



Mother-daughter book clubs -- the choosing

By Audra Otto | Published Thu, Jan 14 2010 8:30 am

The time for finger food and socializing is soon up: The book club must get to the book.

Michele Cromer-Poiré has been leading a mother-daughter book club in St. Paul for 12 years. She offered some insight into the kinds of books mother-daughter groups read and into the selection process.

"Right now our club has third through sixth graders, so we read chapter books. Mainly fiction, but also a bit of nonfiction. We read a collection of short biographies of female inventors, for example."

The only stipulation is that the material must focus on a female character.

Twice a year, Cromer-Poiré comes to book club with a giant bag of books. After presenting them, the group discusses and then chooses titles by popular vote.

Finding books that appeal to both third and sixth graders sounds like a tricky task.

"It's not as difficult as you might think," says Cromer-Poiré, "because the third graders are already reading far above grade level.

"With our current members, we aren't reading young adult books but the club has read young adult and even adult books in the past."

Recently, the group read "Olive's Ocean" by Kevin Henke. Some parents had reservations about the book, which deals with mature themes like death, guilt, and regret.

"Olive is killed by a hit-and-run driver, and there was concern about reading a book centered on a young girl's death," says Cromer-Poiré.

"But it turned out to be entirely successful -- we had a wonderful discussion. The girls had very reflective responses."

Because the younger students in the group need to be able to keep up with the sixth graders -- and occasionally read books with young adult themes -- Cromer-Poiré discourages the youngest girls from joining.

"Sometimes six and seven-year-olds are interested in signing up, but I tell them, 'wait another year.'"

Though they may interest a range of elementary students, do the book selections have multi-generational appeal?

To keep participants coming back year after year, books need to be engaging and entertaining for the mothers and grandmothers, as well.

The reading must provide the entire group with food for thought, topics to spark discussion, and issues to debate. If the women tire of the books, it's unlikely they'll continue putting time and energy into the book club.

To guarantee that both mothers and daughters enjoy their reading, mothers and daughters should choose the books together, says Cindy Hudson, author of "Book by Book: The Complete Guide to Creating Mother-Daughter Book Clubs."

Left to their own devices, girls may choose books popular with their friends at school -- faddish books thin on substance that parents are liable to find uninspired and tedious.

Given total control, mothers are prone to pick classics from their own youth and books heavy on issues they want their daughters to learn about. Rather than providing a fun escape, reading these books can feel like just another chore to the girls.

To ensure that book choices are mutually satisfying, both mothers and daughters are given a vote in Cromer-Poiré's book club.

Michelle Zimmermann, who runs the mother-daughter book club at the North Mankato Taylor Library, assigns each mother-daughter duo a month of the year to choose the book for the entire group.

"The hope is that allowing mother-daughter pairs to take responsibility for selecting books and planning the programs around them will maximize member involvement."

Zimmermann says her group has never had trouble finding books suitable for two, even three generations of members.

"There are a lot of great books out there for the whole family."

I'm sure Zimmermann is right. I recall dozens of books my father enjoyed reading with me when I was growing up -- the entire "Little House on the Prairie" series, the first three books in the "Chronicles of Narnia" series,

Madeleine L'Engle's books, and pretty much everything ever written by Roald Dahl.

We also shared a dislike for certain books. A "Hardy Boys" book and "Swiss Family Robinson" were given the heave-ho.

In recent years, there's been no shortage of authors churning out works that appeal to readers of all ages. The epitome of this trend is J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series, gobbled up by kids and adults alike.

Parent-child book clubbers should also think beyond kids books with adult appeal. Club leaders point out that many adult books will interest middle school and high school readers.

In the past year, I've come across several titles being read in both adult and kids book clubs, including:

- "A Northern Light" by Jennifer Donnelly
- "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon
- "The Giver" by Lois Lowry
- "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" by Betty Smith
- "The Book Thief" by Markus Zusak

Not all parent-child book clubs give mothers and daughters equal say in the book selection process. Julie, a Golden Valley mother in a book club with her fifth grade daughter, says the mothers in her group allow the daughters to choose the books.

The women might not always be keen to read the titles the girls choose, but their focus is to keep the girls interested in reading. Besides, reading their daughters' picks gives them unique insight into the girls' interests, language, and the things that capture their imagination.

How does your parent-child book club come up with reading material? Tell us using the "comment" feature.

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