

The Origins of the MAMs Book Club

It all started the day that Nora Roberts came to Books and Company for a fall reading. Katharine Long, a 40 year old religion professor at Mainline College, dodged a friend, a history professor, browsing in the classics stacks and took the last seat in the center of the room, tucked between a 300 pound butterball lady and a skinny fashion model who looked like she had just gotten out of the eating clinic. Laughing nervously, she glanced around, hoping no one would spot her. A closet romance reader, Katharine Long sought to protect her professional reputation as a scholar.

Her favorite south Dayton bookstore often brought writers in for lectures and book signing. Katharine frequented the store, and the lectures. But when she came to hear a reader like Nora Roberts, she knew that many of her colleagues would not understand how someone with a PhD from the University of Chicago could spend her money on romantic fiction. She had tired of their cutting remarks, but still enjoyed the genre, so she had gone into the closet.

After the lecture, at the book signing table when she noticed a flyer for the first meeting of “The Closet Romance Readers Society of Greater Dayton,” Katharine laughed and checked her schedule on her Brownberry. “Ah! I can go!” she thought and entered the information into her electronic schedule. Then she laughed out loud and congratulated herself on giving herself a little recreational lightness with Nora Roberts and now possibly a group of like-minded readers.

There were ten ladies who picked up the flyer that evening. Molly Grinlough counted carefully, when she went to collect the remaining flyers before the store closed. For Molly, it started as a joke and an idea, but now she tucked the flyers into her purse. “Perhaps this town is big enough to hold some others like me who need a ridiculous escape from time to time!”

Four weeks later, on the first Monday night of the month at 7:00 p.m., Molly turned on her front porch light, checked the sweet potato pie in the oven, adjusted the chairs into a circle in her living room, and sat down to review the schedule. Her husband came downstairs and kissed her cheek. “I’m going to Monday Night Football at Tom’s. “See you later. Have a good group.”

Molly laughed nervously. For ten years she had escaped into romance novels. Her government job provided an endless barrage of people with conflicts and concerns about landlords, tenants, poverty and difficult neighbors. In the evenings and on weekends, she sought solace in the comforting, predictable pages created by the romance writers. At one time in her life, Molly refused to read fiction

of any kind. "I read only nonfiction," she would announce. For several years now, she noticed herself picking nonfiction titles only for vacations.

Her sister had chided her, "What ya doin' readin' all that white stuff? Sister, that ain't reality, and you know it. Why not read some real stuff like Morrison and Hurston?"

No sisters had signed up for this gig, and Molly was ready to roll anyway.

The doorbell rang. Molly rushed to answer. A tall, brown haired lady stood at the door. "Hello, I'm Katharine Long. You're having a book club tonight?"

"Yes, Yes. I'm Molly Grinlough. Thank you for coming. Come on in." Molly looked out and saw three more cars pulling up to the curb. "It looks like we have company."

"I'm glad I'm not the only closet romance reader in this town!" Katharine quipped.

An hour later, six ladies feasted on sweet potato pie in Molly's living room. They had shared their mutual love of romance writing, agreed on a schedule of books for the first three months and an agenda for their regular meetings.

Molly looked at the sign in list, trying to memorize the names with the faces. Using the tricks she had learned in the Memory Book, she worked around the room, while eating a brownie and enjoying the light conversation among the women. Priscilla -- blonde hair and a painted, pointed secretary face, sort of like that puppet I used to call Priscilla in the Sunday school curriculum. Sallie -- the kindergarten teacher, a chubby, short woman with an infectious laugh and a love of children and books. Could I imagine Sallie Earhart flying with Sallie Quisenberry as a passenger; carting a bi-plane full of books? Yes. Jane, the very tall carpenter/builder millionaire. Simple name. Dick and Jane? I'll imagine her putting together a skyscraper with Dick. Child's play. One of those modular buildings, ready to assemble. Abigail Wesley. Her long pony white tail reminded Molly of the circuit rider. Preacher Wesley, Abby on a horse. Katharine Long, the tall lady, the religion professor. I'll remember her standing and lecturing long with that serious tone and friendly laugh. That will do it. Molly emerged from her memory game and announced, "I want you to read this short article I found in a free newspaper last week. Then we'll talk about the name."

Molly distributed the two page article, "Romance: a Feminist Genre," and sat back down to read over it herself. She looked up and saw Katharine laughing to her self as she turned to the second page.

"I love this!" Sallie had announced, after the women had finished reading. "This is really good. Now I know why I like this genre."

"Women are the heroes! They may find a man, but they are the ones who triumph over

adversity. Who woulda thought that this is a feminist genre?" Jane agreed.

"Now not too fast there. If you read the Christian romance novels, the man would be the head." Priscilla cautioned.

Molly said. "Think of this article as a hypothesis, and we'll consider it this year as we read some books. Now, we need a name."

That first night, they settled on "Romance Readers Anonymous." For their fifth anniversary, they went on a reading retreat to the State Park lodge, and during the weekend changed their name to the Magnificent and Marvelous: the MAMs.. Shortly after, Sallie brought a bowl of M & M's to the group one night. "M & Ms -- Magnificent and Marvelous... MAMs. Get it?" It took awhile to catch on, but now M & Ms were a staple of their meeting times.

For their tenth anniversary, the MAMs took a long weekend trip to Niagara Falls. In the Butterfly House on the Canadian side they had a moment of transformation. Molly began to talk about it, and the conversation continued through several bottles of wine that night in their cabin.

"Isn't the butterfly incredible? So amazing. A worm, into a cocoon and then a beautiful flying creature. What change in the space of one short life! Do you think we can change, too?"

"I don't know," Sallie had laughed. "After being a kindergarten teacher for 25 years, I had the parents, and then their children. When those parents walked into my classroom, their personalities were remarkably the same as the five year old little whippersnappers I had known 20 years earlier." She bugged her eyes out, pushed her glasses on her forehead and took a deep breath. "I think change is possible, but it doesn't happen very often."

"I think you're right," Katharine agreed. "As much as I'd like to think that college is a time for young people to come alive and develop themselves, I see a remarkable similarity between the students when I meet them in common courses their freshmen year and when I have them in the senior religion seminar."

"You need to read Zig Ziglar. People can change. That is hogwash. Look at me. I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps and became a millionaire. That wasn't anything I learned at home. It certainly wasn't in my genes." Jane shook her head, took another drink of wine. "Maybe your problem is that you just haven't had enough wine. Want more?" She held the bottle out, and Molly and Sallie offered their glasses for a refill.

Priscilla rolled her eyes. "You do not need any more wine. Of course change is possible. When I accepted Jesus as my personal savior, I became a new person. You didn't know me then, but

believe me I was a real party animal. Overnight, I became a disciple of Jesus. I have never been the same. And it's happened again and again. Look at Saul of Tarsus. He was blinded by the Light and went from persecuting the Christians to becoming the best preacher Christians ever had.”

Abigail smiled. “Wine or no wine, you can't ignore the fact that people change, and we all have that ability to become better people. God gave us choice. We can choose life or death, good or evil. Every day we must choose. If we follow our inner light, we change into loving creatures.”

Molly leaned back against the wall. “I think you're all right. We can change, but it's often hard. Many people go to counseling for years and it doesn't happen. But for some there is a shift, an Aha moment when suddenly the light floods in and transformation occurs. You know they have even studied that process, trying to figure out why some people change and others don't. They've discovered it's a physical process, a shift. I went to a workshop once on “Focusing” which is a process to try to help facilitate the shift. Change can happen. I just wanted to bring this up because...”

It was about that time the Molly stopped talking when thunder rolled in and shook the cabin. Then a flash of light and a loud crack pierced the night. “That sounds too close,” Sallie announced.

“Oh my, God.” Molly cried and pointed up to flames leaping on the cabin roof.

“Out, everybody, out.” Jane commanded. “Don't take anything. Just get out.”

Not until the MAMs got home from that crazy trip and regathered at Molly's the next month, did Molly get to finish her sentence. “...I think we should try some different genre's this year. I think we need to change.”

“Now, I'm an advocate for change, but you need to remember there was a lightening strike in the middle of that sentence. I'm not so sure we should proceed with your ideas. If we haven't gotten the message by now?” Jane made eye contact with Molly and then with each of the women in the room. “Don't you think that was a message from the universe we need to obey?”

The lightening strike had disrupted their weekend. Fortunately they had been able to grab their purses and even some belonging before making it out of the cabin into the night. The insurance had covered their loss, refunded their money and given them a complimentary weekend in the future for a repeat appearance. In they end, they “made out like bandits” Sallie had decided.

Abigail smiled, “We Quakers believe God speaks in a still, small voice. That was too loud for me.”

Sallie laughed, “You two crack me up. Thunder is thunder, lightening is lightening. If there

was a thunder and lightening storm in the middle of your wedding, would you go through with it?"

"I sure wish it would have burned the church down for mine, then I wouldn't have had to suffer for ten years." Jane announced.

More laughter erupted.

"Let's hear Molly out. I agree it may be time for a change." Priscilla suggested.

"I hate to admit it, but I am ready for something new. I've been a closet romance reader for quite a few years, and I'm ready to shift now." Katharine agreed. "What was your idea, Molly?"

Molly explained her idea that in the coming year they would try two new genres, each for six months, so each MAM could pick a selection. After a short discussion, they all agreed to go for it and put the names of different genres into a hat to draw. Historical fiction and mystery books were the winners for the first year.

At a return visit to Niagara Falls in October, they had decided to continue the change the following year and drew for a new genre. "NONFICTION?" Sallie gasped after drawing the slip from the hat. "Oh my God, do you think we're ready to read the real stuff now? I don't know. Maybe some one else should draw."

There were no lightening strikes this time. In fact, there was complete silence. No one else suggested departing from the luck of the draw.

"Nonfiction," Katharine said eventually. "That's my professional genre. Maybe I can get you to read one of the cutting edge books in my field. I'd enjoy hearing how people out of academia react to some of this theological stuff."

"I think you all need a good dose of Zig Ziglar!" Jane announced. "Possibility thinking. Today is the first day of the rest of your life and you need to get on with it!"

"I've really been thinking we need to read the Bible. We could read the New Testament for my turn." Priscilla piped in.

"Is that nonfiction?" Jane asked. "Seems to me there are four different stories about Jesus, and they borrowed that virgin birth story from..."

"Jane, remember we agreed to respect each other. I for one, would agree we could study the Bible as nonfiction," Sallie countered.

"Yes," Abigail added. "All books are written from human perspectives, and certainly the Bible has several hands within, but I think we'd all agree that the Bible is more truth than fiction."

"Absolutely." Molly agreed.

And so it happened that the MAMs continued to venture outside the realm of romantic fiction. After one jaunt through the real stuff, they spent six months on Oprah's books, and voted the Secret Life of Bees their all time favorite. They proceeded to the New York Times bestseller list, completing six months of Bestseller nonfiction, and six months of Bestseller fiction.

To kick of their fourteenth year, the MAMs agreed that each person could bring a book of their choice for the six month cycle. And that was how it happened the MAMs found themselves one January evening, sitting around in Molly's living room, eating M & Ms and discussing the theological treatise, In Search of Paul.