K. (2000, January 27). We're number 2, we're number 2. *The Toronot Star*, pp. J3.
- Christensen, S. (1996). Virtuality, conversation, and morality. *Technology Studies*, 3(2, Fall), 199-214.
- Code, L. (1991). *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Cooke, S. (2001, December 9). Approachable Arden shares love of books. *The Sunday Herald*, pp. B6.

- Crane, D. (2002, October). *Cultural globalization from the perspective of the sociology of culture*. Paper presented at the UNESCO International Statistice Conference, Montreal, Quebec.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Culler, J. (1980). Literary competence. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seventh ed., pp. 101-118). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Culler, J. D. (1981). *The pursuit of signs--semiotics, literature, deconstruction*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Daniels, A. (2000, December 30). From pink gin to pink slips: Entrepreneurs faced Boom and bust in 2000. *The Vancouver Sun*, pp. C1, 2.
- Davis, J. A. (1961). *Great books and small groups*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Dawson, L. L. (2000). Researching religion in cyberspace: issues and strategies. In J. K. Hadden & D. Cown (Eds.), *Religion on the Internet* (Vol. Religion and the Scioal Order, Vol. 8, pp. 25-54). Greenwich, CT: Elsevier Press.
- Dawson, L. L. (2001). Doing religion in cyberspace: The promise and the perils. *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin*, 30(1), 3-9.
- de Moraes, L. (2002, Tuesday, April 9). Same Plot, Different Setting: 'Today' Adopts Oprah's Book Club Idea. *Boston Globe*, pp. C7.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. (3rd ed ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- DiMaggio, P. (1986). Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston: The creation of an organizational base for high culture in America. In R. Collins, J. Curran, N. Granham, P. Scannell, P. Schlesinger, & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Media, culture and society: A critical reader* (pp. 194-211). London: SAGE Publications.
- DiMaggio, P. (1987). Classification in art. *American Sociological Review*, 52, 440-455.
- DiMaggio, P. (1996). Are art museum visitors different from other people? The relationship between attendance and social and political attitudes in the United States. *Poetics*, 24, 161-180.
- Duxbury, N. (1995). *The reading and purchasing public: The market for trade books in English Canada 1991* (Vol. 1). Toronto: The Association of Canadian Publishers.
- Eco, U. (1979). *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fetterley, J. (1978). *The resisting reader: A feminist approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Finn, J. (1999). An exploration of helping processes in an online self-help group focusing on issues of disability (Vol. 24, Issue 3, p. 220). *Health & Social Work*. Retrieved [1999, Sept. 29], from <http://ehostweb11.epnet.com>

- Firestone, W. A. (1987). Meaning in method: The rhetoric of quantitative and qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 16(7), 16-21.
- Firor Scott, A. (1991). *Natural allies: Women's associations in American history*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Firth, S. R. (1999). Preface. In S. Bell & S. Coleman (Eds.), *The anthropology of friendship*. Oxford: Berg.
- Fish, S. (1980a). *Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Fish, S. (1981). How to recognize a poem when you see one. In I. Konigsberg & J. D. Culler (Eds.), *American criticism in the poststructuralist age* (pp. 102-115). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Fish, S. (1989). *Doing what comes naturally: Change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fish, S. E. (1980b). Interpreting the *Variorum*. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seventh ed., pp. 164-185). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fiske, J. (1987). Film, tv and the popular (ed. Bell P and Hanet K). *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, 12(1), paragraphs 16-17.
- Flint, K. (1993). *The woman reader: 1837-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Flynn, E. A. (1986). Gender and reading. In P. P. S. a. E. A. Flynn (Ed.), *Gender and reading : Essays on readers, texts, and contexts* (pp. 267-289). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Flynn, E. A., & Schweickart, P. P. (1986). *Gender and reading: Essays on readers, texts, and contexts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fowler, B. (1997). *Pierre Bourdieu and cultural theory: Critical investigations*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Freund, E. (1987). *The return of the reader: Reader-response criticism*. London: Methuen.
- Fuller, D. (1999). Helen Porter's everyday survival stories: A literary encounter with Feminist Standpoint Theory. *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, 24(1), 122-133.
- Fuller, D. (2002). Critical friendships: Reading women's writing communities in Newfoundland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 25(2), 247-260.
- Fuller, D. (in press). *Writing the everyday: Women's textual communities in Atlantic Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Furlong, M. (1989). An electronic community for older adults: The SeniorNet Network. *Journal of Communication*, 39(3), 145-153.

- Gardiner, J. (2000). Interrogating the present: Book History and Cultural Studies. *SHARP 2000* [July 28, 2000], from <http://www.indiana.edu/~sharp/sharp2000gardiner.html>
- Giltrow, J. (1995). *Academic writing: Writing and reading across the disciplines*. (second ed.). Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press.
- Goodenough, W. H. (1973). *Culture, language, and society*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Gray, A. (1997). Learning from experience: Cultural studies and feminism. In J. McGuigan (Ed.), *Cultural methodologies* (pp. 87-106). London: Sage Publications.
- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. R. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11*(3), 255-274.
- Hall, R. M. (2003). The "Oprahfication" of literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club". *College English, 65*(6), 646-667.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Low, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79*. London: Hutchison University Library.
- Harlan, J. (1998). *Feminism: A reference handbook*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.
- Hartley, J. (1999, June 18). Reading in groups. *Times Literary Supplement*, pp. 18.
- Hartley, J. (2001). *Reading groups*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Healy, D. (1997). Cyberspace and place: The Internet as middle landscape on the electronic frontier. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet culture* (pp. 55-68). New York: Routledge.
- Heft, H., & O'Brien, P. (1999). *Building a better book club*. Toronto: Macmillan Canada.
- Hermes, J. (1995). *Reading women's magazines*. Oxford: Polity Press/Blackwell.
- Holland, N. N. (1980). Unity identity text self. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seventh ed., pp. 118-134). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Holland, N. N., & Sherman, L. F. (1986). Gothic possibilities. In P. P. Schweickart & E. A. Flynn (Eds.), *Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading* (pp. 215-234). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1993). Feminism: A movement to end sexist oppression. In G. Bailey & N. Gayle (Eds.), *Sociology: An introduction* (pp. 419-432). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Howie, L. (1998). *Speaking subjects: A reading of women's book groups*. Unpublished PhD, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Hunter, L. (1999a). *Critiques of knowing: Situated textualities in science, computing and*

- the arts*. London: Routledge.
- Hunter, L. (1999b). Feminist thoughts on rhetoric. In C. Mason Sutherland & R. Sutcliffe (Eds.) (pp. 237-248). *The changing tradition: Women in the history of rhetoric*. University of Calgary Press.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading : A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Iser, W. (1980). The reading process: A phenomenological approach. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seventh ed., pp. 50-70). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jenson, J. (1998). *Mapping social cohesion: The state of Canadian research (15723)*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy REsearch Network.
- Jick, T. D. (1983). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods. In J. V. Maanen (Ed.), *Qualitative methodology* (2 ed., pp. 135-149). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jordan, J. O., & Patten, R. L. (1995). *Literature in the marketplace : Nineteenth-century British publishing and reading practices*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1964). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. (1st Free Press pbk. ed.). New York, N.Y.: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Katz, E., & Liebes, T. (1984). Once upon a time in Dallas. *Intermedia*, 12(3), 28-32.
- King, S. (1994). Analysis of electronic support groups for recovering addicts. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology*, 2(3), 47-56.
- Lamey, A. (2002). Slighting Oprah was Slighting Reading. *National Post On-line*. Retrieved [2002, April 16], from <http://www.nationalpost.com/search/story.html?f=/stories/20020416/652718.html>
- Laskin, D., & Hughs, H. (1995). *The reading group book: The complete guide to starting and sustaining a reading group, with annotated lists of 250 titles for provocative discussion*. New York: Plume.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1968). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. (3d ed.). New York,: Columbia University Press.
- Leblanc, L. (1999). *Pretty in punk: Girls' gender resistance in a boys' subculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Leitch, V. B. (1995). Reader-response criticism. In A. Bennett (Ed.), *Readers and reading* (pp. 32-66). New York: Longman Publishing.
- Lippert, B. (2001, January 1). On a wing and a prayer. *Adweek*, 39, 12.
- Long, E. (1986). Women, reading and cultural authority: Some implications of the audience perspective in cultural studies. *American Quarterly*, 38, 591-612.



- Long, E. (1987). The book as mass commodity: The audience perspective. *Book Research Quarterly*, 3(1), 9-27.
- Long, E. (1992). Textual interpretation as collective action. In J. Boyarin (Ed.), *The ethnography of reading* (pp. 180-212). Berkley: University of California Press.
- Long, E. (2003). *Book clubs: Women and the uses of reading in everyday life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lorimer, J. (1981). *The readership and distribution of books in Canada: An analysis of the readers of English-language books in Canada: What they read, where they get their books, and how they find out about books*. Ottawa: Book Publishing and Public Policy.
- Lorimer, J., & Shaw, S. (1983). *Book reading in Canada: The audience, the marketplace, and the distribution system for trade books in English Canada*. Toronto: The Association of Canadian Publishers.
- Lowe, S. (1986). *Urban social movements: The city after Castells*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Manguel, A. (1996). *A history of reading*. (1st American ed.). New York: Viking.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McHenry, E. (1995). "Dreaded eloquence": The origins and rise of African American literary societies and libraries. *Harvard Library Review*, 6(2), 32-56.
- McMains, V. G. (2000). *The readers' choice: 200 book club favorites*. (1st perennial ed.). New York: Quill.
- McRobbie, A. (1978). Working class girls and the culture of femininity. In W. s. S. G.-C. f. C. C. S. o. t. U. o. Birmingham (Ed.), *Women take issue: Aspects of women's subordination* (pp. 96-109). London: Hutchinson in Association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham.
- Meltzer, B. N., Petras, J. W., & Reynolds, L. T. (1975). *Symbolic interactionism: Genesis, varieties and criticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Michalski, J. (1995). What is virtual community? *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 12, Spring(2), 44-46.
- Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-167.
- Miller, L. (1999). Shopping for community: The transformation of the bookstore into a vital community institution. *Media, Culture & Society*, 21, 385-407.
- Mitchell, A., Rundle, L. B., & Karaian, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Turbo chicks: Talking young feminisms*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Morgan, R. (2003). Online chat with Robin Morgan, editor of Sisterhood is forever: The women's anthology for a new millennium. *msmagazine.com*. Retrieved [2003, May 23], from [http://www.msmagazine.com/chat/chat\\_robinmorgan03232003.asp](http://www.msmagazine.com/chat/chat_robinmorgan03232003.asp)

- Morley, D. (1980). *The Nationwide audience: Structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.
- Morley, D. (1981). The Nationwide audience: A critical postscript. *Screen Education*, 39(Summer), 3-14.
- Murdock, G. (1989). Cultural studies: Missing links. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6(4), 436-440.
- Murray, C. (2003). *Cultural participation, policy and praxis* (Prepared for the "Accounting for culture: Examining the building blocks of cultural citizenship" colloquium ). Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian Cultural Research Network, Department of Canadian Heritage & University of Ottawa.
- Murray, H. (1999). Great works and good works: The Toronto women's literary club 1877-1883. *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'education*, 11(1), 75-95.
- Ott, B. (2001). Oprah Cure. *American Libraries*(April), 102.
- Page, M. (2001). *Feminist collaboration: Relationships between women across political, business and intersubjective worlds*. University of Bath, Bath.
- Parkin, F. (1972). *Class inequality and political order: Social stratification in capitalist and communist societies*. St. Albans: Paladin.
- Pearlman, M. (1999). *What to read: The essential guide for reading group members and other book lovers*. (Second ed.). New York: HarperCollins.
- Radway, J. (1991). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Radway, J. (1997). *A feeling for books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, literary taste, and middle-class desire*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Rehberg Sedo, D. (2003). *Readers in reading groups: An on-line survey of face-to-face and virtual book clubs*. *Covergence*, 9(1), 66-90.
- Rehberg Sedo, D. (July 2000). *Maggie McMicking, The National Home Reading Union and reading on Canada's West Coast at the end of the nineteenth century*. Paper presented at the 8th Annual Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, Mainz, Germany.
- Reid, E. (1991). *Electropolis: Communication and community on Internet relay chat*. University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Rheingold, H. (1993a). A slice of life in my virtual community. In L. Harasin (Ed.), *Global networks: Computers and international communication* (pp. 57-80). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Rheingold, H. (1993b). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Rogers, E. M., & Kincaid, D. L. (1981). *Communication networks: Toward a new paradigm for research*. New York and London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan.

- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Wilson, B. L. (1985). Numbers and words: Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single large-scale evaluation study. *Evaluation Review*, 9(5), 627-643.
- Ruggles Gere, A. (1997). *Intimate practices: Literacy and cultural work in U.S. women's clubs, 1880-1920*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ryan, M. P. (Ed.). (1997). *Gender and public access: Women's politics in nineteenth-century America* (Fifth ed.). Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Salter, L., & Hearn, A. (1996). Disciplines and interdisciplinarity, *Outside the lines: Issues in interdisciplinary research* (pp. 1-43). Montreal: McGill-Queen's.
- Sandra, J. N. H., & Spayde, J. (2002). *Salons: the joy of conversation*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Schweickart, P. P. (1986). Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading. In P. P. S. a. E. A. Flynn (Ed.), *Gender and reading: Essays on readers, texts, and contexts* (pp. 31-63). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Scott Smith, D. (1974). Family limitation, sexual control, and domestic feminism in Victorian America. In M. Hartmen & L. W. Banner (Eds.), *Clio's consciousness raised* (pp. 119-136). New York: Harper & Row.
- Sicherman, B. (1989). Sense and sensibility: A case study of women's reading in late-Victorian America. In K. Davison (Ed.), *Reading in America* (pp. 201-225). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, D. (1993). A peculiar eclipsing: Women's exclusion from man's culture. In G. Baily & G. Noga (Eds.), *Sociology: An introduction, from the classics to contemporary feminism* (pp. 347-370). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D. (1993b). High noon in textland: A critique of Clough. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(1), 183-192.
- Smith, D. (June 23, 2000). Public presentation: Feminism and the university . Vancouver: Simon Fraser University.
- Smith, R. (2002, Saturday, April 27). Call me Curmudgeon, but I Just Can't Join the Club. *Globe & Mail*, pp. R13.
- Snape, R. (1995). *Leisure and the rise of the public library*. London: Library Association Publishing.
- Stewart, T. D. (2002). *Principles of research in communication*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. New York: Falmer Press.

- Tesch, R. (1991). Software for qualitative researchers: Analysis needs and program capabilities. In N. G. Fielding & R. M. Lee (Eds.), *Using computers in qualitative research* (pp. 16-38). London: Sage Publications.
- Tompkins, J. P. (Ed.). (1992). *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (Seven ed.). Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Trachtenberg, J. A. (2002). Oprah will end monthly book club in a big blow to publishing industry. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved [2002, April 8], from [http://online.wsj.com/public/article\\_print/O,4287,SB1018027272779873640,00.html](http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/O,4287,SB1018027272779873640,00.html)
- Trelease, J. (2003). Lessons from *Harry Potter*. Retrieved 2003, December 1 from [http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/rah\\_chpt7\\_p2.html](http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/rah_chpt7_p2.html).
- Tursi, R. (1996). Hey, Mr. Spelling, look what we've done to your 90210! An ethnographic study of the audience of Beverley Hills 90210. Retrieved [2003, January 25], from <http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/202/300/mediatribe/mtribe94/bh90210.html>
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso.
- Williamson, J. (1986). Woman is an island: Femininity and colonization. In T. Modleski (Ed.), *Studies in entertainment : Critical approaches to mass culture* (Vol. Theories of contemporary culture ; v. 7., pp. 99-109). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Witmer, D., Colman, R. W., & Katzman, S. L. (1999). From paper-and-pencil to screen-and-keyboard: Toward a methodology for survey research on the Internet. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Doing Internet research: Critical issues and methods for examining the net*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wood, J. T. (1994). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Young, I. M. (1990). The ideal of community and the politics of difference. In L. J. Nicholson (Ed.), *Feminism/postmodernism* (pp. 300-323). New York: Routledge.