

The Book Bags

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Level of intimacy brings about richer book discussions

What Jan Gill likes most about the Book Bags is a level of intimacy built up through the years that allows for rich discussions.

“We talk more freely about how the book connects with us personally,” Gill said.

When the oldest continuous book club in Gothenburg was formed 40 years ago, she said she was more guarded with what she shared.

The Book Bags came into being in 1974 when Gill and friend Donna Dudley decided to do something about their mutual love of reading.

Each one brought a friend to Dudley’s house to discuss a book they all had read.

“The idea is to get together around books you’re passionate to read and be exposed to other people’s ideas,” Gill said. “There isn’t anyone in the club who isn’t a dedicated reader.”

Dudley said the purpose of the club is to talk about books in relation to their own lives and experiences.

The group has eventually grown to 11 members which is the limit for the kinds of discussions The Book Bags enjoy.

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They meet monthly 10 times a year which includes a planning meeting when members choose books to read and a hostess and discussion leader for each gathering.

Group leaders research the authors of the chosen books which is shared at meetings.

Some of the selections have included fiction, non-fiction, young adult, books by women or Nebraska authors and more.

Gill said retired English teacher Monna Uehling was once part of The Book Bags and she always chose classics.

Dudley said the club learned early on that some books everyone thinks they will like turn out to be duds during discussion.

When members don't like a book or disagree with the author's point of view, she said interesting discussions often ensue.

Through the years, the Book Bags have read and discussed 367 books. The first was "Zelda" by Nancy Milford and the most recent "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," by Amy Chua.



Dudley, who left the group for 12 years when she became a pastor, said she thinks the group questions things deeper than they did in the beginning.

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Although the get-togethers began with book discussions and refreshments, decorations have taken on a life of their own.

One month, Dudley said member Cathy Simon decorated a table and made food that connected with the theme of the book and the idea took off.

Gill remembers when the group read "A Sandhills Ballad" by Ladette Randolph in which the protagonist has lost a leg in a car accident.

A prosthesis was borrowed and served as a table decoration when the book was discussed.

Technology has brought about another change.

Skyping with authors.

So far, the Book Bags have skyped (communicated through a computer webcam) with Randolph and Jenna Blum who wrote "Those Who Save Us," a book that centers around the Holocaust.

When members thanked Blum for taking the time to talk to them about her book, Gill said the author expressed appreciation to them for helping to promote her book.

"Skyping is now a marketing strategy for authors on the front end," Gill explained. "They know book clubs will buy their books."

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One strength of the book club, Dudley said, is that members read a variety of books from light fare to great literature.

With younger members in the Book Bags, Gill said she thinks the club reads more young adult fiction.

And sometimes selections, like “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” serve a larger purpose than the monthly book club reading.

Gill said teacher Lori Long, who directs one-act plays at Gothenburg High School, had the group read the Gothic thriller to see if it would work on stage.

One of the best discussions the women remember was about “Doctor Zhivago.” The discussion leader used the historic novel as a teaching tool when she told how it was written to get past Russian censorship.

Gill said she values the exposure she receives to a wide variety of literature in the Book Bags that’s been present from the beginning.

“Books that I would never have chosen to read have become important in my life,” she said.

Dudley said members push themselves to talk about things that matter.

Long likes that discussions don’t often go where members think they will.

“We all bring our own ‘take’ on the book,” she said.

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Book Bags member Kathy France said she loves being part of a group of Gothenburg women who range in ages and life experiences and share laughter and learning.

For Gill, books are portals into other worlds that intrigue her.

Books for Dudley allow her to live in different circumstances.

“I learn about who I am and what I am about as I read about other people,” she said.

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