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HEADLINE: Build a Better Book Group Pair helps form, jumpstart clubs
for
like-minded

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BODY:

Book group consultants, Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens, 30, are sitting in the sunroom of Stevens' fashionable Victorian in the Highlands, sipping tea and wearing black wide-legged pants. The space is painted a perfect shade of cherry - a color you might find in a custom lipstick - and the north wall supports custom book shelves (built by Kira's husband) with row upon row of titles like 'Middlemarch' and Camille Paglia's 'Sexual Personae.'

With their hip hair and irreverent interest in pop culture, they seem more like young publicists than Ph.D. candidates looking for something to do.

Faced with the prospect of graduating with terminal degrees in English - both are attending and teaching at the University of Denver - the two have taken a hard look at their options (it's easier to get a top-level security clearance from the CIA than a tenure-track job teaching college English) and decided that desperate times call for creative measures.

An idea is born

One languorous evening in the waning days of summer as the two were sipping beer at Ellen's home in Washington Park, they hit on this idea: Why not take their passion for teaching, research and reading into the hundreds of book groups in metro Denver? A long-time Tattered Cover employee, Kira had years of experience facilitating book groups for Virginia Valentine, the bookstore's full-time book group coordinator.

'A light bulb went off,' explains Moore. 'Here was a place for lifetime literary geeks like us.'

Such was the genesis of Good Books Lately, the area's first book group consultancy. Good Books Lately - as in 'read any' - works to help both established and new book groups create reading lists, run their discussions or infuse literary life into clubs whose conversations have devolved into 'yeah-I-liked-the-book, but-you-should-have-seen-my-Timmy-at-soccer-practice.'

The market for Good Books Lately is potentially huge. Over the past decade, membership in book clubs has exploded. According to Rachel W. Jacobsohn, author of 'The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Start Your Own Book Club,' there are about 500,000 book clubs in the United States, double the number from 1994. The Tattered Cover, which helps jumpstart book groups with reading lists and advice, numbers about 1,000 people they have advised over the years and estimates that the Denver area alone supports about 400 book clubs.

Oprah genesis

Why the interest in reading en masse? Jacobsohn attributes the ascension of book clubs primarily to Oprah Winfrey, who, in 1996 established a monthly on-air book club for 'Oprah' watchers. Since then, her show has been responsible for 28 best sellers out of a total of 32 'Oprah' books; 'her' selections have sold more than 20 million copies, and her unprecedented public forum has elevated certain authors into the realm of super stardom.

As the Tattered Cover's Virginia Valentine says, 'Almost everyone is in a book club.'

The industry surrounding book groups is maturing, as well. Books like Jacobson's 'The Reading Group Handbook' and Ellen Slezak's 'The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group,' have appeared on the scene as special book group reading guides, most notably the reading guides distributed by publishers such as Penguin and Vintage.

Professors interested in augmenting their university salaries have taken their acts on the road to facilitate book group discussions. And bookstores, like the Tattered Cover, are angling for ways to support book clubs in the hopes of cultivating sales.

Although they won't go so far as to call their service 'book group in a box,' Kira and Ellen may have the first comprehensive book group consultancy in the country. Instead of simply offering academic-level discussions-to-go, Good Books Lately gives book groups a menu of services to select from. Book groups can hire Good Books Lately to provide custom study guides in advance of their meetings (\$ 50), study guides with a discussion facilitator (\$ 100), reading lists, and advice on how to get started. (One value add: They come to book group meetings toting a complimentary bottle of wine from Mondo Vino.)

Enter business world

They also hope to take the book group into the corporate world and are introducing their corporate packages with a series of free seminars for local businesses on everything from hot business titles to armchair travel book workshops. The idea: Help companies start and perpetuate employee book groups as a way to build business knowledge and teams.

'Companies are always looking for ways for people to improve their skills,' Moore says. 'When you're talking about books, you're developing your analytical thinking and listening skills.'

Their own corporate strategy begins with their reading list, something they call 'The Greedy Reader Menu.' To create this list, the Good Books Lately duo read hundreds of books and applied strict criteria to their 'canon.' Sequestering themselves, they pored over the 'Oprah' books, the recent big award winners (National Book Award and Pulitzer honorees), best sellers, friends' recommendations, publisher's recommendations and books on display at independent booksellers.

Chasm discovered

In their reading, they discovered that a huge chasm exists between the 'good book' and the 'good book group book.'

'There needs to be some element that encourages a heated discussion,' Kira says. 'There needs to be ambiguity, something to hold onto.'

'Of course, we had to like the story,' Ellen adds. 'And the writing. There also had to be something about the book that would get people worked up.'

After sifting through hundreds of titles, Kira and Ellen came up with their suggested reading list. Stocked with 'appetizers' - a list of savory contemporary short-story collections, including Lorrie Moore's 'Birds of America' - 'prime cuts,' oldies but goodies such as Mary McCarthy's delicious 'The Group' - 'entrees,' which include rich works of contemporary fiction like Kent Haruf's 'Plainsong' - and 'desserts,' fun, easy works such as Melissa Bank's 'The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing.' They've also added recommendations for private reading under the header, 'More Food for Thought.'

The More-Food-for-Thought list includes works they loved which might not make appropriate book club selections because of the book's length, expense, current book group popularity or lack of controversy. For each recommended title, Good Books Lately has created a ReadSmartGuide - a study packet with biographical information about the author, information about the novel's literary context, critical response to the work, character information, thematic studies and questions that might stimulate discussion.

Moore likens the ReadSmartGuides to 'Cliff Notes for people who have read the book.' Eventually, Good Books Lately hopes to publish the ReadSmartGuides as part of their strategy to build a product line.

In business for little over a month, Good Books Lately has already begun working with book groups on specific titles. Ann Marie Morrow's book group contacted Good Books Lately, for example, to help them deal with T.C. Boyle's complex and controversial work, 'The Tortilla Curtain.' Confronted with facilitating an evening on this sprawling, highly political novel, Morrow asked Good Books Lately for some guidance.

Good Books Lately provided Morrow's group with custom ReadSmartGuides, which were mailed in advance, and an appearance by Ellen and Kira on the night of the discussion.

'We felt it was a really worthwhile evening,' Morrow says. 'It enriched our discussion enormously. They didn't try to control the discussion or lecture us, but asked a lot of thought-provoking questions. We left there feeling like we had really explored 'Tortilla Curtain'.'

Line drawn

Although Good Books Lately willingly fashions custom book group evenings and study guides, they draw the line at certain titles. Bret Easton Ellis's incendiary work about a yuppie serial killer, 'American Psycho,' is 'no problem,' they agree, because there's plenty of meat to stimulate discussion, while the James Herriot 'All Creatures Great and Small' series would be a 'no,' because there's little to say about the adventures of a rural veterinarian besides 'nice.'

In the nascent, plastic stages of their business plan, Moore and Stevens are encouraging book groups to call them for advice even if they can't afford to secure their services.

'Even if book groups don't want us to appear and just have questions,' Moore emphasizes. 'They can call us.'

'We have this idea,' Stevens says, 'of bringing people together to play and learn at the same time. We want to expand the experience of the book group as well as build a bridge between the commercial and academic book worlds.'

Literary seminar

What: Good Books Lately offers 'Waking Up from the American Dream: Visions of the New West,' an in-depth look at Annie Proulx's 'Close Range: Wyoming Stories.'

When: Saturday, July 1, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Cost: \$ 25

Information: 303-244-1776

Sumptuous titles from The Greedy Reader Menu

Appetizers: 'Homestead' by Rosina Lippi; 'Krik? Krak!' by Edwidge Danticat

Prime Cuts: 'Mrs. Dalloway' by Virginia Woolf; 'Sula' by Toni Morrison

Entrees: 'The Hours' by Michael Cunningham; 'Disgrace' by J.M. Coetzee

Desserts: 'About a Boy' by Nick Hornby; 'The Boys of My Youth' by Jo Ann Beard

For more, check out Good Books Lately Web site
at www.goodbookslately.com or call Good Books Lately at 303-244-1776.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: The Denver Post/Hyoung Chang Ellen Moore, left, and
Kira Stevens founded Good Books Lately, the area's first book group
consultancy to help establish new book groups and create reading
lists. The Denver Post

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