

## Plumage From Pegasus: Book Clubbed

by Paul Di Filippo

“*The Book Club Companion* has a goal: to emulate one of the most successful and evergreen how-to guides around. It would like to tell you what to expect when you’re expecting to read a book.

“To that end, the author, Diana Loevy, puts on her party hat and pulls out all the stops. She calls for everything from hole punchers (aren’t you keeping a scrapbook?) to dog costumes. And she treats any literary experience as an occasion for merriment. Gauche as it might be to bake Marie Antoinette Cake in honor of the French Revolution, *The Book Club Companion* steers the festive reader in that direction.”

—“Which Cheese Goes Best With Faulkner?” by Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, September 4, 2006.

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It all started innocently enough, I suppose. No one could have predicted at the beginning that our weekly book club meetings would result in over a dozen ruined marriages, the disbanding of the PTA at Edmund Wilson Middle School, several bank holdups, one full-blown international crisis, three gender-reassignment operations, and at least four separate stints at various drug-rehab clinics, not to mention an additional bushel basket of similarly upsetting incidents, all of which stood out vividly in our small town of Farblondjet, Nebraska.

But despite all the tumult and distress, I still fondly recall the enthusiasm and high hopes we all had for our little literary salon at the start.

We convened that first Wednesday night at Sally Peterson’s house. Sally had the nicest rumpus room, with a wet bar and pool table and lots of comfy seating, and had been generous enough to volunteer her place. Originally we were going to rotate our meetings among the houses of the various members. But when Sarah Ozols protested that she’d never fit us all into her studio apartment (over in the Latvian-dominated Brindleback district, where no one trusted the street parking anyway), we all voted to make Sally’s home our permanent meeting spot.

So there we were, fifteen women who more or less all knew each other pretty well (we had tried unsuccessfully to interest a few of our husbands and boyfriends in the group), holding Bloody Marys and

wondering how to begin.

“Has anyone ever been in a book club before?” asked Tina Feldman. “I certainly haven’t done anything so creative myself.”

A chorus of “no’s” greeted her question.

“I didn’t think so,” continued Tina. “That’s why I went looking for a reference work to help us get started. Here’s what I found.”

She dug a book out of her knitting bag and passed it around.

Diana Loevy’s *The Book Club Companion*.

The Bible of our doom.

We all clustered around the book, studying its light-hearted, good-natured, informative pages that taught us such clever tricks as how to entertain (and drink!) thematically. Excitement surged, and pretty soon we had concluded our first meeting by vowing to pattern ourselves completely along the lines of Loevy’s guide.

“This will be so much fun!” exclaimed Donna Starzl. “No dry literary discussions! More like a costume party or an amateur theatrical event or a support group every week!”

“But centered around a book,” Beth Ostrander politely reminded us.

“Of course,” said Tina. “We just have to choose our first title.”

Well, none of us wanted to venture right off the bat into the confusing domain of brand-new books, so in the end we opted for a classic: James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

“And we can watch the movie afterwards too!” shouted out Lena Bolland. Lena had had three Bloody Marys to everyone else’s two. “That John Garfield was so hot!”

“John Garfield?” I said. “I thought that was Jack Nicholson....”

“You’re both right,” said Beth. “There were two versions. But no movie-watching till you’ve read the actual book.”

“And don’t forget,” Tina chirped in, “we’re doing the whole discussion

Loevy-style!”

The next week we reconvened, and everyone had gone enthusiastically full out, totally getting into the spirit of the Loevy-style book club.

All the girls were dressed up in period clothing, Depression-era duds they had dug out of attics. Some came in “drag,” as men with false mustaches. A few had borrowed vintage cars like the ones we saw in the annual Elks parade.

Inside, we each got handed a drink of “bathtub gin.” Snacks were Ritz crackers and Spam and Velveeta.

Then we started discussing the book.

The conversation quickly grew hot and heavy as we argued about whether Frank and Cora were right to follow their hearts and passion and kill Cora’s dreary husband Nick.

“Well, let me tell you something,” said Alice Sanders, her face all flushed, “if someone like Frank ever came into my life, I wouldn’t think twice about doing the same thing to my Harry!”

The room fell silent. Then Sarah said, “Alice, don’t you think that’s going a little too far...?”

“No, I don’t! This discussion has made me see my whole life differently. It’s just—it’s just so intense to act books out this way! I never knew fiction could be so powerful and meaningful! God bless that Diana Loevy!”

The conversation quickly shifted to less personal interpretations of the book, and we eventually broke up, although thanks to the bathtub gin I don’t really remember too much about the final hours of the meeting. In fact, the next day I had to call up Irma to learn what the next book was. It turned out to be another classic, *Madame Bovary*.

What a turnout everyone made for that book! How the sewing machines hummed! Old mothballed bridesmaid gowns were exhumed and fancied up. Horse-drawn carriages were rented from farmers. Sally laid on Champagne (actually, sparkling California wine), and we made the Frenchiest recipes that Rachael Ray offered.

The one sad thing was that Alice Sanders was nowhere to be seen. We were all abuzz about her absence, but it was not until a few days later that we learned from the local television news about the tragedy at her house and how Alice and some young man named Jimmy Wayne “Knuckles” Burgess were now wanted criminals on the lam, last seen heading for the Mexican border.

But to get back to Flaubert. So many of us empathized with poor Emma and her affairs and her spendthrift, self-indulgent ways that barely compensated for her boring marriage. I guess it was only natural that a few of us would go on afterwards to a little extramarital hankypanky and some running up of the old credit cards.

You can see where things were heading with our book club. The Diana Loevy method of getting deeply into these novels was just so powerful that the books took hold of our lives.

Perhaps our choices of which titles to read weren’t too wise either. If only we had picked something like *Little Women* or *Little House on the Prairie*.

But we didn’t. In fact, for next week we decided to do Jackie Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls*.

When Sally opened the door to her house for me that Wednesday, she was wearing a fringed leather vest over her bare chest, a headband, and a pair of polka-dotted short shorts.

“Groovy Carnaby Street gear!” she exclaimed, admiring my vinyl miniskirt and go-go boots. “Come right in!”

The refreshments that night were bowls of pills. Sally had gotten her nephew, Harold, who went to college in Omaha, to provide her with something called “ecstasy.”

“Are you sure these pills are safe?” I asked.

“Oh, hang loose, babe! Is Loevy your guru or not?”

Embarrassed and not wanting to be a party-pooper, I indulged.

It was right after that night that the PTA had to disband, in light of a highly radioactive public freakout by several strung-out moms. Things were said that just made it impossible ever to work together on bake sales again.

Of course the whole town of Farblondjet was in a dither by now. But no one outside of our book club really knew the cause of all the recent scandals. The men especially were clueless. And we Loevy-ites were in too deep now to stop, recruiting new members to replace the ones we lost to jail and other distractions.

Over the next few weeks, we tackled Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*, Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge*, George Higgins's *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, Nicholson Baker's *Vox*, and William Vollman's *The Royal Family*, among others. That last one was particularly trying. Not only was it a dreadfully long book to read, but I picked up a really nasty infection working for a week in a certain exclusive establishment in Nevada....

I suppose we would have gone on in this fashion much longer, if not for our choice to tackle John le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*. Those Middle-Easterners are so darn touchy! The headlines from the arrests of Sally, Beth, and a half dozen other Farblondjet natives found meddling in the Gaza Strip broke the secrets of our little club, and we were forced to temporarily suspend our literary activities, especially since Sally's home was now the legal property of Hamas.

But the survivors of the local program dedicated to the methods of *The Book Club Companion* are determined to reunite soon.

If anyone shows up next week, we're going to tackle Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*.