

Boy's Club

This all-male book group defies convention

by Lisa Oram

Four and a half years ago, David Sigelman decided to start a book group made up entirely of men, a surprisingly novel concept. Most general-interest reading groups—like the one Sigelman's wife attends, comprise only women.

Why? For one thing, some women's groups find a man can be a problematic addition. "Frequently, when we have men in a group," says Carol Schuldt, a book group facilitator at the Minnesota Women's Press, "it seems like all attention goes to the man when he begins to speak." Some men tend to preach, Schuldt has observed, and the dynamic that finds women in a book group willing to share opening might be upset. Also, there's the theory that men simply won't enjoy the reflective exchange at the heart of the book group experience: They'd rather talk about a deck they built or the fish they caught.

Despite these presumed obstacles, Sigelman easily rounded up a collection of other Northampton, Massachusetts, men—including several doctors, a dentist, a lawyer and a retired middle school teacher—who, in fact, were eager to read novels together. "Our group," Sigelman says, "looks for books that create an expansive reading experience." Though Sigelman brought the group together, he declined a leadership role, and the group has been run as a democracy for more than four years.

With one exception, Sigelman says, the members live in the same neighborhood and all are in their fifties. But he says that what the group lacks in diversity, it makes up for in its reading selections. Sigelman says that because one of their goals is to "hear voices in the literature that they otherwise wouldn't hear," they often read the work of international authors, including recent selections *Blindness* by Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago, and *Disgrace* by South African writer J.M. Coetzee.

Member Bob Bissel, a retired pediatrician now writing a novel of his own, says the group's men-only nature "certainly affects some of the discussion." (Part of the group's standard joke repertoire, he says, is about "guy books" versus "girl books"—though the Northamptonites don't actually read typical "guy lit" writers like Tom Clancy and John Grisham.) The group's single-gender membership affects the nature of its meetings, of course, but that happens in women-only groups, too: Both are often as much about social contact as literary exchange.

Attorney David Hoose calls the group a "great experience," adding that he's appreciated developing deeper friendships with other members. Hoose says that before he joined Sigelman's group, he tended to read non-fiction, and he hadn't read fiction for pleasure in many years. That's changed, and Hoose, like other members, rarely misses a meeting. (The group's code of honor keeps attendance high and helps ensure that members actually read the books.)

At meetings, some time gets spent on the book, some on other issues like sports, politics and workplace adventures. Members convene every month, though with family vacations and holidays in mind, they skip July, August and sometimes December. Over the summer, they assign themselves a long book, often a classic. These have included *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann, *Cloudsplitter* by Russell Banks and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon.

Sigelman says he now reads three times as many books as he used to. He adds that his wife's reading group now sometimes gets ideas from his. "They could even come to one of our meetings," he says. "I wouldn't mind."

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