

# A passion for reading

## THE STORY OF A CANBERRA BOOK GROUP

Claudia Hyles relates her experience as a member of the Bookworms reading group, and advises of a memorial book donation which the group is making to the Library's Collection

There must be dozens of women's book groups in Canberra. Little concentrations of women are frequently to be seen at literary events in the city and one can safely assume they are representatives of a book group on field excursions.

When did the phenomenon start? A number of groups in Canberra have been going for 25 or 30 years, but there seems to have been a burgeoning in the 1990s. The committee of the now sadly defunct Canberra Word Festival, of which I was a member, wished it could tap into the network of book groups to inform them of events and seek support. But the groups exist in isolation, and everyone knows that their particular group is the best in the world.

Living in the country, and overseas, were I thought the reasons for my never having been a member of a group. So I was delighted to be invited to join a brand new group in 1995. Two of the founding bookworms had belonged to stimulating international groups while living abroad, and we decided at the outset that our small membership should always be a balance of Australian and foreign women. It seemed to us that readers coming from varying ethnic backgrounds would react in different ways to whatever we read, and our discussions would thus be enhanced.

We originally aimed for eight members, though now we are 10. Our foreign members have, over the years, come from Japan, Holland, Serbia and Montenegro, Zimbabwe, Germany, France, Norway, Belgium, Spain,



Portugal, New Zealand, Singapore, Austria, the United States of America, and New Zealand; and some Australian members were born in other lands. So our backgrounds, and therefore some of our perceptions, are very varied.

Our first meeting was held in November 1995, and we discussed *The First Stone*, by Helen Garner. The feeling for some of us that day has been repeated many times since—that we wouldn't have read it unless we had 'had' to, but having done so, the read was very worthwhile. Even when the verdict is a unanimous negative, we have always enjoyed the challenge of reading a particular book, and the subsequent discussion it has provoked. Occasionally the different reactions have been intense—probably the most extraordinary was the day we discussed Dorothy Porter's verse novel *The Monkey's Mask*, which truly shocked some European members of the group.

Like most groups, we hold our meetings in one another's homes, and in rotation. The person who hosted the previous month's discussion takes the minutes, and

Bookworms members Darelle Goodrick (second from left) and Vanessa Griffith (front right). Their lives are celebrated with memorial book purchases donated in their names to the National Library



Claudia Hyles (standing right), with the meeting held at her house to discuss *Bulibasha*, by the New Zealand writer Witi Ihimaera

circulates them to all members, these days by email.

Another of our very few rules is that the food we consume at the meetings should relate somehow to the book. This is absolutely not intended to lead to competitive baking, but it certainly adds another little frisson of anticipation to each gathering.

Some books lend

themselves to thematic ingestion very easily; others severely tax one's powers of culinary invention. *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf was accompanied by bread and honey. *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields was accompanied by Aunt Daisy's Lemon Pudding, the recipe for which was contained in the book. *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie was not accompanied by a samosa or a vadai, but by a superb Viennese pudding called The Moor in a Veil—made of chocolate and cream. *The Songlines*, by Bruce Chatwin, was marked by meat pies and Violet Crumble Bars; and *Family Matters*, by Rohinton Mistry, by a splendid dhansak, a traditional Parsee dish. From time to time we have threatened to write a Bookworms Cookbook.

We read Australian novels and works of non-fiction, works of current interest or bestsellers, and books by authors from the countries of our foreign members. *A Heart of Stone*, by the Dutch writer Renate Dorrestein, *The Half-Brother*, by the Norwegian Lars Saabøe Christensen, *The Lover*, by the French writer Marguerite Duras, and *Bulibasha*, by New Zealander Witi Ihimaera, have been fascinating choices.

Several times we have been honored by the presence of the author at the meetings. This can be a little inhibiting, and on one such occasion one of the group's usually vocal members was extremely quiet. She hadn't enjoyed the book, but was too well-mannered to say so.

Marion Halligan has visited us twice—once for *The Fog Garden*, which had a profound effect on us. The husband of one of our group had recently died and it was at her suggestion that we read this sad and happy

book. We have read two of Geoff Page's verse novels, and Geoff kindly joined us for *Drumming on Water*, and in an 'extra-curricular' meeting Rosemary Brissenden talked about writing her Southeast Asian cookery books, and created a beautiful Thai luncheon.

One of our most memorable meetings was when we discussed *Dark Victory* by Marian Wilkinson and David Marr. We met in the home of our Norwegian member, whose husband, the then Norwegian Ambassador to Australia, had negotiated his country's position in the unfortunate Tampa affair. For the first, and possibly the only time, husbands and partners were invited, and David Marr also kindly agreed to be present. It was a remarkable evening.

We have also gone as a group to see the film of a book now and then—*Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* was one—and some of us have attended literary events in Canberra to hear an author discuss his or her book which we have read at Bookworms. We saw Sarah McDonald speaking on *Holy Cow*, and Colm Tóibín on *The Master* at the National Gallery; and Robert Dessaix speaking on *Night Letters*, at Tilley's. As well, we have been to poetry readings at Red Belly Black, and Beess & Co, and excellent events at the Australian National University and the National Library of Australia.

We used to meet in the morning, until two of us re-entered the workforce, and the meetings were generously changed to the evenings—such is the nature of the group. Some members see each other socially, some don't, but we find that we all share in each other's joys and sorrows—new jobs, houses and grandchildren, the health of pets, retirements and weddings, support for charities and other endeavours.

A great sorrow last year was the death of one of our group. Darelle Goodrick was a perceptive and enthusiastic Bookworm, with a great sense of style. When meetings were held in her home we all looked forward to some kind of surprise. Her sitting room was often transformed. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* by Rebecca Wells had us sipping very strong cocktails at a simulated riverbank picnic, and she always had the right music playing in the background.

So it seemed a very appropriate thing after her death, which affected us all,

for group members past and present to remember Darelle in the form of a memorial gift to the National Library. We were given a choice of books which the Library had on a wish-list. Knowing Darelle's interest in plants and gardens and the fact that she was born in Queensland, we chose a collectors edition of *Fruits of the Australian Tropical Rainforest*, by Wendy Cooper—a beautiful book. Darelle's husband and two of her three children were present with six Bookworms (some of the contributors were interstate or overseas) when we officially handed the book to the Library on 10 March this year. We were very grateful for Director-General Jan Fullerton's kind and gracious words, and we will long remember the afternoon. The book will be of great use in the Library's Collection and, as Jan said, it will last for ever.

Most recently we have read *The Makioka Sisters* by the Japanese writer, Junichiro Tanizaki. Held in the home of our Japanese member, it was an immersion into Japanese culture, accompanied by sake, a sushi salad meant for cherry blossom viewing, served in beautiful black lacquer bowls, and a dessert intriguingly called 'snow and red flower with black bean'. We *did* seriously discuss the book—it wasn't all just about eating and atmosphere!

Membership of our Bookworms book club has brought us intellectual stimulation, fun, joy and wonderful friendships over a period of a decade.

*Postscript.* Sadly, another of our members, Vanessa Griffith, recently died. I hurried to write this article as if by finishing it, I could cheat death of a great friend. She was one of the foundation members of Bookworms and had been an inspiration to the group. Such was her capacity for devouring books that she was a member of another Canberra group simultaneously with ours and when she returned to Melbourne three years ago she rejoined the group she had started there 27 years ago. Vanessa set the standard of the group's minute-taking and usually got out the camera to record the gatherings on film. She had enthusiastically contributed to Darelle's memorial book, and now we are starting a fund for her. She had such a huge network of friends that we are extending the opportunity to contribute to anyone she knew. If you are one of those friends, you could send your contribution, no matter how small, to the National Library, marked for the 'Vanessa Griffith Fund'. Vanessa had a very wide range of interests, which will make it easy for the Library to put up suggestions for the book to be purchased in her memory. I am sure we will find a treasure.

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The meeting attended by David Marr (seated front centre) for discussion of *Dark Victory*. The Norwegian ambassador, Ove Thorsheim, is standing at back centre of the group and his wife Anne, a Bookworms member, is seated front left