

Reading Groups in the UK in 2015

Introduction

Background

The Reading Agency is a leading independent charity whose pioneering work brings the joy of reading to the widest possible audience across the UK, in partnership with the public library service. The charity's mission is to create and deliver innovative reading opportunities inspiring more people to read more, encouraging them to share their enjoyment of reading with others and celebrating the difference that reading makes to all our lives. The Reading Agency is a national portfolio holder of Arts Council England.

Our Reading Groups for Everyone website (readinggroups.org) supports over 4,000 reading groups across the UK. Reading groups register on the website to rate and review books, or compile a list of what to read next. Readers can find their nearest group, search for their next title to read and take advantage of free promotions, competitions and visits from authors. Groups can also access resources on how to set up a reading group, advice on running events and tips on how to work with children and young people.

Aims

This research aimed to find out about reading groups across the UK, including investigating:

- who takes part in the groups and where they meet
- what groups read and how they decide on this
- how groups structure their reading group discussions
- what is the impact of taking part in a reading group

We conducted the research to inform and improve our support and offers for reading groups and to share the findings with publisher to help support their work in this area. We will use the findings to develop our strategy for the Reading Groups for Everyone website.

Key findings

Reading groups generally meet monthly with an average of eight people attending. Members are most likely to be female and aged 25-64.

The most popular sources of ideas about what to read for the meetings are recommendations from friends, book reviews and book prize shortlists and winners. The library also plays an important role.

The favourite books respondents had discussed in their group were as follows:

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Harper Lee
2. *Elizabeth is Missing* – Emma Healey
3. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* – Lionel Shriver

Group members experience a wide range of positive benefits from taking part in reading groups:

- 95% of respondents report that members feel happy because of being part of the group
- 94% feel that being part of a reading group results in members reading more widely
- 80% report that members enjoy what they are reading more when they discuss it at the reading group

Methodology

We carried out an online survey with reading groups from September to November 2015. The survey was publicised via the Reading Groups for Everyone website, The Reading Agency website and on The Reading Agency twitter and Facebook accounts. We included information about the survey in our regular emails to librarians, emailed it to people who have previously volunteered to give out books as part of World Book Night and it was promoted by the Publishers Association, the Booksellers Association, and various writers associations.

Respondents were informed that the survey was for completion by anyone involved with reading groups for adults or young people (aged 13 and over). As an incentive to take part respondents were entered into a prize draw to win a luxury hamper for their reading group. We asked respondents who are involved with more than one group to answer in relation to one of their groups, either completing additional surveys for their other groups or nominating a group member or a colleague to do so.

Sample

The survey was completed by 1642 people, each answering with reference to their reading group. Therefore the responses relate to a larger number of reading group members than the number of respondents. More than one person in some reading groups completed the survey, but due to the high number of responses we are confident that the results cover a wide range of different groups. Respondents come from all nine regions of England and from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. A small number of respondents are from outside of the UK, including respondents from Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Trinidad and USA.

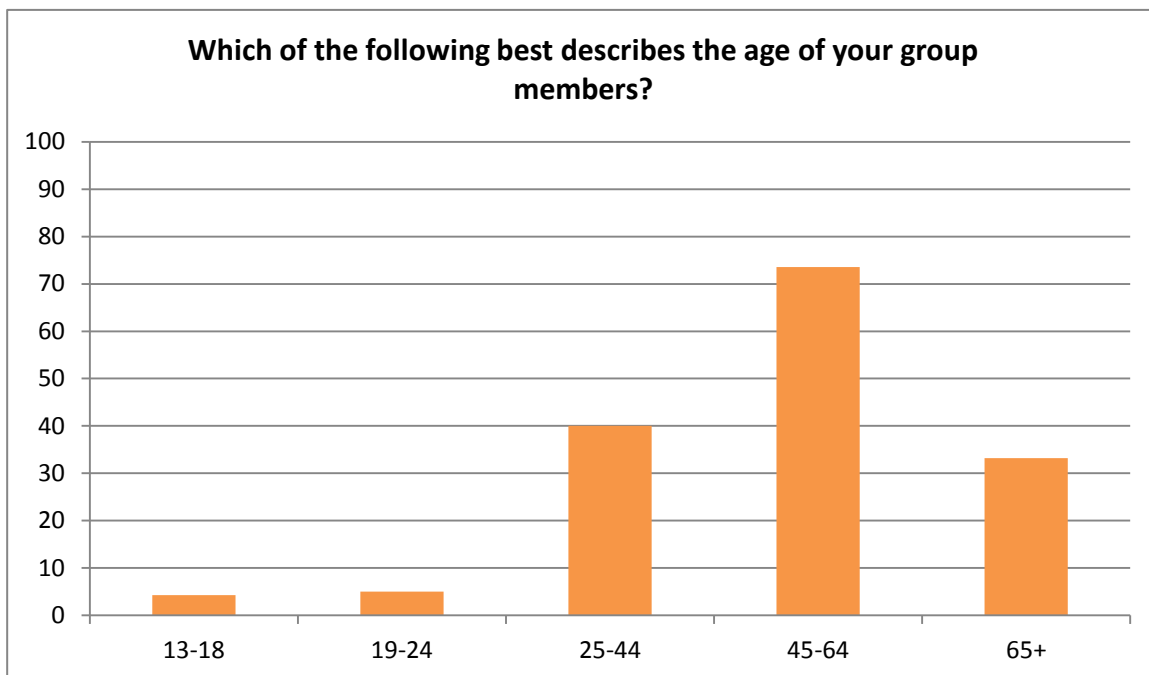
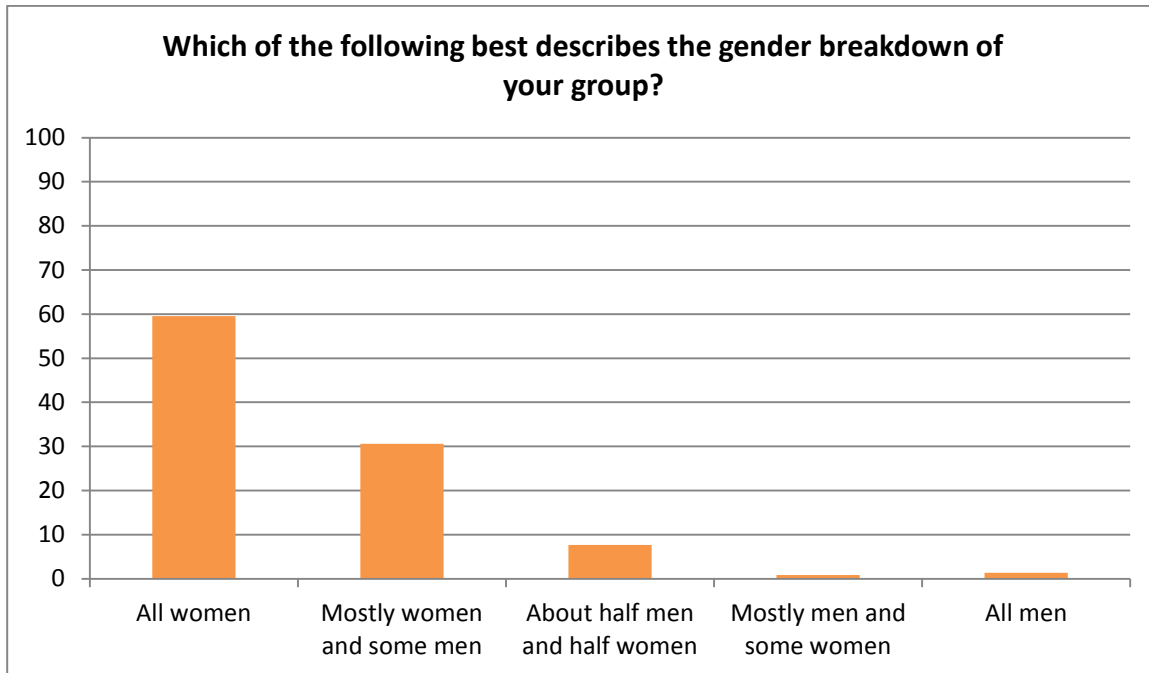
15% of respondents are from reading groups registered on Reading Groups for Everyone, 62% are not registered and the rest are unsure (potentially if another group member registered the group). We received a large number of responses to the survey from our World Book Night volunteers contact list, which enabled us to reach out beyond reading groups taking place in libraries and beyond groups that we are already in contact with via Reading Groups for Everyone. This may mean that World Book Night volunteers are over-represented in the survey data, but we are not aware of any specific bias that this would result in.

Findings

Who takes part in reading groups?

The survey found that on average, 20 people are on the membership list for each reading group and eight people attend each group meeting. Most groups meet monthly (73%) with a minority meeting every six weeks or every two months and small numbers meeting weekly or fortnightly.

The vast majority of reading group members are female and they tend to be in the 45-64 age category, with significant numbers also aged 25-44 and over 65. The exact figures are shown in the charts overleaf:



The majority of reading groups are for a general audience, but a small number (8%) are run for people with specific characteristics or additional needs. These groups focus on visually impaired people, those with mental health issues, those with lower levels of literacy, people who speak English as an additional language, people with physical or learning disabilities, homeless people, prisoners and people who are LGBT. Respondents feel that reading groups can be particularly helpful in these instances, with respondents making the following comments:

“My book club friends and I have visual impairments and our reading group is a life line for members of the group. We meet read, chat, discuss amazing books and socialise and really look forward to the group each week.”

“We all have mental health problems and try to support each other. People say they love coming to the group and that it has enabled them to go to the library with their children, read more widely, learn about different things, tackle Shakespeare and poetry, voice questions and views in a safe space.”

“It started as an LGBT group but gradually the men in the group all left for one reason or another...It is a great space for women who are new to the area or women who are just coming out and feel isolated to meet other lesbian and bisexual women as often this can be difficult when moving to a new place or coming to terms with your sexuality at whatever age... the group is very supportive and we always go for a drink after the library closes”

Where do groups meet?

Groups meet in a variety of places: a group member’s house is the most frequent location (43%), followed by the library (23%) and a pub, bar, café or restaurant (19%). Small numbers meet in a community centre (3%) or a bookshop (1%). A few groups also meet in schools or workplaces. For those who selected ‘other’ for this option it was largely because they meet in different places each time, often rotating around group members’ houses. Respondents who are part of a group that is registered on Reading Groups for Everyone are slightly more likely to meet in a library (49%), and less likely to meet in a group member’s house (22%) or a pub, bar, café or restaurant (19%).

Many respondents make an event of their group meeting: cooking food related to the book or making a cake to share, while some like to keep things simple to ease the pressure on the host:

“In the early days, people felt obliged to cook and guests tended to also feel the need to bring food or wine. This became a bit of a commitment and caused people to postpone or cancel if they felt under-prepared on the food front, which seemed ridiculous, so we switched to the host just bunging a supermarket pizza or three in the oven, meaning we could focus more on the book than the catering.”

In just over a quarter of cases (27%) other interest groups meet in the same location as the reading group. This is more likely to be the case when the group meets in the library, when 69% of respondents report that other groups meet in the same location. The other groups span a range of different topics including creative writing groups, film clubs, board game clubs, fitness classes, arts and crafts groups, slimming groups, history societies and other book groups. In some instances there is overlap between the groups – one reading group started as a knitting group and then began discussing books, while a number of reading groups mentioned meeting to go walking as well:

“Our reading group evolved from a large group of knitters. Our group consists of women who tend to read a lot anyway but find the book group is good for discovering new authors

and genres to try AND as escapism from various challenges - disability, the terminal illness of a spouse, high-pressured jobs, depression, anxiety and the joys of family life with small children.”

“We formed the Monday Book Club earlier this year when a member posted on a small local social network... I am astonished at how well read the others are, I had stopped reading fiction and they have changed my reading habits. We began walking together and plan to do more rambles. At meetings we exchange ideas and news of plays and films as well as books and take turns to suggest the next book to be read.”

How do groups decide what to read?

Groups use a variety of sources to come up with ideas about what to read:

What sources does your group use to come up with ideas about what to read?	
Recommendations from friends/word of mouth	75%
Book reviews (online, TV, radio, magazines or newspapers)	66%
Book prize shortlists and winners	58%
Book recommendation lists	49%
Bestseller lists	40%
National book clubs such as Richard and Judy or Radio 2	29%
Suggestions from Reading Groups for Everyone	16%

Amongst respondents who are part of a group that is registered on Reading Groups for Everyone the use of the website for recommendations is much higher, at 40%. This suggests that we need to raise awareness of Reading Groups for Everyone, to ensure that reading groups are able to access book recommendations via this route.

The important role of libraries as a source of recommendations is noted by over 200 respondents (approximately 13%). While this proportion is lower than the other sources of ideas for what to read, there was not a tick-box option for the library and the evidence arose from responses to an ‘other’ option. The fact that a relatively large number of people recognised the role of the library in their comments adds weight to the importance of this finding. Respondents mentioned choosing books from library stock, receiving specific recommendations from librarians, selecting from reading group lists prepared by libraries, or choosing books based on their availability in the library. This demonstrates the key role that libraries play in supporting reading group activity.

“We order our books through our local library... Our fantastic librarian there recommends books for us.”

To make the final decision about which titles to read, group members mainly decide by each suggesting possible books and the group comes to an agreement about which to read (46% of respondents). In other instances a different member decides for each meeting (27%) or the group leader decides (11%). As with the previous question, in the comments box lots of respondents noted the role of the library service in selecting the book.

What do groups read?

Reading groups mainly read fiction (95%) with many also reading non-fiction (66%). Smaller but still substantial numbers of groups read short stories (45%) and poems (23%).

Respondents were asked to name the book they had most enjoyed reading and discussing with their group. Many felt this was too difficult a task and some said the books they enjoyed reading and the ones they enjoyed discussing were different – if all members liked the book the discussion might not be very interesting.

“Impossible! Our group has been meeting for 12 years and we have read more than 150 books.”

“Too many to choose one, it works best when some of us enjoy and others hate”

For those who were able to answer this question (1369 respondents) the following titles emerged as the most popular:

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Harper Lee
2. *Elizabeth is Missing* – Emma Healey
3. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* – Lionel Shriver
4. *The Book Thief* – Markus Zusak
- =5. *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* – Annie Barrows and Mary Ann Shaffer
- =5. *The Miniaturist* – Jessie Burton
- =5. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* – Khaled Hosseini
- =5. *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* – Rachel Joyce
- =5. *The Goldfinch* – Donna Tartt
10. *The Help* – Kathryn Stockett
11. *The Poisonwood Bible* – Barbara Kingsolver
12. *The Rosie Project* – Graeme Simsion
- =13. *This Boy* – Alan Johnson
- =13. *Wolf Hall* – Hilary Mantel
- =13. *A Fine Balance* – Rohinton Mistry
- =13. *The Light Between Oceans* – M. L. Stedman
- =17. *All the Light We Cannot See* – Anthony Doerr
- =17. *The Kite Runner* – Khaled Hosseini
- =17. *Me Before You* – JoJo Moyes
- =20. *Room* – Emma Donoghue
- =20. *Gone Girl* – Gillian Flynn
- =20. *Stoner: A Novel* – John Williams

In general, groups read a variety of different types of books. A small number (8%) of respondents describe their group as a ‘special interest’ reading group. The most popular special interest is crime fiction, with just over 20 groups focusing on this. Young adult books, literary fiction and science fiction/fantasy are also

popular, with nine groups focusing on each of these types of literature. Groups also focus on religious and spiritual books, classics, LGBT books and Quick Reads.

Do groups post reviews and use social media?

Around a third (32%) of respondents report that group members post reviews of the books they read, while 54% do not (others are either unsure or skipped the question). For those who post reviews, Good Reads (40%) and Amazon (31%) are the most popular sites, with 19% of those who post reviews doing so on their own blogs and 8% on the Reading Groups for Everyone site. For respondents registered with Reading Groups for Everyone, higher numbers post reviews (50%) and higher numbers use the Reading Groups for Everyone site for this (31% of those who post reviews).

The comments following this question suggest some libraries have their own sites for reviews and reviews are sometimes posted on a physical notice board within the library. People also posted reviews on Facebook or Twitter and in local newsletters or newspapers. Reasons for not writing reviews tend to relate to lack of time or lack of desire to do so, including a preference for informal discussion rather than written responses to the books they read.

In terms of social media, 27% of respondents report that group members use Facebook for reading group related activity, 10% use Twitter and 4% use a blog related to their reading groups. Social media use is slightly higher amongst respondents who are registered with Reading Groups for Everyone; of these respondents, 32% report that group members use Facebook for reading group activity and 19% use Twitter.

How are meetings structured?

Reading groups structure their discussions in a wide range of ways, including using formal discussion guides. Respondents report that 45% of groups sometimes use publisher provided reading group guides, 10% regularly use guides and 45% never use guides. The use of publisher guides is slightly more prevalent amongst members of Reading Groups for Everyone – 53% sometimes use guides and 18% regularly use them. The advantages of using guides are that they prompt deeper discussion, help structure conversations, get things started or keep conversations going, help the group to focus on the book, provide context and insight about the book or the author and raise questions that members had not thought of. Example comments include:

“Some members aren't confident creating their own discussion questions so publisher reading group questions are a great help. They also often broaden the discussion and introduce areas we wouldn't have thought of.”

“They're really handy to prompt discussion, either at the start of the evening or if conversation flags. It's also great to get some snippets about the author and their inspiration”

The reasons for not using guides are lack of awareness, lack of need (they already have plenty to say in their meetings), lack of availability for some books, a preference for their own structure and a feeling that they might be intrusive or make discussion too contrived:

“We prefer to have an unstructured approach to appraising a book. We enjoy discussing our initial thoughts on the book e.g. ‘did we actually enjoy it?’ and from that we will develop our own line of questions based on members' responses. We may refer to a questions if found at the back of the book but usually we have enough to talk about without it.”

“We use them very rarely because the questions are often so pedantic and predictable. Our book group discussions evolve into philosophical, historical, dramatic, general interest and current affairs discussions.”

Aside from using reading group guides, some groups have developed their own structure. Some respondents wrote about starting the session with each member having a few minutes to say what they thought of the book before breaking into general discussion, in some instances giving a score out of five or ten. Other groups like to score their books at the end of the session and some keep a record of scores so they can look back at favourites together:

“We always start by closing our eyes and hold up fingers (0-5) to indicate how much we liked the book, then open our eyes to see what others thought of it. That starts the conversation off! We talk about the book we've just read for about 20 minutes”

“At the end of the discussion we each give the book a mark out of ten and work out a percentage; this percentage is added to a spreadsheet of all the books we have read. We really enjoy looking at the spreadsheet and remembering precious books and scores.”

A number of groups run their own mini book awards at the end of each year – either looking back at the books they have read or more generally the best books of the year across a number of different categories.

Some respondents informed us that their group is organised in a slightly different way: rather than all reading the same book they each come along to the group and talk about the different books they have read. Other groups focus on one book, but also set aside a period of time to talk about books more generally and share recommendations. Some groups each read a different book around a common theme or by the same author, and some groups read a poem or a short story aloud to the group. Some groups chose themed books for the time of year, or related to group members' specialist interests. One group is a 'mother and daughter' book group, reading children's books and adult's books. One respondent describes meeting on a weekly basis and reading a section of the book between each meeting:

“We divide books up into manageable weekly chapters. Many 19th century novels were published in parts in magazines anyway and often our divisions correspond (75-85 pages). Then we meet weekly and discuss the portion we've read. It has helped us to read less accessible novels”

Some reading groups do not meet physically: one group in the UK is paired with a group in America and they share reviews by email, and a number of groups mention using Skype to include members who live or have moved abroad. Some groups also keep notes of their meetings to send to those who cannot attend or submit reviews to the group if they are not able to attend a meeting in person.

Do members always focus on the book?

Some groups are strict about members only attending if they have read the book, and other groups are much more flexible. Many respondents mentioned chat and gossip which is unrelated to books that sometimes takes place in meetings; some respondents really valued and welcomed this, while others were keen to keep focused on the book:

“We agreed early on there was to be 'no guilt'! If someone hadn't read the book they shouldn't feel guilty about it or apologise. The book club is for fun and to socialise. It shouldn't be a burden or another chore to add to the many we have to deal with on a day to day basis”

“Everyone in our group says they have never been in a group like it before. As leader, I go to the meeting prepared with lots of questions stemming from the book, that can be very wide-ranging. The discussions evolve into related (or unrelated) areas around the questions. We never let it disintegrate into gossip.”

“We love to chat about the books but also enjoy drinking wine, eating home baked cakes, discussing local issues, supporting each other through good times and bad and of course gossiping!”

The impact of reading groups

Group members experience a wide range of positive benefits from taking part in reading groups. The survey included a structured question to explore the impact of taking part in a reading group, asking respondents how far they agree with a number of impact statements. The results were very positive:

- 95% of respondents report that members feel happy because of being part of the group
- 94% feel that being part of a reading group results in members reading more widely
- 80% report that members enjoy what they are reading more when they discuss it at the reading group
- 74% think that members talk about reading to others more often because of the group
- 72% state that members had read more since joining the group

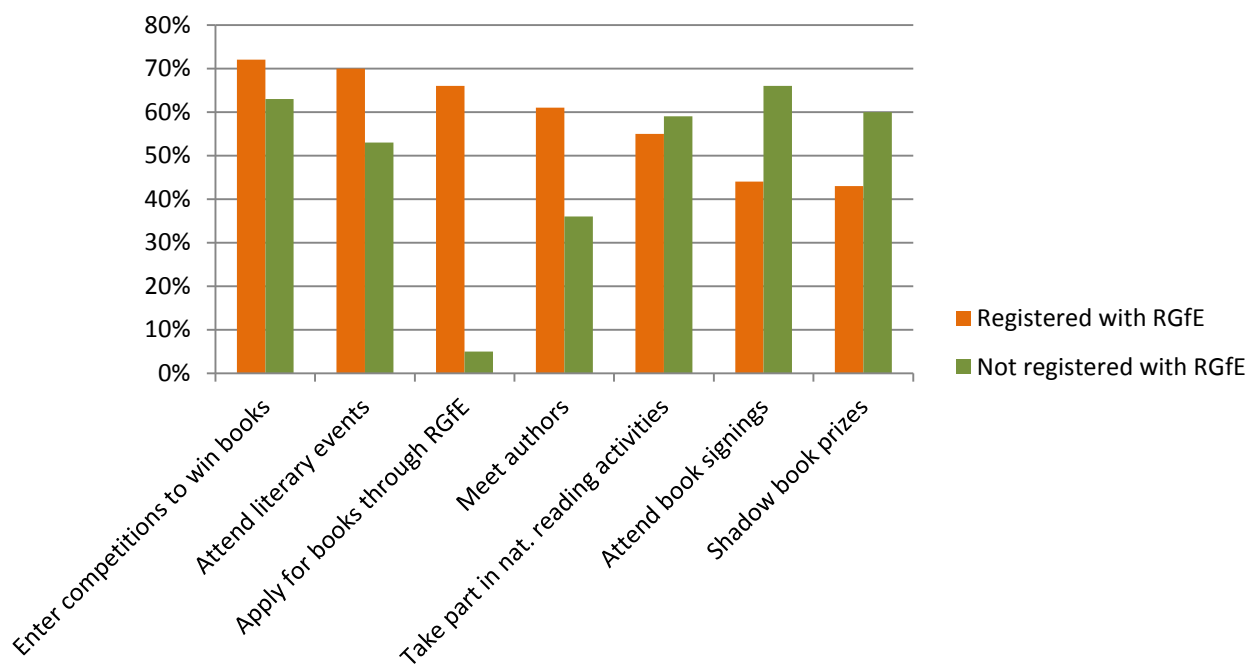
There is less certainty that reading groups increase confidence about speaking in public: 41% of respondents agree or strongly agree that this is the case, but a high number (45%) are not sure, which might be because it is difficult to answer on behalf of someone else.

Participating in reading and book related activities

Taking part in a reading group can result in members becoming involved in other reading and book related activities. Just over half of respondents (59%) report that their group has attended a literary event once a year or more often and 43% have met an author. Other activities that groups have participated in once a year or more included national reading activities (41%), shadowing book prizes (40%), entering

competitions to win books (37%), attending book signings (34%) and applying for books through Reading Groups for Everyone (16%).

These activities were generally even more likely to take place if the group is registered with Reading Groups for Everyone. The chart below demonstrates this, comparing the responses from respondents that are part of a group that is registered with Reading Groups for Everyone with those who are not.



Some respondents note that they would not have attended these events without the reading group:

“Attending literary events has been popular - many members would not have gone on their own and have tried this for the first time as part of the group. We've all agreed that we get a lot more from the book by listening to the author explain their motivation and thoughts”

Reading more widely and increasing engagement with books

From a depth analysis of the comments made by respondents, it is clear that reading group members experience wide ranging benefits from participation. Many respondents find that the group encourages them to read more widely, gives them an opportunity to share their love of reading and to hear other people’s views about books:

“The best thing about being in the group is reading a wide variety of different books, different topics and by different authors. We also enjoy the different reactions that group members have to the same book.”

“I believe we understand the world better reading things we wouldn't chose ourselves and hearing other points of view. We don't think the same so we have a broader sense of the text we read and can feel more empathy”

Some respondents explain how joining a reading group has helped them rediscover reading for pleasure:

“Speaking personally, I had not been able to read for pleasure for some years. After my husband died, a few months after my mother, I tried a number of activities to fill up the time and our reading group, which had just started, is the only activity which "stuck". I struggled to read still, until our book one month was "Purple Hibiscus", which had me reading just like I used to, with real pleasure and anticipation. It made me more discerning again instead of struggling with every book I picked up. We get on well in our group, everyone is listened to and respected and we have become friends.”

“I went through a very difficult time just after my second child was born... another mother came up to me and asked if I'd like to join a book-club that was just beginning and I took the plunge and said yes. Ironically, the first book we read was "We Need to Talk About Kevin"! It was definitely a life-changing moment for me and I so enjoyed reading the book, about such a harrowing and taboo subject, and then talking about it with - wait for it - adults!...I believe passionately in the power of books but I believe fundamentally in the power of talking and including. A social-group, like a book-club, has the power to lift, involve and welcome a person who may be feeling isolated or unhappy.”

Social engagement

A large number of respondents really value the social element of the reading group, stating it helps them become part of their local community and develop friendships:

“We participate in social activities sometimes connected with books (eg visit to Swinbrook near Mitfords's home) and have lunches together often. It has created a social life for some members who previously participated less in community life owing to personal circumstances. We love our book discussions and I can say with some confidence it is the highlight of most members' month.”

Many respondents describe the close bond they have developed with the people in their reading group, referring to the support the group provides through major life events. A number state that the meetings are therapeutic or like counselling sessions, in part because the act of discussing books enables them to talk about deep and difficult issues in a supportive environment:

“It's interesting because I meet with the book club more often than my other friends and we end up having deeper conversations and revealing more about ourselves through discussing the books. I've been surprised by how close we all become and how often individual members thank me for setting it up. It has probably been the single best thing I have done in years.”

“Everyone enjoys being part of the group...[it] is more than a place to share book reviews. It's a place you can share a bit of yourself if you feel like it, laying your thoughts and feelings on the table as well as your book review if you have an issue, safe in the knowledge you'll

be supported, not judged and leave at the end of an evening a little bit enriched and take away a new book to nurture yourself too.”

“The discussions are a little bit like counselling sessions. Everybody has to give a lot of themselves away with their opinion and reasoning.”

Increased confidence

Reading groups have in some cases helped group members develop confidence – either with reading or socially:

“A hugely enthusiastic group of teen readers who share their love of the books they read amongst their peers, thus reaching more than I could reach - they also tell their families about their reading; siblings, cousins, parents. They love going to the presentation evenings and meeting authors, it all builds confidence, discussion and negotiation skills as well as deeper understanding of the author's craft. Win win.”

“One woman had not left her house for ten years because she had gone blind. When I rang her, she said she could not come to a book group because she was blind. I told her I was blind and ran it. She came to every meeting but also found the confidence to leave the house for other reasons from then on.”

“Through the love of books, the ladies have all become good friends and enjoy meeting once a month. They have gained confidence when discussing the books and take it in turns reading reviews and discussion questions printed out in advance of the meeting.”

Enjoyment

Overwhelmingly, what came through from the responses to the survey was how much people enjoy being part of their reading group:

“I LOVE my book club, I work at a hospital and it is a very high pressure, stressful job, and it is such a pleasure to meet just once a month for an hour with colleagues to chat about books. The book club has a wide range of members...and it has really forged relationships across the hospital as we have met people through book club who we wouldn't meet normally.”

The role of The Reading Agency

The support provided for reading groups by Reading Agency initiatives such as Reading Groups for Everyone, World Book Night, Reading Ahead (formerly known as the Six Book Challenge) and Quick Reads were all mentioned:

“We love getting involved with activities coordinated by the Reading Agency, in fact it is because of reviewing we have done for them we are going to start our own blog via Wordpress. We might be way, way up north but we like to be involved in the literary world and the Reading Agency helps to make us feel included. A great example of this is the

Baileys Prize for Fiction, we didn't even know about Prize Shadowing until we became an official prize book group for the first time in 2013, now we do more of this officially and unofficially”

“Everybody now reads and most read A LOT, whatever their starting point when they joined. Getting books from the Reading Agency website and being asked to submit reviews in return has raised awareness of the publishing world (ie: that it exists and has an important role) and also of authors (ie: that they're real people doing a really hard job). Writing reviews has also, I think, encouraged members to think critically about what they're reading and not just be entertained (or not!) by a book”

“We are a small group of learning disabled learners which meets on a weekly basis. We started by reading mainly Quick Reads, and supporting events like National Poetry Day. With the local library, we host an event for World Book Night where we generally invite an author - and occasionally perform a script we have been reading (or as is current; writing!).”

Conclusion

This research has found that there are a number of common characteristics across reading groups. Members are likely to be female and aged 25 to 65 and they generally meet on a monthly basis in a group members' home or a library. They mainly read fiction, with high numbers also reading non-fiction. Reading groups select their books in a number of ways, using recommendations from friends, reviews, book prizes and in some cases seeking advice from libraries.

Reading groups differ in whether they write their own reviews and use social media for reading group activity; there are a significant minority of groups who do this and it is more likely amongst those registered on Reading Groups for Everyone. Groups also differ in how they run their meetings, with some groups very structured and focused on the book that they have read and others more flexible in the topics they cover. Groups often have wide-ranging discussions that stem from the books but go much beyond the specific title to encompass issues in group members own lives, with the group playing a therapeutic role for some.

The role of The Reading Agency and our various programmes in supporting reading groups was also highlighted by some respondents, via the Reading Groups for Everyone website and also initiatives such as World Book Night, Quick Reads and Reading Ahead. However there is an opportunity to increase awareness of the support that Reading Groups for Everyone can provide, particularly for book recommendations.

Reading groups also take part in reading and book related activities such as literary events or meeting an author and this is more likely to be the case amongst groups that are registered with Reading Groups for Everyone. Respondents describe many benefits from taking part in reading groups, including reading more widely, become more engaged with books, having an opportunity for increased social engagement and experiencing enjoyment from being part of the group. To sum up in the words of one respondent:

“In conclusion I can only say that I whole heartedly believe that the impact a reading group can have on the social wellbeing of society cannot and should not ever be underestimated. These groups and groups like them are absolutely invaluable.”

Recommendations

As a result of these research findings we intend to:

- Ensure our support for reading groups is suitable for the current membership of groups, while working to promote reading groups to a wider audience including younger age groups and men.
- Increase awareness amongst reading groups about the different ways in which they could structure their meetings and choose books, and highlight the support available for them to do this, for example via Reading Groups for Everyone.
- Provide support and advice for reading groups about sharing their activity on social media and sharing book reviews.
- Raise awareness of the benefits that result from taking part in reading groups, to celebrate the difference that taking part can make to people’s lives and encourage more people to join reading groups.

We will address these recommendations in the two-year strategy for Reading Groups for Everyone.