

RANDOM SAMPLES

BOOK CLUB'S BENEFITS GO BEYOND THE PRINTED PAGES

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When your book club selects a novel about a dinosaur private detective living in modern-day L.A. who gets high off of basil, maybe it's time to start rethinking your membership. Not that there's anything wrong with a book like *Anonymous Rex* — or the others in the series that followed, *Casual Rex* and *Hot and Sweaty Rex* — but let's just say that it's not exactly on Oprah's list.

Somehow, though, the book club that I helped start in 2000 is still going and will celebrate it's 10th anniversary on Monday. I'd say it's been the best of times and the worst of times, but Dickens never found his way onto our reading list.

It started by accident when a good friend and I were hanging out in a bar and discovered that we happened to be reading the same book. We got to talking and debating, and before the night was through we'd decided to recruit a handful of others to join us for monthly gatherings over beer and pizza (which made our unofficial name, The Beer and Pizza Book Club, pretty original).

In a world where book clubs seem to be everywhere, each with its own gimmick, our simple group became quite the hodgepodge, a happy mix of reporters, teachers, and moms who covered the spectrum of politics, religion, and pizza topping preferences. Over the years, people came and went. We even had a few special guests, like the friend of a friend who responded to one of my comments with the put-down: "I didn't even think that in high school."

Our selections, chosen democratically, have always been ... interesting. We've read everything from Steinbeck to Stephen King. We've read true stories about cross-dressing suburban dads and inner city drug-dealing thugs, things I never would have picked up on my own but am glad we did. We even read a book about a Neanderthal physicist living on a parallel Earth who accidentally passes from his universe to ours.

I still remember our first meeting. We read *Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow, a book that managed both to make it to No. 21 on Modern Library's top novels of the 20th Century list and inspire a Counting Crows song. It turned out to be a perfect metaphor for us, always somewhere between a serious literary discussion and a detour into the wilds of pop culture.

There were nights when we spent more time talking about Facebook than Faulkner or when some members didn't finish the book. I'll admit that it frustrated me at times. Maybe that's the former English major in me.

Still, I've always looked forward to book club night. Anyone can read a book by himself, but there's something special about being able to share it — the beauty of truly great writing, the joy of imagination stirred.

Even when a book is bad, and we've had our share of duds, you can learn a lot. For us, each book's subject matter is a pretense for a larger discussion. It isn't just about what the author is trying to say. It inevitably turns into: How do we feel about war? What are our assumptions about race? Gender relations? The poor? Religion? Neanderthal physicists?

These themes may be the writers', but they become ours to explore. In the process we delight in each other's company, sharing our pasts and challenging each other's viewpoints. If, along the way, embarrassing details of each others' lives are uncovered — like that one book clubber has a strong fear of touching newspapers, or that one of our more fashion-conscious members owns more than 30 coats — all the better.



We may gather to interpret some author's story, but in the process we can't help but reveal more about our own. It reminds me of something that David Sedaris, whose book *Naked* made our reading list, once said in an interview: "Writing gives you the illusion of control, and then you realize it's just an illusion, that people are going to bring their own stuff into it."

That's what we do — bring our own stuff into it. And that has made all the difference.

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READING LIST

Since its formation in 2000, Ryan Smith's Beer and Pizza Book Club has included the following books on its reading list. If you have a suggestion for a future selection, email him at ryansmith@theblade.com.

2000

Henderson the Rain King, Saul Bellow
About a Boy, Nick Hornby
The Long Goodbye, Raymond Chandler
Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut
The Winter of Our Discontent, John Steinbeck
In the Lake of the Woods, Tim O'Brien
The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Thornton Wilder
A Simple Plan, Scott Smith
The Optimist's Daughter, Eudora Welty
White Teeth, Zadie Smith

2001

Still Life with Woodpecker, Tom Robbins
Surfacing, Margaret Atwood
The Commitments, Roddy Doyle
Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury
Bridget Jones's Diary, Helen Fielding
Their Eyes were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston
The Sheltering Sky, Paul Bowles
Kissing in Manhattan, David Schickler
Ladies' Man, Richard Price
Into the Wild, Jon Krakauer
Anonymous Rex, Eric Garcia
The Trial, Franz Kafka

2002

Penny Dreadful, Will Christopher Baer
There are No Children Here, Alex Kotlowitz
American Pastoral, Philip Ross
The Right Man for the Job, Mike Magnuson
Cold Sassy Tree, Olive Ann Burns
The Keepers of Truth, Michael Collins
The Obituary Writer, Porter Shreve
Stray Dogs, John Ridley
Native Son, Richard Wright
The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Stephen Chbosky

2003

In Harm's Way, Doug Stanton
Choke, Chuck Palahniuk
Fargo Rock City, Chuck Klosterman
Naked, David Sedaris
Blindness, Jose Saramago
Rosemary's Baby, Ira Levin
The Martian Chronicles, Ray Bradbury
The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Tom Wolfe
Looking for Mr. Goodbar, Judith Rossner

2005

Dress Codes, Noelle Howey
The Dante Club, Matthew Pearl
Little Children, Tom Perrotta
Running with Scissors, Augusten Burroughs
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Mark Haddon
Deliverance, James Dickey
Death of an Ordinary Man, Glen Duncan
Sweet and Vicious, David Schickler
The House of the Seven Gables, Nathaniel Hawthorne
The Invisible Man, H. G. Wells
Peace Like a River, Leif Enger
The Sparrow, Mary Doria Russell

2006

In Cold Blood, Truman Capote
The Rule of Four, Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason
The Coast of Akron, Adrienne Miller
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, Michael Chabon
Tiger Force, Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss
The Time Traveler's Wife, Audrey Niffenegger
High Fidelity, Nick Hornby
Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned, Walter Mosley
The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri
The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Ken Kesey

2007

Franny and Zooey, J. D. Salinger
Black Swan Green, David Mitchell
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers
Gods in Alabama, Joshilyn Jackson
My Sister's Keeper, Jodi Picoult
Anthem, Ayn Rand
The Secret Life of Bees, Sue Monk Kidd
The Inner Circle, T. C. Boyle

2008

The Road, Cormac McCarthy
Different Seasons, Stephen King
Individual short stories selected by book club members
The Memory Keeper's Daughter, Kim Edwards
A Long Way Down, Nick Hornby
As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner
Seeing, Jose Saramago
Watchmen, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini
We Need to Talk About Kevin, Lionel Shriver
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Diaz

Everything is Illuminated, Jonathan Safran Foer
Life of Pi, Yann Martel
The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys, Chris Fuhrman

2004

The Man in the High Castle, Philip K. Dick
The Autograph Man, Zadie Smith
The Devil in the White City, Erik Larson
Hominids, Robert Sawyer
The Maltese Falcon, Dashiell Hammett
The Stepford Wives, Ira Levin
The Beans of Egypt, Maine, Carolyn Chute
Atonement, Ian McEwan
Ella Minnow Pea, Mark Dunn
Old School, Tobias Wolff
The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien
Einstein's Dreams, Alan Lightman

2009

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Dave Eggers
A Gracious Plenty, Sheri Reynolds
Out Stealing Horses, Per Petterson
The Witches of Eastwick, John Updike
Black Hawk Down, Mark Bowden
Special Topics in Calamity Physics, Marisha Pessl
In My Father's House, Ernest Gaines
Random Family, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc
Into Thin Air, Jon Krakauer
The History of Love, Nicole Krauss
The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath

2010

White Oleander, Janet Fitch
Bad Mother, Ayelet Waldman

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