BOOK DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR WOMEN AGE 65 AND OVER

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Fighting the cold January weather, their cheeks flushed from the wind, the women enter the library and slide their hats and mittens into their pockets. Moving toward the small conference room, they talk with each other about their holidays, doctor’s appointments, children, grandchildren, their latest restaurant dinner, and whether or not they have finished the evening’s book on time. They are retired teachers and other older women with The Invention of Wings tucked under one arm; though they all share the same age group, each has her own motivation and reason for attending the monthly book discussion group. After everyone has served herself coffee and dessert, they sit down and patiently wait for the librarian to start the discussion group. “All right, ladies, what did you think of the Grimke sisters?” the librarian asks. The next hour is filled with discussions about slavery, sisters, family relationships, the nineteenth century, women’s rights, and southern versus northern politics, as each woman in turn describes her response to the book.

Braving the elements to discuss responses to reading (and not to satisfy the requirements for a course) is not uncommon for women, even in this day of internet responses to reading. Quite the contrary, on any given evening in small towns and in large cities, groups of women meet to intelligently, thoughtfully, and informally discuss what they have been reading. Created and/or facilitated by friends, co-workers, teachers, librarians, and even television celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, their discussion groups meet in a variety of venues, including churches, nursing facilities, members’ homes, restaurants, community centers, and public libraries.
Public libraries are one of the more common venues for book discussion groups. The book discussion groups not only complement a library’s mission, they also offer it an opportunity to strengthen its programming and, consequently, its role in the life of the community it serves. Challenged by losses of state funding and changes in people’s perception of public libraries owing to home computer use, the Internet, and handheld technologies, public library managers are seeking to redefine themselves and their relationship to their patrons. They know that long gone are the days when a library could count on its reputation only as a place from which one could borrow books. Libraries are now purveyors of services that include media other than print and programs devoted to topics other than books. Librarians and staff are eager to contribute to community outreach by providing library-related information and technological services.

For the most part, emphasis on library programming has been directed toward children, teenagers, and adults in general. However, with many baby boomers entering their retirement years, it would behoove libraries to look more closely into programs for seniors. By making a concerted effort to develop more programs for older adults, public libraries can strengthen their connections with seniors, making them stakeholders in library goals and activities, thereby increasing their interest and attendance and increasing the likelihood of their support for future levies. In this endeavor, book discussion groups can play an important role. As Ronald Wolf, who examined leisure-time reading behaviors of elderly persons, has found, reading gives older adults a way to satisfy their curiosity, relax, adapt to social changes, and talk with others (16-17). When geared to the interests and needs of certain cohorts, older women, for example, book discussion groups can provide an outlet for patrons to express their opinions freely about books and, consequently, about their lives.
Many questions come to mind when one organizes and structures a book discussion group. What compels older women to join a book discussion group? What makes them so devoted in their attendance and commitment? What constitutes a well-organized meeting for them? In what ways can older women be encouraged to share their reading experiences in a book discussion group setting? Running a successful group can be challenging, despite guidance available online and in the suggestions increasingly available in books themselves. This is especially true for focused groups such as senior women. In an effort to answer the questions posed above, the present study was designed to develop and propose what could be considered “best practices” for book discussion groups for women age 65 and over. On the basis of extensive reading about book discussion groups and their history, a survey created and administered to women in that age group, an analysis of their responses, and additional in-depth interviews with some of the women, a set of guidelines for best practices was constructed. It is hoped that those guidelines will provide a planning tool for public librarians and other facilitators when they organize new book discussion groups or work to improve existing ones.

It is important to stress that the history of book discussion groups was instrumental in devising some of the questions asked on the survey, because past practices can provide an anchor from which one can navigate in new directions. In order to think about and plan creatively for best practices in the present, it is important to know how groups have satisfied the social and intellectual needs—in this case, those of women—in the past.
CHAPTER ONE

Book Discussion Groups in an Historical Context

Women have participated in book discussion groups for centuries. During the Middle Ages, for example, the rate of illiteracy was high and, as Alberto Manguel explains, in some homes “books were read aloud to family and friends for instruction as well as for entertainment” (117). One of the groups Manguel describes is found in the Gospels of the Distaffs, which dates from the fifteenth century and involves an early discussion group that included women only. A learned man visits an elderly lady whose neighbors congregate at her home in the evenings. There he acts as recorder and narrator while the women spin their wool and talk about “certain passages on the sexes, love affairs, marital relationships, superstitions and local customs” from the point of view of the female (Manguel 117). Over a period of several days, the women read their chapters, while they “interrupt, comment, object and explain, and seem to enjoy themselves immensely” (Manguel 119). Though he recorded the women’s words as requested, the learned man cannot help but notice the differences between the informality of these recorded women’s discussions and the more formal discussions held by men (Manguel 119).

In fact, the formal literary and reading societies discussing books by the late eighteenth century were, for the most part, comprised of men (Sedo, Reading Communities 3). However, an exception was the Bluestocking network in Great Britain, led by Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey, and Frances Boscawen, whose gatherings started in the 1750s but became most influential in the 1770s (Schellenberg 25). Rather than playing cards during their soirees, the
Bluestockings discussed current publications and translations of history, poetry, and religious issues among themselves and with gentlemen who were invited (Schellenberg 25). When parted by circumstances and distance, many of the Bluestocking women corresponded with each other, sharing their reading preferences and opinions of literature. For example, over a span of fifty-five years, the letters of sister correspondents Elizabeth Robinson Montagu and Sarah Robinson Scott described the world of reading and writing during the late eighteenth century (Schellenberg 27).

By the middle of the nineteenth century in Great Britain, reading groups specialized and dedicated themselves to following certain authors’ books, such as Shakespeare and Browning, or targeting particular audiences, such as women’s prison groups or emigrants who were on-board ship to specific countries (Hartley, “Nineteenth Century,” 45). Advice manuals aimed at teenage girls also became very popular (Flint 71). A working-class woman was encouraged to attend reading circles or clubs to help “apportion and direct her time” to be used beneficially (Flint 107). According to feminist lecturer Emily Davies, the women who joined reading or essay societies could use their memberships to show justification in being allowed some quiet time of their own (Flint 107). In a lecture by the novelist Edna Lyall, as described by Kate Flint, certain rules had to be followed, such as “that members should read for half an hour a day, in sessions as long as ten minutes at a time; that fiction and newspapers are excluded from this” (107). The most famous of these self-help reading groups for working-class women was the National Home Reading Union (NHRU), the intention of which was to help continue education after formal schooling had finished for women who had not yet married or were not in a situation where they had to be employed (Flint 107).

The National Home Reading Union was established in 1889 by John Brown Paton “to improve popular reading through the formation of local reading circles” (Snape 60). Members of
reading circles were advised to read the same book so as to maximize the effectiveness of the group discussions, and those who completed reading lists were issued certificates “signed by Princess Louise, the Union’s patron” (Snape 61). These groups met in public libraries, churches, and technical schools, but most often at members’ homes (Snape 63). Procedural suggestions by Miss M.C. Mondy, secretary of the NHRU, were that the first meeting should be in the form of a lecture, but subsequent meetings “should open with singing, followed by a discussion of that week’s reading, with members quizzed as to whether they gained any new ideas from what they read; if anything had surprised them, and what passages they had liked best and why” (Flint 108). Often, part of the activities at other meetings was to read aloud (Flint 109). At the height of the National Home Reading Union’s popularity in 1912, it was estimated that there were 70,000 members; however, enrollment dwindled after the death of the founder in 1911, and the organization became defunct in 1930 (Snape 64).

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, writer Lady John Manners suggested that ladies’ waiting rooms at train stations be equipped with reading materials and comfortably furnished so that young working women had access to the materials (Flint 110). Some of her suggested readings included Miss Nightingale’s Notes on Nursing, Lady Baker’s Friendly Words for Our Girls, Mrs. W.H. Wigley’s Thoughts for Young Women in Business, Nisbet’s Letters to Young Women in Mills and Factories, and Jane Tytler’s Common-Sense for Housemaids (Flint 110). Also, to encourage the continuing education of working women, author and lecturer Marianne Farningham helped to create a library and held evening meetings for working-class women from various factories in Nottingham (Flint 111).

While educated members of societies and clubs in Europe first included the wealthy upper class and gradually began to involve the working classes, white Colonial Americans
cultivated a different attitude in regard to education, in that, by the early eighteenth century, they “saw knowledge as the property of all, rather than a select few” (Gere 33). Americans were more inclined to informally educate themselves rather than wait for formalized institutions to initiate their education (Gere 33). Out of this desire for knowledge grew self-improvement societies and young men’s associations through the Lyceum movement, an association popular in the first half of the nineteenth century, the main goals of which were to educate youths and to help disseminate useful information in application to domestic and useful purposes of life (Gere 35). The Lyceum movement promoted the education of adult Americans through lectures and debates, and “it provided a mechanism for inspiration and influence” (Ray 186). Young college men who belonged to literary societies on campus could also join these self-sponsored groups (Gere 36). These were self-education programs and mostly male, but women were able to attend the groups if accompanied by male relatives (Gere 37). The Lyceum movement gave way at the time of the Civil War to offshoots which included the continuation of improvement societies and the beginning of public lecture series (Gere 36). One of the largest groups to proliferate after the Civil War was the Chautauqua movement, which held both large assemblies and small study groups (Gere 36), and on which the National Home Reading Union was modeled (Snape 60). The Chautauqua movement began as informal summer seminars at Lake Chautauqua in New York; with its emphasis on self-improvement beyond formal schooling, it became a legacy to the twentieth-century idea of lifelong learning (Scott 391).

There were few changes in attitudes toward adult women’s education and self-improvement groups until the middle of the nineteenth century (Gere 37). Shifts in population by the mid-nineteenth century had spurred the creation of female academies to accommodate the large female population, examples of which were the Hartford Female Academy, founded in
1823, and the Mount Holyoke Academy, founded in 1837, where curriculum included instruction in music, art, and domestic arts (Gere 39). Gere speculated that as the public became more accustomed to educated women, a natural transition in the acknowledgment of self-improvement groups for women became acceptable; this led to a growth of women’s clubs in the latter part of the nineteenth century (40). These literary societies and clubs “provided one of the few socially acceptable alternatives to domestic isolation” (Gere 41). One such women’s group, Sorosis, was founded in New York City in 1868 by journalist Jane Cunningham Croly, whose desire was to improve women’s status in society; the group concentrated on personal growth and self-help issues rather than women’s suffrage (Gere 42). Meetings were often modeled after the more formal literary societies affiliated with churches and universities (Sedo, Reading Communities 5). Another group founded in 1868 was the New England’s Women’s Club, and the establishment of other groups followed (Gere 42). One of the oldest African-American reading groups, the Aurora Reading Club, which was created to promote literacy for black women, was founded in 1894 and is still in existence (Jack 260).

According to Dr. Elizabeth Long, who studied white women’s reading groups primarily based in Houston, Texas, pivotal changes came about after the Civil War which led to the development of literary societies (36). One change was the separation of home and industry so that middle-class women managed the homes while men managed the business sector (Long, Book Clubs 36). With more leisure time than before the war, women, confined to home management, joined literary clubs to be “part of a broader world” (Long, Book Clubs 36). Because so many of the academies that were popular in the early part of the century had closed, many women found themselves wanting to learn more, and the “literary club offered the possibility of lifelong learning” (Long, Book Clubs 36). During this period of time, women
assumed responsibility in preserving the best in high culture; current authors such as Dickens were glamorized in American culture, while authors such as Shakespeare became “sacred” (Long, Book Clubs 37). There was a large thrust to build theatres, museums, and concert halls in cities across the United States, which meant that high culture slowly became the “property of the wealthy and well educated” (Long, Book Clubs 37). As Long explains,

The construction of late-nineteenth-century high culture that served nationalism, individualism, and the cultural authority of the upper classes also provided an opportunity for women to build on their supposedly “instinctual” affinity with the aesthetic realm. By appropriating high culture with the systematic discipline and seriousness that is required of its acolytes, they could also appropriate its cultural authority. (38)

Mottos of women’s literary societies became symbolic and uplifting, such as “Step by step we gain the heights,” and “Neglect not the gift that is in thee,” which inspired women and helped them gain a “strong sense of social mission” (Long, Book Clubs 38-39). By-laws for the societies included a club purpose, officers, membership requirements, election procedures, dues, and penalties or fines for absences or tardiness (Long, Book Clubs 39-40). Meetings followed parliamentary procedure, and the most important activity was a discussion of a book or topic whose selection was prompted by one of the members’ written reports (Long, Book Clubs 39). The group’s research skills and presentations of the papers provided intellectual stimulation for its members. There was a tendency to bar men from the meetings, but members sometimes allowed them to attend as guest speakers (Long, Book Clubs 40). Clubs concentrated on subjects which were deemed to fall under “women’s sphere of interest” and could be studied without the use of rare books, because there was a lack of public libraries at the time (Long, Book Clubs 41).

Not wanting solely to rely on the libraries of family and friends, many women’s literary groups
in Texas campaigned for the building of public libraries and were instrumental in their
construction at the end of the nineteenth century (Long, Book Clubs 42). In fact, women’s clubs
were instrumental in establishing 75% of the public libraries in the nation (Long, Book Clubs
52). These women’s groups advocated for certain causes, campaigned for them, and achieved
many of their goals, reaping the benefits of working together.

Topics on history, literature, or the fine arts helped quench women’s thirst for knowledge
at the literary club programs; domestic arts topics were sometimes included, but topics such as
mathematics and classical languages generally were not (Long, Book Clubs 43). The minutes, for
example, of the Ladies Reading Club from 1901-1902 covered American literature from the
Colonial Period, the Revolutionary Period and the Constitutional Period progressively during its
yearly meetings (Long, Book Clubs 43). The role of women’s names was called at the beginning
of the meeting, to which they had to respond or comment on a current event or domestic incident
(Long, Book Clubs 44). Speaking to the group helped foster self-confidence and cooperation
among members. Once subjects or authors were read, members debated the themes and
characters they had studied. Members of the groups became knowledgeable, participated in
literary and scholarly discussion, and learned “to form opinions about the wider world and their
own place within it” (Long, Book Clubs 47). Their “meetings became a cherished event that
brought women out of the narrow round of their domestic concerns” (Long, Book Clubs 48).

While examining several Texas book groups in existence at the end of the nineteenth century,
Dr. Long found that “almost every club held at least one special meeting during the club year to
celebrate the fellowship of the reading club itself,” which demonstrated the members’ dedication
and enthusiasm toward their groups (Book Clubs 48). Long stated that the clubs enabled women
who had difficulty speaking in public to “find and value their own voices” (Book Clubs 48).
Members of the literary groups were mature middle-class women, usually segregated by race, with grown children and similar backgrounds (Long, *Book Clubs* 49).

What evolved for many of the literary groups in the first half of the twentieth century was a focus on less-formal group activities. Changes in society, particularly in the 1920s after the Great War, were redefining America from a culture of character to a culture of personality, as described by Dr. Matthew Hedstrom:

Central to the culture of character … were notions of duty, work, honor, reputation, self-sacrifice, morals, and manhood; the twentieth century culture of personality, in contrast, described itself with adjectives, not nouns, including terms such as magnetic, masterful, creative, dominant, and glowing. (47)

The early twentieth century saw a constant tug-of-war between the two ideologies—changes often reflected in the publishing business. While still mourning the loss of the small nineteenth-century village life, publishing leaders saw the potential for marketing strategies, and “promoters of book weeks and book clubs made the consumer ethic a prevailing cultural norm” (Hedstrom 28). Frederick Melcher, the secretary of the National Association of Book Publishers and editor of *Publisher’s Weekly*, headed the successful 1919 Children’s Book Week campaign, and promoted the Religious Book Week from 1921 to 1927 (Hedstrom 28-29). He instituted The Newbery Medal in 1922, and the Caldecott Medal in 1937, both intended as marketing strategies for book promotions (Hedstrom 30). Because these campaigns promoted children and religion, they helped publishers rationalize their profession as “cultural work rather than simply commercial” (Hedstrom 31). Additionally, Hedstrom explained that “the promotion of religious reading fostered the development of communities among those reading the same books at the
same time, and publishers depended on those communities for further sales” (33). The Religious Book Club was created in 1927, modeled after the Book of the Month Club (Hedstrom 53).

The Book of the Month Club was created in 1926 as a direct mail service, building on the experience of the owner, Harry Scherman, with his direct mail business of the Little Leather Library (Lee 22). The Little Leather Library was made up of small leather-bound books of the classics that were placed in Whitman candy boxes, and sold as “The Library Package” (Lee 22). Successful at its inception, the enterprise eventually became too expensive as sales dwindled and leather prices rose. The experience, however, encouraged Scherman to explore different business avenues related to books, and his company began the direct mail order business of the Book of the Month Club, using the United States Postal Service and aiming for sales to populations who did not have close access to bookstores (Lee 26). Advertisements were placed in weekly book review sections and in magazines; solicitation and follow-up letters were also sent to prospective members (Lee 33). The Book of the Month Club soared from a circulation of 4,750 books in April to 12,000 in May in its first year; by December of the same year, circulation had risen to 46,539 (Lee 30). In 1927, the membership was at 60,058; it doubled in 1928 to 94,690, and by 1929 totaled 110,588 (Lee 30). The Club was able to maintain itself during the Depression years, and by the end of World War II in 1945, the total membership was 767,622 (Lee 31). By the end of the 1980s, the Club had 1.5 million members (Kaplan 62). Publishers profited from the Book of the Month Club, because as books were ordered for the club membership, there was an increase in the selected books sold in bookstores (Lee 32-33).

When the BOMC was first created, Scherman and then President of the Book of the Month Club, Robert Haas, set up the board of judges who chose the monthly selections: Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, William Allen White, Christopher Morley, and
Heywood Broun, who all carried a mix of culture, respect, and intellect while remaining unassuming (Lee 35). A foreign advisory board was also set up to select recommendations from European publications, but the committee disbanded at the beginning of World War II (Lee 36). Membership procedures were modified as time went on, and members were allowed to choose four books, or alternatives, per year, instead of twelve, alleviating the large cost of return postage (Lee 38). Other companies followed the success of the Book of the Month Club; by the end of the summer of 1928, the Literary Guild, the Religious Book Club, the Catholic Book Club, the Free Thought Book of the Month Club, the Crime Club, the Detective Story Club, the American Booksellers Association Book Selection, and the Book League of America all competed in the direct mail book business (Lee 38).

Statistics on the membership of the Book of the Month Club, at Lee’s publishing date, revealed that more women belonged to the clubs than men, club readers were more likely to be in their twenties and thirties, they were more likely to belong to upper income groups, and education was more influential than income (Lee 148). Three quarters of the membership were married, and 13% of the members were teachers (Lee 149).

Critics feared that standardization was created by the Book of the Month Club because of the judges’ selection decisions of books which thousands of members immediately bought (Lee 152). Lee felt that the Book of the Month Club “encouraged” a trend in the rising “standard of best sellers in fiction,” and helped “produce a great increase of interest … by the public in nonfiction” (Lee 156). Lee proclaimed that good books now have “a better chance of winning broad public acceptance than at any other time in modern history—and the BOMC has participated in this democratically basic educational development” (156). The Book of the Month Club’s appeal was to the middle-class or middlebrow reader. Highbrow culture appealed
to aesthetic and intellectual superiority, while lowbrow had come to be associated with the opposite in society. Joan Shelley Rubin, in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, believed that the term “middlebrow” was coined by Margaret Widdemer in a 1933 *Saturday Review* essay, where she described middlebrow readers as “men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares” (Madigan 81). The difficulties that The Book of the Month Club had when it was established in the 1920s included being accused of not allowing choice in reading material, that material was being essentially selected by a committee seen as elitist, and that the Book of the Month Club and other reading clubs of the time were denying people the right to choose what they wanted to read; “they were stereotyping taste” (Radway, “Scandal,” 712). In any case, the Book of the Month Club broadened its influence on book choice for middle-class Americans. It has enjoyed a history of success in the United States, and was recently consolidated with *The Literary Guild*; their combined membership is estimated at nine million (McGee 65).

**Book Discussion Groups 1960s to Present**

The various organized book clubs of the early twentieth century ushered in a new way to look at reading in groups; by the mid-1960s many of what were formal study clubs had dissolved (Sedo, *Reading Communities* 6). Many of the new book discussion groups consisted of women with similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds who lived in the same area and who were often at the same stage in life (Sedo, *Reading Communities* 6). Oprah Winfrey’s television show was responsible for moving book discussion groups into the mainstream culture again in the 1990s (Sedo, *Reading Communities* 6). Having worked in a bookstore in the early 1990s, author Rona Kaufman observed firsthand what effect the mention of a book on Oprah’s television show had in sales; if Oprah mentioned a title, customers would flock to the stores to
purchase the book (221). Oprah’s Book Club began in October 1996 with selections Oprah had chosen; she gave her readers one month to read the book (Kaufman 224). Her first selection was *The Deep End of the Ocean*. Publishers and booksellers were given advance notice of Oprah’s choices to help them cope with customer demands (Kaufman 224). Oprah asked readers to write about their experiences after reading the selected book, and chose four people who had written letters to attend a dinner interview in Chicago with her and the author (Kaufmann 224).

Most of Oprah’s selections became best sellers on the *New York Times* book list, including *The Deep End of the Ocean* (Jacquelyn Mitchard), *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* (Toni Morrison), *She’s Come Undone* (Wally Lamb), and *Heart of a Woman* (Maya Angelou) (Kaufman 224). Many women wrote to Oprah to tell her how they were affected by the book selections, and ratings were strong (Kaufman 224). In the United Kingdom, the Richard and Judy Book Club began in 2004 on the *Richard and Judy Show*. The selection of *The Jane Austen Book Club* by that club in 2005 contributed to book sales of 68 million pounds (Jack 283). The influence of both the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in the United States and the *Richard and Judy Show* in the United Kingdom helped develop a tremendous number of new book discussion groups (Jack 283). The Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders, which is an online service for book discussion groups in America, “recently estimated that there were 500,000 book groups with between 1 and 5 million members in America in 2002, twice as many as in 1994, before Oprah’s launch in the mass media” (Jack 283). *New York Times* writer James Atlas began his 2014 article stating that the question to be asked is: “What’s your book group reading? and not: Are you in a book group?” (SR11). Atlas estimates that there are currently five million Americans who belong to book discussion groups that meet once a month, and these groups can be organized by genre, location, gender, race, and age (SR11).
Monitoring the proliferation of book discussion groups at the beginning of the twenty-first century is quite daunting, since so many book discussion groups are informal and do not keep written records. It seems appropriate to record the opinions of women age 65 and over about their perceptions of and interest in book discussion group membership in order to increase the knowledge base about book discussion groups in the twenty-first century and to provide information for book discussion group organizers and facilitators.
CHAPTER TWO

Survey Construction and Distribution

The survey consisted of 41 questions. It was administered to participants from civic groups, church groups, all-female non-library groups, all-female library groups, and mixed gender non-library/library groups in Portage and Summit counties and Columbus, Ohio, between May and August 2014. Questions “1” through “17” asked the 145 respondents about their vital statistics, such as age, ethnicity, and marital status, retirement status, occupations (either current or before they retired), reading habits, preference of reading formats, computer use, library use, and book discussion group membership. If they did not belong to a book discussion group or had no desire to join one, the participants were finished with the survey after Question “17.”

Women who thought they might possibly join a book discussion group or already belonged to one (105 respondents) continued the survey to answer Questions “18” through “22,” in which they were asked about time preferences, age group preferences, transportation issues, and genre preferences. After Question “22,” those respondents who thought they might join a book discussion group but currently did not belong to one were finished with the survey.

Questions “23” through “41” were answered by women who belonged to book discussion groups (84 respondents). They included the 75 women surveyed in their book discussion groups as well as the nine women from the civic and church organizations who also belonged to a book discussion group. Questions were asked regarding the number of years they had belonged to a group, location, importance of the meetings, reasons for missing, how books are selected,
opinions on the most important aspects of their book discussion group meetings, preferences in
protagonists, online book discussion group participation, books read in successful and
unsuccessful book discussion group meetings, and what they personally gained by being in a
book discussion group.

The individual women who volunteered for the in-depth interviews were asked seven
questions about why former members might have left their book discussion groups, voting
selection preferences, comfort levels in expressing opinions, unsuccessful and successful book
discussions, and more details about what they gained by attending book discussion groups. In
addition, comments were recorded at meetings of current book discussion groups and community
organizations other than book discussion groups to determine what practices might influence
them to join a book discussion group. The information gathered from the individual interviews
and the above groups increased the range of observations and opinions of women age 65 and
over engaged in social, civic, or religious group activities, ensuring a more complete picture of
commonly-shared attitudes toward reading and book discussion group membership.

The 145 surveys were distributed to members of four civic groups, three church groups,
and fourteen book discussion groups, 21 groups in all. Three of the civic organizations were
located in Summit County, Ohio; one civic organization and all the church groups were located
in Portage County, Ohio. Nine of the book discussion groups were located in Summit County
and four were in Portage County. One book discussion group was located in Columbus, Ohio.
Three book discussion groups were not affiliated with a public library and met at members’
homes or at restaurants, with most members residing in Summit County, Portage County, and
Columbus. Contact was made with local librarians and/or directors for permission to attend their
groups. The non-library groups were contacted through one of their members who polled the
group to see if they would participate. Six in-depth interviews of participants were conducted:

four with women in library book discussion groups; one woman in a non-library book discussion group; and one woman in a civic organization, all of whom volunteered to discuss in more detail their thoughts on the survey and book discussion group membership.

The survey was administered to women age 65 and older. Although the American Library Association’s guidelines define older adults as people aged 55 and above (1), I chose 65 and above because of the distinction between middle adulthood (40-64) and that of older adulthood (65-74). As Barbara Bjorklund has explained, older adulthood (65 to 74) finds many people re-examining, re-evaluating, and adjusting their roles in life (366). For example, many women must deal with a loss of “work” role, a decreased “mother” role, an increased “grandmother” role, an increased “sibling” role, and possible changes to a “spousal” role (Bjorklund 367). Some of these changes continue into late adulthood (75 and older). Perhaps being a part of a civic, church, or book discussion group is an acquired role taken on by many women to balance the changing roles they are experiencing in these later stages of life.

Because direct observation of the groups within the context of their usual setting is an important component of qualitative research, I attended as many of the book discussion, church, and civic meetings as possible (Slavin 122). For the very few groups whose meetings I did not personally attend, surveys were distributed by a member of the group or local librarian via email, or hand-delivery, and were returned via U.S. mail, email, or in person. The most frequently used procedure to administer surveys consisted of my informal introduction to the group by an officer, librarian, or facilitator at the beginning of the meeting, followed by my explanation of the purpose of the survey, my request for volunteers with assurance that confidentiality would be guarded as covered by the research protocols of the University’s Institutional Review Board, my
observation of the meeting or book discussion group, and my administration of the survey at the completion of the group’s meeting/discussion. Most of the women were very enthusiastic about participating; they seemed delighted that they were being asked for their opinions. Most of the women answered each question in the survey; however, some skipped answers and left them blank.

Survey Results

The survey results have been divided into fourteen sections, according to topic.

Section I: Demographic Information

With respect to age, ethnicity, and marital status, the mean age was 74.93, with an age span ranging from 65 (six respondents) to 93 (two respondents). Three women stated that they were “over age 65,” while one person answered “80-plus.” As to ethnic background, 137 of the women who participated in the survey were Caucasian, six women were African-American, one woman was African American/American Indian, and one woman was a Pacific Islander. Eighty-three women were married, 19 were divorced, one had been divorced and then remarried, 33 were widowed, two were partnered, six were single, and one person left the answer about marital status blank. Those who marked “single” or “partnered” created a line for each of those categories and checked it because the categories were not originally listed on the survey.

Section II: Work History

Most of the women (131) responded that they were retired, while three respondents left this answer blank. Fourteen women indicated they were either still working, or had taken part-time jobs after retirement. Careers or part-time jobs for those still working included piano teacher, realtor (2), professional artist, business manager, professor, librarian, writer, purchasing executive, program assistant, travel agent/hairdresser, homemaker, chemist, and sales clerk. Of
those who had retired, the list of professions and jobs they formerly held included pharmaceutical representative, teacher, registered nurse, chemist, secretary, social worker, insurance agent, payroll clerk, auditor, business trainer, banker, journalist, tax preparer, housewife, mechanical design draftsman, community relations officer, administrative assistant, university professor, sales representative, baker, librarian, attorney, sales supervisor, office manager, government field representative, sales clerk, university administrator, human resource manager, office clerk, analyst, dental office assistant, supervisor, travel agent, hairdresser, manager of hospital laundry, executive administrator, medical secretary, court administrative scheduler, small business owner, transportation administrator, case manager, cook, psychologist, computer consultant, engineer, human resource manager, and information technology assistant.

Statistically, 29.7% of the respondents had been elementary school, high school, and university teachers. Those who had worked in office careers, such as office managers, clerks, secretaries, and administrative assistants, were the next highest category at 23.2%, and an additional 21.8% had worked in white-collar positions (office jobs requiring a degree). Nurses made up 4.2%, and social workers 3.5% of the respondents. Almost all of the women who responded had worked outside the home in a career, with only five women stating they had been housewives. Three respondents left the answer blank.

Section III: Reading Habits

Question “7” asked the women if they read for pleasure on a regular basis and, if so, how many books per month. Of the 129 respondents who answered yes, 33 responded that they read five or more books per month, 40 responded that they read three to five books per month, 28 responded that they read two books per month, and 28 responded that they read at least one book
per month. One person wrote in “0 per month.” Those who answered “No” to the question of reading books for pleasure left the number of books read per month blank (Question 8).

Question “9” asked for the preferred format when reading books, and the question caused some confusion for the respondents. Many of the women did not follow directions for this question; some wrote down “One” or “Two.” Many simply checked off answers and did not rank in preference “One” through “Four” as the directions stated. Over a third of the respondents simply put a check beside print books rather than listing four categories in the order of their preference. For the purpose of collecting data for this question, answers were not counted unless they were ranked “One” through “Four.” Of those who labeled the preferences in numerical order, 39 (67.2%) of the respondents had checked print books as first preference. Nine respondents (18%) selected large print books first, and seven respondents (14.9%) selected e-books first. Five respondents (11.9%) selected audio books as their first preference. Nineteen women (38%) marked large print as their second choice after print books, with 16 women (34%) marking e-books as their second choice after print books. The selection of large print books and e-books where print size can be adjusted may account for some of the high percentages in these categories, as visual challenges can be an issue in this age group. Cecil Smith, who examined the reading abilities of older adults, discussed visual changes as one ages: the lens of the eye changes, resulting in less light reaching the retina, affecting visual acuity—the ability to “discern fine details, such as small print” (419).

Section IV: Technology Use

In answer to Question “10,” “Are you familiar with the technology of e-readers?”, 80 respondents (57.6%) said they were familiar with the technology, 59 women (42.4%) said they were not, five women left the question blank, and one said she was not interested. Based on these
results, there appears to be a trend in the acceptance of some new reading technologies in this age group. The women in this study indicated they enjoy reading on their Kindles and iPads, and this may be a viable alternative in the future, especially for those library book discussion groups who may be limited by the number of books they can acquire for their members to read. Downloading books onto their e-readers can resolve this issue. Related to Question “10” was Question “11,” in which women were asked if they had access to computers at home. One hundred twenty-three women (84.8%) responded that they had access. Thirty-five women (24.6%) responded “Yes” to Question “12,” which asked if they used the computers at the library, while 107 women (75.4%) said they did not use them. Three women left this answer blank. It appears from the answers to these questions that most women in this age group have access to computers at home, and therefore are not dependent on using computers at the library. But 14 women who have access to computers at home also use the computers at the library, perhaps to reserve books or conduct research on the databases available on-site.

Section V: Public Library Use

The women in this study were asked how many times per month they went to the public library (Question 13) and if they knew that the public library has monthly book discussion groups (Question 14). Thirty-five of the respondents marked that they visit the library between three to five times per month, and 28 women responded that they visit the library more than five times per month. Twenty-nine women said they visit twice a month, 27 said they visit one time per month, seven said “0” times per month, and 17 people left the answer blank. One woman wrote that the library staff visits her assisted living unit once a month, and one woman wrote that the question didn’t apply to her. Members of civic and church organizations who also belonged to book discussion groups indicated they visit the library each month, but 22 respondents from
the civic and church organizations indicated they either never visit the library (5 respondents) or left the answer blank (17 respondents).

Most of the respondents who took the survey (118, or 84.3%) indicated they knew the public library offered monthly book discussion groups, while 22 said they were not aware that the library held them. Five women left the answer to this question blank. Fifteen percent of the respondents were unaware of the library book discussion groups; perhaps more advertising might effectively inform the public that book discussion group programs are offered.

Section VI: Book Discussion Group Participation and Interest

When asked if they had ever belonged to a book club and, if so, why they had stopped attending (Question 15), most of the respondents (108, or 78.3%) said no, they had never belonged to a book club and stopped attending. Seven respondents left the answer to this question blank. Of the 30 women who responded yes to the question, only 26 of the women indicated the reason they had stopped attending. The most frequent responses were that it took too much time to read the book (six), and that the books were not interesting (six). Other reasons, each with three responses, were that the club took up too much time, that the member lost interest, and that the member had moved. Additional responses included that the group had dissolved, or the group was too large and chaotic. One respondent indicated she left her group because one person monopolized the conversation, one respondent left for health reasons, and one respondent was too busy with other activities to attend regularly. One respondent said the discussions were not interesting, while another wrote that she “needed to get back into it.”

Extended interviews with several women supported the views expressed on the surveys. One woman said she knew two women in her group who had moved and therefore were no longer available to attend the book discussion groups. Another woman confirmed that the women
who left their book discussion group had to do so because they were ill, or because a family member had fallen ill. One woman interviewed said she dropped out of her group because it was not a “good fit,” that the other women in her group spent too much time discussing personal matters. This made her feel isolated, because her main goal for joining a group was to discuss the books. One woman changed groups because of location; when she found a book discussion group closer to her home, she joined it and discontinued attending the other. Another woman interviewed said that she knew of a woman who quit attending her book discussion group because the books that were chosen were not to her liking or were not very challenging. It appears that women who stop attending book discussion groups do so for important personal reasons.

Eighty-three respondents (58.5%) stated that they currently belong to a book discussion group, while 59 women (41.5%) said they did not (Question 16). Three women left the question blank. Nine women who were surveyed while in attendance at either the civic or church organizations completed the entire survey because they also belonged to a book discussion group.

Question “17,” “Would you consider joining a book club? If not, could you say why?”, seemed to cause some confusion. Some of the respondents who already belonged to a book discussion group asked how to answer the question and were told to leave it blank. Not all the women asked how they should respond, but there were 40 blank answers. All in all, 69 women (47.6%) said they would consider joining a book discussion group, while 36 women (24.8%) said no. Two women said they might consider it. It should be noted that of the 69 women who said they would consider joining a book discussion group, some may have meant joining another group in addition to their current group.
Only 33 women who responded “No” to joining a book discussion group responded to the second part of Question “17”—explaining why they were not interested. Eight women said they had no time to join, six women said they liked to select their own books, and four women said they were happy with the book discussion group they were in. One woman stated she might join a book discussion group if it were closer to her home and topically interesting. One woman stated that joining a book discussion group would be boring; another woman said she was too old. Two women said they could not join because they were taking classes; one woman said she spent her spare time taking care of an ill husband. One woman stated that she would rather read leisurely, and one woman stated that she preferred black authors. One woman said she was not interested, and another respondent said that possibly at this time it would be nice to join. One woman said she was still working, and so could not join a group. One of the interviewed women said that because of her age (93), she no longer read much. She said “I can’t retain the information the way I used to.”

At this point, those women who said they would not join a book discussion group were finished with the survey. The next five questions were addressed to women who continued the survey (105) because they said they would consider joining a book discussion group, or already belonged to a book discussion group.

Section VII – Logistics Related to Joining a Book Discussion Group

Question “18” asked respondents about the best time of day to schedule a book discussion group. Thirty-three women (32%) said evenings were best, 43 women (41.7%) preferred afternoons, and 12 women (11.7%) marked mornings. Three respondents indicated “mornings or afternoons”, and nine respondents indicated “afternoons or evenings.” Three respondents wrote “any time.”
Question “19” asked the participants if they preferred to join groups that included people their own age or a variety of ages, to which 89 respondents (84.8%) said they would prefer to have a variety of ages in their book discussion groups. Sixteen respondents (15.2%) said they preferred being with a book discussion group of people their own age.

Ninety-eight respondents (93.3%) said that transportation to book discussion groups was not a problem for them (Question 20). Seven respondents (6.7%) said that they experienced some difficulties: driving in the snow, or after dark, or not having access to a car (Question 21).

Section VIII: Reading Preferences

The next question (No. 22), “What types of books do you enjoy? Please rank your top favorite five categories with ‘One’ being the most important and ‘Five’ being the least,” caused some confusion. Many women (24) misunderstood this question and simply checked off their preferences without stating any rank. Of those who ranked their preferences, 30 women (42.9%) ranked fiction as their first choice, and 20 women (28.6%) ranked it second. Seventeen women (32.7%) ranked historical fiction first, and 12 women (23.1%) ranked it as their second choice. Sixteen women (32%) ranked mysteries as their first choice, and 15 women (30%) ranked mysteries as their second choice. Six women (13%) ranked nonfiction first, while eight women (17.4%) marked nonfiction as their second choice. Fourteen women (30.4%) and eleven women (23.9%) ranked nonfiction fourth and fifth. Biographies were four women’s first choice (2.8%), and eight women’s second choice (6.2%) in reading preferences. Three women (2.1%) ranked inspirational fiction first, while four women (2.8%) ranked it as their second choice.

The genres that were ranked most frequently by the highest number of respondents were fiction, historical fiction, mystery, and nonfiction.
At this point in the survey, the women who were considering joining a book discussion group were done with the survey. Only those respondents (84) who already belonged to a book discussion group continued the survey.

Section IX: Questions for Current Book Discussion Group Members

In regard to Question “23,” “How long have you belonged to your current book club?” the answers provided were in units of months or years, which needed to be changed to one consistent unit of measurement. For example, for those who had belonged to a book discussion group for less than a year, the number of months was converted, using .8 to represent one month (four months became .32). For women who were in two book discussion groups, the group in which they had participated for the most years was used. For those who answered with indefinite time frames over a large span of years, like “15 to 20 years,” the lower number was used. For one example, a person wrote “2-3” years, and 2.5 years was used. The answer “7 + years,” was rounded to 7 years.

The lengths of some of the women’s membership in a book discussion group were extraordinary. One woman had belonged to her book discussion group for 44 years; another woman had belonged for 40 years. Another participant had belonged to her book discussion group for 27 years, while yet another woman had belonged to her group for 20 years. As for the rest of the respondents, one woman had belonged to her group for 16 years, three women for 15 years, three women for 14 years, one woman for 13 years, two for 11 years, two for ten years, five for nine years, three for eight years, five for six years, four for five years, eleven for four years, four for three years, eight for two years, and 16 for less than two years. One woman wrote that she had belonged to her book discussion group “for a long time.” One woman indicated that she had belonged to one book discussion group for six years and another group for one year. The average length of book discussion group membership in this study was seven years. Fifty-four
survey respondents (64.4%) indicated they belonged to just one book discussion group. Ten women said they belonged to two groups, two women stated they belonged to three groups, and two women belonged to four groups (Question 24).

That one person had belonged to a group for 44 years and one for 40 years demonstrates the dedication of some book discussion group members. Fahima Haque, a reporter for the Washington Post, wrote about a group of women from Howard University whose group was founded in 1966 and who still meet from September to June each year at different members’ homes, expanding their group to include community service to promote youth literacy (B01).

As to the locations of their book discussion group meetings, 55 respondents stated that their book discussion groups meet at the library, and 13 respondents said they meet at members’ homes or at restaurants (Question 25). Three respondents said their group meets at church. One respondent stated the actual cities where her book group discussion meets. Most of the respondents (78.6%) said their book discussion groups meet once a month (Question 26). Variations to this pattern included meetings every five to six weeks, meetings that take place quarterly, and meetings that take place every other month. The advantage for book discussion groups meeting outside the library is that they can be more selective about their membership and generally are; these were most often friend-related or work-related groups. A public library book discussion group is always open to all ages, races, and genders. Library book discussion groups may be advantageous for those people who are interested in cultivating new and different contacts.

When asked in Question “27” about the importance of attending book discussion group meetings, 38 respondents (50.7%) felt that attending book group discussion was very important, 26 (34.7%) stated that it was important, 10 (13.3%) stated that it was somewhat important, and
no one stated that it was not that important. With regard to Questions “28” and “29” about attendance, five women said they never miss book group discussion, and two women said they rarely missed. Twenty-six respondents (39.4%) missed the group meetings once a year, 25 (37.9%) missed them twice a year, 11 (16.7%) missed them three to five times a year, and four (6.1%) missed book discussion group meetings more than five times a year. Three women stated that they only lived in their areas for six months of the year, which is why they had marked that they missed the meetings more than five times a year. The most common reasons for missing book discussion group meetings were vacation (24), followed by illness (19), schedule conflicts (8), weather (6), and other obligations (5).

When asked in Question “30” what was more important to them when joining a book discussion group, “being with a particular group of people” or “location and convenience,” 36 women stated that location and convenience were most important, while 23 women stated that being with a particular group of people was most important. For those respondents who chose “Other,” comments included “learning about new books to read,” “listening to a variety of opinions,” “meeting new people,” “reading various books,” and “talking about the book.” Except for one respondent, all thirteen members of the non-library groups agreed that being with a particular group of people was the most important consideration for joining a book discussion group. In groups that meet outside the public library, there appears to be a different type of “draw” to joining a book discussion group. The attraction to non-library groups may be that they can be more selective about membership and develop deeper ties with the same participants.

When asked in Question “31” how books were chosen in their book discussion groups, 31 respondents said that members vote on a selection of books, 26 stated said the librarian chose the books, and eight stated that a moderator selected the book and the group members took turns
being the moderator. The responses to this question had some similarities to those found by Dr. Elizabeth Long as she examined book selection in reading groups. Dr. Long found that there were four frequent methods to selecting books: 1) selecting a committee which examines and selects a list of books for several months in advance; 2) having the facilitator of the group describe several books while everyone comes to a consensus; 3) voting on a list of selections; and 4) placing the responsibility for selection on one member of the group, who becomes the rotating facilitator for that month’s discussion (“The Book,” 15-16).

An example of the first method listed above by Dr. Long is the Akron Summit County Public Library’s selection procedure, where staff at the main library and branches can make suggestions to a main library central committee, which then considers the recommendations along with their own, and makes book selections to be purchased in quantity specifically for book discussion groups. At some of the libraries in Portage County, I observed the librarian offering a selection of books to the group to discuss. A consensus was reached, an example of the second selection method on Long’s list. When the librarian distributes a list of book choices to the members of the book discussion group, who then vote on several selections, Long’s third selection method is being used. The groups who hold their meetings at homes or restaurants were more inclined to use the second method above, where a group member acts as facilitator during which a consensus is reached, or the fourth method, where one member chooses the book for the next month’s discussion and becomes the facilitator for that meeting.

Several of the women who were interviewed in depth felt that voting on the books to read was the most democratic way to select books. Another woman, whose group spanned the ages of 40 to 70, indicated her group allows each member to have a turn to select a book for the group to read, emphasizing that this created a diversity in their reading and selection of books, providing
titles which each member on her own would not necessarily choose. One woman who was interviewed suggested that books should be chosen by the decades in which they were written, or that more classics should be read; her main point was that too many “best sellers” were being read by her group, and they might not necessarily be the “best” books to read.

Question “32” gave respondents a choice of six answers that they were to rank “One” through “Four” in importance, with “One” being the most important aspect of book discussion group content. The answer “Reading books that I might otherwise have not chosen to read” was ranked by 49.2% of the women as their highest ranked response. Close behind at 43.5% was the second highest ranked answer, “Listening to everyone else’s opinion about the book.” There was a marked drop in the percentages for the other answers. “Talking about the book and sharing my thoughts” was ranked second by a number of respondents (36.5%), and “Hearing about the additional information that our librarian/facilitator gives us about the author and other books the author has written” was ranked fourth by an even larger percentage (39.5%), but neither answer was ranked high in the “first choice” position.

Section X: Perceptions of Self-Expression

Question “33,” which was designed to explore the willingness of each participant to express her own voice, had six parts, each of which the respondent was to answer “Yes” or “No.” The first part of the question was “My book club is the only group I belong to where I feel I can express my opinions.” In response, 48 women (78.7%) said no to the question while 13 (21.3%) said yes. Twenty-three left this question blank. Most of the women who were interviewed in depth said that this question did not apply to them, because they were members of other organizations as well as their book discussion groups and felt that they could express their opinions in all of the groups to which they belonged.
To the second part of Question “33,” “My book club is one of several community groups I belong to where I feel I can express my opinion,” 74.5% of the respondents answered yes. Of the 43 who listed the other groups to which they belonged, nine marked church groups, nine marked civic groups, and six marked hobby-themed groups (e.g. knitting club, ceramics club, bird club, art club, and national park volunteer) where they could express their opinions. Two people specified friendships as a “group” where they could express their opinions openly.

The third part of Question “33” was “I feel more comfortable expressing my opinion in a group of women than in a group of both men and women.” A majority of the respondents (70%) replied “No” to this question, while 30% replied that they were more comfortable voicing their opinions in a group of women, indicating that most of the women who were surveyed do not have a problem expressing themselves in mixed-gender groups. Similar to the survey responses to this portion of Question “33,” the women who were interviewed in depth had mixed feelings. One woman said she preferred all female groups because “men don’t value women’s opinions as much.” Another woman confirmed that she felt more comfortable voicing her opinions in a group of women rather than with men. One woman said she preferred to discuss topics with women in book discussion group because “guys are guys.” One woman said that because her book discussion group had been meeting for so long and had developed trust among its members, their conversations about family matters and personal issues might “not be open for discussion in a mixed group.” Another interviewee, though, stated that she never got upset when others expressed their opinions, regardless of gender. It is interesting to note that all of these women belong to all-female book discussion groups. When comparing the book discussion groups composed of both genders to those composed of only females, 15 of the mixed gender group members responded “No” to this question, with only one stating that she felt more comfortable
voicing opinions within an all-female group. This suggests that members of book discussion groups seek out the groups that make them feel most comfortable, whether that is all-female or mixed.

Regarding the three work-related or friend-related book discussion groups that meet outside the library who took the survey, one group consisted of both men and women. Of the eleven library-associated book discussion groups surveyed, four groups (36%) had male participants. In a survey done by Jenny Hartley in 1999-2000 on reading groups in many countries, results consistently showed that for all ages, 27% of reading groups were mixed gender (Reading Groups, 26). One might infer from these percentages that in the past decade it has become more common for men to join book discussion groups.

The fourth part of Question “33” was “It is very important to take turns speaking in book discussion groups, so everyone has a chance to express her opinion,” to which 52 women (84%) responded in affirmation, while 10 respondents (16%) said no. The fifth part of Question “33” was “I’d rather everyone had the opportunity to speak if and when I want to rather than being required to speak or having everyone speak in turns,” to which 50 respondents (83%) said “yes,” and 10 respondents (16%) said “no.” When the book discussion groups’ conversations during their meetings veered too off-track, I observed the facilitator, at an opportune moment, direct the conversations back on track to the book. This behavior related seamlessly to the sixth part of Question “33,” which was “Having a facilitator at the book club helps when participants get ‘off-track.’” Fifty-five respondents agreed with this statement, and five did not.

The last part of Question “33” was “I become annoyed if one person dominates the conversations,” to which 43 respondents (73%) said yes, and 16 respondents (27%) said no. One respondent said this does not happen in her group, one woman said it depends on what the person
Section XI: Preferences Related to Book Content

The most frequently checked answer to Question “34,” “In your book discussion group, do you read different genres of literature?” was “Yes, and I like this,” selected by 82.7% of the respondents. Twelve respondents (16%) checked that they read only one genre, and they liked this. One woman stated she read only one genre and did not like this. The women who read only one genre belonged to the two mystery book discussion groups and the cookbook discussion group in this study. It is possible the woman who was reading only one genre and did not like it may have the opportunity to diversify, or perhaps this is the only group whose time frame fits her schedule or is close to her home.

Question “35” asked the survey participants to check whether they had a preference for a younger man, older man, younger woman, or older woman as the protagonist of the book, or had no preference. Most women (98.6%) indicated they had no preference when it comes to reading books with either a male or female protagonist, or a younger or older protagonist. It is interesting to note that the next highest checked category was for a younger woman as the protagonist. This result seems to support statements made by writer Fay Weldon in her article “Writer of a Certain Age,” where she reflects that older women make up most of the market in fiction; however, they “like to identify with themselves when young and beautiful, when sexual power and adventures were for the taking and life was fun” (BR10).

Section XII: Online Activity

Questions “36” and “37” asked about participation in online discussion groups; 88.1% of the respondents said they did not belong to an online discussion group. Many women left the answer to this question blank. With regard to having an opportunity to join an online group,
70.2% said they would not join, four women said maybe, and one woman said she was not sure. Four respondents said they would not join because of time factors, three said it was too impersonal, and 18 said they liked the person-to-person contact of a face-to-face group. Seven women said they did not like to be on the computer that much, and two women indicated they did not have computers.

In response to Question “38” concerning how often respondents conducted online research used for book discussion group, 31 respondents (41.3%) said they did not research very often, 25 respondents (33.3%) said they never do online research, and 19 respondents (25%) said they conduct online research about the book or author after or while reading almost every book. These results could be related to the answers given by the respondents when asked about online discussion groups and whether or not they would join one. In this age group, it appears that there are many women who either prefer not to use or do not have access to computers.

Section XIII: Successful and Unsuccessful Titles

Respondents were asked to list a book read by their groups which had created a lively discussion (Question 39). The books listed were:

- Defending Jacob
- Keys of the Kingdom
- The Tender Bar
- Typhoid Mary
- If You Lived Here, I’d Know Your Name
- The Orphan Train
- Room
- Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
- Wind in the Willows
- Zeitoun
- Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter
- The Trees
- Prague Winter
- Seating Arrangements
- The Cashmere Shawl
- Light Between Oceans
- The Husband’s Secret
- The Book Thief
- I Am Milala
- Salads
- Language of Flowers
- Age of Miracles
- The Winter Palace
- Whistling in the Dark
- All - 2
- Blank - 18
Question “40” asked respondents to list a book recently read by their groups which had not lead to a successful discussion. Answers included:

- *The Color of Water*  Can’t Recall - 1
- *The Coal Black Horse*  Blank - 36
- *Return to Stoney Gap*  None - 7
- *Room*  Just joined - 1
- *Prague Winter*  Usually successful - 3
- *Seating Arrangements*  Never - 1
- *Age of Miracles*  Never lost for words - 1
- *Zookeeper’s Wife*  Usually successful - 3
- *Lemon Cake*  Usually successful - 3
- *Where’d You Go, Bernadette?*  Usually successful - 3
- *Chips and Dips*  Usually successful - 3
- *Wild*  Usually successful - 3
- *Killing Lincoln*  Usually successful - 3
- *Maude*  Usually successful - 3
- *Soul Survivor*  Usually successful - 3

For titles of books of successful discussions, 18 women left the write-in answer blank, while for titles of books of unsuccessful discussions, 36 women left the write-in answer blank. A total of 10 women wrote either that none of their group’s discussions were unsuccessful, or that the discussions were usually successful. Many of the women could not think of an unsuccessful book discussion.

Section XIV: The Significance of Book Discussion Group Membership

Question “41” asked the respondents, “What do you gain by being in a book club as opposed to reading on your own?” Twenty-four respondents stated that what they valued “hearing other points of view,” and that it was “interesting to hear others’ opinions,” supporting the second highest ranked answer in Question “32;” “Listening to everyone else’s opinion about the book.” Related to this, fourteen women stated that they gained “validation of their point of
view,” “insights and choices that they might not have considered,” “new perspectives,” “a better understanding of subject matter and content of book,” “a detail or getting a question answered that eluded them,” and “by seeing what others get from the book.” Supporting the findings in Question “32” for the highest ranked answer of book discussion group members during discussions, “Reading books I might not otherwise have chosen,” fourteen women valued “reading books I normally would not read,” and three gained “new information.” Nineteen women stated that they gained “making new friends of like mind,” “an opportunity to interact socially,” “sharing a love of books with people who like to read,” “friends, laughter,” “better friendships where we’re more accepting of differences,” “sharing with good friends,” “social contact,” “personal interaction,” and “companionship.”

One respondent who was interviewed said that she enjoyed “being exposed to other avid readers, knowing that many women were willing to expand their horizons rather than reading trivial literature.” She said book group discussions add “substance” to conversation. Another woman who was interviewed enjoyed the depth of understanding of the book by group members, and how everyone’s combined opinions gave one an overall view of the book and the writer. Two interviewed respondents loved the discussions engaged in by the book group members, and hearing opinions and input from other people. Another woman who was interviewed said the life experiences of those at the table often enhanced the discussions; for example, if one of the women had actually been to a place described in the book, she might expand on the description within the book and talk about her personal experiences in that place. These personal experiences, when related to the book, enhanced the discussion about the book for this respondent, and gave her some insight into the special interests of fellow book discussion group members.
Author DeNel Sedo, who studies reading communities, wrote that “in a book club environment, readers are able to satisfy their need to increase their knowledge, nurture their love of books, and share bonds of community” (“Predictions,” 11). Many of the responses to Question 41 by the women who were surveyed appear to support this observation about book discussion group membership.
CHAPTER THREE

Analysis of Survey Responses and List of Best Practices

Most of the women who took the survey were married or widowed, with a proportion of them divorced (13%). Six women were single, and two were partnered. Evidenced by their presence and participation in the surveyed groups, the women, regardless of age, ethnic background, or marital status, felt compelled to join an organization, increasing their time spent with other people. Cornwell, Laumann, and Schumm found, through the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project, that involvement with the community and civic engagement contributed to successful aging (187). They concluded that “people who have larger interpersonal social networks usually are more involved in voluntary associations and other groups that provide opportunity structures for establishing interpersonal relationships” (Cornwell, et al. 200).

In his time studies on the social connectedness of older adults, Benjamin Cornwell found that the average 70-year-old woman had five hours of social contact per day, compared to a 20-year-old woman, who had seven hours and 45 minutes of social contact per day (608). Cornwell also concluded that “retirement is positively associated with non-work social exposure for women” (614). The women who took this survey, who averaged 75 years of age and were, for the most part, in retirement status, appear to be actively increasing their hours of social contact. Robert Havighurst’s definition of activity theory appears to apply to this group of surveyed
women who manage “to stay active and resist the shrinkage of his or her social world” by increasing their time spent with others (Quadagno 50).

Capitalizing on this desire to establish interpersonal relationships, women age 65 and older seem to prefer face-to-face book discussion groups rather than online book discussion groups. These face-to-face groups can be traditional book discussion groups, or they may cater to a more specific population. For example, there may be groups that form in rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and nursing homes, or groups that may discuss one particular author, such as Shakespeare or even Stephen King. Book discussion groups can also be formed to discuss one book only, such as a Bible study group. Belinda Jack wrote of a group of Israeli women in Chicago who study and discuss Israeli authors in Hebrew in order to maintain their language skills (285).

Many women look forward to their face-to-face book discussion groups as a way to break out from their own daily routines. For example, in *Reading the Romance*, a 1984 study of women from a midwestern town (called Smithton for study purposes) who read romances, Dr. Janice Radway found that many of the women read to carve out a piece of time for only themselves apart from the day-to-day demands that their families or work expected of them (*Reading* 92). One respondent stated that she joined the book discussion group to learn something that would enrich her mind, and that being part of a group whose objective was a book discussion was a better experience than attending a senior center activity. She wrote, “I have more to talk about than grandchildren and cooking.”

Almost 60% of the women surveyed held positions as teachers (elementary, high school, and university), nurses, social workers, and office positions requiring a degree. Dr. Elizabeth Long wrote that most members of the white women’s reading groups she studied in Houston,
Texas, during the 1980s were college-educated, with some earning graduate degrees (“The Book,” 62). However, in this survey, not all of the women who took part were college-educated. Members without college degrees were included in the church groups, the civic groups, and the book discussion groups in Portage and Summit counties, and in Columbus, Ohio. One might infer from this information that since Long’s study was conducted in the 1980s, book discussion groups have become more popular to those without college educations. The women in this study who claimed careers as housewives were civic organization members and not members of the book discussion groups. Only five women categorized their profession as housewives, highlighting the social changes that have transpired over the last century for women. By viewing these survey results juxtaposed with the history of book discussion groups, one can see that women have advanced from a cultural norm of staying at home to that of working outside the home.

Almost 89% of the women surveyed said they read for pleasure on a regular basis. All of the women who said they did not read for pleasure belonged to the civic and church organizations, making it appear that reading may not be as high a priority for some of those group members. However, most of the women who belonged to the civic and church organizations did read for pleasure: 15 women in the civic and church groups read three to five books per month, nine women read five or more books per month, 13 women read two books per month, and 21 women read one book per month. Based on these results, the value and frequency of reading for pleasure appears to be high for most women age 65 and over.

Results indicated that at least 85% of the women surveyed do have access to computers. However, a number of women in this study (59) indicated they were not familiar with e-readers. Because some of the book choices in the book discussion groups were made contingent upon
having enough print copies, perhaps downloaded copies of the selected books can be made available on Kindles, iPads, or mobile devices, as long as the book discussion group member owns and/or knows how to use them. Teaching patrons how to use these devices is a current service provided by many public libraries. This service could be announced during the book discussion groups as well as at civic and church meetings. Advertising about this service may also alert members of book discussion groups who do not meet in the library about the opportunities to learn this technology.

Based on the survey results, most older women visit a public library at least once a month. Nine women (69%) who are members of book discussion groups that meet outside the library indicated they visited the library at least once a month; three of the members of non-library book discussion groups (24%) did not make library visits, and one woman in that group left the answer on the survey blank. Only seven respondents overall had marked “0” for the times they visited the library on a monthly basis. The frequency in visits to the library by this demographic certainly supports the consideration of further development of programs for women age 65 and over.

Twenty-two women said they were not aware that the library held book discussion groups. It is interesting to note that six of the 22 women were non-library book discussion group members (almost half of the non-library group members surveyed). The library advertises its book discussion groups on its websites, in newspapers, and in print material distributed to patrons and Friends of the Library. Perhaps managers of public libraries could reach out to other civic and church organizations to advertise their book discussion groups, since the majority of the women in this study who were unaware of the library’s book discussion groups were from the civic and church groups. Since the group of women who took this survey had a large
representation by retired teachers, office workers, or white collar workers, advertising on the staff bulletin boards of local elementary schools, high schools, local colleges, and corporate offices might attract some people to join a book discussion group. There are many reasons that groups of older women meet outside the library for book discussion groups, and the desire to change venues is not a priority for these individuals. However, there may be a few members of these non-library groups who might choose to attend a book discussion group at the public library as well as their non-library group if they were made aware of the meeting dates.

Based on the results of the study, women age 65 and over rarely quit book discussion groups and do so for very legitimate personal reasons. The most frequent reasons for leaving a book discussion group were that it took too much time or that the books were not interesting. When asked how often they missed meetings and for what reasons, 51 women (64.4%) said they missed one or two times a year. The most common reasons for missing book discussion group meetings were not frivolous: vacation, illness, schedule conflicts, other obligations, or weather. It appears that once an older woman joins a book discussion group, she is very loyal about her attendance. Eighty-five percent of the respondents stated that it was either “very important” or “important” for them to attend their book discussion group meetings.

The survey results indicate that the most important reason older women value their book discussion groups is because they are encouraged to read books they might not otherwise have chosen. The various methods of book selection, described by participants in this study, all contribute to the wide assortment of books read by members of the book discussion groups. The next highest ranked statement by older women is that they place a high value on “listening to everyone else’s opinion about the book.” Belenky et al. found that in the stage of “subjective knowing” women challenged the opinions of “authority,” but were also concerned about not
hurting the feelings of others; a priority was “sustaining connections” with others (84). Women in this stage recognize that others may disagree with them, but are “less concerned than men in persuading others to their point of view” (Belenky et al. 70). In the observed book discussion groups, women age 65 and over often demonstrated this stage of “subjective knowing,” in that they gave differing opinions about aspects of the book selections and “agreed to disagree” respectfully. They appeared to challenge the authority of ideas over a broad spectrum of human themes in relationship to the book, questioning moral dilemmas within the texts, while not questioning the right of another woman to have her own opinion. It is very important for them to hear what others have to say about the book. For some group members, this may provide validation; for other members, this may make them question their own conclusions or help them gain a different perspective on what they have read. Women are actively learning at their book discussion groups.

“Talking about the book and sharing my thoughts” was ranked as second choice by some of the women who took the survey. Women who belong to book discussion groups often are able to find their voices and learn to express an opinion on a subject without judgment directed at them, in the spirit of cooperation and equality. While doing so, the women are developing their critical analysis skills by examining the contents of the book and expressing an opinion about it. This is also described in Belenky et al.’s “subjective knowing” stage, in that responses are “an intuitive reaction—something experienced, not thought out, something felt rather than actively pursued or constructed,” where women express themselves in terms of what is comfortable to them (69). As the ability to express oneself in a book discussion group develops, it could lead to an increase in self-confidence for its members.
Older women enjoy reading a variety of genres in their book discussion groups. The exceptions are specific genre book discussion groups, such as the mystery groups, and the cookbook group, whose members have made a choice to read only one genre. Including all genres, ranked from most frequent to least, the women in this study preferred to read fiction, historical fiction, mysteries, nonfiction, romances, magazines, short stories, fantasies, science fiction and westerns (tied), and poetry, in that order.

Older women feel that taking turns in book discussion groups is the best approach for discussing the book. I observed women in book discussion groups both taking turns and successfully exercising the informal option to express their opinions conversationally in no particular order. For the groups in which members took turns to speak, the person discussing the book finished and acknowledged the person beside him or her that it was now time for that person to take a turn. For those book discussion groups which did not use formal turn-taking, the members voiced their opinions, and then someone else in the group either asked a question or continued with an opinion about the book. Women also prefer having a facilitator in the group to keep the discussion on track, even though, for the most part, there appears to be an inherent self-maintenance in the book discussion groups that allows all those who want to express their opinions to do so. If someone does not have a tendency to speak up, she at least gets a turn to do so in the turn-taking process.

Having a facilitator and taking turns are examples of establishing some consistency in the organization of a book discussion group. Meeting on the same day of the month, at the same time, and having a loosely structured plan for the way a book discussion group proceeds during its discussion hour appeared to be the norm for these groups.
Older women were able to name books that led to successful book discussions; even so, 18 women left the answer on the survey blank. Thirty-six women also left blank answers for books that led to unsuccessful book discussions. By the end of the survey, many of the women may not have wanted to take the time to think of a book leading to an unsuccessful discussion. There also seemed to be a hesitancy in writing about an unsuccessful book discussion group meetings, as if writing an answer might seem disloyal. It is interesting to note that *Room, Prague Winter, Seating Arrangements, The Age of Miracles,* and *Killing Lincoln* appeared on both the successful and unsuccessful book title lists. This seems to indicate that women in book discussion groups often have differing opinions about books which can lead to animated discussions, and that they may also have different definitions of what “successful” and “unsuccessful” discussions are. For example, if everyone in the book discussion group has the same opinion about a book, that they like it, and the discussion lasts just long enough (perhaps ten minutes) for each person to say why she liked the book, is this a successful or unsuccessful discussion? From observing many book discussion groups, it appears that the best discussions seem to happen when some of the group members like a book and some of them do not.

Alyson Rudd, a writer for the *London Times,* reported that being in a book discussion group “is ultimately all about shared experience” (18). When writing about what she had gained by being in a book discussion group, one respondent in the study compared the experience to that of watching a favorite television program. The fun came from discussing the program after it was viewed with friends to get their opinions of the episode. Rudd commented further that “book clubs are a cure for that sudden onset of depression…one feels upon finishing a captivating novel” (18). Instead, the opportunity to discuss it with other people is anticipatory.
Librarians and facilitators want to organize book discussion groups so the women who attend have positive experiences. Based on the results of the survey and in-depth interviews, and utilizing them as planning tools, the following are “best practices” librarians and facilitators may find useful in designing successful book discussion groups.

**Best Practices for Developing a Book Discussion Group**

**The book discussion group will benefit from a structured, consistent system for selecting books.** Each book discussion group should have a mechanism in place for selecting the books members wish to read, either by voting on a list created by the librarian/facilitator, reaching a consensus on suggestions made by the members, or taking turns within the group to act as the selector/facilitator, with each member selecting a book for the next meeting.

**The book discussion group can start by meeting once a month.** The women in the study were not asked if they were satisfied with a monthly meeting, but evidenced by the length of years they have been in book discussion groups, it seems likely that they have no problem with meeting monthly. For the most part, the non-library groups met in local restaurants or in members’ homes on a monthly basis as well. A few book discussion groups met every six weeks, every other month, or quarterly, but the most common time frame was monthly. This meeting schedule gives most of the group members time to read the book selection. It is possible that members can be polled at a later date to see if the schedule is working for them, at which time modifications can be made.

**The book discussion group can be scheduled in the evenings.** In Question “18,” respondents were asked to indicate the best times for book discussion group meetings. Thirty-three respondents chose evenings as the best time for meetings to take place. There were more women who chose the afternoons (43), but nine women marked “afternoons or evenings,” and
three marked “any time.” However, evenings are recommended because of the answers to Question “19,” in which the majority of respondents (85%) said they preferred a variety of ages in their group rather than being in a group of people their own age. It would be difficult to create a book discussion group with a variety of ages unless it was held in the evenings or on weekends when most working women could attend. Since afternoons and evenings were the most frequent answers, it is possible to poll the members of the book discussion group to determine if they wish to meet at a different time of the day.

The book discussion group will benefit from having access to multiple copies of titles available in a variety of formats, including multiple print and large print copies. The women made their ranking clear in Question “9” of the survey when asked about preferences of ways to view reading materials. That is not to say that older women will not look at the other options they have, but it is apparent that women in this age group still prefer print.

The book discussion group will benefit by beginning with selections of works of fiction. Question “22” asked for the genre older women liked to read most frequently. It appears that older women read fiction more any other type of genre, with historical fiction and mysteries ranking second and third. After the book discussion group has met for some meetings, different genres can be introduced. Knowing that most of the older women who took this survey had previously been in the workforce might have an effect on the diversity of book selection, even among books of fiction; facilitators and librarians may assume that the life experiences (including work and travel) for this demographic may expand the interests and curiosity with regard to book selection.

The book discussion group will benefit by holding face-to-face meetings. This is not because women in this age group do not have access to a computer; most of the respondents
(85%) in this study indicated they did. Although some of the survey respondents were open to the idea, having a book discussion group online defeats the purpose for this demographic; they want to socialize. They want to have face-to-face contact with the women with whom they are discussing books. Since most of the older women are retired, it is a chance for them to get together with other people and see the body language and facial expressions of the women as they talk about the book.

Online book clubs are appealing to and have been created as an innovative way for school-age children to read books, since there has been a decline in the levels of book reading by youth of all ages, races, income, and education, as cited in Cassandra Scharber’s article on digital literacies (433). Scharber has written about the way online book clubs may be able to bridge old and new literacy practices; they allow students to talk about a book from any location, to conduct live chats, and to include people from other countries (434). In cases where a woman age 65 and over no longer has the mobility to physically travel to a local book discussion group, an online group might be a viable alternative.

**The book discussion group will benefit by having a facilitator.** Most adult organizations are constructed in an authority figure hierarchy, i.e., churches have ministers, schools have teachers, hospitals have doctors, and civic groups have officers. The book discussion group facilitator guides the conversation; she is not in charge of the group. Based on the results of the survey, women enjoy hearing other group members’ personal experiences, but very few respondents ranked it first. Thirteen women ranked it as a third choice, and 17 ranked it fourth. In other words, it appears that women will listen to others’ personal experiences in the group, but only if the experiences *relate to the book*. A facilitator helps keep the content of the discussion on track in a tactful, unobtrusive way. Anne Ruggles Gere suggested that “because
authority resides ultimately in individual members of self-sponsored groups, the relationship
among them is essentially nonhierarchical and gives more emphasis to cooperation than
competition” (50). The atmosphere of a book discussion group is convivial, with all members
and their opinions equal.

Carpooling can be an alternative for any driving issue. For most of the women in this
study, transportation was not an issue. For those few women who did have problems with
transportation, the major issues reported were the distance to the public library, having no car,
and driving in winter weather. The book discussion group members who met outside the library
did not report any driving issues. For library book discussion group members, the library staff
may be able to help those women who are having driving issues get in touch with one another to
create a carpool.

The library book discussion group’s visibility could be promoted in community
outreach programs by the public library. In Richard Beach and Steven Yussen’s study on the
practices of productive adult book discussion groups, those that were examined met in members’
homes and began with a discussion, culminating in dinner, which they felt contributed to the
intimacy and comfort of the discussions (122). A recommendation for public library groups,
then, would be to carve out a comfortable space within the library, to find easy chairs and other
furniture that present the illusion of being in a home to enhance the comfort of the book
discussion group members. Most of the groups already serve a snack at their meetings, which
contributes to the feeling of intimacy for the group.

One of the women from a civic group interviewed in my study said that when she used to
help with programming, she tried to get experts to come to the meetings. She found that people
enjoyed listening to them, but also enjoyed the social aspect of the meetings. Speakers can be
costly; however, the library could reach out to those in the community who have expertise in areas of interest to ask them to speak for a nominal fee or for free. Relevant and popular guest speakers help increase attendance, thereby improving the visibility of the library in the community. Many public libraries do have community members who volunteer as program speakers.

Public libraries currently create space for community groups to meet, examples of which are the Rotary Clubs, quilting clubs, and knitting clubs, which would appeal to both women who belong to non-library book discussion groups and women who belong to civic and church organizations who currently do not visit the library. Seven women in this study indicated that they do not visit the library on a monthly basis, and 17 women left this question blank on the survey. By providing a space for non-reading groups, the public library may increase its visits by the public, create an interest in book discussion groups for those who currently do not participate, and promote an atmosphere which encourages non-library users to feel comfortable in their library. Of course, space would have to be available and the groups’ goals should fall within the mission of the library.
CONCLUSION

Book discussion groups offer older women an excellent way to remain socially and intellectually active. The survey developed for the present project was designed to provide a useful tool for measuring the reading interests of women age 65 and over, and its results suggest many “best practices” librarians and facilitators can use as guidelines to organize their book discussion groups.

Dr. Michael Smith, who interviewed adult reading group members in his research study, found that three themes presented themselves: members enjoyed the social aspect of belonging to the book discussion group, valued the equality among group members, and felt a sense of cooperation among the members (180). Those characteristics were found repeatedly in the present study, evidenced by the participants’ answers on the survey and in the group dynamics at the book discussion group meetings. Based on the results of this study, another predominant theme is proposed: that book discussion group members bond with women who intensely feel the same way about shared reading experiences. It is evident from the responses on this survey that most women age 65 and over read for pleasure. It appears the key that compels them to join and remain in a book discussion group is whether or not they want to share their reading experiences. The social benefits they gain include learning from each other through intelligent, thoughtful conversation while strengthening friendships. In one survey response, a book discussion group member wrote of her attendance at monthly meetings that “it is just important to my well-being.”
Book discussion groups from the past fulfilled a need in society and provided an occasion for women to express themselves with purpose. With the advent of the Internet, computers, and other technologies, how might book discussion groups evolve in the digital age? Journalist Chelsea Carter wrote of a group that read the book, attended the movie adaptation of the book, and then got together for drinks at a bar for discussion (1). Carter also wrote about a mother/daughter group (1), and about a group called PaperBackSwap.com, an online book club where members could trade their paperback books with each other and then participate in live, online chats (2). Wall Street Journal columnist Danny Heitman suggested that, in keeping with the tradition of writers colonies cropping up during the summer months, perhaps readers colonies could be created, where “bibliophiles can apply for fellowships that offer retreats to rustic cabins for a week or two” where books can be read in peace (A13). One of the libraries whose members participated in this study experimented with an audio book discussion group, where not only the book content but also the performance of the reader on CD was discussed. In sum, the composition of book discussion groups is constantly being modified and reworked to reflect the social and intellectual needs of its participants, often mirroring the adaptations the public library finds itself addressing in the twenty-first century.

Organizing and running a successful book discussion group for women age 65 and over is one example of program inclusion for older women within the community. It appears that older women join book discussion groups and remain in them because they are exposed to many different authors, possess a love of reading books, and desire to hear what other women think of the books. Public libraries contribute to these senior programs by providing a welcoming, safe, and comfortable space for women age 65 and over to meet, and library staff can be instrumental in the organization and creation of this platform that allows women to speak in turn and fosters
respectful listening. Women age 65 and over can use the platform of a book discussion group so that their voices and opinions may be heard, thus encouraging advocacy for lifelong learning.
REFERENCES


