

Interview with Man Book Club

1. Does your group have a name and/or a theme? How long has your group been in existence?

We're fairly new. We started in early 2007 and our name—Man Book Club—aptly defines us but it also makes us mildly uncomfortable. It was intended to acknowledge our men-only composition, but was also meant as a cheeky reference to the Man Booker Prize. (The name expresses both our willingness to be bought by the Man Financial Group as well as our book selection bias.) Unfortunately, the name is used derisively by our wives and only infrequently by our members, some of whom think it euphonically suggests NAMBLA, an organization with a vastly different agenda.

2. How many members do you have? How many men, how many women? What age are most of your members?

We have about 14 regulars, with a few on the sideline (they enjoy receiving the emails but disdain the actual reading and meeting part). We're mostly in our 40s, with kids in school and careers that take us in different directions. We thought our group would be a nice counterweight to the book clubs our wives belong to, as their reading lists tilt too heavily in Oprah's direction. The fact that our monthly sessions provide excellent group therapy is an added bonus.

3. How often do you meet? Where do you meet?

We meet monthly, rotating homes. The challenge for the host is how to make the rest of his family disappear for a couple of hours. (Our loud disagreements and occasional profanity make this desirable.) A challenge for the entire group is keeping track of the details for the next meeting, since we don't meet at the same time each month. After way too much email (most of it intentionally provocative), our solution has been to create our own blog (<http://www.manbookclub.com>) with the key data highlighted at the top and with plenty of room below to flame each other.

4. Do you eat at your meetings? What do you eat? Who brings the food?

The host is responsible for providing dinner. The quality varies, especially when we try too hard to eat alongside our book's characters. When we were discussing the apocalyptic devastation in *The Road* (by Cormac McCarthy), our host had us eat from unmarked cans pulled from an open fire. That was a culinary low point. But on the beverage front, we've done a consistently fine job. The selection always includes some outstanding bottles from Napa and Sonoma (and, thanks to our Aussie member, from Down Under). One of our members is an accomplished chemist who has a fine repertoire of home-brewed and -distilled products. During our discussion of the Battle of Gettysburg (*The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara) he had us drink from an earthenware jug of corn liquor. His concoctions are bracing and take us right into the moment of any narrative. The fact that his professional specialty is high-performance engine lubricants never seems to bother anyone.

5. Who leads the discussion? Do you use reading group guides?

Sometimes we've circulated reading guides and questions in advance, but they're usually ignored. Instead, once we sit down to dinner, a free-for-all ensues. Our approaches are

pretty diverse: some guys enjoy exploring the narrative itself, but most seize on key themes and praise or disparage the book on that basis alone. We don't have an anointed discussion leader. Anyone foolish enough to commandeer the discussion is an immediate target.

6. What kind of books do you read?

We claim to read only books written by authors who've won or been shortlisted for a major literary award (e.g., Pulitzer, (Man) Booker, National Book). This sometimes gets us uncomfortably close to the mainstream (i.e., Oprah), but we do give ourselves room to deviate when inclined. There are two rules, however, that we usually hold to: maximum book length (500 pages) and the Man Book Club Rule (no chick lit--think *Eat, Pray, Love*). Our selection criteria suggest we've literary pretensions. Nothing could be closer to the truth.

7. How do you choose your books? Do you choose one new book at each meeting, or do you choose the books for a number of meetings ahead of time?

After lots of name-calling and other disagreeable behavior, we finally settled on a selection process that seems to work well. The host for the next meeting proposes 2-3 books that meet our criteria and the one with the most votes from the group gets the nod. We do this each month and prefer it to drawing up a consensus list months in advance. Actually, we've never tried to do a list because we know it would be pointless, given our difficulty agreeing. A month at a time also allows certain members (well, mostly me) to lobby regularly for their personal favorites.

8. What were some of the best discussions or favorite books the group read?

Our discussions get more spirited with each new book (and each new blend of home brew). We've all had our favorites, so it would be easier to identify our Worst Pick Ever as *Oscar and Lucinda* (by Peter Carey). Few admitted to finishing the book, but everyone panned it as a tedious read with painfully awkward characters and a plot that no one cared about.

Because we're a group of men with disparate interests and we're all far removed from our undergraduate days, our approaches to reading and talking about reading are wildly different. There is no one-size-fits-all structure for men like us. Recognizing that, we each accept that the discussions sometimes echo our own interests and sometimes not. It helps that we're all friends and refuse to take anyone's viewpoint too seriously.

9. How do you keep things fun?

We ridicule one another in our emails and blog comments. Invariably someone is trying to borrow a copy of the book days before the meeting, or another guy has to beg out because his in-laws are visiting, or one of us engages in an exercise of self-loathing because he sees the book club structure as too effete and pretentious. But once we get to the meeting, most of that disappears (except the self-loathing part).

10. What advice would you give to other reading groups?

We don't give advice and we don't take direction. We're men.

11. Is there anything else unique or noteworthy about your group that you would like to share?

We're still waiting for the Man Financial Group to pay us a naming fee; otherwise, we may change our name to the Costa Book Club (named after the coffee chain that now sponsors the Whitbread Book Award) and demand free coffee for our efforts. They may

contact us at men@manbookclub.com