

## Sunday Cover

# The joy of reading a bonding experience for book club members — in person and online

*Online technology has changed the way many book clubs work, but the basic premise remains the same: read, share*

By Heather Sawers — The Daily News

You know how you feel when you finish reading a really good book? You just want to talk about it to anyone who will listen. Unfortunately, sometimes the people around you just aren't interested.

"A lot of people read, but don't have a chance to discuss what they've read," explained Elaine Murray, branch manager of the Tantallon Public Library. She started the Tantallon Book Club shortly after the library opened five years ago, and says there are many benefits to being in a book club.

"A number of people have said that the book club has given them an opportunity to read books they never would have chosen themselves," Murray said. "That continues to broaden their perspective on literature."

The club usually has between 10 and 15 members and meets on the second Tuesday of every month — except for July and August, where they take a break. Books are chosen as a group every June, and they have a few ground rules for picking what they'll read.

"We try to read a black author for Black History Month, and in May we try to read something connected with Asian history," Murray said. "We've had a really good time with it, and have done some really interesting things."

Things really changed for the club last year, when they started using the Internet to contact the authors of the books they were reading, hoping to have discussions.

"In September, we read *Blunt Trauma*, which is about the Swissair disaster. (Author) Ivy Bannister had been in Nova Scotia for the anniversary of her sister's death, so we e-mailed her our questions and she e-mailed responses back," Murray said.

They've also conducted e-mail interviews with Queen Noor, who wrote *Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life*. Authors Joan Baxter (*A Serious Pair of Shoes*) and Tom Gallant (*A Hard Chance: Sailing Into the Heart of Love*) ended up joining the book club for an in-person chat.

They also search the web for book reviews and biographical information about the author, as well as audio and video clips of interviews, which they play during their meetings.

"It's been an interesting move forward," Murray said about their work online.

They've read more than 50 books so far, but the Tantallon Book Club has only unanimously loved two: *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* by Wayne Johnston.

"People always have differing opinions about each book, and that's what makes the discussions really interesting," Murray said. "Sometimes we have people who absolutely hated the book and people who absolutely loved the book, and that makes for a really interesting dialogue."

"With (*Family Matters*), we were able to e-mail the author and tell him it was one of the few books we all loved."

But if a member happens to despise the current book once they start reading, Murray says it's fine if they choose not to finish it.

"They always come to the club to explain



Tantallon Book Club members Joan Fraser (left) and Charlotte Reinhold take part in a meeting at the Tantallon Public Library

why they didn't like it, and hear how other people responded to it," Murray said. "Sometimes they'll go back after the book club and finish it, because of the discussion. They will come in with a very determined opinion, and then, by the end of the meeting, they'll have changed their mind completely."

It's this passionate exchange of ideas about literature that has kept book clubs in existence since the early 1800s.

"We tend to think of reading as a solitary activity, but historically that wasn't the case," Jennifer Harris, Mount Allison University English professor and co-editor of *The Oprah Phenomenon*, said.

Harris says families in the early 19th century often read aloud in the evenings, and workplaces had designated readers who would read aloud from newspapers and novels. Later in the century, Harris says book clubs were formed around social activism and were based on having "a social and a moral purpose."

"A lot of women at that time wouldn't have had more than a Grade 8 education, so for many of them, this was the only time where they had an intellectual or profes-

sional opportunity," Harris said. "These people kept detailed minutes of their meetings, they wrote papers to present at their book clubs, and they were much more formalized."

These days, most book clubs are very informal, and have even branched out to include book-lovers lounging in front of their computer wearing their PJs.

"I think (online book clubs) show an evolution in reading communities," said DeNel Rehberg Sedo, an associate professor at Mount Saint Vincent. She is an extensive researcher of online book clubs and the co-director of the Beyond the Book project.

"Whatever specific interests readers have, they can create a community of like-minded people from various parts of the world."

Rehberg Sedo said online book clubs are popular because of their flexibility: members can come and go in the club as they please, and log on to share their thoughts without having to leave the house — or the office.

"One of the studies that I did showed that 45 per cent of the people were accessing their online book clubs at work," Rehberg Sedo said. "The access to an online commu-

nity is always there, it's omnipresent."

Constant availability is important to online book club members, who Rehberg Sedo says tend to be between 20 and 40.

"Time is really precious to them, because they're in the middle of their career," Rehberg Sedo said. "Online book clubs — just like online shopping — give them the flexibility to do it when they want to."

Online clubbers meet in chat rooms or post on message boards, or can make their own character to share their thoughts on virtual reality website SecondLife.com.

"People create avatars of themselves, and they discuss books inside a virtual library. It's really quite extraordinary," Rehberg Sedo said, adding that most online conversations between members are deep and genuine. "My online book club respondents reported being 'friends' with each other much more frequently than people in face-to-face book clubs."

While she finds online book clubs fascinating and observes many groups, Rehberg Sedo says she also belongs to two traditional book clubs. "There's something about meeting face-to-face that satisfies a social need that all of us have," Rehberg Sedo said.

Back at the Tantallon Book Club, Murray appreciates how the Internet has advanced the group's research, but says the world wide web can't replace the intimate discussions among the group of women.

"I don't know what we would do if a man came to our book club. I think that women tend to talk about their personal feelings in a way that men aren't entirely comfortable doing," Murray said. "You're talking about your responses to a book, and you can get some pretty personal information shared."

"There's a level of trust that builds up, that this is something you wouldn't share outside the group."

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GLENN CANNING

## MORE ABOUT BOOK CLUBS

Here are a few books from the Tantallon Book Club's 2006-07 reading list:

**Green Mile.** By Stephen King

**Wedding in December.**  
By Anita Shreve

**An Audience of Chairs.**  
By Joan Clark

**Blind Assassin.**  
By Margaret Atwood

**Tenth Circle.** By Jodi Picoult



For more information on the Tantallon Book Club, call 826-3330.

For more information on DeNel Rehberg Sedo's Beyond The Book project, visit [www.beyondthebookproject.org](http://www.beyondthebookproject.org).

To find out about **Hfx BookTalk**, The Daily News's online book club, visit [hfxnews.ca](http://hfxnews.ca), and see Page 39 of today's paper. Voting begins Tuesday for our next book of the month.