

A Celebrity Book Club Book Club

By Laura Stoll, Assistant to the Director

Over the past few years, the number of celebrity-endorsed books seemed to multiply. What started with Oprah's Book Club in 1996 has grown to include Good Morning America, Read with Jenna, Reese's Book Club, Belletrist, Good Housekeeping Book Club, and more from Emma Roberts, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Shonda Rhimes. Every month (or so), these clubs recommend a book, offer opportunities to hear the author speak, or encourage general conversation amongst readers. If you want to explore more about the book, there is no shortage of resources.

The obvious downside to celebrity book clubs is that they are partly a marketing scheme to call attention to the famous person for one reason or another. On the other hand, they have encouraged reading and supported up-and-coming authors.

I have to confess that as I looked over the list of books I've read recently, many of them had the little, round logo of a celebrity book club. For me, the appeal of reading one of these titles is that I can keep up with what everyone else is talking about, reading, or watching. I'll find articles or photos on social media about the book or listen to a podcast discussion. If you're willing to overlook them as marketing ploys, there are quite a few good books to choose from.

Here are a few that I've read recently.

The OG book club queen, Oprah Winfrey, chose Robert Kolker's "Hidden Valley Road" as a pick back in 2020. I listened to the audiobook on Libby and I agree with Oprah's review that it is, "A riveting true story of an American family that reads like a medical detective journey." It tells the story of the Galvins and their family of twelve children; six had schizophrenia and six didn't. Although heartbreaking, it made me think a lot about siblings, genetics, and mental health.

Good Morning America's pick for March 2023 was "Pineapple Street" by Jenny Jackson. This was one of those books that left me wondering whether I was supposed to like or hate the characters. It's about a well-to-do family in Brooklyn Heights and their life of privilege. Love them or despise them, I was engaged for the full 300 pages and then checked reviews to see how other people experienced the book. No doubt it made for a lively conversation on GMA.

Reese Witherspoon's team chose "Tom Lake" by Ann Patchett for their most recent pick. In my opinion, Patchett will go down in history as one of the best writers of our time and she didn't really need the endorsement. However, maybe the extra exposure will lead new readers to find "Tom Lake" and then read some of her older titles. This wasn't my favorite of Patchett's books but I thought it did a good job recalling the uncertain time of the summer of 2020 when we found solace and safety with our families. Plus, if you're a fan of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," there's more to love.

I read Shelby Van Pelt's "Remarkably Bright Creatures" after it was recommended by two fellow librarians; I later discovered that it was part of Jenna Bush Hager's club, Read With Jenna. Normally I wouldn't bother with a book whose main character is an octopus, but it turned out to be a story about much more than that. All of the characters were flawed but lovable and the ending will have you reaching for a tissue.

Not everything I read is recommended by a celebrity book club, but as you can see, I have found quite a few that I liked. This gives me an idea for a new book club: the celebrity book

club book club where we all read a title from one of these lists and then discuss why it might have been chosen and what the celebrity and author got out of the partnership. Our first pick can be Oprah's latest selection, "The Covenant of Water" by Abraham Verghese. Did Oprah actually find the time to read all 736 pages or did she have an assistant skim it for her? There could be a lot to talk about!