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These ladies are lit

Today, book clubs are becoming cultural events rather than intimate gatherings. Meet the women leading the change.

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The Globe and Mail (Alberta Edition) | Sat, 06 Oct 2018
Special to The Globe and Mail

These ladies are lit

"I don't think that women are necessarily reading more than before. I think it's more that our interests are finally getting some respect. ELAINE LUI, CO-HOST, THE SOCIAL

Today, book clubs are becoming cultural events rather than intimate gatherings. Meet the women leading the change Toronto's Bad Girls Book Club is just one example of how reading has gone from solitary pursuit to social movement. Courtney Shea reports on the new look of these literary gatherings



A little over a year ago, Kara Wark decided that her book club had officially outgrown her living room, but the plan to expand was about more than just a lack of space. Having been approached by friends and friends-of-friends about joining her bimonthly gatherings, she saw a chance to do something on a larger, more public scale.

“We decided to see what would happen if we sold tickets,” Wark says. “We” is Wark and her friend Kate Chippendale, who cofounded the project, but has since stepped away to focus on a new job. What happened is they sold out and the Bad Girls Book Club was born. Every couple of months a 7,000-plus Instagram community votes on the next read. Meetings (events, really) are held at cool venues across Toronto and feature guest speakers along with the odd tarot card reader or drag queen performance, depending on the book. Wark, in her late 20s, talks about reading the way people in her cohort talk about urban farming or heritage denim: “People are craving real experiences. We’re all so busy ... on our phones all the time. I think people are really starving to hit pause. To have conversations that aren’t on Gchat.”

Zuzana Drakul agrees. “People really want to find their tribe, to break bread,” says the co-founder of Bookn-Brunch – a recently launched tech platform that connects eager readers with book clubs (and the restaurants that want to serve them). Drakul started the lo-fi version of her club six years ago after a bad break up and a move to a new city left her wanting for social connections. Initially a way to indulge in her passions for reading and eating and to make friends older than 30 (“nearly impossible,” she jokes), the gatherings quickly spawned a waitlist and then spinoff clubs and now a business. “When you see how popular these reading communities have become, it just makes sense,” says her sister and business partner Daniela Kelloway, who isn’t modest about their aspiration to become “the Airbnb of books.”

If you haven’t been to a book club lately, you may find that the plot has changed. The last time I gathered in a friend’s living room over sweaty cheese and *The Sun Also Rises*, the “book club” part was a 15-minute discussion about postwar aimlessness, followed by several hours of gossip and levels of red wine consumption that would make Hemingway blush. But that was more than 10 years ago – back when Reese Witherspoon was still starring in *Legally Blonde* movies and book culture had yet to converge with social media and the power of celebrity influencers to become a sexier, more public-facing version of its former self. It’s true, the notion that reading is suddenly “hot” sounds as ridiculous and cringe-worthy as “Stormy Daniels, bestselling author.” And yet, there’s no denying a new level of cultural capital attached to a long-beloved (and previously solitary) pursuit: These days, we post book photos on Instagram in the same the way we post

images of avocado toast, we use our taste in books (and for books) to communicate personal brand and, more than ever, we form connections with others who share our passion.

Last spring, the Bad Girls Book Club read *The Home for Unwanted Girls* by Toronto author Joanna Goodman. The fictionalized narrative, based on the experiences of Goodman's mother, is set in the Quebec orphanage system in the 1950s and explores themes around parenthood, belonging and female identity. For the club, it was an ideal select – a buzzy new title with relevant, female-centric themes and an author willing to attend their meeting as a guest speaker. For Goodman, it was a marketing no-brainer: “As an author I can tell you that this has become a huge part of promoting your work,” she says. “My book came out in April and I am still doing book clubs.” Goodman estimates she has participated in at least two-dozen in person and via Skype, and has several more coming up. Recently, she attended an author luncheon in Indianapolis, Ind., and afterward she was swarmed: “It was all of these women coming up to me saying ‘I’m in a book club,’ ‘I’m in a book club,’ ‘I’m in a book club.’ It’s almost like book clubs are even more popular than reading.” She’s kidding, but she has a point and it’s one publishers are paying attention to.

Irina Pinteá, a publicist at Harper Collins Canada, says that from a marketing and sales perspective, book clubs used to be “a bit of an enigma. We knew they were happening, but they were smaller and less interconnected.” I mention my nights of Hemingway and hangovers. “That’s exactly it – before social media, we didn’t have a way to track those kinds of clubs,” she says. Moreover, infiltrating a group of six women discussing a novel published in 1926 may not have been worth the effort. These days, Pinteá and her department think about book club potential long before books hit shelves, meeting with librarians and bookstore owners to determine which new titles are poised to be future book club darlings. Getting selected by a club such as Bad Girls is great for that initial sales boost of maybe a hundred copies, but it’s also the ripple effect facilitated by social media, where “meetings” continue in the comments section.

It’s an ironic silver lining that this same the same technology blamed for whittling readers’ attention spans down to a single tweet has also brought about book clubs without borders. Directed by hashtags and devoid of meeting places and read-by deadlines, online book communities are a lot looser. And, of course, they are lot larger, thanks in part to celebrities such as Witherspoon, Emma Watson and Sarah Jessica Parker – aspirational book-butterflies who promote their favourite reads the way George Clooney hawks luxury tequila. Witherspoon in particular has done more for reading than any celebrity since Oprah. The Hello Sunshine Book Club is one prong in Witherspoon’s biblio-centric empire, where many titles go on to become film or TV projects for her production company, Pacific Standard. One such example is Curtis Sittenfield’s short story collection *You Think It I’ll Say It*, which Witherspoon selected in May. “That’s a huge win for us,” says Kristin Cochrane, chief of Penguin Random House Canada, which has the Canadian distribution rights for Sittenfield’s title. “Our key retailers responded in a significant way when informed [that the book was Witherspoon’s latest book club pick] – in some cases almost doubling their initial buys.” News that Witherspoon is developing the book for TV is icing on the cake. “It just makes books sexy, which is really great for readers and for writers,” Cochrane says of the recent onslaught of high profile book-to-film adaptations such as *Big Little Lies*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Sharp Objects*.

And so far, the impact of book clubs on publishing has been good for women, who have long been the primary buyers of fiction and are finally getting some deference from an industry that previously attempted to group their preferences under the derogatory “chick lit” banner. “I don’t think that women are necessarily reading more than before,” says CTV’s Elaine Lui (a.k.a. Lainey Gossip) of the recent prominence of book club culture. “I think it’s more that our interests are finally getting some respect. There is a very feminized power to this new book sexiness that we’re seeing on social media. It’s women having a space where they can say, ‘This is what I like, this is part of my day to day life.’” On the daytime chat show *The Social* Lui and her co-hosts helm a monthly book club. One of their summer selects was Celest Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere*, which has spent 31 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, at least partly thanks to its popularity amongst book clubbers. “That’s the other thing about book clubs and social media is that there is a sense of FOMO [fear of missing out],” Lui says. “We picked that book because it felt like everyone was reading it. You don’t want to miss out.”

For Wark, that can only be good for business. Having recently left her day job, she hopes to turn the Bad Girls brand into a full-time gig. Last month, they launched a brand partnership with Nike – official sponsors (and outfitters) of the BGBC running squad who are currently in training to run the Scotiabank Waterfront Marathon. What does that have to do with books? Well nothing, and everything. Wark sees both running and reading as a way for women to have meaningful (read: relatively sober) interactions outside of the workplace. “It’s about books,” she says, “but it’s about a lifestyle, a community.”