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Life after book clubs a solitary pleasure

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By Nancy Shohet West, Globe Correspondent | November 17, 2005

The woman sharing a bench with me at the playground showed me the book she was reading, and I mentioned that I had just finished one by the same author. It didn't take long to discover that we had similar tastes in books. We chatted briefly about reading and then she innocently enough asked the question that shoots splinters through my heart: "Are you in a book club?"

I paused for a moment as I considered how much to disclose. She was a new acquaintance, true, but what better way to solidify a budding friendship than with a heartfelt confession? So I told her my sordid story: the flirtation with a new book club, the anguished decision to leave my old book club, the embarrassment and ostracism that had followed that decision. I'm the jilted mistress of the book club world.

Several years ago, while I was living in Framingham, a woman at church invited me to join her book club, which also included people from Southborough. I was flattered and delighted. That group and I had nine very happy years together. As with any long relationship, there were high points -- such as the Greek stuffed grape leaves we devoured while we discussed "Middlesex" by Jeffrey Eugenides -- and low points -- such as the occasional flare-ups in our ongoing debate between whether to spend more time on Russian classics or emerging South American novelists. But for the most part, we were happy, stable, and secure together.

When my husband and I bought a house in Carlisle -- 45 minutes east of where the rest of the group lived -- I promised nothing would change. I assured them that I'd keep up with the books; I'd never miss a meeting; I'd even host the yearly autumn banquet at my new house. For a while, we all believed that distance wouldn't harm the relationship a bit.

But of course, that was an unrealistic hope. The 45-minute drive to meetings started to seem like a real drag, and I began to wonder if I'd already heard everything they had to say about books. I wanted to meet new readers with exciting insights.

I suppose the kiss of death came one day at a kindergarten soccer practice when I met Lisa and Janet. They lived in my new town and started telling me about their book club. When I responded with interest, they hinted that I might fit in nicely with their literary group. I told them I was already in a book club relationship and really didn't feel comfortable with their attentions, but they persisted, tempting me with their booklist and descriptions of the desserts they served at meetings.

For six more months, I struggled to keep up my interest with my old group. I dragged myself to every gathering, read the books we'd selected cover to cover, participated doggedly in the conversations. But I had to admit to myself that my interest was seriously flagging. I'd like to be able to say that I explained all of this to my group and bade them farewell with respect and affection. But I didn't. I did the lowliest thing a book club member could possibly do: broke up with them over the summer by e-mail.

It was cruel, but it got the job done, and at last I was free to pursue the seduction of the local group toward which Janet and Lisa had been beckoning me. So I let them know right away of my availability.

And then the inevitable happened: They stopped calling. Once I became book-club single, they lost all interest in me. They didn't return my phone calls or let me know when the group was meeting. When I e-mailed Lisa directly, she was evasive in her response: "Everyone's kids have been sick this winter, so we haven't really picked our next meeting date yet. I'm not even sure what book we're going to discuss." One morning I ran into Janet at the library, and I was sure she deliberately stacked her purse on top of the books she had just checked out so that I couldn't see the titles.

So here I stand, the Anna Karenina of book clubs. Returning to my old group is not an option: It maintains a strict 10-member maximum, and someone was found to replace me within weeks of the breakup. I have

stooped so low as to try to engage a sales associate at Borders in a discussion about Judith Warner's "Perfect Madness." She was pleasant but dismissive; we exchanged ideas briefly, but with a complete lack of literary intimacy.

So for the time being, I'm single in the literary sense. Friends have told me that the first few months will be hard, especially the milestones, and I've already discovered what they mean. When I finished "The Namesake" by Jhumpa Lahiri and had no one to bounce questions off of, I cried, remembering the hours my old group had spent contemplating the same author's previous work. But already, I think I'm beginning to heal. I read "The Kite Runner" all by myself and instead of feeling lonely afterward, I relished the empowerment of knowing that no one would challenge my interpretation of its central metaphor. I put in a reserve at the library for "Devil in the White City" in hopes that by the time a copy becomes available, I'll have met a new book group with which I can discuss it. But if not, I'll read it alone. I'll emerge from this experience a stronger, smarter, more insightful reader. One that maybe a new group, better than both the one I left and the one that jilted me, will want among its ranks for a long-term committed relationship. I think I'm ready to take the jump again. ■

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