

# Book Clubs in the USA

» Conclusions based on years of research provide details on how book clubs operate today.\*

BY DAVINA MORGAN-WITTS

An annual survey of regular book readers conducted in April 2015 recorded more than 3,600 responses in a two-week period.\*\* One of the key points of interest was to understand book clubs, including their evolving needs, who participates, and where they meet. These results were combined with previous surveys, book club interviews and social networking feedback, and parsed through fifteen years of experience examining book clubs to create a white paper, "Book Clubs in the USA." A number of findings summarized in this paper yield information that can be used by librarians to strengthen their existing book club or start a new one.

## BY THE NUMBERS

Between 2004 and 2009, book club participation increased significantly (see Figure 1) while the demographics of those surveyed remained constant. In the six years since 2009, the percentage of respondents in a book club has remained effectively unchanged, indicating that book club participation has stabilized.

Book club participation increases with age. Two factors leading to increased participation levels are time and a desire to connect. While many participants first get involved in book clubs in their 30s, empty nesters and those well established in their careers have more time and are open to building new adult connections, while retirees tend to have more time than when employed and welcome the intellectual

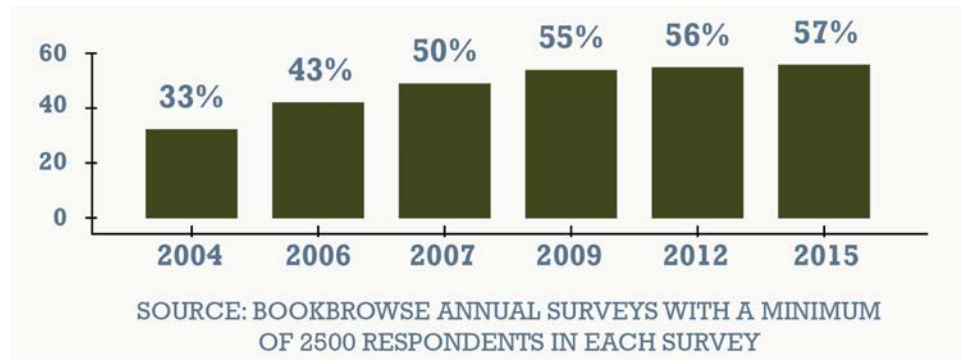


Figure 1: Book club participation has increased significantly in the last eleven years.

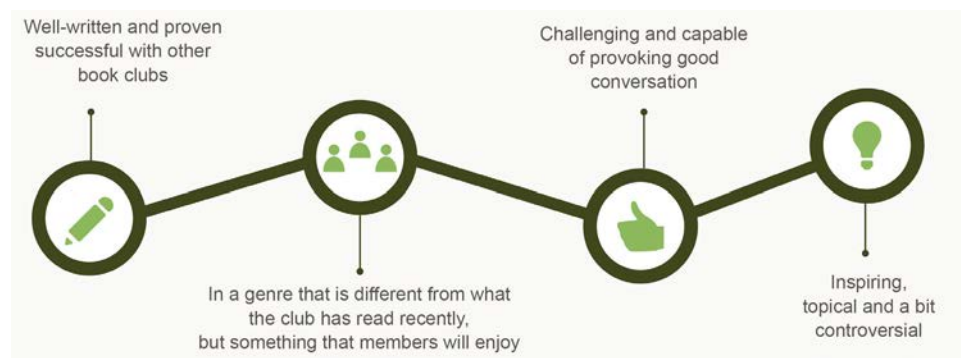


Figure 2: What are the qualities of a good book club read?

challenge that book clubs bring.

Of respondents with a two-year degree or less, 43 percent belong to a book club. This number rises to 55 percent for those with an undergraduate degree, and jumps to 63 percent among those with a graduate degree or higher.

Also, 45 percent of respondents with household income of less than \$50,000 belong to a book club, compared to 58 percent of those in households with income above \$100,000. But the correlation is not as

strong as that seen for education and age, which is in large part because the highest penetration of book club membership is among the 65+ age group who are most likely retired and living on relatively lower income than during their working years.

Statistical and anecdotal data show that the majority of book club members are women. While men may be in the minority, they are no less involved than their female counterparts. When men in the sample were asked what they like about book clubs, common responses matched those of women: a book club gets them to read a variety of books that they would not read otherwise and that the discussions were enjoyable. A number reported that their perceptions of book clubs changed when they joined one. The majority of men in a book club, and those interested in joining one, want to be in a mixed group of men and women.

Among those who read at least one book a month, it is difficult to discern a difference in reading habits between book club members and non-members. While some in book

**Publisher's Note:** Many public and K-12 libraries host or administer book clubs for various groups of patrons. Libraries use these clubs to meet a variety of goals:

- Encourage persons from the community or school to use the library.
- Allow participants to know their librarian in an informal setting.
- Enlighten the group about the resources available at the library.
- Encourage members to expand their reading choices.
- Provide a social outlet for like-minded as well as diverse participants.

No matter why a library chooses to run a book club, librarians who serve as leaders can tailor the format in many ways. In general, how do most book clubs operate and how can they be structured to provide the best outcome for participants?

The results in this report can assist in answering these and other questions.

clubs are highly prolific readers, others will only read their book club selection. Equally, there are both light and heavy readers among non-book club members. Book club membership is less a factor of how much a person reads and more to do with whether they enjoy discussing books with others and whether they have had the opportunity to be part of a group that suits their interests.

### PUBLIC BOOK CLUBS

Book clubs open to all in public venues (such as a library) are invaluable to those interested in participating but who either do not have the opportunity or the desire to join a private group, with the potential for social angst and long-term commitment. Many book clubbers whose first experience in a book club was in a library-hosted group are still happily participating years later while others have joined a different group or started one of their own. Considering that nearly one-third of book clubbers surveyed belong to more than one group, some simply join additional groups with maintaining their connection to the first.

Interestingly, half the men surveyed who are not in a book club but would like to be say that they would prefer a club that met in a public place, with a number specifying the library. Only 15 percent would prefer to meet in a home.

### WHAT BOOK CLUB READ

Statistically speaking, 70 percent of clubs read fiction most of the time. However, it is too simplistic to assume (as some not in book clubs do) that book clubs are bastions of “women’s fiction.” The reality is that the amorphous qualities that book clubs look for in their books result in interest across a range of genres and types, including serious and “light” books, fiction, nonfiction, classics, and bestsellers.

Book club choices are influenced by both the personal reading preferences of individual members and the simple fact that some genres produce more books suitable for discussion than others, but few, if any genres

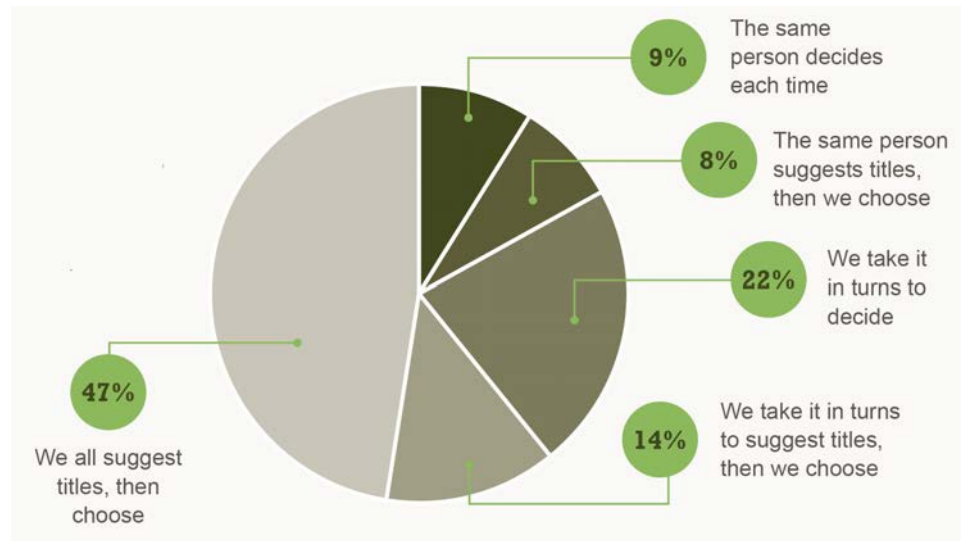


Figure 3: Who chooses the books a book club reads?

are off limits to clubs. A fascinating aspect of conducting in-depth interviews with book club members over time shows not only how varied the world of book clubs is but also how the choices of individual groups expand over time. Clubs that start off reading “safe bets” start to explore new avenues as the groups’ tastes and confidence grows.

In another interesting finding, 80 percent of book clubs read local authors at least occasionally, and many enjoy hearing firsthand from authors, local or not. A note of caution: while clubs enjoy hearing from and asking questions of authors, some are uncomfortable openly discussing the book in front of the author. An answer is to have the author participate, in person or electronically, for only a portion of the meeting.

### THE IDEAL BOOK

Overwhelmingly, book club participants want to read books that expand their horizons—windows that allow them to see into the lives of others or mirrors that let them reflect on aspects of their own lives. Above all else, books need to have plenty to discuss. Sometimes a book can be fun to read but provide little to discuss, while another book may not be universally liked but generates good conversation. The core criteria that book clubs look for are shown

in **Figure 2**. Clearly, it is a tall order for any book to meet all the criteria, which is why proven book clubs books spread rapidly from club to club. Those choosing books can feel considerable pressure, which is why information and guidance on a book’s suitability is so important.

### CHOOSING THE BOOKS

E-mail newsletters and websites or blogs are the sources used “most often” to find books among all readers, whether in a book club or not. While personal (reader to reader) recommendations score highest overall, the vast majority of personal recommendation originate from another channel, whether that be reading a book review or “discovering” a carefully placed book on a library display. Thus, reader-to-reader recommendations serve to amplify books discovered through other sources (see **Figure 3**).

Of book club members who meet in person, 90 percent have a say in what books are read at least some of the time (see **Figure 4, page 15**). Close to 70 percent of clubs meet most months, discussing nine to twelve books a year. More than four of ten in-person book clubs make their selections at least four months in advance. Only one third of book club members say that a reading guide is a factor in their book club choices.

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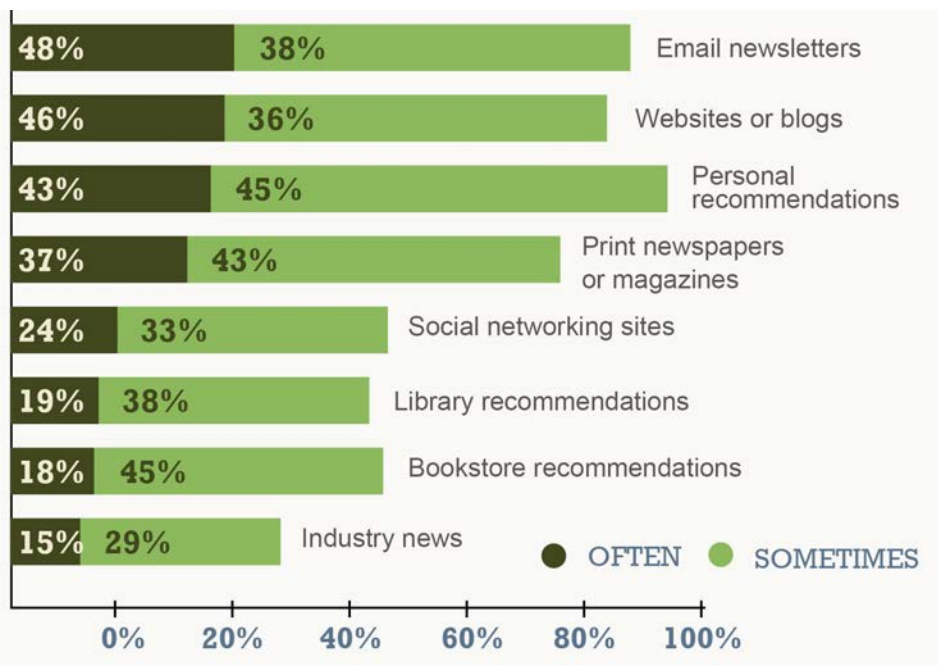


Figure 4: How do book club members find out about books?

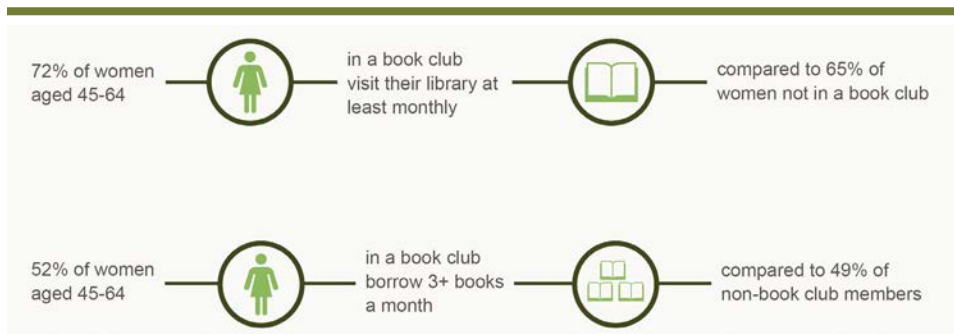


Figure 5: How do book club members use the library?

On-line book clubs tend to plan less far in advance with half scheduling just one month ahead and only 5 percent planning for a full year. This ad hoc format reflects the larger size and “drop-in” nature of many on-line book clubs.

In a model that other book clubs might wish to follow, some groups host discussions on a given topic rather than a specific book. For example, in some sessions, the club might choose to split the group so some read a biography of a famous person while others read an historical fiction focused on the same person, or they may decide to read different books by the same author.

### BOOK CLUBS AND LIBRARIES

Book club members are more likely to visit their library, both online and in person, than non-book club members who are regular readers. However, much of this difference has to do with demographics; book club membership increases with age and skews in favor of women, as does library usage. But even when these factors are removed, book

club members are still somewhat more frequent visitors to the library than similar readers who are not in a book club.

Book club members borrow slightly more library books than non-book club members (see Figure 5). Also, of the almost 500 Friends of the Library members surveyed, almost three-quarters were in a book club.

### INSIGHTS FROM LIBRARY BOOK CLUBS

The following links provide insights from four librarians who host successful book clubs at their libraries. Librarian Marika Zemke of the Pre-Pub Book Club at Commerce Township Community Library in Michigan shares her unusual model for a book club—one that, among other things, educates its members on how and why books get published. The group attracts a diverse range of ages and both men and women.

<http://www.bookbrowse.com/featured-bookclubs/archives/index.cfm/bookclubnumber/50>

Librarian Terye Balogh of the Milpitas Library Book Group in California shares some

excellent advice about inviting authors to the group, managing large discussions, and keeping the group engaged.

<http://www.bookbrowse.com/featured-bookclubs/archives/index.cfm/bookclubnumber/29>

In its more than thirty years, the “Young Critics” book club at the Perrot Memorial Library in Greenwich, Connecticut has inspired generations of children.

<http://www.bookbrowse.com/featured-bookclubs/archives/index.cfm/bookclubnumber/17>

The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award Book Club is a fourth grade student book club at Richmond Elementary School, Richmond, VT. The club is run by teacher/librarian Beth Redford who has devised a process by which the fourth graders get to read new high-quality literature and help choose Vermont’s “Book of the Year.”

<http://www.bookbrowse.com/featured-bookclubs/archives/index.cfm/bookclubnumber/49> ■

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Davina Morgan-Witts is founder and editor of BookBrowse, an online magazine and readers’ advisory resource particularly suited for patrons in book clubs and those who read to expand their horizons. Features include book reviews, book previews, “beyond the book” articles, author interviews, reading guides, read-alike recommendations, and the ability to search by time period, setting, and theme. Information on library subscriptions can be found at [www.bookbrowse.com/lib](http://www.bookbrowse.com/lib).

**\*\*NOTE ON THE SURVEY SAMPLE:** Unless otherwise specified, the primary source of information in this article is a survey conducted by BookBrowse in April 2015. Respondents completed a questionnaire hosted by BookBrowse. Of those who participated, 27 percent were BookBrowse members; 73 percent were non-members.

Because the focus was on book clubs, responses were filtered to include only those who read at least one book a month—that is, people who read sufficiently to belong to a book club, whether they chose to or not. The responses were also filtered to only include persons living in the United States, resulting in a sample size of a little more than 3,000.

The full white paper can be downloaded at [www.bookbrowse.com/wp](http://www.bookbrowse.com/wp).