

The Book Club Phenomenon

There is nothing new about the recent explosion of Book Clubs throughout Ireland. It could be argued that ever since two or three people discussed a book they all had read the concept of the Book Club was formed. The more formal examples of the Book Club in modern history are the French Literary Salons and the English Coffee Shops of the Eighteenth Century.

These Salons were generally frequented by the literati themselves who used them as a talking shop to promote their own work and satirise their literary opponents or by the nouvelle bourgeoisie who were trying to establish their literary, intellectual and cultural credentials in Fashionable Society.

A different concept of the Book Club emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century when many publishers offered recognised classics or popular novels at a reduced rate to customers who committed to buying so many volumes a year.

The disadvantage of these Book Clubs was that the reader had no say as to what books were selected and often had to accept titles that didn't appeal to them. On the other hand they did allow the ordinary punter access to many titles he or she could not otherwise afford and, by introducing a writer to a much wider audience, they could make his or her career. When one of these Imprints chose Walter Macken's *Rain on the Wind* as one of their selections in 1950, not only did he receive a generous and welcome cheque, he became a novelist of international status.

However, while the concept of the Book Club may have existed since books were first printed, or even written, the current model has a refreshingly new and energetic feel to it, driven as it is by an enjoyment of reading and a love of books. Gone is the need to emulate one's own work or to deride one's perceived opponent, gone, too, is the need to make a social or intellectual statement, present is the sheer pleasure of reading a good book and the opportunity to share that pleasure with others.

A small group of people – mainly women it must be said – come together at regular intervals and share their own opinion of a

pre-selected titles they have all recently read. There is no personal, literary, social or cultural axe to grind, neither is there a hidden agenda. There is simply a wish to share a positive experience and to have fun doing it.

These clubs seem to have no real rules. They are completely independent of one another, each one reflecting the interests of its own members. The life span of an individual club can vary from a couple of months to over twenty years. The method of book selection also differs from club to club, the most common being that it rotates among all the members thus ensuring that everyone makes a positive contribution to the proceedings.

No matter what the modus operandi is, there is no doubting the almost universal popularity of the modern Book Club. The vast majority of people who participate in one seem to find it an enjoyable and enriching experience. Perhaps the main reason for this lies in the total flexibility of these clubs, the small membership, the minimal financial outlay and their apparently seamless ability to cater for the needs of all its members.

Either way, the modern Book Club provides all its members with a forum to enhance their knowledge and love of books and, in a world that is presently imbued with negativity, they are a shining beacon of welcome light.

Saturday March 5th (2011) is World Book Night and one could do worse to celebrate it than by forming or joining a Book Club thereby enhancing one's own cultural quality of life.