FAST FORWARD

THE RISE OF THE 'WHITE GUILT' BOOK CLUB

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because sometimes we need to talk about how we can talk.

By Zara Stone

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In June, Dallas nonprofit worker Beth Wise made her appeal: “Dear White People, We Need a Book Club,” she titled the blog post. The idea was to confront racism and implicit bias and to find ways to change it. Most of the books would have Black authors, but the forum came with an important proviso: “Oh, and the target audience of the book club is white people,” Wise wrote.

Six people expressed interest. Two weeks later, a shooter murdered five local police officers — and interest in Wise’s consciousness raising shot up to 110. Today, the group of about 100 connects on a private Facebook page, sharing book commentary and posting articles to provoke discussion. Nearly all the members are white, and yes, Wise knows how weird that might

sound. But she figures that people of color don't owe whites an explanation of the ways they're racist, and shouldn't have to deal with white guilt. Besides, "becoming an antiracist takes a lot of humility and vulnerability," she says; a place to make mistakes is key.

Unknowingly, Wise and her group joined a swell of "white guilt" book groups around the country. While not all of them are, er, whites only, they share a common cause: raising racial consciousness. Consider them a response to growing unease with racial bigotry and violence and everything from police shootings to de facto school segregation. As the country argues whether all lives matter or Black lives matter, on whether political correctness is a synonym for "woke" or "cucked," these book clubs use James Baldwin, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Michelle Alexander, among others, to help them figure out the answers.

Some, like Wise's, gained momentum after a local crisis. Community for Understanding and Hope book club, in Kirkland, Missouri, began in 2008, after a Black man killed six white officials at a city council meeting and "the national media made this all a racial thing," wrote founder Joy Weese Moll, a white librarian, on her blog. "We in Kirkwood knew from the beginning that was only one factor." The book group was meant to last three sessions, but it's continued indefinitely. The #FergusonReads group, run out of Left Bank Books, an independent St. Louis bookstore, started as a response to the 2014 shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown 20 miles away and the protests that followed. Tagline: "Adding some civility and context to the mix by exploring race."

BIG CONVERSATIONS BENEFIT FROM MANY VOICES OF DIFFERENT RACES, AGES AND BACKGROUND.

WINTAYE GEBRU, MANAGER, LEFT BANK BOOKS, ST. LOUIS

Book groups have long been a font of activism, of course. In the late 19th century, women gathered to discuss literature and social reform. Book clubs in the 1970s found the notion that "the personal is political" roundly debated. Today, experts estimate that some five million Americans belong to clubs that meet in person, while GoodReads counts 8,184 online book groups in its global network.

For Wise, who works at a nonprofit that teaches English to refugees, these conversations are personal. In 2014 she adopted a 9-year-old Latino boy and started worrying about how he'd be treated in her predominantly white community. "A friend's son spray-painted a neighbor's driveway, and they laughed it off," she says. "If that had been [my son], it could have gone differently." She initiates conversations about race with her son, using the 2016 election to

discuss with him attitudes about immigrants. But for Wise, the larger goal is to change the conversation about race in her town. She says it typically starts and ends with the phrase "we don't see color."

The #FergusonReads group started when Wintaye Gebru, the 26-year-old manager of Left Bank Books, created an online reading list with a mix of fiction, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and nonfiction, like Radley Balko's Rise of the Warrior Cop. (Publishers Weekly has cited the list.) Gebru, an African-American, decided she wanted a physical group to meet as well. Eight to 10 people is optimal, she says, but 60 attended her first event, in 2014. Now there are eight regulars, plus occasional newcomers, and the split typically is 50–50 Black–white. "When we started, we had a lot of disclaimers, with people saying, 'This is my opinion; I don't speak for everyone in my demographic,' " she says. "Now we've built a knowledge base, [so] that kind of shorthand is unnecessary."

To be sure, there's the risk of, as Wise put it, "people sitting around patting each other on the back for how 'woke' they are." After all, it's not as though thumbing through Angela Davis' The Meaning of Freedom makes you an antiracist. But the conveners of these groups say that self-comfort is not the point. And flare-ups do occur. Howard Zinn's 1980 best-seller A People's History of the United States spurred a heated conversation around the intersection of race and class at the #FergusonReads group, says Gebru. So did a discussion about abstaining from voting.

But what about groups targeted to whites? While pleased that people are choosing to educate themselves on race relations, Gebru finds the concept difficult to address. She pauses before responding. "It's not just Black and white or about race," she says. "You can't have a conversation about serious topics that affect [so many] without different perspectives. Big conversations benefit from many voices of different races, ages and backgrounds."

Wise says people of color are welcome to join her group but she has had no requests so far. She adds that people of color have asked her to talk to her white friends, "so they don't have the burden of educating them." Sometimes, she thinks, the painful and often shameful conversations about white guilt, and so-called white tears, are best had among white people.

LIVE CURIOUSLY

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