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## **For Bookworms Who Want to Talk About It**

By BRUCE SHENITZ

Reading is an essentially solitary activity, but talking about books requires at least two people. Even if you live with another bibliovore, what are the chances that you will both be struck by the desire to read and discuss, say, "Bleak House" or "Ulysses" at precisely the same moment? The growing popularity of reading groups and book clubs attests to the desire to talk about books as well as read them.

Another motivation for joining such groups, suggested Alberto Manguel, author of "A History of Reading," is that it "makes you feel less guilty about an activity that society sees as leisure, entertainment or diversion."

As a result, he said, "it gives us an alibi for this kind of guilty pleasure."

In fact, New Yorkers have been gathering together for general book talk for more than 100 years, said Thomas Bender, a professor of history at New York University. Around the turn of the century, he said, such groups played an important part in the city's cultural life.

The phenomenon of the author as a star had already developed in Europe earlier in the 19th century, Mr. Manguel said, when groups were organized to discuss the works of a single author. A number of English societies were established to read and discuss Robert Browning during his lifetime, said Bob Griffiths, vice president of the New York Browning Society, and the poet often made the rounds among his enthusiasts.

While some people come together to celebrate a favorite author, others are seeking intellectual support as they undertake a long, difficult work like "Remembrance of Things Past" or "Finnegans Wake." No statistics are kept on how many such groups exist in New York, but at least a dozen maintain an active schedule of reading groups, lectures and other events. There are also a number of societies that publish journals and hold one or two meetings a year, often in conjunction with groups like the Modern Language Association.

Aside from the intellectual stimulation they receive, participants enjoy sharing their enthusiasm with like-minded people. This sometimes leads to the members' taking on a bit of "their" author's style. The members of the Jane Austen Society, for example, seem to speak in well-constructed

paragraphs containing wry aperçus, while the "Finnegans Wake" readers can range through the entire world of human experience while discussing one word of the text. Mr. Samuel Pickwick might have felt quite at home at a meeting of the jovial Dickens Fellowship, and the Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts delight in arch wordplay and tongue-in-cheek scholarship.

Some people even have divided loyalties: the Shaw and Yeats societies have some joint activities as well as members in common, and a fair number of James Joyce enthusiasts have joined the relatively new Proust reading group. At some point, members of a society are likely to pull aside a visitor to whisper that it is the people in "other" groups who are the strange birds. (It was the Joyce fans who most often elicited this description, but they appeared no more impassioned than any other enthusiasts.)

One Sherlockian might have been speaking for all the literary society members when she said, "We're eccentric, but we're harmless." Here is a user's guide to some of the New York societies devoted to a single writer:

### New York Joyceans

When the Modern Library named James Joyce's "Ulysses" the No. 1 choice in its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the century, members of the James Joyce Society figured that the rest of the world had finally realized what they already knew. " 'Ulysses' is such a rich, human, universal kind of book that it speaks to human experience in a way that no other book has done for me," said David Rose, a society member from Westchester. Joyce enthusiasts have a number of groups to choose from.

The James Joyce Society, the oldest of these groups, held its first meeting at the Gotham Book Mart on West 47th Street in Manhattan in 1947, and is still there. The group's continuing association with the bookstore can be traced back to the store's legendary owner, Frances Steloff, who long functioned as an informal clearinghouse for scholars and admirers of Joyce.

In addition to the society's activities, there are two reading groups working their way through "Finnegans Wake," a book that even the most avid Joycean will acknowledge needs the benefit of several brains to make sense of. (Study groups started poring over the work while excerpts were being printed beginning in 1924, 15 years before the book's publication.)

The general group, which is open to all comers, covers anywhere from two to six pages a session. Still too fast? If you show up and demonstrate your devotion to the work, you might be invited to join the "sub-group," which also meets monthly but delves even deeper: it's taken about four years to get to page 36, and the book begins on page 3. "We all have reasons for this study, but way down on the bottom of the list is actually finishing the 'Wake,' " said Murray J. Gross, a lawyer who leads both reading groups.

The James Joyce Society is open to anyone with an interest in the writer, but apparently some

beginners felt they might be more comfortable with a less scholarly group. Stanley Goldstein, the founder of the American Friends of James Joyce, is also a member of the James Joyce Society, but, he said, "They're over my head." He explained the need for the new group by saying, "I can't play baseball as well as Mickey Mantle, but I still love to play baseball."

The new group made its debut last year on Bloomsday -- June 16, named for the day in 1904 on which Leopold Bloom traversed Dublin in "Ulysses" -- as the New York hosts of a global Internet reading of the novel. A monthly reading is often led by Mr. Goldstein, who uses a text-oriented "Great Books" approach. In a recent discussion of the story "After the Race" from "Dubliners," Mr. Goldstein moved the discussion along crisply, occasionally seeking a comment from the more reticent members of the group. If you decide to go, be sure to do your reading: Mr. Goldstein will insist on specific passage references to back up interpretations.

### Proust Society of America

The sheer volume of Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" has made it one of the more formidable mountains of 20th-century literature. But there has been a revival of interest in the French writer; two recent popular books, "How Proust Can Change Your Life," by Alain de Botton, and "The Year of Reading Proust," by Phyllis Rose, made a case for reading Proust today.

Why Proust and why now? It may be a reaction to the literary minimalism of the last several decades, suggested Harold Augenbraum, director of the Mercantile Library and the leader of a monthly reading group run by the Proust Society of America.

At its current pace of 50 to 150 pages a session, the group will take two to three years to get through the work. In addition to running the reading group, the society publishes a newsletter and sponsors periodic lectures.

### Jane Austen Society

Pity the members of the Jane Austen Society of North America. They are among the most passionate of devotees, but they have only six novels and the author's minor writings to read. To compensate, the New York chapter newsletter features a column called "What to Read When You Are Not Reading Jane Austen," which addresses fiction by her contemporaries, or even reviews of such moderns as Anita Brookner, who might be thought to write in Austen's spirit.

A recent meeting of the monthly book group discussed Ms. Brookner's "Hotel du Lac" and asked if its protagonist was "a Jane Austen heroine gone wrong." But even Catalina Hannan, who led the discussion, acknowledged that if the group is discussing a non-Austen work, "I don't want them to complain that Jane Austen didn't write it." Measuring other writers against Austen, Miss Hannan said, is "pointless because we consider her the best."

### Shakespeare Society

It's surprising that one of the longest-standing masters has given rise to the newest New York group devoted to a single author's works. The Shakespeare Society is barely a year old, but it has already run several symposiums and organized reading groups in and around New York. The founders, Nancy Becker and Adriana Mnuchin, looked around and saw literary groups devoted to other writers, and were surprised to discover that while there were plenty of academic groups devoted to Shakespeare, there were none for people who simply loved the plays. Mrs. Becker and her husband had already started one cultural group, the Beethoven Society, so the two women started work on another.

The Shakespeare Society has almost 500 members and several reading groups under way. Mrs. Mnuchin, who has a background in chain-store retailing, would like to see "a web" of chapters throughout the country. Among the goals of the group is to run workshops for educators in order to improve the teaching of Shakespeare in high schools and elementary schools.

### Dickens Fellowship

The Dickens Fellowship of New York began in 1905, but it almost didn't make it into the 90's. When Rose Roberts, the current president, joined eight years ago, the organization was foundering and at one point the membership was down to three. Ms. Roberts, who was once a professional ballroom dancer and now owns a Manhattan travel agency, has been largely responsible for reviving the group.

The society holds a monthly discussion that addresses a different Dickens work each year; last year, members read "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," and they are about to undertake "Bleak House."

A highlight of the discussions is the rhymed couplets by Morton Jacober, the group's "poet laureate." Members joke about their fanatical devotion to Dickens and describe themselves as "nuts" about him. As Mr. Jacober wrote in a birthday salute:

Now salute our author so divine,

Ever to be a rare vintage wine.

So keep reading Dickens to the end,

He is indeed Our Mutual Friend.

### Sherlock Holmes Groups

The many groups of Sherlockians, as they call themselves, are ultimately descended from the Baker Street Irregulars, the club founded by the novelist and essayist Christopher Morley in 1934. There are several in New York City and its suburbs. One group, the Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes, developed out of a 1968 picketing of the annual Baker Street Irregulars dinner to protest

its men-only policy. Women have since been admitted to the Irregulars, and there are a couple of men in the Adventuresses.

The different clubs often hold joint events, like a spring reading.

The Victorian detective continues to fascinate because the stories by his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "don't pall on rereading," says the Adventuresses co-founder, Evelyn A. Herzog. As much as the stories themselves, Sherlockians seem to enjoy one another's company, along with pseudo-scholarly wordplay and ritual.

"Who you are in the world is not immensely important," Ms. Herzog said. "It's how funny you are, how witty you are, how good you are at making up songs in short order. It's a nice step away from the real world."

### Bernard Shaw Society

Every theater season seems to bring at least one play by George Bernard Shaw to New York. The plays remain popular because "he was so far ahead of his time that contemporary society is just now beginning to deal with the subjects he tackled," said Rhoda Nathan, president of the Bernard Shaw Society and a professor of English at Hofstra University.

His play "Getting Married," she noted, treats open marriage, prenuptial contracts and lesbian motherhood.

"He is the most far-seeing and the most revolutionary of playwrights," she added.

While the society does not have reading groups at this time, it has several public events each year, including lectures and symposiums by prominent Shaw scholars, actors and directors.

### Mark Twain Circle

Just about every organization, literary or otherwise, seems to go through periods of dormancy or inactivity, which, with any luck, are followed by reinvigoration. Peter Salwen, a public relations executive and author, is trying to bring about that kind of revival with the Mark Twain Circle of New York. Formerly known as the Mark Twain Association of New York, the group was established in 1926 by a New York City public school teacher to study the humorist's writings and his New York associations. (It managed to create at least one New York association of its own: at a luncheon in 1958, Hal Holbrook first presented his one-man show "Mark Twain Tonight.")

In recent years, the group's membership dwindled as the average age increased; when the longtime president died two years ago, the organization threatened to fade away completely.

Mr. Salwen organized a brunch at Pete's Tavern in Manhattan over the summer for anyone interested in reviving the group, and more than 50 people showed up.

## W. B. Yeats Society

When Andrew McGowan, a public service announcement producer, stopped by the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, Ireland, he thought he was simply doing research for a history-based play. When it was suggested that someone ought to organize a group in New York dedicated to the Irish poet, he took up the challenge.

Ever since the group's first meeting on Yeats's birthday in 1990, Mr. McGowan has been the president and moving force. The W. B. Yeats Society of New York organizes readings and lectures, often with other literary groups, including the James Joyce Society and the Bernard Shaw Society.

The club also helps promote interest in the annual Yeats Summer School, which sometimes has unintended results. When Hillary Harrow attended the school a few summers ago, she met Declan Kiely, an Englishman who was writing a dissertation on Yeats. The two are now married.

Who says poetry can't change your life?

## C. S. Lewis Society

There are many paths that lead people to C. S. Lewis, and most of them contain a spiritual component. But the Oxford don, who wrote prolifically on Christianity and spirituality, also wrote scholarly literary works and science fiction and fantasy.

"His achievement as a man of letters is as great as any in the English language in the last 300 years," said James Como, a professor of speech communication at York College in Queens and the author of "Branches to Heaven: The Geniuses of C. S. Lewis," a recently published study.

Mr. Como, one of the founders of the New York C. S. Lewis Society 30 years ago, likes to point out that contrary to Lewis's popular image as a stodgy academic, he was in the midst of reading "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" when he died in 1963.

Several members of the society joked that they were wary of joining a "cult," when they first came to the group, but Mr. Como said that when one member suggested beginning the monthly meetings with a reading from Scripture, he was roundly hooted down.

## New York Browning Society

Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were among the most popular poets of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For some poetry aficionados, the attraction has never faded. "The draw is the incredible fusion between their real lives and artistic lives," said Mr. Griffiths, the vice president of the New York Browning Society.

"It's an absolutely magnificent love story that never could have been invented."

As for Robert Browning's poetry, it presents a series of psychological puzzles that continue to fascinate readers, said Glen Al Omans, the society's president.

The group holds monthly meetings, which are always followed by tea.

It also sponsors an annual poetry contest for high school students in New York City.

### Betsy-Tacy Society

What do Anna Quindlen and Bette Midler have in common? They are both devoted readers of the Betsy-Tacy books, a young adult series that chronicles the lives of two young women growing up in a Minnesota town at the turn of the century. The 10 books, by Maud Hart Lovelace, follow Betsy Ray and Tacy Kelly from girlhood through marriage; though the series has not attracted the following of "Anne of Green Gables," its fans are equally devoted.

Just what is it that attracts grown-up professional women to gather together to discuss the books? Many were originally struck by the fact that they featured female characters with professional ambitions that their families supported.

Betsy eventually becomes a writer, and her older sister Julia, an opera singer.

"There was not only a wonderful family, a wonderful town; they get to pursue their destiny," said Andrea Shaw, a writer and one of the original members of the New York chapter of the society.

Perhaps that's why the subject of Ms. Quindlen's 1993 address to the Twin Cities Betsy-Tacy Society was "Betsy Ray, Feminist Icon." The society was also formed in part "to facilitate friendships and communication between Lovelace fans of all ages."

Which is hardly a surprise since "what the books do is celebrate friendship," Ms. Shaw said.

### The Wolfe Pack

It took some doing and a bit of imagination, but the fans of Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout's corpulent, orchid-raising gourmet detective, now have a plaque to commemorate the sleuth's probable Manhattan residence at 454 West 35th Street. The books place the fictional detective's brownstone at various spots along the street; some of the addresses given would put it in the Hudson River.

None of this troubles members of the Wolfe Pack, a club of Nero Wolfe enthusiasts that celebrated its 20th anniversary last year.

In the world of armchair detectives, Wolfe truly deserves the name: he rarely leaves home to solve a crime, usually delegating the gumshoe work to his assistant, the dashing Archie Goodwin.

Even his devoted fans make no brief for Rex Stout's plotting. Instead they read him for "unparalleled characterizations and subtle humor," said Jonathan Levine, the group's treasurer.

The club has four major events a year, including the Shad Roe Dinner and the Black Orchid Banquet. Every two months, there is also a dinner and discussion group centered on a book in the series.

### If Reading Great Books Is Your Obsession, You Are Not Alone

Here is information on the groups mentioned in the article on literary societies.

AMERICAN FRIENDS OF JAMES JOYCE. Contact: Gerry O'Beirne, (212) 372-1394. Fax: (212) 372-8394. E-mail address: [gobeirn@ggk.com](mailto:gobeirn@ggk.com). Annual membership, \$35. Meetings, second Thursday of each month, 8:30 A.M., American Express Tax and Business Services, 1185 Avenue of the Americas, near 47th Street, fourth-floor boardroom.

JAMES JOYCE SOCIETY. Contact: Sidney Feshbach, (413) 549-6470. Annual membership, \$12.50. Next meeting, Feb. 17, 7:30 P.M., at the Gotham Book Mart, 41 West 47th Street, Manhattan.

FINNEGANS WAKE SOCIETY OF NEW YORK. Contact: Murray J. Gross, 178 Spring Street, SoHo, (212) 226-8903. Fax: (212) 226-0996. E-mail: [grossm@idt.net](mailto:grossm@idt.net). Meetings, fourth Wednesday of each month, 6 to 8 P.M., at the Gotham Book Mart, 41 West 47th Street, Manhattan; donation, \$2.

PROUST SOCIETY OF AMERICA, care of the Mercantile Library, 17 East 47th Street, Manhattan, (212) 755-6710. Annual membership, \$15. Meetings, third Thursday of each month, 5:30 to 7 P.M., in the library's Reading Room.

JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA. Contact: Catalina Hannan, New York regional coordinator, (914) 967-6756. Next meeting, Feb. 27, 2 P.M., at the Grolier Club, 47 East 60th Street, Manhattan.

SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY. Contact: (212) 327-3399; E-mail address: [bard@shakespearesociety.org](mailto:bard@shakespearesociety.org); Web site: [www.shakespearesociety.org](http://www.shakespearesociety.org). Next meeting, March 8, 6 to 7:30 P.M., at Florence Gould Hall, 55 East 59th Street, Manhattan. All activities, including reading groups, require membership in the society, which begins at \$50 for students, \$150 for individuals and \$275 for couples.

DICKENS FELLOWSHIP OF NEW YORK. Contact: Rose Roberts, (212) 371-9306. Next meeting, March 6, 1 to 4 P.M., at the New York Public Library, Yorkville Branch, 222 East 79th Street, Manhattan. Luncheon celebrating Dickens's birthday, Feb. 6, 1 P.M., at Ye Waverly Inn, 16 Bank Street, Greenwich Village, \$23.50; reservations through Dickens Fellowship.



SHERLOCK HOLMES. Contact: Priory Scholars, William Nadel, 235 West 71st Street, New York, N.Y. 10023; Montague Street Lodgers of Brooklyn, Thom Utecht, 1676 East 55th Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11234. There are many other societies devoted to Sherlock Holmes in the New York metropolitan area. For a complete list, including groups like the Adventuresses, there is the Sherlocktron Web site at <http://members.home.net/sherlock1/Sherlocktron.html>.

BERNARD SHAW SOCIETY, P.O. Box 1159, Madison Square Station, New York, N.Y. 10159-1159. Next meeting, March 12, 8 P.M., at the American Irish Historical Society, 991 Fifth Avenue, at 80th Street.

MARK TWAIN CIRCLE OF NEW YORK. Contact: Peter Salwen, (212) 242 5546; E-mail: [twaincircle@salwen.com](mailto:twaincircle@salwen.com).

W. B. YEATS SOCIETY OF NEW YORK, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York, N.Y. 10003.; (212) 780-0605. Web site: [www.panix.com/wlinden/yeats.shtml](http://www.panix.com/wlinden/yeats.shtml). The critic Helen Vendler will speak on "The Wild Swans at Coole," Feb. 25, 6 P.M., at the National Arts Club.

NEW YORK BROWNING SOCIETY. Contact: Glen Al Omans, (215) 848-8472. Meetings, second Wednesday of each month, 1 P.M., at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 7 West 55th Street entrance. The next meeting, on Feb. 10, will focus on Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Linda M. Lewis, a professor at Bethany College who has written a book on her, will speak.

NEW YORK C. S. LEWIS SOCIETY. Meetings, second Friday of each month, 7:45 P.M., parish house of the Church of the Ascension, 12 West 11th Street, Greenwich Village. Annual membership, \$10; nonmembers welcome at meetings. Contact: Clara Sarrocco, 84-23 77th Avenue, Glendale, Queens, N.Y. 11385.

BETSY-TACY SOCIETY. Contact: Beth Sutinis, 229 Hudson Street, No. 2, New York, N.Y. 10013. Next meeting, Feb. 22; the group will discuss "Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill."

WOLFE PACK, P.O. Box 822, Ansonia Station, New York, N.Y. 10023. Next meeting, March 15, 7 P.M., at Jackson Hole restaurant, 521 Third Avenue, at 35th Street, Manhattan.

Photo: The Jane Austen Society, on its annual picnic, at the Morris-Jumel Mansion. (Dith Pran/The New York Times)(pg. E35); A re-creation of the Christ-mas dinner scene in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" during a Bloomsday celebration in Boston last June. In New York, there are three Joyce literary groups that enthusiasts can join. (Evan Richman for The New York Times)(pg. E42)

