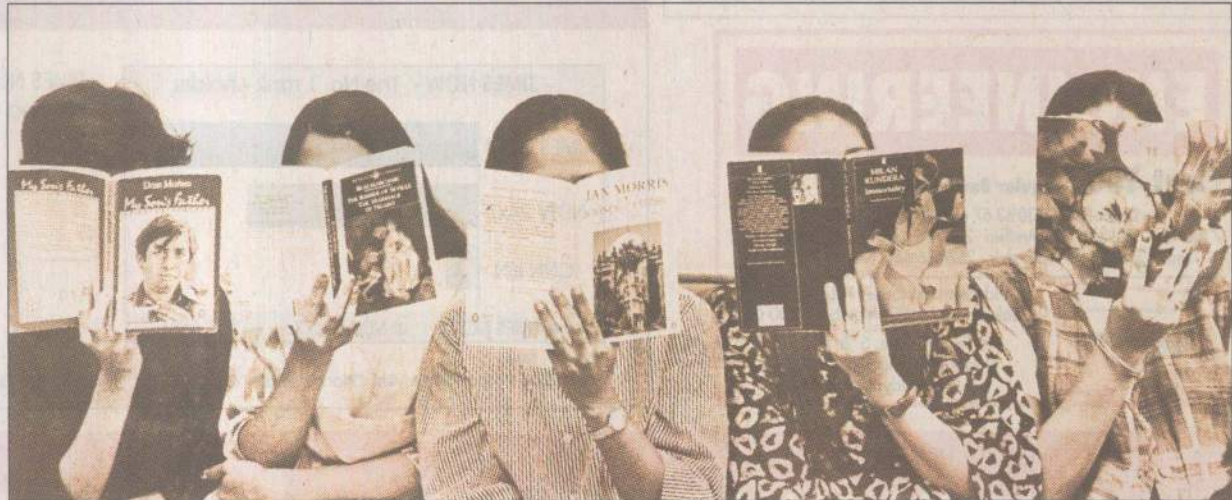


Coffee, cake and Rushdie

Meher Marfatia on book clubs, and why men give them a wide berth

Shriram Vernekar



Sakina Rassai thinks nothing of travelling all the way from Santa Cruz to Colaba every second Friday of the month. Plus, she votes this among her best nights out. What better way for an avid reader to kick-start the weekend than with a book club meeting? Journalist Sonya Dutta Chowdhury covers even more miles to reach the group, though she already belongs to a book club in Juhu where she lives.

Why brave the long distance downtown with unflagging regularity? It could simply be a serious case of bibliophilia or the joy that comes from sharing a really good line or phrase with others as smitten by the written word. "It's stimulating to discuss a book beyond its plot," reasons Rassai. She tried recommending Kazuo Ishiguro's enigmatic *Never Let Me Go* to her children's friends' parents with limited success. "When I suggested we talk about the issue it raises, the ethics of human cloning, they thought I was from Mars."

Most Mumbai book clubs comprise between six to 12 people who gather post-dinner over coffee and cake at a different host member's home every month to dissect an assigned text they have all read. Reading over, they disband and go their separate ways. Activist Nandita Shah's club, which includes an architect, a fashion designer, an educationist, an ad

woman and housewives, doesn't hang out socially barring an occasional birthday dinner or watching the classic film version of a book being discussed like Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*.

But it takes more than a shared passion for books to sustain a club. There is the whole problem of ego management and divergent reading tastes—what is fascinating for some can be downright boring for others, and some members have been known to turn to Scrabble or Pictionary instead of sitting through a dull reading. *The Moor's Last Sigh* has divided Rushdie haters and fans in the same club. Another club struggled with Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, unstirred by what the *Listener* raved was "the most exhaustive account of the Spanish bullfight that we have".

Paediatrician Vibha Krishnamurthy, one of the founder-members of a three-year-old group, says that in her experience a book club is guided by its core group. "The bottom line is the comfort level between people who really enjoy each other's company. While they may meet mainly over books, it's wonderful to spend other evenings together. Knowing my club members personally has been enriching," says Krishnamurthy, who belonged to two book clubs in Boston where she studied medicine in the 1990s.

Poet and author Jerry Pinto heartily agrees. "Reading is a process, not a product. It is essentially an isolated activity, so it's lovely to come out of there to generate discussion or deepen a point," he says. Each reading club, adds Pinto, has an unspoken arbiter who generally steers the course. The group's longevity rests on how democratic the arbiter can be—he or she should get the windbag to shut up, interrupt general chatter, and invite the more reticent to express an opinion.

That Pinto was once the lone male member of his book club is not surprising. Men make rare appearances at city reading circles. Creative writing teacher Renu Balakrishnan puts this down to a gender bias: Men prefer non-fiction, a genre book clubs seldom cater to. Besides, in an all-women scenario, there is always the danger of a "feminist reading of the text". "The solitary gentleman we have doesn't always fall in with the rest," says Balakrishnan. Radical feminism can sometimes backfire, even with the women. Angela Carter's *The Passions of New Eve*, set in an America is a stage of terminal decline, where the New Eve is a young Englishman impregnated with his own sperm, evoked negative reactions from Dutta Chowdhury's Juhu group members who moaned "the book took off too bizarrely".