

And finally... A book club guide, or how to avoid the bores

by Mandy Appleyard

IT'S the social phenomenon of the last decade — thousands of women of a certain age have embraced the book club as the new rock'n'roll. As middle-class as M&S canapés, we bond over books where once we might have done so over the garden wall.

I am a proud member of a group of 12 women who convene each month to deconstruct the finer points of Balzac. In fact we eat Doritos and quaff wine, then chat about the book for a brief moment if there's time at the end. We spill back home feeling mentally reinvigorated, maybe even a little smug that we spent a more edifying evening than the usual one in front of the telly.

I have belonged to several groups in many different places over the last ten years. Over that time, I have identified six distinct tribes who will be instantly recognisable to anyone who has ever been to a book club. They are as follows:

The Harried Mother

SHE'S a staple at every book club, well-intentioned but over-stretched. She always arrives late, usually with food in her hair. There's invariably an ongoing crisis at home — the baby is teething and hasn't slept for three nights, the teenager has thrown a strop and locked himself in his bedroom, her husband's job is on the line so the family's facing financial Armageddon.

The Harried Mother has never read the book. She says she has no time.

'Was it any good?', she says. 'I wish I had the time to read, but having kids has put an end to all that.'

The last Harried Mother I met never spent any time with anyone other than her husband and four young children, until her sister brought her to book club. We came to odds when I chose *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, a dark read. 'Why don't we read a children's book next

time?' she asked. 'Because we're adults,' I snarled. Book club is the wrong place for her: she'd be better off doing yoga to relieve stress.

The 'I'm not much of a reader'

SHE'S there for the social interaction — because she never reads the

book. Ever. She'd be better placed at an Avon party buying bath soak and make-up or at home watching Jennifer Aniston rom-coms on DVD. Instead she comes to Book Club, offers nothing to the debate, but comes alive when it is time to choose next month's book.

'Can't we do something uplifting this time? Maybe one about love? Or shopping?' she asks.

If there's a film or a TV adaptation of the book, she doesn't see the point in reading it. 'Never Let Me Go? That's the one with Keira Knightley, isn't it? One Day? No point reading that — the film's out later this year.'

The Head Girl

SHE has always read the book, has often read comparative works by

other authors, and has usually done forensic web research. She may even have printed off detailed reference notes for the group, and will already have bought tickets to see the author at a literature festival somewhere this summer.

This, despite the fact that she works full-time in an Alpha job, has a big family, fits in copious good works for a local charity, and always looks immaculate. Head Girl is the one who calls the group to order.

Everyone else is rambling about what happened in *Fair City* this week or how much number 23 sold for, while she brightly says: 'So, shall we talk about the book?'

Every group needs her. She's focused and organised, and always comes armed with four well-considered suggestions for books to read next time.

The Hostess

SHE sits in a pool of nervous sweat, worrying about whether she has provided enough nibbles, the right kind of wine, and whether anyone will notice that passata stain on the carpet. While everyone else is wrestling with the power of metaphor in this month's set text, The Hostess is on a constant trek to the kitchen and back, ferrying dips, olives and very crumbly cake to guests who seem not to appreciate the efforts she has gone to. The dog's barking because he resents being shut in the utility room, and her husband will spend all of tomorrow moaning about being banished to the spare bedroom for the evening.

The Floor-Hogger

('IT'S all about me.') A phenomenal bore. She talks too much. Incapable of conducting an impartial, analytical conversation,

she likes to drone on about herself using



the most tenuous of links to the book under discussion.

'When he's mugged on that beach in Ecuador in Chapter Two, it reminded me of when Ralph and I were in Cyprus last year and we were ripped off by a taxi driver in Paphos. Did I tell you we've booked Paphos again for this September? Well, you don't like to go when it's too hot, do you? Ralph can't stand the heat...'

The Floor-Hogger is impossible to avoid and hard to manage, but shows up at these events with depressing regularity.

The Gossip

HER only fields of interest are the private and financial lives of everyone in the room, in the street and in the environs.

She comes armed to the teeth with gossip — who's left their spouse, how much the house on the corner sold for and to whom, whose child is struggling at school.

The Gossip never makes any attempt to read the book. Why would she? She is here solely to prey on those whose tongues have been foolishly loosened by supermarket wine — and she hunts her quarry down with ruthless precision.

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