



The Spanish-language book group at Freeport Memorial Library, Club de Lectura, includes native and non-native speakers; above, member Dirk Wojtczack and facilitator Rose Luna.

# 2,700 books and counting

Longtime **readers' groups** sustain Llers through the changes in their lives

BY LIZA N. BURBY  
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**R**ead any good books lately? Ask the members of some of Long Island's long-standing book groups — including one that has been meeting for 65 years — and they'll likely have some recommendations. After all, they've collectively discussed more than 2,700 books.

It's not just plot and characters that bind these groups. For most members, many of whom

are in their 60s or older, it's also the friendships they have forged over the decades. Some formed around a particular life stage, like early motherhood. Others developed from special interests and meet through local libraries. None let COVID stop them from meeting because, as Port Washington resident Rachel Fox, a founding member of the Children's Librarian Book Discussion group, said, "It was a really important piece, especially because we had retired people in our group who were very isolated."

Involvement in book groups has mental health benefits, according to Gayle R. Berg, a psychologist in Roslyn Heights. "Book groups are an excellent example of a lifelong activity that an aging adult can engage in," she said. "It offers mental stimulation as well as a respite and escape from life's inevitable trials and tribulations ...and it culminates in getting together with others and sharing the book and each other's perspectives, reactions and insights."

Here are six book groups that have been keeping their pages

turning for a decade or more:

**VIRGINIA FULLER BOOK CLUB**  
**Founded: 1959**  
**Books read: 1,120**  
*Recent title: "Afterlives: A Novel" by Abdulrazak Gurnah*

Founder Virginia Fuller originally established this club as the Monday Morning Discussion Group, a gathering of 10 young mothers that met at the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library in Setauket to discuss books "and stretch their minds," reference librarian and book group coordinator Carolyn Emerson, 69, said.

In 1987, to honor her, they became the Virginia Fuller Book Club.

There are currently about 25 members, many in their 70s and 80s, and the group has officers and requires members to pay dues. They discuss only contemporary authors of note and classics and meet twice a month, from September through June, on Mondays at 10 a.m.

For many years, the meeting time was why Terry Shapiro, 76, wasn't able to regularly

See BOOKS on E18



# Reading through thick and thin

## BOOKS from E17

attend. She became active — she's now the club's president — when she retired from dentistry five years ago. She said the club has an annual meeting to vote on the reading list for the year. Volunteers are assigned to lead the discussion, which includes an author's biography, the book's themes, style, setting, plot, characters and reviews. Discussion is strictly limited to the book.

"A lot of people have taught literature, so they're very knowledgeable," said Shapiro, of East Setauket. "I enjoy the discussions. I like to hear perspectives of people who may know more than I do."

Rhoda Spinner, of South Setauket, joined in 1967 as a new mother who had just moved to Long Island. "There were people who loved to read as I did. It added a great dimension to my life because whenever I could convince the kids to take a nap, I grabbed a book. That was my comfort," she said.

Spinner, now in her 80s, left the group for 25 years when she was a middle school English teacher and returned when she retired in 1993. Having attended the book group at two very different stages in her life, she's found the conversations and perspectives have changed: "We all have much more free time and can read even more than we've read before." She added that she appreciates the perspectives of newer, younger members as well.

### SUNKEN MEADOW CHAPTER OF WOMEN'S AMERICAN ORT

**Founded: 1973**

**Books read: 500**

*Recent title: "Untold Power: The Fascinating Rise and Complex Legacy of First Lady Edith Wilson" by Rebecca Boggs Roberts*

Fifty years ago, a group of stay-at-home mothers volunteering to raise money for the Sunken Meadow chapter of the Women's American Organization for Rehabilitation Through Training, a Jewish organization, hosted a book and author luncheon.

"It was so successful that we decided to meet monthly and choose books and lead the discussions ourselves," said



From left, Rita Auerbach, Kathy McCabe and Patricia Callahan meet for the Children's Librarian Book Discussion group.



Rhonda Gordon and Marian Guralnick attend a meeting of the Virginia Fuller Book Club, formed in 1959 as a gathering of young mothers.

founding member Cheryl Pegler, 78, of Kings Park. They've been meeting ever since.

Each August they plan their book list for the year, which includes a diverse selection of fiction and nonfiction, usually about other cultures.

Members take turns leading the discussions, which are held either in a restaurant or a member's home. Zoom meetings during the pandemic allowed members who have moved away an opportunity to

attend.

Participants originally used library microfilm to prepare for discussions, but the way they research and their taste in books have changed to reflect their lives, experiences and interests, Pegler said: "We feel that the success and longevity of our book club is that we choose books that give us a window into other worlds or into lives that we wouldn't have otherwise been exposed to."

This enrichment has been



Soul With Heart, seen here with members of Club de Lectura, focuses on authors and cultural experiences of the African diaspora.

important to Lisa Herskowitz, 69, of Northport, who joined 38 years ago when she was a stay-at-home mother. She continued when she went back to work as a children's librarian.

"As a young mom I was thrilled to meet a bunch of women who liked to read. As a children's librarian it was important to me because at least I knew I was reading one adult book a month, which I needed for my sanity," Herskowitz, now retired, said.

### CHILDREN'S LIBRARIAN BOOK DISCUSSION

**Founded: 1997**

**Books read: 700**

*Recent title: "The Eyes and the Impossible" by Dave Eggers*

On Dec. 1, 1997, a group of children's librarians from Nassau County met to discuss some of the best books of the year. Since then, members have met almost 200 times to discuss children's novels and picture books.

"That's what makes us unique," said founding member





The book group of the Sunken Meadow chapter of Women's American ORT celebrated its 50th year in 2023. The group grew out of a fundraising book and author luncheon that was "so successful that we decided to meet monthly," said founding member Cheryl Pegler, second from left.



The Nonfiction Book Club that meets at Seaford Library focuses on biographies and books about American history, and because the books tend to be so long, it meets every three months.

Renee McGrath, manager of Youth Services for the Nassau Library System. "We're passionate about what's being offered to kids."

Currently the group includes 12 working or retired children's public and school librarians. While most of the members are female, reflecting the industry demographics, they said gender isn't a factor and new librarians are welcome.

Rachel Fox, 58, head of children's services at the Port Washington Public Library,

appreciates what she calls the group's pre-gabbing and post-gabbing time. "It's the books that brought us together, but a lot of those discussions evolved and just formed lifelong friendships," she said.

#### SOUL WITH HEART

**Founded: 2001**

**Books read: 220**

*Recent title: "The Book of Goose" by Yiyun Li*

When Ronnie Tiffany, then the reference librarian at Freeport Memorial Library, was

put in charge of its African American collection in 2001 by former director Dave Opatow, a patron encouraged her to start a related book club. They called it Soul With Heart and focused on authors and cultural experiences of the African diaspora, according to librarian Mary Robinson, the current book club coordinator.

Today the club also reads writers from other cultures. There are about 10 members.

Sandra Long-Befon, 73, of Hempstead, joined 15 years ago because, as an avid reader, she wanted to have someone to discuss books with. A bonus is that she has been exposed to new authors. And since her 2010 retirement, the former Nassau County Correctional Center rehabilitation counselor said the book group keeps her from feeling isolated. "It is a way for me to have interaction with people that I normally wouldn't come in contact with. It sort of takes the place of my coworkers," she said.

Monica Webb, one of the founding members, said she appreciates the group's diversity.

"The majority of the women are African American, but we're all different — different ages and backgrounds," said Webb, 72, of Freeport. "I love that the literature is diverse because all of us individually, even if we identify as African Americans, are diverse. I love hearing their version and how they felt."

JOHN ROCA

## STARTING A BOOK CLUB

Experienced book club members offer the following advice for anyone who wants to join or create their own group:

- **Connect with an existing group** at a library or a bookstore. If you're starting your own group, both can help with suggested reading lists and discussion questions, as well as a meeting room.
- **Consider organizations** you already belong to, like your retirement home or a support group, that have built-in membership.
- **Decide on a genre**, like mystery

or nonfiction.

■ **Choose a book selection process**, like taking turns or a voting system.

■ **Know your goal.** Is it mainly to socialize? Do you want to read new books?

■ **Avoid new releases.** "If you're intending to borrow them from your library, they're going to be hard to get and certainly for a specific date," said Carolyn Emerson, reference librarian at the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library in Setauket.

— Liza Burby

#### CLUB DE LECTURA

**Founded: 2002**

**Books read: 125**

*Recent title: "Las Doce Puertas" by Vicente Raga*

Freeport library's Spanish language book club, Club de Lectura, was also formed under former director Dave Opatow's leadership. Rose Luna has been the facilitator since 2008.

While there are native Spanish speakers in the group, Luna said there are also "people who are working on the language and improving their skills. . . . They join because they have that passion for the language, but they stay because of the friendships that form. Inevitably, we end up discussing how it [the book] connects with our own personal lives and learn things about each other that we wouldn't have otherwise known."

The group meets every other month from September to June. Luna, a library media specialist at Freeport High School, incorporates technology through video conferencing with authors, playing YouTube clips of interviews or listening to audio of the author reading.

Dirk Wojtczak, 60, of Baldwin, a native speaker, has been a member for about 10 years.

"For me it's a way of staying in touch with my heritage, my culture, and also not forgetting the proper grammar and proper structure and to enrich my vocabulary," the construction project manager said. "It's also interesting to get perspectives from nonnative speakers. There are nuances in the language that we get that somebody else might not."

#### NONFICTION BOOK CLUB IN SEAFORD

**Founded: 2012**

**Books read: 50**

*Recent title: "Demagogue: The Life and Long Shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy" by Larry Tye*

Though not intended to be for men only, with book selections mostly drawing from American history and biographies, the nonfiction book group, started by Seaford Public Library director Frank McKenna, tends to attract mostly men over 60. Because the books are so long — a recent pick, "Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior" by Arthur L. Herman, is 960 pages — the group of 10 to 25 meets every three months.

"Members have to be dedicated to put in lots of reading time to participate fully," said McKenna, 65, of Levittown. He said what keeps the men — and the occasional woman — coming back is their love of history. "They love discussing it and talking to each other, and they all bring something to the table," he said. "Some of them bring their notes. Sometimes I have to reel them in because they get into other topics."

Retired bus driver Jim Dolega, 70, of Seaford, said, "It's like a history class in college, but so much better because you're not being graded." He also enjoys the conversations: "In one meeting we were talking about a book about the old Horn & Hardart automats, and it brought back a lot of good memories for everybody."

Joe McMahon, 86, an original member and also from Seaford, said he joined because he likes biographies. "The extraordinary thing about the quarterly discussions is that it's been productive insight into various people in American history," said McMahon, a retired junior high English teacher. "I'm impressed by my fellow colleagues to the right and left. I'm in awe of the learning that surrounds me."