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Book club members in Roslyn Harbor have a novel approach

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Lynda Aron shows off some of the novels the book club at Atria on Roslyn Harbor has discussed. She is flanked by Atria residents Caroline Lesser, left, and Francine Schneider. (Credit: Barry Sloan)

On a blustery Friday afternoon in late April, a fire warms the spacious Queen Mary Room of the Atria on Roslyn Harbor, a senior retirement community. A circle of easy chairs is drawn around a table laden with fruit and cookies.

It's the perfect setting for curling up with a good book. But the 12 women gathered around aren't

here for quiet time. These Atria residents have assembled to discuss, debate and dissect a challenging and provocative work of literary fiction.

This is the monthly book club session that has been meeting for 10 years, and the median age of its members is about 90, says the group's professional moderator, Lynda Aron.

Aron leads writing and reading groups in libraries, senior citizen facilities and private organizations throughout Long Island and Manhattan. For the first two years, the focus at the Atria was memoir writing. "As they got older," she says, "they felt that they'd told all their own stories. Now they wanted to discuss other people's stories."

According to a 2015 survey of book club members by BookBrowse, an online magazine for librarians and book enthusiasts, participation increases with age, and one of the primary reasons cited for involvement is a desire to connect with others.

That seems to hold true for members of the Atria

book club.

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“We have lively discussions and there’s a lot of give and take,” says resident Leah Brochstein, who is 95 and enjoys being able to express herself. “If I have something to say, I say it,” she says. Brochstein worked as a legal secretary for many years and lived in Roslyn before moving to the Atria.

This afternoon, Brochstein is not the only one to voice an opinion about April’s reading selection, Camron Wright’s acclaimed 2012 novel, “The Rent Collector,” about a poor Cambodian family eking out a living in a municipal waste dump.

The club members vote on which book to read, based on selections suggested by Aron, and prefer to stay connected with contemporary trends in literature. Their recent picks have included titles by Yoko Ogawa (“The Housekeeper and the Professor”), Amos Oz (“A Tale of Love and Darkness”), Lauren Groff (“Fates and Furies”) and Elizabeth Strout (“Olive Kitteridge” and “My Name Is Lucy Barton.”)

“Some of the titles they’ve chosen are pretty saucy,” Aron says. “Nothing shocks them. . . . These are accomplished women. . . . We have former psychologists, editors, executives.”

Today’s group includes women who are 91, 92, 93, 95 and 97; the rest, Aron jokes, are “young chicks” in their 80s. They’ve all brought their copy of the book — some in print form, others on Kindles or iPads. A common thread among them: They embraced reading at an early age, and many belonged to book clubs when they were much younger.

Caroline Lesser, who is 93, recalls the first books she loved as a girl. “The Book of Knowledge,” she says, referring to the popular children’s encyclopedia. “I read the entire section on Greek mythology. I loved it, and soon I was reading anything I could get my hands on.”

When she became a resident at the Atria four years ago, Lesser, formerly of Great Neck, says she heard about the book club and, “I joined as soon as I could.”

Rita Lichtenstein, 89, a retired clinical social worker from Great Neck, has lived at the Atria for nearly 10 years. She says she loves to read and enjoys the social dynamics of the book club. “So many of the books have been wonderful to read and to discuss,” she says. “And even when they’re ones we don’t all want to read, we still want to discuss them.”

That interaction is one of the major benefits of an activity such as this, says University of Illinois psychologist Wendy Rogers, who specializes in seniors. “There’s a lot of evidence that social engagement is a predictor of health outcomes and even mortality among older adults,” she says. “Having this kind of social engagement that’s high quality . . . engaging, interactive, common goal-oriented . . . is really powerful.”

The quality of discourse in the Atria’s book club, Rogers says, exemplifies what researchers have learned: “Verbal ability is well maintained into old age,” she says. “People have a misconception that everything declines with age. I think this group highlights the fact that that’s not true.”

Such engagement isn’t exclusive to discussions of literature, Rogers says. “It could be a book club, gardening club, knitting circle — something that has that social component.”

Executive coach Margaret Moore, co-director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School, says, “This is a great way to keep learning.” Moore, who is based in Wellesley, Massachusetts, adds: “There is also a sense of purpose derived from helping

your friends cultivate and maintain agile minds.”

At the Atria, Aron starts the discussion by asking the members what they thought of the story, which revolves around a poor, illiterate Cambodian mother who is being taught to read by a stern woman, who also collects the rent on the young mother’s hovel. The rent collector is a former teacher, and some of the Cambodian folk tales the mother learns to read are woven into the story.

“I thought it was very well written,” says Francine Schneider, 91. “I appreciated the way the author integrated fables in the story.”

“Yes,” Aron responds. “We all love literature, and literature was almost a character in this novel, wasn’t it?”

Vigorous nods as the conversation turns to the deplorable living conditions of the characters, who still maintained their dignity and honor.

“It was sad,” one of the club members says. “But it was also beautiful.”

“It was a faster, easier read than some of the books we’ve discussed,” says another. “But the author said many profound things.”

Again, murmurs of agreement, and discussion about the messages in the book. Is there nobility in poverty? All agree that one of the most poignant scenes is when the main characters return to the dump from a trip to find their ramshackle home has been ransacked. They have nothing but the clothes on their backs, but the rest of the community rises to support them.

“That book was all about heart,” Brochstein tells the group.

Aron responds, “It was heart-wrenching.”

The book ends with the young Cambodian mother choosing to live at the dump when given a choice of whether to remain there; a decision that helps Aron move the discussion along.

“Why do you think she would stay?” Aron asks.

“It’s human nature to hope,” says one member.

“It’s like the expression ‘There’s always hope,’ ” says another.

“Because everybody loves a happy ending,” says yet another.

Aron latches on to that. “Why do we love a happy ending?” she asks. Some answers are specific (“Because we like feeling good”), but those remarks prompt comments that come in a free-association flow.

“Like in ‘La La Land,’ ” observes one member, referring to the Academy Award-winning musical. This leads to a brief digression to the merits of that film.

Then someone mentions that “The Rent Collector” was based on “River of Victory,” a documentary film made by the author’s son. One woman says that she had visited Cambodia with her husband years ago, and while a beautiful country, she saw evidence of the level of extreme poverty depicted in the book.

There is brief silence as the women contemplate this and are reminded of the homes where they lived before moving to the Atria. Some say they would rather return to their own homes, but add

that they appreciate the activities available to them at their current residence. The book club is one of their favorites.

“It makes living here easier,” Lichtenstein says.

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