

THE TAMBOERSKLOOF BOOK PUB



Book clubs may have a rep for gossip and wine quaffing (let's not pretend that doesn't happen!) – but could they also be part of a wider cultural phenomenon: modern women's reclamation of sacred sisterhood that transcends time, age, place and culture?

MORE THAN

words

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

As

with many great friendships, mine began with the words, 'Me too!'

As we stood aside at a mutual friend's baby shower, sipping Chenin (me) and beer (Cindy), bonding over how neither of us had ever been struck by a desire to procreate, the conversation took an excursion into books we'd recently read.

'I've always wanted to be part of a book club,' said I.

'Me too!' said she. 'Shall we start one?'

'Um... okay.'

And that was it.

Cindy credits me with being a founding member, but all I did was say yes. She did everything else. I guess she just needed that 'yes' to get cracking.

Our first awkward gathering was on 11 October 2013 at Cindy's apartment in Tamboerskloof. We dubbed ourselves The Tamboerskloof Book Pub (there was wine aplenty, natch). We had no idea how to run a book club and I could tell a few of the other gals were unimpressed with our casual

From left Martina Polley, Libby Hirschon, Amy-Lee Emdon, Samantha Levey, Kirsten Sims, Robyn MacLarty and Cindy Tilney.

‘I went through a painful and traumatic break-up from a long-term relationship that took quite some time to heal... Thanks to these women, the process was so much gentler and ultimately empowering.’ – SAMANTHA

approach. I’ve since learnt some book clubs are quite strict in their procedures. *Vive la difference*; that was not our style. We all brought books we recommended, put them into a book kitty and each month there would be a chaotic swapathon.

Eight years later, only three of the seven original members remain. A few came and went, but after the first three or so years we seemed to settle and no more joined or left. We hit on the magic formula quite by accident, and what we have now is far greater than the sum of its parts. It has been a more powerful force for good in my life than I ever could have imagined.

We abandoned any kind of official meeting roster. Now one member shouts, ‘Hey, when are we meeting?’ on our WhatsApp group, and everyone is in.

When I look back, I can’t quite comprehend how those simple words – ‘Me too’ – gave birth to a group of women that have become my rock, a reliable place of safety and support that I had no idea I was going to need. I had no idea, as members came and went in the first few years, that the final selection that just stuck would be women who would each reveal strength, beauty, wisdom, courage, compassion and a sense of humour over the coming years.

When my marriage ended, they were there to tell me how courageous I was.

When I began to play the field with somewhat questionable taste in men, they never judged me.

When I moved across town three times in one year, the constancy of our gatherings kept me grounded.

When lockdown hit, we took our meetings to Zoom and they became a lifeline of connection for all of us.

When I quit my job without a plan, they convinced me I would bounce back better than ever.

When I was blindsided by a deep dark bout of depression, I received calls to check in on me at random times, messages of encouragement, voice notes... and a complete refusal to allow me to self-isolate.

We’ve all taken turns to fall apart, and it now seems somewhat farcical to call what we are a book club. We are more than that; we are a sacred circle of women.

A sense of trust

‘From the beginning it was clear something special was happening,’ says Amy, who’s been with the club for six years. ‘It all started with books and that’s how we got to know each other. Now we usually take turns to go around and give an update on

where we are at. We go deep right away and allow one another to unpack whatever we’re going through. We celebrate one another and hold space for any pain or venting. It has become deeply personal.’

It isn’t all communing over life’s difficulties, though. There are bouts of uncontrollable laughter and dancing around coffee tables with underwear on our heads (don’t ask).

I’ve come to believe that strong sacred circles of women across all cultures, races and socio-economic strata are a medicine our society needs. When women spend time together, our nervous systems tune into one another, and with consistent, repeated gatherings, where each time we reveal a little more vulnerability and authenticity, and trust that it is safe to do so, we take this sense of trust and safety out into the world with us, and by extension, gift it to everyone we encounter.

Hence: sacred circles of women are medicine. Plus, we get to read some fantastic books along the way!



THE BOOKWORMS BOOK CLUB

‘I have found my tribe. The book club has brought many meaningful relationships into my life. It has also opened me up to more genres, diverse authors and dynamic topics. And when my father died a few months ago, I was enveloped by the love and support of the group.’ – LORRAINE

In

April this Johannesburg-based book club celebrated its first decade, and it is still going strong. Although created out of ‘a love of reading, a love of engaging conversations around books, and a love of community’, says co-founder Lorraine Sithole, it’s become so much more than that. Not only in terms of supporting its members, but also through a strong dedication to helping others.

‘Being able to use your power and resources to help those in need is very important to me, and it is one of the cornerstones of the book club. We’re a group of women who have a lived experience of lack, and for us

being able to give does not mean we have excess; it means we know how it feels not to have.’

Every year, apart from their focus on books, the Bookworms select a cause to raise funds for, and scrupulously organise their time and resources to ensure that they fulfil their objectives.

Over time they have accumulated an impressive philanthropic track record. Noteworthy achievements include providing two years’ worth of hygiene packs to more than 50 girls and women from a Vosloorus informal settlement in 2012 and raising R53 000





Above, from left Sthe Buthelezi, Molatelo Lekganyane, Zanele Nodladla, Mitta Sejamoholo, Lorraine Sithole, Mahumisha Selebogo and Thokozile Dlamini.

for the Ekujabuleni KwaBadala Recreation Centre for senior citizens in Orlando East in 2017. More recently they have been working with an early childhood development centre in Pimville to build an interactive play area and provide reading material (a project that has been delayed by the national lockdown).

'We have shared so many life events as we grow in years and in our minds. Before lockdown, we were meeting in person, but since then we've taken our gatherings online. It's really opened us up, because we now have women joining us from all

over the world. I am grateful every year for the work we are able to do as a network of women.'

If you'd like to make a contribution to philanthropic work the Bookworms do, send Lorraine an email on lsithole9@gmail.com



THE DIRTY DOZEN

When Bidy and Calien decided to start a book club in 1965, they had no idea it would become part of the fabric of their lives for the next five decades... Did they?

'No!' says Calien. 'I never thought I'd get this old!'

'We met at my next-door neighbour's house,' Bidy says. 'There were only six of us then, and now there are 12. Although not all of them could make it for the photographs.'

'We were the Dirty Dozen,' says Jenny. 'Then we had 13 for a while and became the Baker's Dozen.'

Calien and Bidy, as the only remaining founding members from the '60s, are thoroughly pleased with the final mix, which Bidy says has remained stable for the past decade or so.

'I say that if anyone leaves, we are not getting any new people,' Calien says. 'We're just so used to one another now, it would be too strange to have a new member.'

On that note, Libbi points out that she is the newbie of the group, having joined a mere 35 years ago!

'If my phone goes ping, or if my husband can't find me, or if I walk out the door with my car keys, he says, "Book club stuff, I presume?"' That's Janet, the 'Book Prefect'. A flurry of praise ensues for her book-organising brilliance.

There is an ease among these women, a matter-of-factness and humour that reveal a deep current of affection and respect.



They must have been through some interesting times together, I prompt. How much of your meetings are just about books?

'The conversation is about 30% books and 70% everything else: what's happening in our lives, in the world,' Calien says.

'Quite a few of us have lost children; that's been hard,' Jean says. 'I took a long time to get over it. Put it behind me. Learn to live with it. All of those things. It's 15 years ago now. The empathy I received here... These are like my sisters. And the women here knew our children.'

One of the great strengths of their club, Pam stresses, is that, 'not everyone is down at the same time. I

'I think the consistency is really key. Knowing you're going to see one another once a month... I mean, there are close friends and family we don't even see that regularly.' – JANET

had amazing support when I broke my neck three years ago, and ever since. They're always there for me. Since my accident I haven't been very mobile, but someone's always dropping off or collecting books, or giving me a lift. It has been unbelievable.'

Above, from left Libbi Downes, Jenny Pannell and Calien Vorster (back); Pam Hansford, Jean Purcell, Bidy Lubbe, Robud de Waal, Janet Steer and Libby Ardington (front). Not pictured: Ann Sass, Rosalind Molteno and Glenn Mol.

Janet sums it up beautifully: 'These are brave women. An inspiration. For people who haven't suffered very much in their lives, like me, looking around and seeing women who have weathered cataclysmic events... I think it makes you stiffen your spine a little.'

Well, it may be too much to hope that Calien and Bidy's book club will keep going for another 50+ years, but they certainly have plenty of love, laughs and reading ahead of them. ❖