

Book group

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For bookworms who are social butterflies, a book club is the perfect excuse to dig into a much-hyped novel or a juicy memoir and then to toast or roast its pages with like-minded individuals. But for many book lovers like Bellamy, finding the right fit is harder than it looks.

Like literature's magical formula of setting, character development and plot, the chemistry of a successful book club involves a delicate balance of spoken and unspoken rules. The size of the group, the members' commitment to reading the assigned book, and the leadership style all shape a club's success.

For Bellamy, 29, the top priority is a group that gets along well but can stay focused; book clubs, she notes, often take too quick a turn for the personal. "A lot of times it's talk about the book for five minutes but then, 'What's going on with you?'" Bellamy says.

Kym Silvasy-Neale of South Philadelphia also dabbled in book clubs that were less than perfect matches. She remembers one especially large group, diverse in viewpoint, gender and age.

"The older crowd felt they had the right to put you down because you didn't live in a certain time or you didn't understand feminism," Silvasy-Neale says, adding that she often felt stifled amid the strong personalities. "There were lots of heated arguments and yelling."

Silvasy-Neale, now 39, attended four or five meetings before dropping out. Determined to develop a fair, democratic and civilized environment, she started her own local book club within a Yahoo online group. A college textbook sales representative for W.W. Norton & Co., Silvasy-Neale said she started the club for the camaraderie she felt she was missing by not having a typical office job.

Four years later, her Philly Book Lover's Group has evolved into the club she always dreamed of. A core group of about 12 women ages 25 to 40 not only meet once a month to discuss what they're reading, but also nurture new friendships that extend to outside social activities. They invite one another to Christmas parties, socialize at fund-raising events, and vacation in Las Vegas together.

But having a strong, cohesive core didn't happen overnight, Silvasy-Neale says.

"It's like dating. You're constantly going on blind dates. It's taken a lot of members to come in and out of the group to find members who are like us."

Silvasy-Neale says her group places a high value on respect for others' opinions, which can lead to self-censorship.

During the October discussion of *Loving Frank: A Novel*, Silvasy-Neale says she and others held back some of their feminist comments out of respect for a mem-

ber's mother, who identified herself as a conservative Republican. Hearing that, Silvasy-Neale conjured up stereotypes of a traditional stay-at-home mother from a previous generation.

That meant it took longer than usual for members to warm up to the discussion of a character who abandons her husband and children to live with her lover in Europe. "A lot of members were pulling back so as not to offend this woman."

Kathy Volk Miller, an English professor at Drexel University and co-editor of the *Painted Bride Quarterly* literary magazine, underscores the importance of finding like-minded people in organizing or joining a book club. But more important than worldview is agreement on what members hope to get out of the club.

"If you need an excuse to socialize, that is different than people who really want to discuss literature," Volk Miller says. "Everybody has to be on the same page."

Readers belonging to more formalized groups are likely to take the reading more seriously and treat the meeting like a literature class, Volk Miller says, while more social groups risk falling apart from lack of structure and a mix of attitudes ranging from utterly devoted to not serious at all.

Bellamy is among those committed readers frustrated by uninvolved club members.

"Less than half the time does everyone read the book, which is my pet peeve," Bellamy says. "I'm such a nerd — as soon as I find out what the book is, I go and get it."

Volk Miller also sees value in appointing a leader who can create rules, structure the discussion, defuse any potentially volatile discussions, and choose the books. Because literature is so subjective, Volk Miller says, assigning a book can feel too personal.

For groups having a hard time deciding on a book, Volk Miller suggests using an arbitrary source, like the *New York Times* Best-Sellers list.

"You have to have an intellectual center or anarchy will reign," Volk Miller says.

Joyce Homan organizes the monthly women's reading group at Giovanni's Room, a gay-friendly bookstore at 12th and Pine Streets. When she first began leading the discussions, she said she used online literature guides. Now, she says, the questions come easily and often lead to controversial discussions that manage to remain respectful.

Homan says the group comprises as few as seven and as many as 19 women depending on the monthly book choice, is mostly gay or bisexual, and has a mix of ages and ethnicities.

"It definitely broadens your viewpoints," Homan says of the controversy that sometimes develops from the discussions of women's literature. "Your dearly held beliefs aren't necessarily held by the people in your group."



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer
Angela Smith of Philadelphia joins in at Giovanni's Room.

Contemporary literature? Not new enough.

Forget the classics — read books that aren't even published yet

By Dianna Marder
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Tired of traditional book groups? Sick of reading the same books everybody else reads?

Lynn Rosen has some intriguing alternatives.

A nonfiction writer with 25 years in publishing, Rosen calls on her connections to give passionate readers an early look at books that have not yet been released.

Rosen teaches "A Sneak Peek at Next Year's Bestsellers," at Temple University's Center City and Fort Washington campuses. Through an agreement with publishers Ballantine, Random House, Knopf, Norton and others, Rosen gives her students pre-publication copies of TBR (to be released) fiction and nonfiction books to read in the five-week, noncredit course.

A class at Temple focuses on soon-to-be-released books.

Her students discuss the novels as well as the authors, and Rosen shares her behind-the-scenes knowledge of the publishing industry.

"We talk about what reviewers might say and how readers might react," says Rosen, who has an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a graduate degree from Columbia University — both in English.

"In many cases, I can interview the authors and answer students' questions about why the writer took a particular approach. People who are passionate about reading are interested in the writer's backstory, too."

And publishers love the idea, she says. "They're totally supportive, because it helps them reach readers on a grassroots level. And it brings the whole process together."

The books aren't rejects or unlikely prospects — far from it. Rosen's Temple class read first-time author David Wroblewski's *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* (Harper Collins, June 2008) before it became a best-seller and



PATRICK SNOOK

Lynn Rosen brings behind-the-scenes knowledge of authors and publishing to her "Sneak Peek at Next Year's Bestsellers" classes.

an Oprah Winfrey pick.

"We loved it," she says. "We knew right away it would be a hit."

Rosen started the Temple class in 2007, and when she saw how the idea caught on, she branched out with another option she calls Open Book. These are small-group discussions, focused on fiction already in print, held in Elkins Park.

Last semester's Open Book group read memoirs; this semester, Rosen has them reading local authors Diane McKinney-Whetstone, Kelly Simon, Beth Kephart and Benjamin Wallace.

Rosen says Open Book and

Sneak Peek are designed to give readers a chance to do what J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield wished for:

"What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours," Caulfield says in *The Catcher in the Rye*, "and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it."

Enrollment in Lynn Rosen's course, Sneak Peek, at Temple University, is \$95 for five sessions; participation in Open Book is \$90 for four sessions. Additional information at lynnrosen.com.

Advance copies now seen as marketing tools

For years, publishers were cautious about distributing Advance Reading Copies (ARC) in the publishing parlance) of novels, fearing the books would end up being sold.

But as reading experienced a renaissance, publishers began to view ARC as marketing tools to create prepublication buzz.

Random House developed its "Read It Forward" program to

give free advance copies of certain novels to the first 200 readers who request them. Details at www.randomhouse.com/crown/readitforward.

And last year, Barnes & Noble launched its "First Look Book Club," distributing hundreds of free prepublication copies to readers who register for the company's online book forum (go to www.bn.com/

bookclubs).

Six or more times a year, a First Look title is announced. Often it's a book that will hit the bookstore shelves in the next three to five months. Readers who want in on a guided online discussion about the book are mailed copies, and a few weeks later, the monthlong online discussion starts.

— Dianna Marder

Holiday

Continued from E1

Christmases, which hit theaters last week, is about a traveling couple (stuck at home), but going away for the holidays is becoming a more accepted and even sought-out option, not just for those seeking warmth in December but also for those looking for an escape from mounting commercialism and a break from old traditions.

"There's a tremendous pressure that's put on us commercially and by religion and by advertising that of course it will be happy, and of course you will all be there singing around the piano and everything will be wonderful and better if you buy a lot," said Annie Stanfield-Hagert, a Philadelphia counselor and social worker. "It's a dream. But then someone gets stuck in the New Jersey Turnpike and the kid throws up on your couch."

Tack on travel and time in cramped quarters in a guest room or couch, and you can have a holiday of hurt rather than warm, fuzzy memories.

Plus, the holidays can be especially painful for adults with tainted childhood memories. Having relatives who drank too much and made scenes during family gatherings meant their expectations were never met as children and probably aren't met now. The solution: Stay away from the source of pain and make a run for it.

"If those expectations are going to interfere with enjoying a holiday with your children or your new boyfriend or on your own, oftentimes it's not better to return to a place loaded with resentment and anger,"



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer
Louis Alberta at his salon in Collingswood. When Christmas rolls around, he will celebrate by flying to Paris, where the holidays are less hectic.

Stanfield-Hagert said.

Joshua Bush, vice president of Park Avenue Travel, a travel agency in Swarthmore, said he is seeing more families travel during this time of year. And despite the current economic slowdown, plans haven't let up, in part because most of those plans were made and paid for in the summer, he said. "We'll book lots of connecting rooms or one big suite, and [families] look for hotels that can cater to themes as far as having a special Thanksgiving or holiday meal."

In the case of the Hansen family, the Cherry Hill foursome planned their trip to a time share in Tahoe months ago. They take a ski trip every year, but this was the first time they decided to go during Christmas. In fact, their plane leaves Christmas Day.

"So much work goes into the holi-

days. We've always thought about going away but never had done it," said Alice Hansen, 46, a saleswoman for VCT, a plastic card-making company. Husband Rick, 51, is a postal worker in Haddonfield. When looking at possible ski-trip dates, the break between Christmas and New Year's made sense because they found it difficult to pull their children, Kevin, 16, and Erica, 14, out of high school during non-holiday times.

Of course, the change in plans didn't come without consequences. Alice Hansen's mother isn't exactly happy that the family will be away and flying on a religious holiday. To compromise, they're attending Christmas Eve Mass and having a family party the Sunday before.

"Does that make my guilt better? No," Hansen admitted. "I do have apprehensions about not being

home for the holiday and that it will be different for the kids."

Alberta faced that same resistance from his parents in South Carolina when he first announced in 2000 that he would be traveling for Christmas. "They were a little disappointed, but being that I'm going to see my cousin, they understood," he said. "My father understands starting new traditions."

Some people skip town with extended family included. Lisa Simon's family took a cruise together during Thanksgiving week. Their group of 15 — including grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews — sailed a Royal Caribbean cruise in honor of Simon's parents' 50th wedding anniversary.

"We have some traditions, but for the most part, we like to mix it up," said Simon, 46, president of Simon Public Relations Group. "We're not really married to anything or feel like anything has to be repeated."

It helps that her parents haven't always had their heart set on a specific holiday tradition — they were the ones who suggested the family take the trip Thanksgiving week after the suggestion for an August cruise brought up too many conflicts. Simon's son would have missed soccer tryouts, and her daughter's bat mitzvah would take place right after they returned. Plus, her sister-in-law had just had a baby.

While relatives may fight a family getaway, Stanfield-Hagert says that the key to success is telling loved ones the move isn't meant to offend — especially grandparents who might feel entitled to see their

grandchildren on the holidays.

"Recognize that they will be hurt, and they will wonder why you're doing such a mean thing," she said. "Then explain that this is about what your needs are right now. It can feel like a betrayal. But it's not. It's growth."

Then compromise, either by arranging a visit at another time or including the family member that feels left out, especially if he or she is older and can't travel far.

Eventually, the new tradition will be accepted.

Alberta, the salon owner, suggests to his clients that they make a holiday getaway as well.

"They complain about all the stress that they have and what they have to do in preparation for the holiday," he said. "Why don't you just take the money and go away with your family and enjoy each other? They can't seem to tear themselves from what they think they should do."

If you've thought about making a holiday exit, you still have time. The economic downturn has created some travel opportunities.

"There's a lot of holiday space out there," said Bush of Park Avenue Travel. Hotels and travel agencies, he says, are being more flexible by relaxing the minimum-night requirement or allowing customers to take special vacation packages over the holidays — options that usually would not be available.

"People are waiting to see what's going on and they're going to make a decision two or three weeks out, where in the past, they would have been out of luck."

Taking a getaway holiday may strain family ties.