

# Reading Well: Book Clubs as an Origin Story for Librarian Professional Development

Twenty-first-century American public social life and civic discourse have been framed by new technologies that have churned the traditional print-based literacy practices from the industrial age to the digital social information age. Before the twenty-first century, reading was primarily attached to a print-based medium. Ways in which reading was enacted and defined revolved around how readers kinesthetically and intellectually interacted with the physical book. This interaction has often been collective and collaborative, in the form of book clubs as a means of making sense of text and life experience via fusing one's imagination with authorial intention, building a relationship with others in the public sphere, and constructing realms of interpretation that informs one's coordination of social perspectives (Holland et al. 2001; Iser 1978; Park 2012; Wolgast and Barnes-Holmes 2022).

This paper documents the legacy upon which librarian book clubs thrive as a reflective approach to professional development by timestamping literary societies, salons, and book clubs as the original impetus for libraries as a space for relationship building and lifelong learning. This conceptual exploration underscores a profound idea for librarianship; to reach back to the origins of book clubs in the public sphere and retrieve the book club model to apply to contemporary professional practice. Professional development outcomes from librarian book clubs are responses to ways in which librarians read and interpret the work they do in diverse communities throughout a technologically digitized world. In this vein, librarian book clubs are spaces for personal and professional reclamation, exploration, relationship-building, and empowerment. With librarian book clubs, LIS practitioners and scholars have a meeting place where learning and knowledge, agency and legacy can be explored and expressed so that we all grow to do better at work and enact our sustainable "best" for the practices we enact within the communities we serve.

With book clubs being traditionalistic programs in libraries, in recent years, librarian scholars started to explore the question: How do librarians use book clubs for professional development? Some studies have embraced frameworks such as feminist theory, critical race theory, and participatory research to investigate this question (Brown and Shaindlin 2021; Foster et al. 2022; Henriksson et al. 2019; Hincks, 2016; Irvin 2022). Librarian book clubs have been sites for processing work experiences, sharing resources, responding to reading professional literature, and as a checks-and-balances method for studying and improving professional practice. During these historical times where our personal and professional worlds are easily fused via social media and other digital communications, this article is a call for LIS practitioners and scholars to embrace book clubs as a site to bridge the traditional (print) with the contemporary (digital) for networking, professional development, and lifelong learning.

## North American book clubs: A timeline

Although some sources date the start of book clubs in America as far back as 1634, with a women's sermon reading group in Boston (Boston Playwrights' Theatre 2019; Longo 2021), book clubs are recorded as a staple of American life starting in 1760, with "post-revolutionary and antebellum women" engaging in literacy practices "at a host of sites, ranging from family circles to organizations" (Kelley 2008, 3). Before the Civil War, the earliest recorded "literary or culture club" was convened by "black women in Philadelphia, who felt a desperate need for education otherwise unavailable to them, and among a group of White women in Iowa" (Scott 1986, 403). McHenry (1996) dates the rise of literary societies in African American culture as early as 1787, as free Blacks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, sought inclusion in the newly ratified America by establishing literary and mutual aid societies that paralleled the constitutional structure of a new nation that did not consider their citizenry. With

the emancipation of enslaved people as an outcome of the Civil War, African American citizens engaged in book clubs as a milieu for defining their citizenry and civic participation in a war-weary, fledgling nation (McHenry 1996).

Also, during the antebellum era, women's reading groups were established throughout the colonial United States (Kelley 2008), and Chinese immigrants were convening book clubs to read Chinese newspapers in Canada (Leung 2013). Nevertheless, according to Scott (1986), women's associations and men's literary groups grew after the Civil War and flourished throughout the Industrial Revolution. An outcome of the Industrial Revolution's modernization of domestic productions was more leisure time for townswomen. Women used their time to gather, meet, and read together, often procuring books from large city libraries via the fledgling railroad movement. Consequently, these book club groups were early arbiters of intellectual freedom and "democratic participation" (Audunson et al. 2019, 784) and, thus, were a foundation upon which many American public libraries were established (Long 2003; Scott 1986). Thus, American book clubs originated via a diverse population of citizens who used collective reading as a platform to empower and heighten their intellectual acumen and civic engagement. Book clubs eventually became a mainstay program for public libraries throughout the twentieth century.

Long (2003) offers a detailed timeline of the evolution of the American book club movement via women's associations and their interactions with local and non-local entities to distribute and circulate reading materials. Long disputes analysts' view that women's book clubs were passive activities; she posits that "[b]ook clubs fostered women's ability to express themselves" via literary analysis and discussion of current and local events (43-44). Indeed, Long posits that book club agendas were typically organized based on "cultural geography" (i.e., book club members as neighbors, or as the same gender, or as same ethnicity) as a "leavening of issues of the day" (43). In this vein, contemporary book clubs serve as a space, a place, a location, albeit geography, of conversation, discourse, and inquiry. Therefore, book clubs have historically been a site where talk is centered on books and reading books for inquiry that is

often social and cultural. Additionally, these sites of inquiry continue to play a vital role in contemporary public libraries and their services.

During the early decades of the twenty-first century, librarianship began embracing reflective approaches to professional practice via book clubs to greet, meet, and network together as a community of practice to learn from one another for professional development (Brown and Shaindlin 2021; Dilevko and Gottlieb 2004; Irvin and Reile 2018; Irvin and Reile 2020). Librarian book clubs are venues where hard questions find safe spaces to be asked, unpacked, and discussed. It is becoming more critical than ever for librarians to connect with text in response to online information overload during this technologically digitized Information Age.

### **Book clubs and libraries**

Whereas book clubs of yesteryear traditionally read canonical works of the times (due to geographical limits and barriers to mass distribution channels for materials), library book clubs today enjoy access to the literature of more varied reading levels, tastes, and formats (Hermes et al. 2008; Keefe 2007; Porath 2018). The literature also conveys that book club members use the book club space to locate a collective identity by using their literary readings to discuss local issues and events (Craig 2019; Long 2003). Additionally, in today's times, social media and distance education platforms have brought a new kind of collective and collaborative "reading together" experience with discussion posts and comments that result in generative discourse (Boyd et al. 2021; Craig 2019; Irvin and Reile 2018; Porath 2018).

When Hoffert (2006) surveyed the field of book clubs in the public library, she reported a wide range of professional practices librarians enacted to organize and facilitate library book clubs. Citing a variety of methods and techniques for book selection and reading strategies, Hoffert asserts that library book clubs keep reader interest by having thematic book club meetings where patrons can read any title that suits them within the theme and then share their reading responses with the group. Fitzpatrick's (2022) work with high school athletes in a book club confirms Hoffer's position that book clubs established based on shared interests can have positive im-

pacts. Additionally, today's book clubs mix multimedia with traditional book club settings so that readers can meet via virtual communications platforms like Zoom, Teams, and Webex. Library programming went virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic, with virtual book clubs decreasing social isolation (Szempruch and Hinds 2022).

Research on library book clubs appears in the library and information science literature exploring what happens with library book club members, particularly in middle-class, mainstream locations (Fajardo 2010; Fialkoff 2000; Hoffert 2006). The Morris et al. (2006) and Kumasi (2010) studies are groundbreaking in the sense that they both focused on African American teens and their book club experiences, shedding light on the continuum between Black teens as a representation of culture and identity and library patron reading practices as a representation of social literacy events. Within this continuum lies uncharted territory for research concerning librarians as readers in a book club. Morris and Kumasi, librarians who coordinated, facilitated, observed and participated as researchers in library-based book clubs, situate librarians as de-facto readers with an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009; Irvin and Reile 2018; Irvin 2022). Librarians reading with an inquiry stance within a book club context is a viable practitioner model for librarian professional development (Brown 2019; Brown and Shaindlin 2021).

### **Librarian book clubs**

In-kind, the librarian book club is a means to unpack librarians' literary readings to "work out" and "work on" professional issues and events pertinent to their identities as public librarians. For librarians, collective and collaborative reading in the form of a book club online or face-to-face involves reading popular literature from their library collections to serve as a critical inquiry to contemplate community realities, even while acknowledging their collective work as professional learning (Abrams 2016; Brown 2019; Brown and Shaindlin 2021; Irvin 2022).

Librarians have explored the book club as a construct and site for critical discourse in academic, public, and school settings. For example, Dilevko and Gottlieb (2004) conducted a study that focused on

academic librarians' reading habits and juxtaposed those librarians' behaviors with public librarians' reading behaviors. The scholars studied how academic librarians' reading tastes and habits impacted their professional practices. They talked about how "intensive reading of a wide array of current publications gives librarians intellectual tools to confront an equally wide array of information requests" (22). Dilevko and Gottlieb questioned how this works in practice (22). Citing a series of surveys they conducted with academic librarians and a comparison pool of surveys with public library workers (of which librarians were a part of that pool), Dilevko and Gottlieb reported that they asked public librarians questions like, "How do they stay current? What do they read? Do they read newspapers and magazines?" (2004, 22).

Dilevko and Gottlieb's data came from a field of librarians' reading practices with non-fiction and fiction resources. Academic and public librarians reported that their leisure reading practices played a significant role in their practice as successful librarians. One problem in Dilevko and Gottlieb's study of the public library setting was that the fully credentialed public librarians were conflated with paraprofessional reference staff. Only fully credentialed academic librarians, minus the paraprofessional staff, participated in the academic library setting. This rendered the researchers as identifying public librarians and their staff as one homogenous group called "public library reference staff," "public library reference personnel," or "public library reference staff members" (Dilevko and Gottlieb 2004, chapter 6), while the academic librarians in the study were identified as the professionals. While Dilevko and Gottlieb's research is helpful in our appreciation of research being conducted to explore librarian reading habits as connective to professional practices, the conflation of professional public librarians with paraprofessional public library staff is a significant methodological weakness in their study since the same approach was not enacted for their research of academic librarians (of whom their study was the focus). However, their research argues that librarians must be active readers of various genres and formats. They also "must understand the role that leisure reading plays in their lives and the lives of their patrons" (Moyer 2007, 67).

In addition to Dilveko and Gottlieb's pioneering work, studies exploring librarian reading practices and how their readings impact their professional practices have begun to enter the discourse. For example, Irvin and Reile (2018) worked with public librarians in Hawaii, convening practitioners as communities of practice to read texts, documents and policy documents for professional networking and development. Brown and Shaindlin (2021) conducted a study to explore the question, "Do librarians participate in book clubs themselves?" Their survey of 233 librarian participants revealed that librarians highly participate in personal and professional book clubs that positively impact their professional development. Case in point, Hincks (2016) shared outcomes from a small librarian book club between herself and three colleagues where they were "reading what the patrons read" (Irvin 2022) for professional development. Lastly, Foster et al. (2022) convened a group of 12 librarians at various stages of their career (i.e., LIS students, practitioners, alumni, etc.) to investigate how a librarian reading group's work with a lens informed by how critical librarianship and critical theory impacts collective learning and replicates professional networking opportunities that are a part of librarian professional practice. The participants identified ways in which library structures and ministrations have a "dissonance between institutional practices and various equitable principles" and values (65). Foster et al.'s (2002) participants reported that their collaborative readings and interactions provided them "with [a] stronger foundation for their beliefs, improving their language and self-efficacy" (70) for their professional identity construction and practice.

## Conclusion

Book clubs and libraries have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship for centuries, with librarians serving as participants and learners of these reading groups. When librarians are engaged in "reading" their practice within the reflective space of a book club, that group becomes a community of practice for critical inquiry. The library is an organic educative space for librarians to read and study their professional experiences via ongoing social interactions and critical practitioner learning, where questions about professional practice can be asked and explored.

Collective and collaborative reading practices like book clubs serve as an origin story for librarian learning, research, and practice. Reaching back to retrieve this history of book clubs as the originating socio-cultural venue for librarian professional development confirms the library as an educative space for the reading public's lifelong learning and as an ongoing interface for librarian professional growth.

Now that the public sphere of our global society has become a digitized technological realm, online librarian book clubs/inquiry groups are just as engaging and effective in promoting professional development as in-person gatherings (Brown 2019; Irvin and Reile 2018; Irvin 2022). By taking the "tired and true" and applying it to the "fresh and new," librarians honor the ongoing legacy as information professionals who "read well" because we are not just reading what the patrons read or reading what the patrons do. More so, we are reading together to study and better understand the impacts of our work in the world.

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