

THE IRISH TIMES

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Arts

The book club bites back



A one-man art boom in the Donegal wilds



REVIEWS

The newspaper page contains several columns of text, including a 'REVIEWS' section. The main headline is 'The book club bites back', accompanied by a large photograph of a stack of books. To the right, there is a sub-headline 'A one-man art boom in the Donegal wilds' with a small portrait of a man. Below the main text, there is a 'REVIEWS' section with multiple columns of smaller text.

This is the article's web address for reference.

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The book club bites back

Having spotted herself in Mary O'Donnell's recent article about 'the horror of book clubs', **Eleanor Fitzsimons** explains why her club is more than a 'DIY kit for the death of literary possibility'

I READ WITH great interest Mary O'Donnell's recent piece in *The Irish Times* called "We need to talk about . . . the horror of book clubs" – all the more so when I realised that the "speaker" who "does not wish to be disturbed by what she reads" was, in fact, me. Horror of horrors, this dreadfully superficial woman who "only reads as a hobby" (as opposed to what, I wonder), and cannot therefore ever claim to "love literature", bears my name.

Perhaps I should express my gratitude to Mary for confronting me with the unforgivable error of my ways. For as long as I can remember, I have absolutely adored books. The toddling days when I delighted in the childish antics of Peter and Jane; the school mornings when I sat nodding at my desk as a consequence of surreptitiously shining a torch beneath the bedclothes to satisfy myself that Julian, Dick, Anne, George and Timmy the dog

had once again set the world to rights; and the many times when, after a particularly challenging set of university exams (not English literature, I'm afraid), I delighted in escaping to the magnificently self-contained world created by JRR Tolkien.

Decades have passed. I've secured and lost boyfriends, changed jobs, emigrated and returned, and become a wife and mother. Yet books have been a soothing constant throughout my life. They have been boxed up and shipped several times, lent character to various living rooms and given me hours of pleasure when I have merely stood in front of the bookshelf running a finger along those familiar spines and remembering the happiness each one has brought me over the years.

Life is hectic now. I'm a mother of two lovely little boys and embroiled in all that this entails: school runs, helping with homework, organising after-school activities, and simply finding the time to play. I also work part-time. That doesn't leave half enough time for reading, but I snatch what I can. For the first time in my life, I find that I don't have the luxury of dipping into as broad a spectrum of authors and genres as I would wish. Sometimes reality in all its downbeat glory – Lehman, Lisbon, Nama, Fás and the rest – is sufficient to dampen my mood without me needing to feed this general sense of unease by means of the key source of affordable escapism and pleasure that I, like many others, have at my disposal. In the same way that I avoided films such as *Drag Me to Hell* and *The Haunting* in the cinema, so too I gave up on Cormac McCarthy's highly acclaimed and superbly well-written *The Road*. I tried, I really did, but I have a little boy that age, and a husband, and I found that I was overwhelmed by grief and fear and a cloying sense of dread every time I picked it up – so, hey, eventually I stopped picking it up.

Perhaps I was "not thinking enough" (precisely how much I should have been thinking is unclear), but for what it's worth, I loved that author's *No Country for Old Men* and would certainly not advocate that any fellow reader reject a book simply because I, and I alone, could not, at one specific point in time, cope with the content. The ability to depress and disturb a reader is surely testament to the great skill of the author and this is undoubtedly the case with Cormac McCarthy and Lionel Shriver (I did manage to make it to the final page of the

chilling and wonderfully written yet undoubtedly depressing *We Need to Talk About Kevin*).

Mary O'Donnell rather grudgingly describes our book club as "a fairly good book-club set-up" populated by "people who care about books". It certainly means a lot to us.

During the six years of our existence, the group has, collectively, given birth to a dozen babies, endured the trauma of two divorces and moved house countless times. Yet it never once occurred to us that our valued gatherings were a "DIY kit for the death of literary possibility". Nor have we ever felt inhibited in our choice of book or our reactions to those we have read. We certainly never intended to "pick, pore and sniff like dogs moving through rubbish for something tasty".

Of the 50 books we have discussed to date we would warmly recommend Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*, dealing as it does with the "depressing" and "disturbing"

topic of the abandonment of the vulnerable indigenous population of Bougainville Island to the ravages of economic disaster and civil war. We were also impressed by *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a brilliantly evocative and illuminating account of the horrors that followed the partition of Biafra from Nigeria; and by *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro's playful, thought-provoking examination of the potential consequences of abandoning medical ethics and taking cloning to an extreme.

We didn't choose *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Kite Runner*, *Perfume* or *The Lovely Bones* for their "happy-yappy entertainment" or "easy laughs" either – although we certainly did laugh at times and were richly entertained.

Perhaps we should own up to our shortcomings as mere readers and request guidance from Mary O'Donnell and her ilk.

Would it be better if we knew our place and humbly accepted recommended reading lists containing prescribed books which arrive complete with handy appendices explaining how we should think or feel in order to avoid "superficial normality" and

thought crime?

Mary bemoans the fate of her fellow writers who have to “spend considerable hours” pandering to those of us who “crucially fail to understand what writing is about”. As it happens, I fully understand from first-hand experience what it’s like to agonise over a piece of writing – a short story, a feature article or a book review – as I am a published writer myself (that being the part-time job mentioned earlier). I am also aware enough of commercial realities to know that if only those of us (myself clearly excluded) arbitrarily deemed worthy of reading were given access to books, there would be even more impoverished writers signing on than there currently are.

Mary is at least sufficiently self-aware to realise that she will undoubtedly be called “elitist” for expressing her views in so forthright and unchallenged a manner. Well, if the cap fits . . .

““ In the same way that I avoided films such as ‘Drag Me to Hell’ in the cinema, so too I gave up on Cormac McCarthy’s highly acclaimed and superbly well-written ‘The Road’



Photograph: Getty Images

