

“It’s not a usual book club!”

says Robin Simonton of Read in Peace, which meets at the Historic Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh, where she is executive director. “We discuss books about death!”

Described in a blurb as “an engaging book club meeting above ground,” Read in Peace was founded in July 2015, when the group’s first selection was Bill O’Reilly’s *Killing Lincoln*. They welcome books about cemetery history and evolution, gravestone symbolism and iconography, death ritual and mourning customs, horticulture, and green cemeteries. “To reserve your place,” continues the macabre humor in the blurb, contact Simonton.

True, Read in Peace is not your typical book club; and yet, the more you explore the vast variety of such clubs in North Carolina, the less meaningful becomes the concept of “usual.” It’s a terrain as mixed as the state’s topography, and surveying it is rather like inventorying pebbles on Beech Mountain. Avid readers appear to have endless imagination for conjuring themes for clubs, and a club would seem to exist for every imaginable fancy. In addition to many of the usual suspects – like the Book to Movie Club at the Henderson County Public Library and clubs devoted to mystery novels in nearly every municipality – individual clubs across the state focus on single, narrow topics. Examples include understanding the Middle East, global public health, historical fiction, graphic novels, current events, translated works, books in French, cookbooks, Barbara Kingsolver, parapsychology, waste, and, at the Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities in Southern Pines, books exclusively by writers inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame.

Intrigued by both the common elements among the state’s book clubs and, at the same time, traits that distinguish individual clubs, I attempted to canvass clubs across North Carolina. Working mostly through independent bookstore proprietors and public libraries, and with the help of my student research assistant at Davidson College, I sent

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a list of questions to clubs that responded positively to my initial query for information. Although by no means comprehensive, my sampling verifies the remarkable range of book clubs in North Carolina. My survey not only brought home a wealth of facts about clubs, but also prompted an outpouring of appreciation for belonging to one of them. Anyone worried about the decline of reading and discussing significant ideas in our culture would take heart at the testimonials that came my way, as well as the inestimable number of clubs that populate this state.

Some clubs support groups that bond together over shared concerns – not all of them intellectual – as in the case of Back to the Well, in Sylva, sponsored by Neo-Christian Free Thinkers; Sylva Yoga, a class that discusses such provocative titles as Michael Neill’s *The Inside-Out Revolution: The Only Thing You Need to Know to Change Your Life Forever*; Asheville’s Autism Book Club, hosted by two local professionals in the field; and the four Next Chapter book clubs in Forsyth County, coordinated by Deborah Woolard. Based in Columbus, Ohio, Next Chapter has over 250 clubs throughout the US. Their mission, as stated on their website, is “to provide meaningful opportunities for lifelong learning, social connections, and authentic community engagement for people with developmental disabilities through weekly book club meetings that include people with all reading levels.”

Ms. Woolard explains that the Next Chapter book clubs meet weekly in a public location like Barnes and Noble, the local YMCA, or an assisted living center. The participants decide on their readings, though most come from the Classic Start series. At the meetings, members read aloud to each other. “Those who don’t read,” says Ms. Woolard, “repeat or ‘echo’ a facilitator who assists them.”