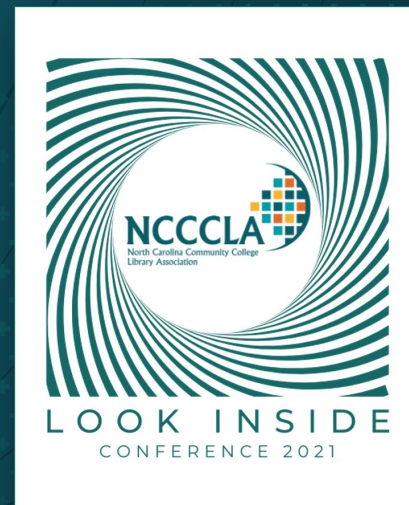


# We Survived an Online Book Club! (and so can you)

Presented by: Ali Norvell & Dane Secor



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# Women and the Rise of Book Clubs

**It's Women's History Month!**

**Let's take a quick look at how women influenced the rise of book clubs in the United States.**

- A 2016 BookBrowse survey found that more than 90% of book club participants are women.
- Women formed early book clubs to deal with professional and educational discrimination.
- Early clubs had a more formal, scholarly format, “communicating their seriousness of purpose to themselves, to each other, and to the world at large.”
- Prior to the late 20th century, many women's book clubs had a social mission or were focused on reform.
- Today, book clubs can provide a space for self-reflection, intellectual development, and social support.
- There's no “right way” to run a book club!



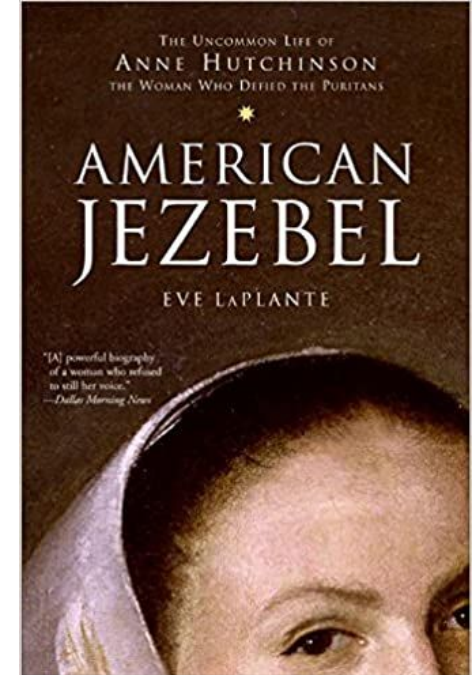
Two Women Reading, ca. 1903. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Long, E. (2003). *Excerpt from Book Clubs: Women and the uses of reading in everyday life by Elizabeth Long.*  
<https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/492621.html>.

# A Club in the Colonies

1634

- Anne Hutchinson, “a woman of a haughty and fierce carriage, a nimble wit and an active spirit, and a very voluble tongue,” starts a discussion group on a ship bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- Once she arrived, she held weekly public meetings to discuss Scripture and theology.
- At first meetings were women-only, but as word spread, men began attending and a second meeting was added.
- These meetings put her at the center of the “Antinomian Controversy,” a political and religious conflict that resulted in her excommunication and banishment from the Colony.



# Belles Lettres and Culture Clubs



The Woman's Book Club. Courtesy Everett Woman's Book Club

## 1700s-1800s

- In the 1700s, women formed clubs to meet and discuss the *belles lettres* of the day.
- In 1827, one of the first book clubs was started by and for Black women: the Society of Young Ladies in Lynn, Massachusetts.
- In the late 1800s, the Women's Club Movement emerged from progressive movements and met to discuss literature, history, and the arts.
- Women met for "self-culture," where they could cultivate their own intellectual and moral character.
- Some of these clubs are still active, like the Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti, Michigan that started in 1878!

# Consciousness-Raising Clubs and Oprah!

## 1900s

- In the early 20th century, mail order book-of-the-month clubs helped book clubs thrive across the United States.
- The feminist “Consciousness-raising” clubs of the ‘60s and ‘70s helped set a precedent for women to gather to discuss bettering themselves and their communities, influencing the growth of book clubs.
- Oprah launched her book club in 1996. The rest is (recent) history.

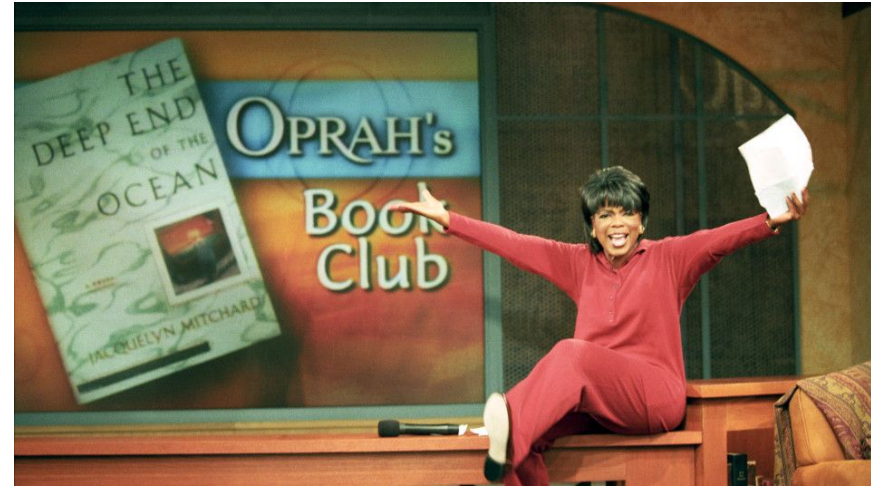
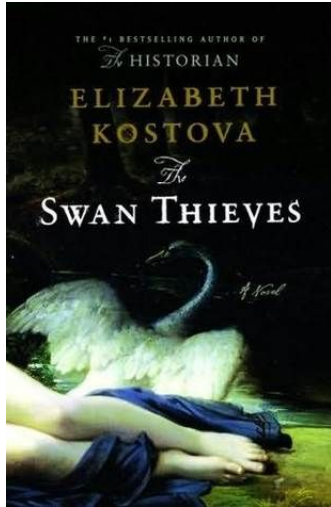


Photo via <https://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/how-oprahs-book-club-came-to-be>





## First Attempt at an Online Book Club (ca. 2012)



- Book was chosen because author was scheduled to be the keynote at our (now defunct) Blue Ridge Bookfest
  - Elizabeth Kostova, "The Swan Thieves"
  - Employee-only participation
- Created a course in our Online Course Management system, with discussion forums on a few chapters of the book each week (this was not super popular)
- Culminated in an off-campus dinner meeting before hearing the author speak
  - Off-campus location was a great opportunity to get to know co-workers in a new and more laid-back way
  - Being able to hear the author speak about a book you've just read was a lot of fun
- Continued the following year with Wiley Cash & "A Land More Kind than Home"
  - Dropped the online component altogether



## Next Book Club Iterations (ca. 2015-2018)

- On campus, in-person, small-group based - still only employees
  - Began with reading “Pride & Prejudice” in anticipation of Blue Ridge CC Theatre Dept’s adaptation of the book
  - Chose books via voting method after that
- SNACKS
  - Tea and cookies for P&P, but the tea theme was very popular so it was kept
- The same few members participated every time
  - Hard to get new faces to come
- Was a lot of work for what felt like little pay-off
  - Did not bring more users to the library



# 2020. COVID-19 Happened. April 2020

- Doing a book club sounded too hard
  - Decided to try it based on a vast amount of interest
- Reading the same book sounded too hard
  - Started with a “What are you reading now?” theme
- Approximately 20 employees participated
  - Broken up into 3 groups so everyone would have a chance to speak
  - Moderated by a different librarian at each group
- All books mentioned were gathered into a list and sent out to participants. The library also purchased the books we didn’t already own



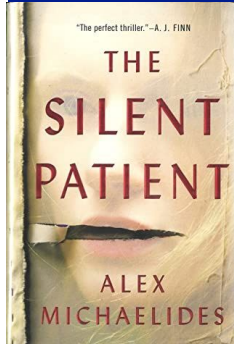
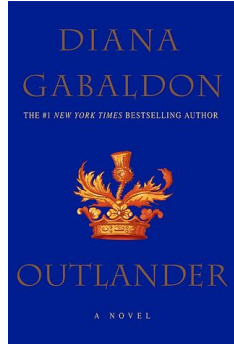




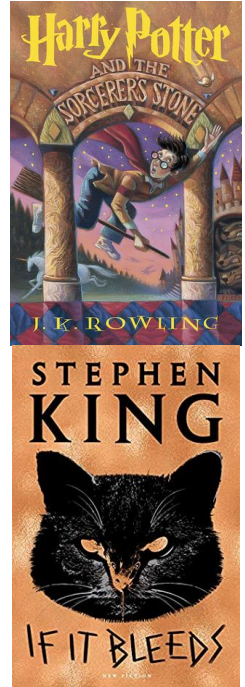
# Lessons Learned from the COVID Book Club

- Having multiple sessions was a good call because people really wanted to talk about their books!
- Should have limited everyone to one or two books.
- People were reading a lot!
- Everyone's mental health was helped by this.
  - Was a chance to connect with other employees in a more informal way
  - There wasn't just one person leading a meeting; everyone was able to speak
  - The President of the college even joined in a session

# Fall 2020 Book Club: Gift Ideas for Book Lovers



- Reading the same book still sounded too hard
- Gift Ideas/What we're reading over the Holidays became the theme
  - Held right before Thanksgiving Break so people could come check out titles after they got ideas
- Slightly less participation; only one meeting was scheduled.
  - Would probably have had more people join if more times had been offered. This sounded too hard.
- This format is much easier than a traditional book club (we found)
  - Didn't require reading a specific book (which required less research/prep on our parts)
  - Less planning after the date is settled. Simply add a Google Meet/Zoom link into a calendar invite.





# COVID Book Club Ideas Around the Web

- Reading clubs or “silent” book clubs.
  - These clubs meet, read for an hour with whatever book they’ve brought, and then share what they’ve learned.
- Bad books
  - Since quarantine has turned our lives upside down, why not the book club too?
  - These sessions can be cathartic and offer an alternative to the traditional book club model.
- Public domain book club
  - Pick a book that’s freely available online
  - Increases accessibility for patrons with COVID-related restrictions
- Translated fiction book club
  - Cross borders with a book!



# A Not-Book, COVID-Free Club

- The Not-book club, from [Library Journal](#):
  - Anxiety related to COVID-19 may leave patrons unable to concentrate on reading.
  - Shift gears and discuss podcasts, knitting patterns, bread-making adventures, Netflix binges, etc.
- Steer clear of virus talk? From [The Guardian](#):
  - “It is noteworthy that as the 2011 medical-thriller Contagion has experienced a resurgence and the docu-series Pandemic trends on Netflix, none of the book clubs I spoke to had themed their reading material around the coronavirus. It suggests, that in connecting over literature, we are seeking to align over a common experience – other than our shared experience of Covid-19.”



## Other Things to Consider

- Partner with your campus Wellness Committee (or another committee).
- Use an external tool like Goodreads Groups or Facebook groups.
- Student bring-a-book clubs.
- Is the new format a stopgap measure or long-term commitment?
- Asynchronous option where folks upload their book “reviews” and others can comment (with something like FlipGrid).
- Think about new rules for your COVID/virtual book clubs like a no-spoilers rule.
- Should an online meeting be recorded?
- Organically formed book clubs