

## A Book Club of One's Own

Where women convene to share thoughts on life and people as revealed in literature — and their own lives.

**A**T 8 p.m. on the first Monday of every month, several professional women arrive at a house on Lover's Lane in Princeton, clutching editions of their most recent reading.

"This is the most famous translation of *Anna Karenina*," says one, taking a seat on a couch and reaching for her copy.

"My edition has little drawings in it," laughs another, holding her book up for the group to admire.

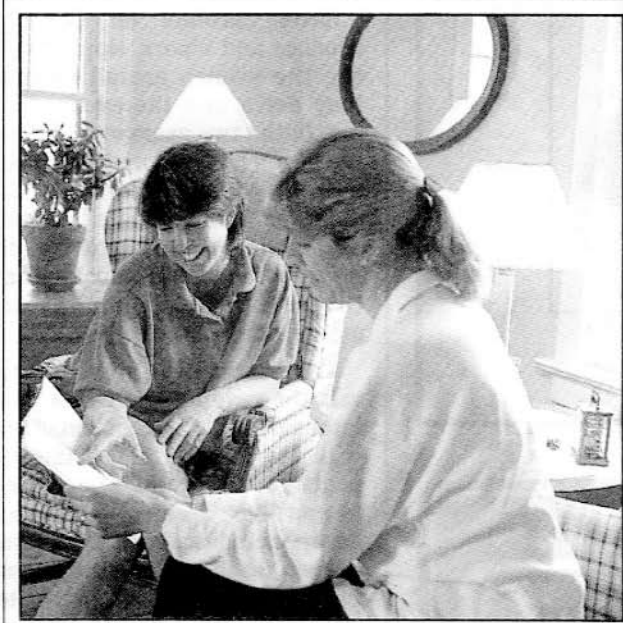
This is the monthly meeting of a women's reading club in Princeton, a group of 10 or so. And each woman will tell you she comes for the fellowship and the chance to have an intelligent conversation with other like-minded women with a fondness for literature. For its members, it is the chance to be themselves, to revel in being women, and not to feel self-conscious about opinions or feelings. Or about expressing them.

Many of the women believe that the inclusion of a man wouldn't be the end of the world. But, it would make things different — like the content and tone of conversation and behavior. Best-sell-

ing author Deborah Tannen documented this phenomenon in her book *You Just Don't Understand Me*. Men, she wrote, tend to view conversations as something to "win"; women, on the other hand, interpret them as a process. What's more, women can have a conversation rife with breaks and pauses, though these disruptions won't affect the substance of what's being said.

It happens all the time at this reading group, women interrupting one another to finish someone's sentence. Maybe it's because they are often the primary caregivers of their children, accustomed to interruption. Many men, it seems, find this manner of communication annoying.

The book group was founded in early 1995 by decorative painter Lorraine



Peter C. Cook

Otis. She noticed that once women are married, they tend to socialize with other couples or generally be in a co-ed setting. Believing that women have a unique perspective and that they crave the excuse to be together in an all-female forum, Lorraine came up with the ideal of creating a fiction reading group.

"I was looking for the opportunity to

(See A BOOK, page 4)

# A Book Club

(Continued from previous page)

have an interaction with just women, and I had to create it," she says. "These kinds of get-togethers just weren't happening."

Sitting around on comfortable couches and chairs, sipping cups of tea, the women are all business as they delve into the evening's reading. In the two years of its existence, the group has explored Balzac's *Pere Goriot*, William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*, Ursula Hegi's *Floating in My Mother's Palm*, Jane Hamilton's *Map of the World* and Melissa Fay Greene's *Praying for Sheetrock*, among others.

The banter over what to read rivals the reading itself as a point of interest, and this has much to do with the composition of the participants gathered and where their interests lie. Besides Lorraine, the group includes a book store owner, a French teacher, a music professor at Princeton University, a writer, a translator and a person who works in a retail store selling kitchen gadgets. Some of them want to read the classics; others want to check out contemporary works. And many look to read stories by and about women. Given this universe of interests, the group has some choosing to do. "Women are the fiction readers today," says Lorraine, "and now you see publishers orienting themselves towards the women's market."

Even when the women settle on a work of fiction written by a man, a strong female character is usually not far behind. It's a rallying point for group members, who cheer on the heroine, who usually merits ardent discussion. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, for one, gave everybody a chance to live in Anna's constricted male-dominated world, and to identify with her making the choices in her own life in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Although much has changed in the world since *Anna Karenina's* time, women continue to look to one another for simple, unself-conscious friendship and support. During these few hours a month, in this book group, men are neither wanted nor needed. It would just change things if they were around. "Besides," says Lorraine, laughing, "we wouldn't be able to make all the wisecracks that we make." ●

— Deborah A. Kaple