

Besties, babies ... and books



For Leela, left, and Eva, the book club is a chance to catch up. Opposite page: Leela and her daughter Maya, top, and Lily O'Brien's truffles

PHOTOGRAPHY: ELENA HEATHERWICK. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: BETHANY RICH

Life feels busier than ever and, for many people, that means they see less of their friends and family than they'd like. But that's not the case for Leela Morris, who took matters into her own hands, creating a book club as a way to regularly get all of her favourite people into a room together. She tells Kala Paul-Worika why it works

"I had a series of conversations with people who said things like: 'I enjoy reading, and I don't want to party as much any more,'" says 34-year-old Leela Morris, recalling how the book club she founded seven years ago came into being. Her friend and fellow book club member Eva Roberts, 35, laughs in agreement: "I remember texting you on my way back from a party. I was on the train, slightly drunk, thinking: 'I'm too old for this, I need something a bit more wholesome!'"

And they weren't alone. Soon Morris had gathered a group of five other regular members including her mum Linda, who's "just like one of our friends".

"Then there's Paige, who I used to work with, and Astrid, who I lived with in Paris," she continues, going on to mention "horse-crazy" Abi, who was introduced by a mutual friend. Finally there's Louisa, "who's originally from Brazil, and who I knew was looking for a few more friends in London", adds Roberts – who herself met Morris through a mutual friend shortly after moving to the UK from Canada.

As the pair chat, it's clear to see the appreciation for the friendships strengthened through the club, as well as the conversations shared and the memories made. Put simply, Roberts says, they all just "clicked".

A typical book club night consists of wine, food – and some book chat. The only rule is that whoever chooses the book, hosts the evening. "We've actually ended up getting more and more elaborate with the cooking," says Morris. "Paige had all these Ottolenghi cookbooks but she'd never really made anything from them, and she's ended up making all these beautiful dishes.

"Everyone will come over with wine, and we just sit around and we talk – probably a little bit about the book and a lot about our personal lives ... and then about the book again when someone goes: 'Oh wait, we should talk about the book!' We have to remember the real reason we're here!"

The friends insist there have never been any heated arguments over the books' themes or topics – instead, they say, it has really helped to "open up conversations" among the diverse group.

"Because there are no rules – apart from whoever cooks picks the book – there are no limits to what is chosen. In some book clubs it's only fiction, but here there are no parameters and you read things you wouldn't normally read," says Morris. "The different perspective has really opened my eyes to lots of books and subjects."

Over the course of seven years, a lot of "life" has happened. Lockdowns, marriages, babies and moves away from the capital have meant the once-monthly meetings now happen less often – although the women say the club is still going strong. Between meetups,



'People got jobs and promotions, they got engaged and married - and every time we celebrated together'



the group shares general musings and book recommendations in a WhatsApp group, and they've also started creating book bundles of their favourite childhood reads whenever one of them has a baby.

"So many of us, over the course of book club, have had babies," says Morris. "But there was also a time where every month there was someone having a new kind of change in their life. People got promoted, got new jobs, then they got engaged and got married – and every time we celebrated it together.

"The book club was founded in 2016 and the first baby wasn't born until 2020 – so it wasn't about babies at that point," Roberts says. "I remember coming away thinking it's amazing because my friends are doing so well in their lives as women. I just had this feeling of, wow, I come from a small town in Canada and I know such an influential group of women.

"For example, Louisa – she was the first to have a baby, and she had changed maternity leave at her company so it was possible to take six months on full pay."

As for the future, Morris is thrilled that her book club is already inspiring the next generation of readers.

"Bedtime For Maya is Maya's favourite book," she says, referring to the personalised book Roberts bought her 11-month-old daughter. "She wants to read it every night and even kisses and strokes the little girl in the pictures. It's completely in tatters now!"

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