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EDITOR



READERS' ADVISORY

"Reading as a Contact Sport"

Online Book Groups and the Social Dimensions of Reading

Barbara Fister, Guest Columnist

Book groups have always been a popular way for readers to come together to share thoughts and ideas. As the online world has continued to expand, book discussions have made their way into this new medium. Now rather than being limited to members who can come together face-to-face, book groups can involve members from across the country or the world. Online book groups bring readers together in new ways, and offer new opportunities for librarians to explore how readers and books intersect. In this article, Barbara Fister examines the social dimensions of an online reading community, the For Mystery Addicts group.—*Editor*

Though reading is often perceived as a sedate and solitary activity, the popularity of reading groups suggests that reading is very much a social experience. Readers—women, in particular—have been coming together for generations to share their responses to books as an occasion for social engagement. That engagement can have a profound, if sometimes unappreciated, effect on our culture. For example, the majority of public libraries in the United States were founded by women who found an opportunity to create positive social change through their cultural associations.

More recently, reading groups gained a high profile during the heady days of Oprah's Book Club, when for a few years, a relatively obscure novel anointed by the popular talk show host would become an instant bestseller. Some members of the literary establishment took exception to a television celebrity being so strongly identified with book culture. When Jonathan Franzen expressed reservations that his novel *The*

Corrections would be labeled with the Oprah logo—and therefore risked being shunned by highbrow and male readers, if embraced by middle-class women—the high-stakes juggernaut came to a sudden halt. But Sedo has pointed out that there is "life after Oprah," that the success of the talk show book club was merely a well-publicized version of an unquenchable thirst for talking about books.¹

The power of a television celebrity to influence reading practices has made some critics worry that book groups, often supported by chain bookstores and big publishers, are commodifying reading—that we are witnessing a corporate takeover of literary practices that engages readers in formulaic, shallow analysis of texts.² Others see the burgeoning of reading groups as a grassroots appreciation of books that can teach us much about the relationship of readers and texts. Hall has noted that "the classroom study of literature sometimes dims the joy of reading," and popular literacy practices encouraged by Oprah offered attractions that academics should take seriously.³ Strip has found in Oprah's invitation to relate books to everyday lives a feminist reclamation of reading as an act of transformation.⁴

Radway and Long have both explored the ways reading and talking about books enriches women's lives in

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a manner that academic approaches to literary analysis often disparage.⁵ According to Long, a sociologist whose curiosity about women's reading groups was considered a peculiarly trivial research subject by many of her colleagues, "literature requires a broad base of readers to flourish" and, thanks to new channels available for forming book groups, "books are still closely tied to moments of experiential insight and still show a stunning ability to make people, in discussion, feel part of a significant book-related community."⁶

Paralleling the rapidly increasing numbers of face-to-face book clubs, the Internet has become home to thousands of book discussion groups. Critics of online communication, including Robert Putnam and Clifford Stoll, suggest time spent in online communities leads to isolation and social disengagement.⁷ An examination of one online book discussion group contests that claim. This analysis draws on the discussion practices of one online group and off-list interviews with members to explore the experience of reading together in a virtual community. An active online discussion among committed readers can reveal much about how readers choose and respond to books, what role reading for pleasure plays in their lives, and how sharing responses to books can enrich the reading experience—and indeed, our lives.

Books at the Center

An unusually successful reading list, 4_Mystery_Addicts (4MA) was founded in late 1999 by a dedicated group of mystery fans who wanted to create an online forum for readers to share their reading experiences through organized book discussions. It is not the oldest or largest of online mystery discussion groups. That distinction most likely belongs to DorothyL, a discussion group founded by librarians at a 1991 Association of Research Libraries meeting that currently has more than three thousand members. But 4MA is surely

one of the most active, with more than six hundred members who together post between fifteen hundred and three thousand messages a month. Although many of these messages are marked "OT" for "off topic" and long-running inside jokes and personal observations pepper the daily diet of lively conversation, the focus is kept on books through three well-organized monthly book discussions and regularly scheduled opportunities to share reading experiences.

When a new member joins, the focus on books is clearly announced: they are asked to introduce themselves to the group by discussing who their favorite mystery authors are and what they've enjoyed reading lately. New members are welcomed by the group, with members responding specifically to their reading tastes but also describing the nature of the group as a social entity. One member does a particularly good job of capturing the character of the community in this welcome post. This quote and all following quotes from 4MA come from list postings or interviews and personal communications with the author during fall 2004.

Stick around long enough and somebody will have danced with a ladder, left their unmentionables someplace, gotten locked in a bathroom, gotten stuck in a stair railing, fainted, fell, ate something, rode something, broke something, that will have you falling out of your chairs with hysterical laughter. (We assume no liability for the damage done to keyboards and mice if you insist on reading 4MA posts while you are eating or drinking). You'll hear about stalking authors, nicknaming authors, plans for book heists, hijacking the 4MA website, wild get togethers in NYC, conventions and somewhere in the midst of all that, you will occasionally hear about books and authors that you won't usually find on the bestsellers lists but should be. And if you hang in there long enough you will find that we just like to laugh, have fun, read and eat chocolate, not necessarily in that order.

Though this post emphasizes the fun aspects of the list, her statement

that you will "occasionally hear about books and authors" is intentionally ironic. In fact, one of the group's prime functions is to help avid mystery readers decide what to read next. In the middle of each month members are prompted to report on what they are reading. At the end of the month they post reviews of the books they have read. Members value these tips. As one member put it, "I have my reading list made to order." Another said:

I tend to be a bit 'traditional' and stick to authors I know I like. If I'm looking at unfamiliar authors, I skim through the summary and if it doesn't sound interesting, I generally don't try it. I've found a number of authors I probably would not have found if they hadn't been suggested by a 4MA member. I also find I now keep a list of books/authors suggested by other readers that I know like many of the same authors that I particularly like.

In fact, many members have "reading twins" whose tastes are so similar they take special note of each others' recommendations.

Ross has pointed out the process of choosing what to read is not a trivial matter, particularly for beginners. "Each book read contributes to the bulk of reading experience that enhances the reader's ability to choose another satisfying book. Conversely, each unsuccessful choice decreases the beginning reader's desire to read, which in turn reduces the likelihood of further learning based on interaction with books."⁸ Sharing information about what to read next—or what to avoid—is a key function of 4MA. As members pool their vast knowledge of the genre, they constitute an ongoing readers' advisory service of great depth.

As self-described "addicts," running out of books to read is a shared concern. One member joked about her need for a mountainous TBR—common shorthand for books "to be read":

That's why most of us are here I think—none of my co-workers read much and they think I'm bats and the family

is constantly wondering aloud if the third signature for committal proceedings is overdue. I just don't seem to be able to explain to any of them that a Mt TBR of less than fifty books is a source of mild panic.

The solidarity of a group of like-minded avid readers is also a source of comfort (and amusement) for this online group.

Most people have stopped asking me why I need so many books (because I've taken to peering at them and asking in a very loud voice "you mean you don't!!!!!!") but they still sigh and pointedly move stacks of books around so they can "sit comfortably" . . . I've often contemplated banning anyone from the house who doesn't have an emergency book in the glove box of their car when they arrive.

Filling the Spaces Around Books

All of the members who were interviewed off-list commented on the warmth and friendliness of the community, and several had stories about times when the group provided emotional support. One member said:

I came aboard after coming out of hospital and in the first throes of dealing with an incurable disease that prevents me from doing lots of things I could before . . . few of my friends share my love for mysteries or books, at least to the degree I do. So finding 4MA was a double bonus for me. I found kindred spirits, I could finally discuss the books I loved to read, and I found a whole parallel community from all over the world (or close enough) who have supported me personally all through the last years.

"4MA has soul," another member said. "We are friends who read books—some of us are best friends even though we have never met each other; there

is even a sub-group which emotionally supports a fellow member in times of sadness or illness," referring to the "sunshine club," an off-list group of volunteers who see to it that members who are going through a difficult time get letters, small gifts, phone calls, and other forms of support. Even members who don't post messages to the list appreciate reading the messages of more active members. One "lurker" wrote off list to assure me 4MA was an important part of the lives of even those who are invisible participants.

"It's a weird thing that you can end up having a sense of community with people you are never ever likely to meet," one member who lives in a rural area commented, which she finds an advantage. "I'm not really a face-to-face people person, to be honest." One felt the community was "there for her" after her husband suffered a heart attack, providing support that was "social and intellectual at the same time." Another said, "I joined 4MA shortly after losing my dad, whose death left a big hole in my life. I was looking for some way to fill the time I had spent with him without falling into depression and joining 4MA did just that. As well as helping to fill a void in my life, I have met some truly wonderful people on the list . . . I look forward to reading each day's posts to see who has done what, as well as who has read what." Members often contact each other off list, make efforts to visit each other in person or meet as a group at mystery conventions such as Left Coast Crime and the Harrogate Festival.

Though all of the members enjoy mysteries, there is enormous diversity in the membership of 4MA, which is considered a strength. "Online book groups take you beyond color, race, religion, and sex—you all love books" one member said. Indeed, the 4MA membership offers great variety in terms of physical disabilities, educational attainment, income, age, gender, and sexual orientation. Though the majority are from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, the membership is

drawn from six continents, and for several active posters English is not their primary language.

This diversity makes for lively book discussion. One member contrasted the narrower range available in her face-to-face group: "we know each other so well (we studied together for the same career forty years ago) that the discussions follow a familiar pattern. In 4MA there is always a fresh view of things." She added, "we get to like other members because we like their minds, not because they are good looking or have lovely manners or move in the best circles." Another member described 4MA as "very non-judgmental and supportive . . . Worldwide perspective and lots of mutual respect." Though political discussions are discouraged as potentially divisive, the sensitivity to international perspectives allows for cross-cultural analysis of criminal justice systems and social issues brought out in mysteries. One member said some discussion lists have "a very American-centric view which I find decidedly rankling, very closed and insular and very off-putting," though she added, demonstrating a "communication work" gambit typical of the list, "That could just be me, of course."

One of the moderators put it especially well:

People respect each other's opinions but go way beyond that and support each other. True friendships have bloomed. Lots of small and not so small gestures have happened—books sent to members who don't have the resources to buy some books for example . . . Over the years, this list has grown into a full blown community where the books are still the center but the people and their lives fill all the space around them.

Making and Maintaining a Community

As Bird has commented, creating successful online communities takes

work and “being subscribed to a list doesn’t result in community, any more than just living in a neighborhood makes that a community.”⁹ Though some online book discussion lists are beset by discord—one even has a list of “forbidden topics” posted on its Web site—4MA members only rarely need a gentle reminder that some issues have the potential to upset other members. “Let’s remember we’re at a party and that politics and religion and causes are subjects that should always be avoided to ensure a peaceful, successful party,” one of the moderators recently posted when members wandered into an area that invited discord. Another member used the party metaphor, but described a somewhat rambunctious event:

This is like a cocktail party where we schmooze the room and maybe make some friends and have heated conversations when we disagree. If you use your imagination you can see this group or that hanging around in clumps, never stopping the focus of why we’re gathered in the first place. A room with mystery book lovers of all types getting along just fine, maybe checking this dress or that suit out or the dressing gowns or jeans . . . we are all here for our love of mysteries and good writing. The point being is I like to schmooze my way through what’s out there to read and thereby add to my daily being something different now and then.

Though controversial issues often surface in the discussion of a book, since social conflict and troubling ethical issues are so commonly the subject matter of crime fiction, members generally are careful to focus their comments on interpreting the texts to minimize any potential to cause offense.

Symptomatic of the group’s self-reflective humor, along with gently worded rules sent to new members and posted in the group’s files, there is a spoof of list rules that includes the following:

- ❖ No member shall submit more than sixty-two posts per day.

- ❖ If you are wittier than the list leaders, you will be appointed as the CEO of something or other and given a very nasty job to do.
- ❖ If you insist on sending BSP [authors indulging in “blatant self-promotion”], we will send the BS back to you and dispel the P.
- ❖ If any of these rules are not adhered to, we will infect your computer with one of those nasty worm viruses who will eat all of your “t”s. -ry -yping a pos- wi-hou- using -he le—er -. No- easy, is i-?

Several moderators divide up the maintenance tasks designed to keep the monthly discussions going, such as organizing nominations for group reads and recruiting discussion leaders, but the task of enforcing polite behavior is not onerous. The focus and tone of the list was carefully shaped by its founders when it was launched, and members work to retain its cordial and informal nature. One moderator told me, “we very, very seldom have to intervene. This list is incredible for its self-policing.” Though some online discussions are closely identified with a single moderator, the sharing of list “ownership” among moderators from several countries has added to the welcoming diversity of the group and avoids the group being too dependent on one person’s tastes and list management style.

Though off-topic posts are welcome, the list never wanders far from the subject of mysteries. In addition to sharing personal reading experiences, three books are chosen for group discussion each month. These books are selected through a voting process that involves members making nominations, a period during which readers comment in support of (ISO) nominated books they would like to read, followed by a voting process from which the two top scoring books are chosen for group discussion. For variety, there is a moderator’s choice month, one devoted to other cultures and a classics month, in which nominated books must have been published at least forty years ago. The middle of

the month is reserved for serial readers, a group discussion of the first three books in a mystery series, spread across three months.

Reading Practices

The discussions themselves are led by volunteer question maestros, who develop a set of five to ten questions to be posted to the list over the course of ten days, giving readers time to compose their own responses and comment on each other’s posts. Often, general questions are included so those who were not able to obtain the discussion book, or did not have time to read it, can participate. Spoilers—information about the endings of books or twists in the plot—are allowed. The discussion questions for each group are archived so novice discussion leaders have models for their questions, as are responses for those who came late to the conversation and want to revisit the discussions about particular books.

Some question maestros go to special lengths to enrich discussion by pointing out Web sites for background information, finding apt lyrics of songs to preface questions, or even contacting and interviewing the authors of books under discussion. From time to time a brave author will join the group for discussion, though that does not prevent readers responding frankly and forthrightly about aspects of the book they disliked. Though some books generate less participation than others, the careful planning, routine maintenance, and sensitive communication work done by moderators and members alike keep the discussions focused and lively. The depth of analysis is no doubt influenced by the fact the membership is unusually well-read in the genre, with members pointing out plot holes, clichés, and factual errors that evade most professional reviewers and many editors. Members feel comfortable stating radically different opinions because it is understood that reactions to books vary widely, and that different responses

are to be expected and even enjoyed. At the same time, having someone respond the same way can be reaffirming. Quite often, after a dissenting opinion is posted, a member will say “I’m so glad you said that; I thought I was the only one who felt that way.”

Becoming more adept at reading critically is a member benefit. “I have never been part of any book discussion group,” a member told me. “Except for high school and college literature courses, I have never had the opportunity to discuss a book in depth with many people . . . I am viewing many of the books I read more critically and therefore I often have a greater appreciation of many of them. I find that many times I really think about what I reading and not just escaping into another world.” Unlike in a classroom, the development of critical skills is not tied to grades. As another member put it, “the book discussions are wonderful. I am forced to consider why I enjoy or reject a book. I am grateful for the opportunity to voice my opinions, even if I consider them half-baked or incomplete. 4MA is invariably kind—no opinion is too stupid. Reading the opinions of others makes me think of the book in new ways.”

The importance of these opportunities to tackle books with other readers is often underestimated by outsiders. “I was talking to a coworker today,” one member told me, “and mentioned this and he was amazed that we actually discuss three books a month. I think he thought it was a group of people who chatted about silly things.” Yet the group can also parody the high purpose of some book discussion groups. A new member was welcomed with this message:

We are just a nice quiet bunch of sedate readers . . . we’re very strict about the rules and never get off topic, we’re quite a serious bunch . . . If this sounds like you—You are on the wrong list! LOL! We’re a rowdy, crazy bunch of readers who spend our waking hours, reading books, trying to keep up with all the posts on this list . . . justifying that last book purchase, entering book give-

aways, drooling over the latest book from our favorite author and trying to figure out if we can get by without using the oven, so we can use it for book storage.

Though deepening one’s understanding of books and of the genre is a function of the discussions, members do not forget to have fun while they are doing it.

Resisting Cultural Categories

Sedo points out that cultural studies scholars have not studied reading groups because they are not considered “oppositional” enough to be interesting, but rather are perceived as groups of middle- and upper-class readers, chiefly women with sufficient leisure to form such groups, who are susceptible to commercial and cultural messages about books.¹⁰ Though certainly chain bookstores and publishers have paid more attention to book clubs than scholars have, the assumption that book group members are by nature complacent and gullible is not borne out by the evidence.

In the case of 4MA, members challenge dominant notions of the worth of books in two significant ways. First, there is a strong resistance to marketing messages. One highly touted but poorly written debut thriller led to the creation of the “Buzzhoff Award,” given to amateurishly written books with big marketing budgets. Nominees are proposed from time to time with snippets of particularly bad prose. Though mysteries and thrillers dominate the fiction bestseller lists, 4MA members tend to pay relatively little attention to big-name authors. Discovering and supporting good mid-list authors is a shared and clearly articulated value among list members.

Second, the focus is on genre fiction, and the membership frequently offers spirited defenses of fiction not considered literary. Unlike the romance readers in Radway’s study of

reading for pleasure as a form of concealed resistance, 4MA members make no apologies for their taste and do not see reading crime fiction as a guilty pleasure but a worthwhile activity.¹¹ Indeed, they frequently argue that the issues tackled in mysteries and the overall quality of writing in the genre makes it superior to most literary fiction. Reviewers who describe books as “transcending the genre” come in for a regular drubbing.

Though all members love mysteries, they like different ones and are savvy about the differences. Several files at the group’s Web site offer humorous definitions and examples of different types of mysteries. A number of these parodies were written by Donna Moore, a talented Scottish writer whose witty posts to a variety of discussion lists caught the eye of a British publisher who encouraged her to try her hand at a full-length mystery. Her affectionate spoof of the genre, featuring every annoying plot device known to mystery readers, *Go to Helena Handbasket*, will be published by Point Blank Press in 2005. A 4MA quiz helps readers determine their reading tastes based on five descriptions of subgenres. They range from “mysteries with a quilt making heroine and a quilt pattern and recipe for something wholesome every three pages,” to “All the good guys have packed up their smiles and left town . . . The good guy usually wins, but becomes a little less good in the process.” Adding up the score identifies the reader as Classy (a cozy lover), Splasher (sometimes cozy, sometimes hard-boiled) or Badass (hard-boiled). Though the taxonomies of subgenres are well understood, the membership is broad-minded; of the nearly two hundred members who have taken the poll, Splashers are in the majority.

When asked what they get out of reading mysteries, entertainment and escape were often mentioned by 4MA members, but so was learning new things. “I like the way I can get lost in a good mystery and I feel like I learn something from the best of them, be it about a geographical area, or some aspect of science or technology, or just

about people of different cultures or backgrounds,” one member told me. Another said, “Reading has always been my saving grace. As the eldest of nine children escaping to a corner with a book was my way of coping with life in general. Even though I have always read many different types of books, from historical to romances to non-fiction history and biography, mysteries have long been my favorite genre . . . Maybe it’s the psychology involved in trying to understand the villain or maybe it’s escaping my problems by reading about someone else’s.”

One member began by pointing out she enjoys the puzzle, but added “What’s kept me interested in mysteries is the constant spotlight on the human condition. Even the more gory, extreme books that I’ve managed to finish have provided an insight into humanity and its frailties that I just don’t get with mainstream literature anymore.” Another agreed, saying “the genre tends to be more grounded in the traditions of social realism and permits a greater interplay between characters and the social surround than do other genres.” Though this may mean reading about uncomfortable subjects at times, that encounter can be informative. “If it makes people stop and think about issues then it’s a positive thing,” one member said. “I keep remembering the discussion we had on Rebecca Pawel’s *Death of Nationalist* and the issues it raised about war, human nature and how nothing is black and white. I think that’s probably the most interesting book discussion I’ve ever participated in.”

One discussion thread concerned “parents as readers.” For some members, reading was not modeled at home. One member noted both her mother and grandmother read in secret because it was considered self-indulgent when there was work to be done. In other cases, reading was encouraged by parents. One member from Argentina told of her widowed grandmother emigrating from Spain with two children and a trunk full of books. “One of the first things I remember is my Father and

my Grandmother discussing the battles of WW II with their newspapers open. And my Grandmother reading or telling me some tales from her books. I was a voracious reader since before I could read. Loved the printed word even before it took a meaning.” Encouraging adolescents to continue reading is a common concern, often prompting book suggestions for particular interests, and getting a reluctant reader or a family member with learning disabilities hooked on books is grounds for communal celebration.

Above all, reading is not seen as a passive activity. One member called the encounter between reader and writer a “contact sport.”

Reading is an *active* process for me, not something I passively do—brain engaged, heart open, willing to be stomped on or thrilled or hurt or helped, or all of the above. It perhaps explains my anger when an author disappoints or, even worse, deliberately “trifles with my emotions”, promising but not delivering, manipulating for sensation only, “playing with my affections”. . . . And oh, the wonder, the joy, the almost physical satisfaction when an author unexpectedly delights you, charms you, pulls you away from the mundane and “the usual”. Brings you into their world, truly welcomes you there, makes you feel a part of it, *invested* in it, as if it truly matters for you what happens to those people, that place, this occasion. THAT’s writing!

Not only is it an interaction, the relationship between book and reader can be an emotionally intense and personal one:

Reading a good book is a lot like a love affair, admittedly short-term, but nonetheless intense for all that. Some lovers become boring very quickly, others can be endlessly fascinating, with new sparkles coming to light at surprising moments, shining in the sun when you least expect it. But it always takes two, and even the ultimately sad ones “grow” you in some way, as long as they touch you where it matters.

Given that members of this group are activist readers, they are comfortable articulating their responses to books even when they disagree, making for lively and impassioned discussions. In fact, the books that meet with the greatest divergence of opinion are often the best choices for conversation. It’s not surprising that each year, as members submit their “tops and bottoms”—the ten books they liked most and least—that the same title will often be found in both categories.

“Book Heaven”

One member commented that, though the librarians she encountered as a child fit the stereotype of spinsters with tight buns found in the film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, they provided something important to her: “several of them were the warmest and nicest people I’d ever met, and they turned part of my difficult childhood into a beautiful imaginary world, gave me gifts I didn’t understand until many years later, helped me realize that the life I—or they—had wasn’t all there might be.” She added, with tongue firmly in cheek, “But obviously I’m a disturbed personality—I consider ‘librarian’ to be a noble title! And I have a tweed suit . . .”

Though most members of 4MA have extensive personal book collections, and those who can afford to buy books make a point of supporting their favorite authors, many rely heavily on their public libraries. As one measure of the need for extensive library service, a member lives in a city in which the branch libraries limit the number of books that can be checked out at one time. She managed to overcome that liability by obtaining seven library cards in various family members’ names from different branches!

Recently, when a member reported moving from a rural location without a strong public library system to a community with a good library collection, helpful librarians, and virtually no waiting lists for books, she added,

"I won't tell you where I live, or you all will want to move here. And there will go my 'no wait list' for books I want to read." The response was immediate: "Where is this book heaven that you've moved to?! We want to know, right now!" Members began planning a retirement community for 4MA, describing the restaurants, pubs, tea shops, and bookstores they wanted located nearby. For this group, a dream community starts with a good library.

The needs and practices of the common reader, largely ignored by scholars of cultural studies and literary criticism, are also neglected in library science literature. For the most part, provision of information (whatever that might mean) is valorized, while pleasure reading is seen as a popular but far less culturally significant function. Information literacy, a cause that academic librarians in particular find urgent, is framed around a process that begins with identifying and satisfying information needs; lifelong learning—the ultimate aim of information literacy efforts—is presumed to depend on continuing patterns of information-seeking established in the school or college years. The Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education makes no mention of reading without a specific purpose in mind, even though readers report learning a great deal through pleasure reading that is not driven by an information need.¹² Ross makes a strong case for librarians taking more seriously the role of encountering information in popular fiction and the significant impact reading has on people's lives.¹³ She points out

that understanding readers and their needs not only leads to better collection development, but better reference and readers' advisory service—not to mention a broader understanding of the uses of libraries, including those considered merely recreational.

Though 4MA is a virtual group, with its members scattered across the globe, it has succeeded in becoming a true community for serious mystery readers who never take themselves too seriously. As a knowledgeable group of dedicated and critically acute readers, 4MA members provide an extraordinary readers' advisory service for one another through regularly scheduled and impromptu sharing of reading lists and ad hoc reviews, forming a worldwide network of friends in the process. As a resource for avid readers, online discussion groups can enhance readers' horizons and provide a sense of community with books at the center. For librarians, virtual book discussion groups offer extraordinary insights into the social nature of reading and its importance in the everyday lives of readers. ■

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