

Libraries Should Be Part of All This Book Talk

by Michael G. Dunn

Against the backdrop of a loneliness epidemic (Murthy 2023), the pervasiveness of the internet, and the escalating news of book banning, it's easy to overlook that we are witnessing a resurgence in readership (Circana 2024). In no small part due to the popularity of the Tiktok-based "Booktok," "Bookgram" on Instagram reels, and "BookTube" on YouTube, along with platforms like Pinterest, bibliophiles are not only reading more, but also showcasing their bookshelves, purchasing book-themed apparel, and discussing their "reader aesthetic." As a result, both online and offline, book clubs are also becoming increasingly popular among Gen Z and Millennials (Meyer-sohn 2024). In an almost counterintuitive revelation, books and reading are "cool" once again.

I, however, was unaware of this cultural moment while wasting time in an airport bookstore during a prolonged layover. Leafing through pages, I thought to myself, "wouldn't it be great if there was a place for other readers like me to get together and talk?" My first internal suggestion was, "perhaps I could seek out a book club?" To which I responded with the cynical reply of, "but who has the time for that?" I thought of my full schedule, with endless obligations and responsibilities. I wondered about the expense and about my rather eccentric interests as a reader. (What can I say? I'm a literary weirdo.) To read an assigned book would feel just

like that—an assignment. Too bad there wasn't a way for people who enjoy reading to just hang out without feeling a sense of obligation or duty. Not so much a "book club" but a "book event." However, as I reasoned, there was nothing like that, so I just left the idea behind as the airline called my boarding group to the gate.

Later, while having an impromptu talk with my friend and coworker Luka Broad, I entertained the book event idea

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again. Feeling uncertain about how it would be received, I posed it in the most passive way possible: "Wouldn't it be cool if—" and to my surprise, Luka replied, "That would be amazing. I'd go to something like that in a heartbeat." And that's the story of how our co-hosting of Book Talk (the name coined by Luka) began.

While hardly revolutionary, we were intrigued by the idea of creating a book event, rather than a club, offering a forum for readers of diverse interests to convene and discuss our feelings about books, how they are written, published, and how they affect our lives. Due to genre-specific meetings unintentionally dividing readers, we would

focus on what all readers share to attract the most attendees. With permission from Fogler Library, we held our first Book Talk Event, titled "BookTok: Find or Fail?" We decided to capitalize on the growing frustration that sometimes the books that BookTok picks up and their influencers recommend are a disappointment. Plus, it felt fitting, as BookTok is where our discussion that day had begun.

Unsure of what to expect, we were excited when a dozen people arrived even during a snowstorm. Some were so eager they arrived early. What ensued was a nonstop, two-hour discussion that encompassed all aspects of books, extending far beyond the chosen theme.

Various subjects, such as cover designs, trigger warnings, translations, and book banning, bubbled up in the discussion. As we braved the weather to return to our respective homes, the resounding sentiment was that "we need to do this again!" So, we did. For the two subsequent events, we chose book-to-screen adaptations and what we called "Beyond the Page," which explored our personal relationships with books. We presented each of these subjects as a starting point, and each event proved to be equally expansive, resulting in an enthusiastic two-hour conversation without fail. Buoyed by these experiences, we will be starting it again this fall, with our next event centering around the relationship between books and music.

In an ever-changing world, libraries continue to offer a trustworthy constant (Geiger 2024). Even as the culture wars take aim at our shelves, committees, and budgets, people have positive feelings about their local libraries. Libraries hold a unique position in the public

consciousness, surpassing even bookstores and coffee shops, providing us with a rare chance to embrace and cultivate this emerging book-based cultural phenomenon. In a time when common spaces are gradually disappearing (Rao 2024), libraries play a crucial role in fostering communities and stimulating conversations. I encourage all libraries to consider embracing this moment and contributing to its growth. Libraries can help bring readers of all interests together and really create something special here. Just don't call it a book club.

Michael G. Dunn is the proud father of three children whom he hopes to make very proud in turn. He is also the cohost and cocreator of Book Talk, a monthly book-centered event that meets in the Fogler Library at the University of Maine. In addition to an upcoming piece in the anthology *North Woods at Night* published by 12 Willows Press, Michael is hard at work on a paranormal investigator-led fictional story that will hopefully be his first published novel.

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