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### How to start your own book club

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Ever read a really great book and want to share some of your thoughts with someone else? Maybe you noticed a common recurring theme, learned about the customs of a country, or simply enjoyed a well-written story.

It is usually much easier to ask friends if they saw a great movie – if they have, you can discuss it immediately; if they have not, the movie can easily be rented. Since reading takes a bit more time, concentration and not everyone has the interest, it can be more of a challenge to find like-minded souls to share your thoughts with. If you can't find a book club near you, why not start your own?

#### What do book clubs do?

A book club is simply a group of people who enjoy reading and discussing books. The club may focus on a particular genre, follow the Oprah book list, focus on New York Times bestsellers or simply weave throughout bookshelves as the interest of the members wanders. It is typical for the members to each have a turn choosing a book, meeting in four to six weeks to share their thoughts on the book. Some clubs may have a list of formal questions the members will discuss while others may simply let the conversation flow more organically.

Karen Wutch of Walker Valley has belonged to four book clubs and continues to participate in two.

"The current library book group I belong to is always exciting," Wutch says. "In one book discussion I can count on conversation that will include points of view ranging from feminist, political, environmental, educational and global happenings. Some, who feel strongly about a book and can't attend for whatever reason, will submit a book report to be read to the group. Personal experiences are often used to illustrate a point of view or to show credibility."

This group meets every six weeks and has grown to almost a dozen members. Wutch also belongs to a smaller group. "We are well matched and comfortable in our beliefs, willing to explore each other's thoughts and just click well. We pick good random books that provide the start to a great evening of conversation and dinner."

This now three member group meets once a month at one member's house and all members alternate who will bring dinner. At times, the food has partnered with the theme or just a feeling from the book.

Lucy Muller of Cragmoor formed her own club with the assistance of library director Hattie Grifo. The members decided to meet about every six weeks at the library at five o'clock. The group pledged never to be rude or critical of each other, their opinions or book choices.

"We do criticize the authors and books' content," Muller explains, "and everyone takes a turn talking and no one monopolizes, which can happen in book clubs. Our book club is almost three years old now and we are trying to meet more often. From five members we grew to 11."

"We sometimes enjoy food that corresponds with the book or its country. We once wore our old wedding dresses and had tea; at another time we had Arabic food as well as Spanish. A book club also forces one to read something we might not otherwise. I tend to like mysteries and classic novels. The book club has taken me to South America, Iran, and to cultures in this country I would never have visited."

Books are selected by members with just a few rules. They do not read "celebrity book club" suggested lists because they want to make their own choices. They do not want heavy political, religious or foreign affair based books, because they prefer light and great stories. Of the 30 titles they have read, some include the Janet Evanovich mysteries; *Water for Elephants*, by Sara Gruen; *Loitering with Intent*, by Muriel Sparks; and are currently reading *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather.

#### Decide what to read

Title selection may be dictated by the genre of literature the club prefers to read. If the club was formed under the assumption they would follow Oprah's picks or a best seller list, the book may be predetermined. However, most groups agree to allow each member at least one opportunity to choose the book. Another option may be for all members to submit a title and have a drawing for the next book to read.

#### Plan on where to meet

In order to keep the focus of a book club on the reading, rather than the social aspect of the gathering, meetings may be held in bookstores or libraries. The group may also elect to meet in alternate members' homes, or in restaurants, church halls or a community room in a town building.

The more casual the setting, the more likely you are meeting with people you are comfortable with and trust. The casual meeting place may also encourage more social discussion, which may be encouraged or frowned upon, depending on the seriousness of the group.

#### Get your club started

Talk to people wherever you go and see if you can find one other person who shares your interest. It may be at the gym, church or at a friend's barbecue, but simple word of mouth is a safe first step. Wutch found local book groups formed online through Oprah's website, a notice on the cash register at the now-closed Ariel's bookstore in New Paltz, and through conversations with members. She once tried to form her own club through contacts at her place of employment, but feels the best opportunity may be through postings at public libraries.

"After moving to the area," Muller reveals, "I missed my friends and book clubs, so I decided to start my own. Our gracious library director was willing to be part of the club and we set out to recruit others. We began with six members and I chose our first book, *How Green Was My Valley*, by Richard Llewelyn."

Your local library may be a good place to start. Check [www.rcls.org](http://www.rcls.org) for the Ramapo-Catskill Library System or [www.midhudson.org](http://www.midhudson.org) for the Mid-Hudson Library System to find libraries in your area. Many list their book discussion groups online. You may also find book discussion groups on the Hudson Valley Life online calendar at [www.hvlifeonline.com](http://www.hvlifeonline.com).

"We do not have any local book clubs using the library or working with our staff," says Kevin Gallagher, director of Middletown Thrall Library. "However, this probably is due to Middletown Thrall Library's long-running adult book discussion series that are presented every spring and fall. The library has been presenting free, public book discussion programs led by scholars from area colleges for over twenty years."

Check local bookstores, chain bookstores, libraries, colleges and even the Internet to find other readers with the same reading interests and level of enthusiasm for discussion that you feel best matches you and start getting together!

Sharon MacGregor is a freelance writer living in Sullivan County. Her work also appears in Hudson Valley Parent magazine.