

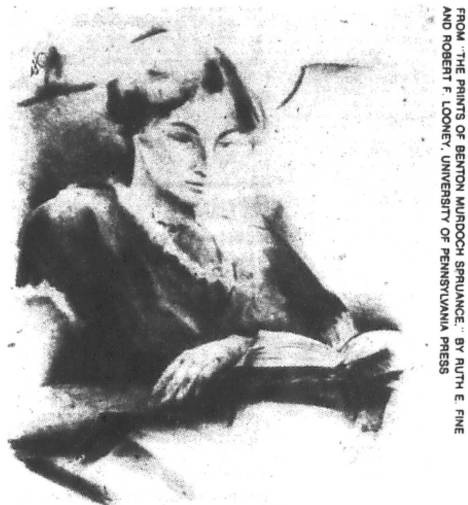
The Home Forum.

The digging work

The dark blue water of the cove sponges up light abruptly halved near the tortoise-shell lighthouse dealt a vigilant stance in bedrock the color of red cabbage.

This hovel is ours, is complete as seed gone to flower; the cottage, one good boat, the bookcase ample as a corner newsstand, its titles ever new, ever dogeared, too, the digging work done years ago so now each character lives afresh where "Our talk can always wait," or "I think we are happiest turning the corner toward home."

Stephen Hickoff



'Evening' (1931): lithograph by Benton Murdoch Spruance

FROM 'THE PRINTS OF BENTON MURDOCH SPRUANCE,' BY RUTH E. FINE AND ROBERT F. LOONEY, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

Exhortation to a canticle

Sweep the hearth
open the draft
lay down the variegated years
and with the tinderbox of attention
set the stack ablaze

Watch the way of the wood
as it changes to fire

Some flames flare up and then at once subside
some hold grow strong and tall
each with its own flickering shape
its own ever altering hue

Sit near the fireplace
let yourself be warmed
most of all listen listen
hear what the flames are doing
with a rush of burning
or with blended intimate whispers crackles sighs
making the fireplace sound
the muted sweet mysterious fireplace sound

Background music drifting murmuring -
suggesting
needing words and a tune

Listen absorb this sound

Only you can complete
this canticle . . .

Catharine Fieleke

Reading, or a club of one

READING is a solitary act, the opposite of clubbiness. Wouldn't a reading club seem to violate that central fact? On summer days when I was small, a best friend and I made a club of two. We'd lie on the grass and read for hours; when we finished our books, we'd sit up, exchange titles, and read on. By a fire on more recent, wintry evenings, my husband and I do that still — read together in silence. And if he laughs, I may or may not ask what's funny. And I may or may not get an answer. And it all goes vice versa.

Yet, a few years ago, we were tempted to expand our twosome and start a real reading club. We kept hearing about such clubs, all chummy and long-lived. And being tired of stodgy party talk about real estate, we made a list of acquaintances and friends we thought might contribute a spark to a different discussion — of fictive plots rather than surveyors'.

Books would be chosen by the group, but for this first time we suggested that anyone who wanted to participate should come to our house on a designated Sunday night having read "The Crying of Lot 49," by Thomas Pynchon.

We chose the Pynchon novel for innocuous enough reasons. First, it was short — 138 pages; and second, it was readily available in paperback. Beyond that, we thought it wouldn't seem as "literary" as, say, "Billy Budd" might. Also, Pynchon, the flamboyant stylist and satiric creator of characters with names like Mucho and Oedipa Maas, Clayton Chlitz, and Genesis Cohen, promised to be controversial. We were, after all, hoping for a discussion as lively as possible.

Bob and I decided beforehand that we'd serve nothing to eat or drink except iced tea. We didn't want our club to be mistaken for a social gathering. Also, we'd heard from a member of another group that a dessert-laden table in the dining room upstaged the book talk every time. We hoped, instead, for some hours of merely chewing the fat of good literature.

Fifteen people came to that first meeting, their occupations as varied as those on a list of suspects in a mystery novel: a dentist, a concert pianist, a bilingual-education specialist, an economist, a psychotherapist, a radio journalist, a community activist, and two computer programmers. There were also four congressional aides, including husband Bob, because this was

taking place in Washington, in a row house on Capitol Hill; and four fiction writers, including myself, because all writers are readers, or should be.

And not one of us capable of defending the poor, pounced on Pynchon! Everyone seemed to agree: Nobody liked the book. But beyond that there was no other island of agreement. Ev, the economist, panned the book's lack of "emotive" detail. Bruce, an aide; retorted that modernism had done away with it on purpose, so if Ev didn't like the novel, he should argue on other grounds. Bonnie, another aide, didn't care: She hadn't liked any of Pynchon's characters.

The talk ignited, though not for all. Mary Ellen, the community activist, sat mute, as did Roy, another aide, ordinarily quite vocal. But it was hopeless to try to include them. With people squirming in their seats, waving hands wildly, without anyone to call on them (Bob and I were helpless to lead such chaos), it seemed like a rowdy high school class. Interruption prevailed. And when the session ended, it was unclear what had been concluded about Pynchon or anything else.

Before adjourning, we picked a book for our second meeting, out of a paper top hat. It was Joyce Carol Oates's "Wonderland," met with groans. Three people had already read it. More flailing and invective until a substitution was made — Oates's earlier novel, "A Garden of Earthly Delights." Then other organizational suggestions were aired. Heard most often: Next time, let's all bring more refreshments?

In fact, no one got fancy with food. We simply read and talked about books, including "Stop-Time," by Frank Conroy; "Another Roadside Attraction," by Tom Robbins; "The Lime Twig," by John Hawkes; "The Spire," by William Golding; "On the Road," by Jack Kerouac; "The Great Gatsby," by F. Scott Fitzgerald; "The Moviegoer," by Walker Percy; "Tin Drum," by Günter Grass; "Master & Margarita," by Mikhail Bulgakov; "Lady Chatterley's Lover," by D. H. Lawrence; and even the quirky, hefty tome "JR," by William Gaddis.

The deliberative did diminish as we gave more structure to our once-a-month meetings and the designated leader (different each time) really tried to lead. We also looked up biographical facts about the authors to share and reviews to compare early returns with later verdicts as well as with our own.

Ev's program on Kerouac, his longtime hero, was a particularly poignant one; and fiction-writer Aseneath could be especially insightful with "The Moviegoer," since she'd lived 13 years in that book's romantically fateful locale, Louisiana.

What is more, left to my own devices, I'd never have chosen some of the titles for private reading; the darkly fanciful Bulgakov, for example, or the allegorical Golding. But the exposure could only do me good. Like Marsha Quest in Doris Lessing's novel of the same name, I was "saturated" with one kind of reading, which "deepens and intensifies what one already knows," and needed the other kind, which presents "new facts, new views to weave into one's life."

Why, then, did we end the club after about a year? Some of the trouble was that we, Bob and I, as the club's organizers, became the keepers of the literary souls of its members. Regularly, one hour before meeting time, we'd receive a spate of phone calls — the regrets: from those who had not found a copy of the book; from those who'd had to work late for two weeks, and hence were only just on Page 37; from those whose dog had fallen ill; et cetera — even though we'd never asked to hear excuses.

There were also those from the original list of invitees who insisted we tell them the selection every month, and still never came; then started avoiding us on the street. We felt like camp counselors; or the police. Attendance did fall, but we didn't want to twist arms. Where literature was concerned, it was the furthest thing from our minds.

When we decided to disband the club, we heard the predictable protests. We said: Be our guests. You run it; we'll be members. But nobody took us up on the offer.

As I write this, Bob is downstairs, just finishing "The Patriot," by Evan S. Connell Jr., which I bought at a used book sale but haven't yet read myself. He climbs the stairs, says, "Pretty good." We nod.

So maybe there is something else that decides me against clubs for reading. I heard myself telling someone at a party not long ago: "After I've read a book, I really don't like to talk about it, especially if I've really liked the book. I just want to give it a little pat along its spine and put it back on the shelf."

Jeanne Schinto