

Join the club

Samantha Whitaker *discovers the linguistic, cultural and social benefits of joining a bilingual book club*

Today, it seems that almost everyone is a member of a book club, with an estimated 50,000 in the UK alone. So it may be no surprise that groups for those wishing to discuss books in other languages are growing. Nadia Kerecuk hosts the monthly Brazilian Bilingual Book Club at the Brazilian Embassy in London (see culturalbrazil.org/category/books/bookclub), where she is the official translator and interpreter. The club is still in its infancy, having begun in January, and at the session I attended there were around 10 members – a mixture of people from Brazil, the UK and elsewhere. We had read *Backlands: The Canudos Campaign* (1902) by Euclides da Cunha – some in Brazilian Portuguese and some in the English translation, although the discussion was in English.

Kerecuk has a long history of running book clubs and stresses that the aim is reading for pleasure. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal, with wine and cupcakes, but it is also very structured. Translations for contemporary Brazilian authors are easier to find, but Kerecuk has chosen to start by acquainting and reacquainting readers with the neglected classics. She posts supporting material online ahead of meetings and leads the session with a series of thought-provoking questions. If no one volunteers, she is not afraid to pick on people.

Kerecuk kicked off a lively discussion about the experience of reading *Backlands* in English, as it was felt that the translation had not captured the beautifully poetic style of Da Cunha's prose. Many agreed that the title, *Os Sertões*, should have been retained (as other words were, such as *jagunço*), because the term doesn't exist in English and 'Backlands' adds an unintended negative tone.

For member Martin Pinder, it is this high level of discussion and insight that is particularly attractive: 'It opens your mind. Once you've read two or three books covering Brazil at different times, you start to get a picture of how the country evolved.' Indeed, one of the group members, Colonel Carlos Henrique Teche, provided an insight into the military history leading up to the War of Canudos. 'We're not just here to be entertained, but to understand and get a perspective of the country,' Pinder adds. The embassy also runs other literary events and, where possible, the cultural section screens adaptations of the books at its Cineclub.

The Japan Society Book Club is run in a similar way by CEO Heidi Potter, and is hosted once a month at Daiwa Foundation Japan House in London (see www.japansociety.org.uk). It has been going for more than six years and has a core group of regulars, who often go for dinner after the session. Members include students, expats, teachers and translators, as well as those who have lived in Japan or have an interest in the country. They can choose which language to read in but the discussion is in English.

Perhaps because the club is more established, Potter is able to take a hands-off approach. 'I have some questions ready if it's needed, but I don't ever want to dominate the discussion,' she says. 'I think the danger of a society-run club is that people expect somebody to be in charge and we want it to be a bit more democratic. Besides, there are often people there who know a lot more about the books than I do.'

Members suggest the books: at the session I attended, they had read Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun* (1948) but no one seemed to have enjoyed it very much. Interestingly, those who had read it in Japanese had struggled more, as they found Dazai's formal style off-putting. This, says Potter, is one of the main advantages of belonging to a book club: 'It's a discipline. When you've got a deadline it concentrates the mind and you'll persevere with a book that you might not find so easy.'

Informal learning

Sara Caba founded Battersea Spanish Book Club three years ago (batterseaspanish.com). Every month, the book is from a different Spanish-speaking country, broadening the cultural and linguistic scope, and exposing lesser-known authors. Members are mostly non-native speakers who want to practise their Spanish in a safe and friendly environment. 'It's not a class, so we never correct people,' she says. 'It's just an informal chat, with the focus on Hispanic literature and Spanish as a language.'

Daniel Calvert, who edits course materials for English language learners and will start an MA in Applied Linguistics in September, is one of the club's regulars. 'The wonderful thing about being an applied linguist is that you get to be your own guinea pig, trying out different approaches to language learning and seeing what effect they have,' he says. 'One of the reasons I joined the book club was to see what effect reading novels would have on my vocabulary acquisition.' There is wine, tapas and laughter, and an emphasis on reader-response rather than anything too analytical. Member Paul Sweeney, who travels nearly an hour for the monthly meeting, appreciates the quality and variety of books, which 'are mostly short enough for a linguistically diffident and time-challenged group like us.'

Of course, professionally run book groups such as these have premises to meet in and a readymade network of potential members but, nowadays, almost anyone can set up a group. Jan-Mike Singer launched the London German Language Book Club last year using the online portal meetup.com. He ran a book club in Berlin more than 20 years ago, and when he came to the UK in 2001 he wanted to do the same here, as a way of getting to know like-minded people. 'I find that people who are interested in reading are quite often interesting people,' he says. But at the time, Singer found it almost impossible to get the word out. 'Now you have these platforms, such as Facebook and meetup.com, and you can easily communicate via email, so it's much easier,' he explains. The club has around 50 members, with 5-10 people gathering every six weeks in a cafe near St Pancras to discuss a German book in German (www.meetup.com/londongerman).

Finding books

Sourcing original books and good-quality translations is an issue most foreign-language book clubs face. The Swedish Book Club in Cheltenham (www.swedishclub.co.uk) often relies on members bringing back books after visiting the country, while Kerecuk has been forced to disregard some books. The only English edition of Erico Verissimo's *Time and the Wind*, for example, is a 1970s translation by L L Barrett that can sell on Amazon for more than £800. Kerecuk hopes that book groups will help to build demand so that she can pursue publishers in the hope of getting new translations to print.

It was this that led translator Stefan Toble to set up And Other Stories (AOS), a small publishing house dedicated to bringing international contemporary fiction to the English-speaking world. One of the ways Tobler selects books is via bilingual reading groups (andotherstories.org/reading-groups). Translator Elisabeth Jaquette runs the Arabic group, which meets every six weeks in central London. 'We pick a bunch of books, read them, discuss them and then report back to AOS which, if any, we think should be published in English,' she explains. 'It's like editorial crowdsourcing and adds a satisfying element of purpose to the reading.' Although Arabic is currently the only AOS reading group, past groups have discussed literature from countries including Poland, Italy, France and Russia.

Whether members attend for practice or pleasure, the foreign language element adds another level to the book club experience. It is simple enough to find groups for almost any language or culture – and if you can't find one near you, it's easy to set one up. All that's needed is a space, a book to read and an open mind.

OFF THE PAGE

Book groups offer an informal space for practising another language (below); and Battersea Spanish Book Club (above left and below right)





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