

**LEARNING TOGETHER AND BUILDING KNOWLEDGE IN INFORMAL GROUPS: A FIRST
HAND ACCOUNT OF COMMUNAL PRACTICAL WISDOM**

By

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ABSTRACT

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In an effort to understand the ways in which individual members of social groups brought their lived experience and personal histories to the group, and how after doing so the group co-constructed a new kind of understanding at the communal level, I joined such a group for over a year. Throughout the course of my complete participation, I experienced first hand how the group developed and reshared what I call “communal practical wisdom”. This dissertation is my attempt at representing the experience I had with this group, honoring and retelling their stories in an authentic manner, and offering some implications for postsecondary education in the process.

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To Henry—may you grow up to have insatiable curiosity and a love of learning. I hope you develop the openness to recognize, seek out, and value the knowledge that lives in the communities that surround you. To the women of Read ‘Em and Eats—for opening up your hearts and homes, and sharing with me the wealth of wisdom that has been created within the bounds of your group.

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To all the educators—formal and informal—who have shared their knowledge and wisdom with me over the years, thank you for that gift. I see you and appreciate you.

PREFACE

In early October of 2018, I asked my mom to connect me with Alice, who was the founder of Read ‘Em and Eats book club, and who I knew should be my first point of contact if I was interested in joining the group. I called Alice and told her of my interest in collaborating with the group for my dissertation research. Without hesitation, she exclaimed that I would be most welcome. As you will read, this is very much in character for Alice. I had the impression that the group wasn’t completely “just show up” to be a member, so I asked Alice if she’d share our conversation with the group at their next meeting. She agreed. In the meantime, I drafted a letter to the members, which my mom distributed at the October meeting. The letter briefly described my scholarly interests, and why I was hoping to join their group. I offered them the opportunity to reach out to me with questions, and if they all agreed, would join their November meeting. It was relayed to me that all agreed to have me join, so I began to prepare for November’s meeting.

November’s meeting was at Joann’s house, and was a book entitled “Thicker Than Blood”. In September, my husband and I got married, and we were using his annual professional conference, which happened to be in Hawaii that year, as our “pre-honeymoon”. What better time is there to read a book than on vacation at the beach! So I brought “Thicker Than Blood” with me and read it completely between the flight there, one beach day, and the flight home. I was ready to participate in my first meeting.

When November 29th rolled around, I began driving to the meeting. Joann was one of the members I had never met before, so I had never been to her home. It was about an hour and a half drive, just enough time for me to get nervous about my first meeting. Not only would I be participating in my first book discussion as a full-fledged member, I’d also be introducing myself as a researcher to my collaborators. I’d have to go through the consent forms and formally ask people to participate. I was anxious to say the least.

I arrived at Joann's house and was immediately met with a warm welcome. My jacket was hung and I was offered a beverage. I set out the consent forms and dinner commenced. We all ate, and I felt like I fit right in. When it came time to transition to the book discussion, it continued smoothly. I sat on the floor in Joann's living room and the passing of the book discussion questions began. I chose my question and the group began the conversation. I was curious to see how this would go because the book seemed different from others I know the group read in the past. For starters, it was the first in a series, and then there was a particular thread of religion throughout the story.

I was so impressed and surprised at the ways in which the group handled the discussion. The members were kind to each other, and to me. They showed great respect for one another's ideas and didn't push back hard when they disagreed. In fact, it was one of the healthiest examples of "agreeing to disagree" that I've ever seen. As the discussion wrapped up, I was given the floor and I reintroduced myself and my project. I hung around to answer any questions, and collected consent forms. Everyone seemed enthusiastic and the adventure began.

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INTRODUCTION

Adults engage in learning on a daily basis but this learning is discounted and often goes unrecognized. To acknowledge this learning as a valuable exchange of knowledge, we must move beyond what has historically been recognized in a traditional western framework. “Considering other ways of knowing leads us to examine how knowledge is produced, whose interests are being served by this knowledge, and how knowledge comes to be validated or ‘official’” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.219). For example, in African cultures knowledge is exchanged primarily by oral means and learning is communal, whereas Western cultures consider knowledge that is documented and individually pursued (Jegede, 1999). Eastern cultures have also been described as relationship or friendship-based in contrast to Western independence (Merriam et al., 2007). An additional non-Western perspective is indigenous knowledge, or knowledge that is situated within communities and generated and shared over time to deal with local problems or issues. This kind of knowing is organic in that it is generated during daily activities in a local context, and is usually conveyed through various modes of storytelling and creative activities (Fasokun, Katahorie & Oduaran, 2005).

As demonstrated by these non-Western ways of knowing there is significant diversity in the ways in which knowledge is shared, along with the variety of practices and places where learning takes place. Similarly, there are various kinds of knowledge. *Phronesis*, or *practical wisdom*, is a concept developed by Aristotle (Lacewing, n.d.) that recognizes the “other-than-theoretical” knowledge that takes account of a wider community and is acquired with experience. Practical wisdom is a “flexible and thoughtful adaptation to circumstances of a moment” (Breier & Ralphs, 2009, p.481). In a similar vein to indigenous knowledge, practical wisdom is locally situated and often constructed or shared through discourse. It is a kind of both learning and knowledge that is difficult to see happening and measure, but occurs on an ongoing basis in the lives of individuals.

To build a foundation of understanding for this work, I went through a process of identifying relevant bodies of literature including that on adult learners, communities of practice, informal learning, and practical wisdom. What I found as I explored these varied literatures is that there were themes that cut

across each separate body. Instead of writing synopses of each body of literature as it is relevant to this research, I have organized this next section into themes. The themes are representative of concepts or ideas in each body of literature I explored, but are intentionally structured to indicate the flow and interconnected nature of ideas from one to the other. In the upcoming sections, there are examples and scholarly support for my decisions to focus on informal learning in which learners are active participants in discovering, experiencing, and constructing new knowledge. I have also chosen to focus on knowers in community-based contexts with knowledge that is situated in the context of their life spaces. These decisions help me best answer my research questions, which are situated at the apex of community, interactions, and knowledge. The themes here grounded my questions in scholarly work, and informed the protocol I employed for this work.

Organic & Informal

“Informal and incidental learning take place wherever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning.” -Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins in ‘The New Update on Adult Learning Theory’ edited by S. Merriam (2001, p. 28)

When we think about learning, our minds often drift back to a time when we were in school—elementary through secondary school, maybe even in college or technical training. What are common experiences from these memories of past years? Is it sitting at desks and doing assignments? Maybe we think of a teacher at the front of a class sharing a lesson. Conversations around experiences with teaching and learning are frequently framed within the context of a classroom, with a board certified teacher or tutor, lesson plans, and student-learning assessments. All of these things are typical connotations of teaching and learning, but they do not represent all teaching and learning. Where formal learning happens in a classroom with a specific teaching plan oriented for learning, informal learning happens outside of the classroom.

Informal education is the broad term for all of the learning that happens outside of a classroom and outside of pre-planned learning activities (Smith, 2015). Here, education is not synonymous with schooling. Where schooling denotes the kinds of memories discussed earlier, and is often related to

required participation in activities where things are taught to us, education is something else entirely. Education is “a process of inviting truth and possibility, or encouraging and giving time to discovery” (Smith, 2015, np). Education moves beyond what Freire (1973) calls banking where information is bestowed upon people into a more social process of acting with people (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1973). Informal learning, as discussed in this work, is best defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990) as the following:

Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning.

Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it. (p. 12)

When we decide to try out a new activity or take up a new hobby, we often learn in informal ways. Through engagement with community-based organizations, we might interact with experts and learn informally. When our guardians taught us how to tie our shoes or ride a bike, we were learning informally. Even when we have conversations with friends and family about our experiences and process through our reactions and next steps, we are learning informally. Jeffs and Smith (2011) define informal education as “the wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning” (para. 6.). They note that informal education “works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience” (Jeffs & Smith, 2011, para. 1). The important note here is that informal education is the learning that occurs during and throughout our day-to-day lives. This type of learning can be so ingrained in the everyday processes that we might not even recognize it as learning (Merriam et al., 2007).

While scholars of informal learning use multiple definitions, the common thread is the distinction of context. Where formal education encompasses schools and other learning institutions, informal

education covers all the learning that happens in environments that are not dedicated to education. The definition of informal learning that resonates with me is “the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p.8). Another important point is that we each engage in informal learning throughout the course of our lifetimes, meaning that regardless of our level of formal education achievement, informal learning accounts for “the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p.8).

Aristotle discussed three different types of knowledge, each based on a unique purpose served or telos. These three types of knowledge, theoretical, productive, and practical, are most succinctly described based on their purposes.

The purpose of a theoretical discipline is the pursuit of truth through contemplation; its telos is the attainment of knowledge for its own sake. The purpose of the productive sciences is to make something; their telos is the production of some artifact. The practical disciplines are those sciences which deal with ethical and political life; their telos is practical wisdom and knowledge. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.32)

As we think about the characteristics of informal learning, it is integrated with daily routines, not highly conscious, influenced by chance, and is an inductive process of reflection and action (Marsick & Velope, 1999). We can conclude that the type of knowledge we build through informal learning is practical knowledge. Practice in this conversation is considered informed action or praxis. Aristotle thought about praxis as acting in thoughtful and practical manners with personal concern for advancing human well-being. This praxis, or practical knowledge, is what enables us to enter a situation as “committed thinkers and actors” and engage in a continual process of thought and action around our desired ends and the means in which to achieve those ends (Smith, 1999, np).

Because of the nature of informal learning “– at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p.8), we can actively learn without being aware

that we are learning, that our knowledge exists on a spectrum between implicit and explicit. Tacit knowledge is a type of implicit practical knowledge, in that tacit knowledge is:

- (a) knowledge acquired by implicit learning of which the knower is unaware;
- (b) knowledge constructed from the aggregation of episodes in long-term memory;
- (c) knowledge inferred by observers to be capable of representation as implicit theories of action, personal constructs, schemas, etc.;
- (d) knowledge that enables rapid, intuitive understanding or response;
- (e) knowledge entailed in transferring knowledge from one situation to another;
- (f) knowledge embedded in taken-for-granted activities, perceptions and norms. (Eraut, 2000, p.28)

If we think about the ways informal learning is integrated into our interactions with the world around us, and the deep reservoir of practical and tacit knowledge we each possess, it is also important to recognize as we walk through the world, not only are we all regularly learners, but we are also teachers. As we interact with one another, we share our knowledge and thus, *teach* each other.

Experience & Participation

*“Like its congeners, life and history, it includes **what** men do and suffer, **what** they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also **how** men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of **experiencing**.” -John Dewey in ‘Experience and Nature’ (1929, p. 8)*

Have you ever gone into an experience, reading a book for example—and at the same time a friend was reading the same book? When you both have finished the book, you get together only to find that what you were left thinking about was something totally different from that of your friend? Or perhaps you have been in a meeting, thinking the conversation with your boss or colleague is going quite well only to find that when you get back to your office you have a message in your e-mail inbox from them with follow-up questions that indicate you were definitely not on the same page? In talking about experience it is important to remember that, like learning, ‘experience’ can refer to both a process and a

result. John Dewey (1929) described experience as a whole which is made up of two parts: primary experiences and secondary ‘reflective’ experiences. Primary experiences are what occur with minimum incidental reflection where [secondary] reflective experiences are those that occur through “the intervention of systematic thinking”. It is difficult, and not always valuable, to differentiate between primary and secondary experiences because one impacts the other. The thoughts and judgments that result from secondary experiences connect and influence other experiences (Boud & Miller, 1993). Because this reflective experience is a part of experience as a whole, we have to recognize that we each reflect in unique ways.

If the key feature of experience is that it has meaning (Usher, 1993), we each are influenced by a variety of factors when we interpret experiences. The processes we each engage in on a regular basis to interpret our experiences are driven by our own unique worldviews. To some scholars, worldview is also called *positionality* and is considered “sets of basic beliefs about the nature of reality and how it may be known” (Reason, 1998, p.4). From here one might think about three fundamental positionality questions:

1. What is the form and nature of reality, and therefore, what is there that can be known about it?
2. What is the relationship between the knower or the would-be knower and what can be known?
3. How can an inquiring person go about finding out whether she believes can be known about?

(Reason, 1998, p.4)

Other adult education scholars take a simpler approach to defining worldview. Leon McKenzie (1991) defines worldview as both the lens through which an individual understands the world, as well as the vantage point during a specific time that impacts an individual’s experience in the world. The construction of our worldview is interconnected to our processes of thinking, knowing, and understanding the world. The collective experiences, beliefs, and values we maintain in each of our lives, along with the multiplicity of our identities during a specific location in time and space are independently unique. This means that our worldview is a unique lens that we each use to make meaning of the world, and as we make meaning of the world, our worldview grows, expands, and shifts (Creswell, 2006). “Knowledge is

the product of a specific position [worldview] that reflects particular places and spaces” (Sanchez, 2010, p.2258).

Previous experiences serve as a vast resource of practical knowledge and as we participate in the world around us, interact with one another, and engage in experiences that result in furthering our knowing, we continue to build our practical knowledge. Our practical knowledge, experiences, and worldview do not always change over time, though time *can* be a factor. In many communities and cultures around the world, elders are highly respected as individuals who live a life balanced with wisdom—they act in accordance with their teachings (Price, 2008). As our experiences grow, we cultivate a greater wealth of knowledge, but to expand our worldview we have to challenge ourselves (Skinner, 2015). When we try new experiences, interact with new groups of people, or try to think about our experiences from different perspectives, we open ourselves up to vast opportunities for informal education and building of practical knowledge. The practical knowledge we glean from our experiences is influenced by our worldview—a unique lens from which we view and interpret the world around us.

Situated & Applied Knowing

“ ... there is no activity that is not situated... What is called general knowledge is not privileged with respect to other ‘kinds’ of knowledge. It too can be gained only in specific circumstances. And it too must be brought into play in specific circumstances. The generality of any form of knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances.” -Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger in ‘Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral participation’ (1991, p. 34)

Informal education is a result of our participation in experiences, both those that happen in our average day-to-day lives and those that we specifically seek out. We learn from these experiences through a process of meaning-making, which is exactly as it sounds (Zittoun & Brinkmann, 2012). How we make meaning *of* our experiences is how we process what happened. How we make meaning *from* our experiences is what we learned from what happened. In my work I refer to the meaning-making process as one including both aspects—*of* experience and *from* experience—as an intentional decision. This is

important because meaning-making as a whole process is how we build the knowledge that we use to inform our decisions, actions, and approaches to future experiences (Dewey, 1938).

Inherently, based on this understanding of the meaning-making process, knowledge gained from experiences is situated. Where we are, who we are with, and what role we are playing in that particular encounter impacts what we learn and informs how we apply that knowledge to future experiences (Lave, 1991). With each new experience we encounter, our learning is situated within specific physical, emotional, and social contexts (Tennant, 1997). Each detail of an experience is a contextual thread, woven together to build the experience as a whole. That said, as we walk through life and experience other situations the threads of our previous meaning-making inform how we proceed in the present. According to Kober (2015), “Learners of all ages possess understandings, skills, and beliefs that significantly influence how they remember, reason, solve problems, and acquire new knowledge. Prior knowledge can either facilitate or interfere with new learning” (p.57). For example, a thread of an experience one has at the doctor’s office might be related to the feeling of uncertainty. In the future when experiencing the feeling of uncertainty, this individual may draw upon the knowledge she gleaned from the doctor’s office to proceed.

In this process knowledge is a result of informal and organic learning that happen as a result of our participation in experiences; the application of that knowledge is situated in the details of our experiences. We put this knowledge into practice regularly and often without conscious thought. The process of applying our informal education in varied contexts makes this knowledge practical knowledge. The manner in which we apply this practical knowledge is uniquely influenced by our worldview, just like our meaning-making processes. Not only is our knowledge situated in various contexts, with possibilities of interconnected threads, it is also uniquely situated within ourselves—it is uniquely ours.

As we encounter new people, places, and ideas—as we seek out new experiences—we adapt what we know from our past to tackle our present and attempt planning for our future. There may be times when we share this knowledge with others; maybe others who are experiencing the same situation as we are, or others who just want to learn from us as knowers. As we apply our practical knowledge in the

broader contexts of our community, as we share this knowledge with others through informal education and co-construct new meaning, are we transitioning our “bank” of knowing into communal practical wisdom? For the purposes of this work, there is a distinct difference in my interest area-communal practical wisdom- and practical wisdom, communities of practice, and individual knowledge or learning. Considering that practical wisdom is what we call upon, often based on lived experience, to make decisions or take action in the moment, *communal* practical wisdom is the body of practical wisdom that is co-created at the group level. From here on, when I discuss communal practical wisdom, I am referring to the wisdom that has been created by the group through the telling, retelling, and building upon individual stories by members- and because it is created by and through the group, any members of the group can call upon that wisdom at any time [to help inform individual or group action].

Knowers & Community

“Learning traditionally gets measured as on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part.” -R. P. McDermott in ‘Learners, Learning and Assessment’ edited by P. Murphy (1999, p. 16)

When you think of knowledgeable people in your life who comes to mind? Why is it that you think of them? Is it because they hold advanced college degrees or are leaders in their fields, or both? The history of the United States bears witness to a great number of influential individuals who either did not attend postsecondary education or who stopped attending prior to receiving a certificate or degree; Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company; Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most significant architects of the twentieth century; Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of *Vogue* magazine; and Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc. are all examples. Farmers are a great example of a profession of people who in many cases do not have postsecondary education. Because of the financial obligation required to purchase land and

equipment for farming, many farms are multi-generational; they are passed down from generation to generation with children or grandchildren inheriting the business from their parents or grandparents (Withrow-Robinson et al., 2013). Farming is often an apprenticeship-type of educational experience. The younger generation works side-by-side with the elder generation to learn what they know and practice their skills with the support of many years of experience (Brush, 1996). Imagine Scott, for example, who learned how to farm with his grandfather and now farms the same land that his grandfather once did. He has an immense amount of knowledge. He is a mechanic when equipment breaks, an entrepreneur when there is product to sell, a meteorologist when crops are dry, a soil scientist when fields need of fertilizer, an economist when he sells portions of his future crop based on the current markets, and a soil conservationist when he is planning his approach to pasture rotations and no-till planting—just to name a few. Scott does not have a college degree, but he has a wealth of knowledge. Of course the example of Scott is not representative of the experience of all farmers, but it remains a testament to the valuable knowers that exist and thrive in our communities without formal postsecondary experiences. All this is to say that having a college degree—a common qualifier of knowing—is not the only indicator of knowledge.

When we limit the individuals we think of as knowledgeable to those who have postsecondary education experience, we forget and inherently devalue the amazing individuals who are knowers without formal training. Indigenous knowledge is “local or community knowledge that is commonly generated and transmitted over a period of time in geographic and historic space” (Fasokun, Katahorie & Oduaran, 2005, p.61). This kind of knowledge differs from the kind of knowledge one learns in a formal classroom. There are no predetermined or designed outcomes set for the transfer of indigenous knowledge; instead it is locally, contextually bound and is generated during peoples’ daily lives (Merriam et al., 2007). This traditional way of knowing is situated at an intersection of individual knowledge, practice, and belief (Berkes, 2004).

Indigenous knowledge includes “the botanical or pharmacological lexicons of peasants and tribal people, farmers’ knowledge of soils, hunters’ knowledge of animals, bakers’ knowledge of yeast and

dough, shamans' ability to read oracle bones, and the rules of football played in schoolyards and sandlots around the world" (Brush, 1996, p.4). Producing this knowledge is a messy interaction of people, practices and places, thus the knowledge itself is complex, situated, and local (Turnbull, 2000). In many communities, expert knowers are the elders, and these individuals did not gain their expertise through formal schooling. Instead they learned through experience, and when they passed their knowledge down they supervised a similar process. Learners observe and help expert knowers complete tasks, eventually moving on to try on their own and build their expertise through trial and error (Ohmagari & Berkes, 1997). "The concept of some adults being *teachers* and others (presumably) being *non-teachers* is a somewhat alien one to many traditions" (Reagan, 2005, p.249).

To share tacit knowledge, interaction through processes like conversation, coaching, and storytelling are required (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Similarly, in contrast to formal knowledge, indigenous knowledge is usually preserved in oral traditions and is culture-specific (Brush, 1996). Graveline (2005) goes on to say that this knowledge is shared through "storytelling, poetry, metaphor, myth, ceremony, dreams and art; and honoring indigenous elders as 'cultural professor'" (p. 308). With a focus on interdependence, community, holistic approaches, and embedded, lifelong informal learning, indigenous knowing and learning is quite different from formal teaching and learning systems (Merriam et al., 2007).

Other examples of individuals coming together in community to learn together exist as well. Reading circles and literary societies were places for women to collaboratively further their own knowledge in the process creating communities and friendships that empowered members to embark on journeys of self-transformation (Kelley, 2003). Gullestad (1985) emphasizes that the discourse amongst young women who meet and visit around one another's kitchen tables is beyond social. This discourse creates a space for these women to construct normative boundaries and manage their identities, sharing how they juggle the contradictions of maintaining an attractive appearance while being a good mother. All that said, you don't have to have common experiences, values, or identities to learn from others.

It [a learning partner] is someone with whom focusing on practice together creates high learning potential: “I can see the practitioner in you from the concerns you express, from the way you behave, and from the stories you tell.” There is a kind of trust that arises out of this mutual recognition. (Wenger, 2012, p.12)

The locus of knowledge is not limited to formal institutions but instead lives within our communities—within each of us as knowers. As we interact with one another, we move beyond independent meaning making and collaborate with each other. Is it possible that in this we are shifting from the development of practical knowledge at an individual level to practical wisdom at a communal level?

“Knowing is connecting, wise ones make skillful use of connections, wisdom’s essence is concern with relationships in the context of inter-relatedness.” -Xinzhong Yao in ‘Wisdom in Early Confucian and Israelite Traditions’ (2012, p. 323)

PART 1: MEMBERSHIP IN READ ‘EM AND EATS

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Group Story

Meet the Narrator

Throughout the narrative you are about to read you will hear the voices and stories of multiple individuals. The majority of the stories here were told to me by members of the Read ‘Em and Eats book club, and are represented, to the best of my ability, completely and in their voices. Many of the stories I share were a result of conversations that I had with members, one-on-one. In addition to these conversations, I became a fully participating member of the group. Each month I read the chosen book and traveled to the host’s home for a monthly book discussion. It is through the latter that I was able to observe much of what individuals were telling me in conversations, in real time. So all the while a participant, I was also observing how the group interacted, shared, and engaged with one another thus identifying myself as a participant-observer.

I have tried very intentionally to weave this storyline and my experiences, reflections, and learnings together using the stories that were shared with me by members. Throughout the majority of this writing, I aim to synthesize and build connections across separate stories, all with the goal of aiding in meaning making around their individual and group experiences. It is for this reason that I consider my voice that of a narrator in this work, and not a main storyteller. The stories represented here were shared with permission to retell, but my goal was to treat them with the utmost respect and care. I didn’t want to deconstruct the stories shared with me, nor did I wish to claim them as my own. In this particular instance of storying and restorying, I feel it is important to make the designation my collaborators are the primary storytellers. Because the majority of my voice in this narrative serves the purpose of providing context, synthesis, and interpretation I consider myself the narrator. That said, you will have opportunities to read some of my own personal stories and key reflections throughout this work which are designated primarily by italics. While the voices here are predominantly those of my collaborators shared in the stories they told, there are key points in the framing of this broader narrative where I tell you more of my own story. At the start of this writing you read my own reflections of joining the group and attending my first meeting, and later you’ll have the opportunity to read more on the ways I was impacted by the group in

my personal life (Chapter 7). You'll also read my reflective fieldnotes, which were documented after each monthly meeting in Chapter 6: The Meetings. At these points my voice is no longer represented in italics. I feel very honored to have worked with a group who were so willing to let me be a part of their experience over the past year, and who individually shared so much of themselves with me.

It is important to note that members of Read 'Em and Eats shared deeply and honestly about their own lived experiences. In order to honor my collaborators and respect their experiences, if their stories are incorporated into this narrative—they have not been censored. As you begin reading, please note that some of the stories shared may contain content that is upsetting in nature. Content included in these stories provide depictions or descriptions of self-harming behavior (suicide), impacts of abuse (interpersonal relationships), discriminatory attitudes or actions (sexism and racism), and mental state of suffering as a result of medical diagnosis (cancer). Though not all stories contain this kind of potentially stress-inducing or activating content, such content is present. The individuals who shared these stories, or recounted the impact of them being shared originally, exhibited great vulnerability and bravery. I have immense gratitude toward them for their candid sharing and thank you, readers, in advance for engaging in their story.

The Group: Read 'Em and Eats

Read 'Em and Eats is a book club that has been established for over 10 years, and was originally started by a core member who remains a member to this day. The group consists of 11 core members with other members and guests participating at varied levels. The group meets monthly as a book club for two to four hours, but members interact socially outside of regular meetings. There is no formal meeting in December. Each of the core members are responsible for the selection of a book, assigned to a specific month in which they also host the other members at their home. Hosting duties include setting up the group's meeting space, preparing a selection of snacks and beverages, and writing or identifying a set of book discussion questions. Discussing book-specific questions is a common process for the group.

I had direct access to this group, as my mother has been a core member for almost a decade. In addition to existing acquaintances with the group, and some existing trust because of my sporadic participation (maximum one meeting per year), there were multiple benefits of approaching Read ‘Em and Eats to collaborate with me in this work. The members, though all identify as women, are diverse in life experience, marital status, educational attainment, career path and trajectory, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. My ability to engage as an authentic member of the group was enhanced because I have existing relationships with some of the core members and have attended gatherings on various occasions as a participating guest. I also believed that because of this history and a desire to support me (as another woman and book lover) in my endeavors to document their stories and celebrate them as knowers, the group would be welcoming of me as a new member and willing to participate in this work.

Meet The Members

I’d like to take this moment to briefly introduce you to the main characters of this narrative. These women are active, core members of Read ‘Em and Eats, whose voices and stories are represented in the following narrative. It is important to note that the individuals included here do not represent the full membership of this book club, nor do they encompass all those who volunteered to collaborate with me. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout this narrative.

Alice is the founder of Read ‘Em and Eats. She grew up in a neighboring town to James and went to college for one year before leaving to get married. She has four children in total, and ended up going back to school to complete an associate’s degree which led to her formal career. She identifies Christianity as particularly important to her and tries to “gently bring that lens to conversations”. Other members describe Alice as “positive”, “warm”, and even an “extra mother figure”. She tends to bring up things related to the relationships in stories, and according to Rita, “She’s in her glory—she’s got a lot of women to talk to, she loves food and a glass of wine, so she’s having a great time.”

James has been married for 30 years, 28 of which she lived in the same town as many of the book club’s other members. She has three kids and two grandchildren. She is an office manager and likes to engage in creative endeavors in her free time. She describes herself as a more “reserved and quiet

member” and has noticed that she hones in on the emotional, humanist aspects of stories. Other members consider her a “resource person” and she takes over the facilitation of the club in the winter while Alice is down South.

Rita self-identifies as “not much of a sharer”. She’s lived in the same town as other members for about 25 years, and spends six months of the year down South. She is married with three children and two grandchildren. She is retired from a lifelong career as a school administrator. Other members describe Rita as being really good at connecting the current discussion to previous stories the group has read, and reads a lot personally (and remembers details) so she serves as a great resource.

Lynn was born out of state but moved to the area of the book club when her parents bought a local business. She got married and went straight into the workforce after graduating from high school. She has one child and got divorced at the age of 26. She has since happily remarried, and works in accounting and events management. She manages the book club’s social media presence, scheduling events and posting relevant links. Other members recognize Lynn as very connected to the community and attuned to local events. She is one of the youngest members of the group and tends to bring a more relaxed point of view.

Erin is in her 50s and got married early in life. After attending a specialized postsecondary program, she began to work in the travel field where, despite some challenges and changes along the way, she still works today. She has two children and a grandchild. Though she loves reading, book club helps her widen her horizons to different genres. She is often the first to volunteer thoughts about a story because she likes to verbally figure out why she liked or didn’t like a particular story. She says she “chimes in a lot” and “says what she feels without holding back”.

Sam no longer lives in the same town as many other core members, but she did grow up there. Erin is a relative and that is how she first became acquainted with Read ‘Em and Eats. She and her husband had three children and she now works part time after retiring from the education system. She describes herself as “comfortable talking in the group” which she attributes to her experience as an educator. This was reiterated by other members who also shared that Sam is one of the more liberal

members of the group.

Gail is from a very small neighboring community, where her father was on the Board of Education, so schooling was very important to her and her five brothers and sisters. She had a full scholarship to college and chose to pursue a secretarial degree, which led her to working in a school. She fell in love with being an educator and eventually went on to be an administrator. Divorced and remarried, she never felt much comradery with other women in her workplace, so the book club provides a “generous place” for women to come together. Gail is in the process of having her own “based on true events” book published.

Charlie takes a different approach to book club discussions than many other members. Her husband is a scientific editor, and she shares similar abilities, so her discussion around the stories often relates to the author’s approach and voice—the structure of the story more so than the content. She had been in the process of writing her own non-fiction book, and has recently switched gears to toy with a novel instead. Charlie travels the farthest for book club, and is described by other members as “intellectual”, “interesting”, and a “facilitator” who brings a “serious” writer’s perspective.

Rebecca lived on the West side of the state before getting a divorce and moving back to the book club community. Her two children made it easier for her to meet people through the public school, where she met fellow book club members. She has a part-time job after retiring from her career, and enjoys spending time helping her kids and reading.

Marie was born and raised in a nearby community to the book club. She met her husband at a local university and they remained local. She worked as a coordinator at a neighboring library for 34 years. After a medical leave, her position transitioned to outreach, and after downsizing decided to put her teaching degree to use as a substitute educator. She has three children and grandchildren, and coming from a large family herself, family is her number one priority. She is a two-time cancer survivor and lost her husband to the disease last year. Since then, she has met a new gentleman with similar life experiences and considers this opportunity a nice surprise after her wonderful marriage.

A Usual Meeting

Each member I talked with walked me through their perceptions of an “average meeting” and that, combined with my own experiences as a member of the group are represented here.

As mentioned, the group meets once per month for a book discussion. The book is selected in advance by a core member, who also serves as the host for that month’s discussion unless extenuating circumstances arise. Erin mentioned that many members carpool to meetings, and Gail said “gathering is always fun. There's lots of hugging, catching up, and people passing bits back and forth.” Charlie shared, “We always have good conversations, and by now we're all such old friends that everybody interacts so much that it's just like a reunion.”

Alice, the founder, recognized the next phase of a meeting: the meal. She said, “It's just a joyful night in a month and we all get together and we socialize and eat a nice dinner that our hostess has prepared. And that’s usually pretty special.” As members arrive and catch up with one another, dinner ensues. Sometimes this includes a specialty of the host or something connected to their ethnic background. Other times the host may have just compiled some of their favorite dishes or aligned the meal with the theme or setting of the book. For example, Charlie picked a book set in Ireland and made a complete meal that aligned with Irish traditions and recipes. Rita shared, “it's a place to go that's kind of relaxing and peaceful and a comfortable place to be.”

After dinner, the group assembles into a circle if they aren’t already sitting in that configuration and each draws a question. At the inception of Read ‘Em and Eats, the group did not utilize questions to guide discussion, but found the meetings geared much more socially than connected to a dialogue on the book itself. “You randomly pick a question that is sometimes attached to a treat or a goodie,” shared Erin. Sam mentioned that the questions provide a “nice vehicle to keep us all on target” and Lynn reaffirmed, saying that the questions “give everybody their time to speak”. Sometimes the questions are provided with the book, a reality the group is finding more common as “book clubs rise in popularity” noted James, but if the book does not have accompanying questions, the questions are usually generated by Alice. We go around the circle in numerical order with the person who has question number one sharing their

question and response first. “Then it's open for the rest of the group to chime in” before moving on to question number two, noted Erin. Once all the questions have been read and discussed, Sam noted that “there's always a discussion about what's the next book and where the meeting will be” before people start packing up to head home. Alice shared that there is a strong sense of belonging that comes from “loving being a woman and discussing things with your friends”, which book club facilitates.

The Books

As mentioned, each of the core members gets the opportunity to select a book for one of the month's meetings and then hosts said meeting at their home. Later, I share reflections on how these books provided members a starting point for a kind of discussion beyond the contents of each book selection. The books read by Read 'Em and Eats during my involvement are included below to provide some context for the types of readings that helped create a space conducive for the kind of sharing you'll read more about in future parts of this narrative.

2019 books (in the order they were read): *Church of Marvels* by Leslie Parry, *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue, *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, *A Matter of Chance* by Julie Maloney, *Beasts of Extraordinary Circumstances* by Ruth E. Lang, *What the Wind Knows* by Amy Harmon, *The Storyteller's Secret* by Sejal Badani, *The Edge of Lost* by Kristina McMorris, *City of Girls* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris.

Chapter 2: How We Arrived

I was exposed to this group of women in their early years. My mom was an early member, so whenever I had either read the book already or she was hosting, I would join the group. I met them all when I was early in my college career and got to know the process of their club. That being said, I didn't really have relationships with any of the members. I popped in and out... that is until November of 2018. When I officially joined the group as a regular and active member, I knew much of the gang had been together for a while, but I really didn't have any idea that the majority of the current group were either original, founding members or early joiners (within the first couple of years). I could tell right away that these individuals had a deep and special bond. They shared things with one another that I hadn't witnessed in many other groups I'd been a part of, and were extremely giving of unconditional support- a demonstration of the unique and intimate bond that exists within the group.

Over my year as a member of the group, participating in meetings and talking with the women one on one, I bore witness to and heard on countless occasions an atmosphere of unconditional caring and acceptance within the group. Multiple individuals shared in our conversations sentiments like "I love book club" and "it's my favorite night of the month". To begin this brief peek into the narrative of Read 'Em and Eats, you'll find three member-origin stories, as told by the three members. Each one represents a slightly different perspective on the group—newcomer, original, and non-native—and how they became members. These stories represent not only the diversity in membership, but they also represent the different paths taken by members, each one leading to Read 'Em and Eats.

Through each of these stories, despite their unquities, you'll see the individuals' perceptions of camaraderie, friendship, and belonging. Their stories highlight different entry points to the group, experiences with exclusion and pre-existing relationships, and how the group has impacted these relationships over time.

Lynn: The History of a Newcomer

"I think that when I was growing up, I lived out in the Irish Hills so I wasn't in town to be able to do a lot of the in-town things. My parents were self-employed. It wasn't easy for me to stay after for

practice and stay over for stuff unless I had a friend's house to go to after school or had a way to get home, that type of thing. I did participate in some sports, but some of the extracurricular things in school I just didn't participate in because my parents were so busy with their business.

So, fast forward to when I was living in town. I enjoyed living in town. I enjoyed having neighbors and being able to walk to church and walk to the playground and things like that. Walk to the movie theater and walk to get the pizza or take a bike ride, things like that. I felt like in-town people did. A friend of mine was involved with Child Study [a group for moms to hear from experts on parenting related topics] and had invited me to join. I dabbled a couple of times in and out over the time that I've had my child, Jessica, with selling educational toys, so I think that she had invited me from that aspect, like a developmental type thing. I want to say Jessica was probably like six or seven maybe. So maybe elementary school when she invited me. I went a couple times, and I knew people like Alice, and Rita. There were a couple of the moms in there that were Jessica's friends' moms.

But I really was uncomfortable there [in Child Study]. I really felt out of my element. I was pretty sure without taking roll that I was the only single parent in the group. And I felt like it was a click... you know, like 'we all go camping together as a family'. And they were talking about their memories of doing that together. Planning stages of doing that together. And, and I don't know, I just felt like I had this big shirt with a big "D" on it or something that I was divorced. You know, that I wouldn't fit in doing stuff with them because I wouldn't have that, that other partner. So I went a couple times, and I was kind of starving for that connection to other moms and other families and, you know, with Jessica being an only child who'd like embracing a larger community, but I just didn't feel comfortable. And so I didn't, I didn't. I went a couple times and then I quit going.

Then I was married, and I felt more comfortable. But Erin had posted on Facebook and we knew each other. And she had posted on Facebook probably about the time Facebook was getting popular that she was looking for... maybe I posted... if anybody's looking for a walking partner, somebody to exercise with, I'd love to have an accountability partner. And she had replied to it and so we met at the high school and started walking. What we had in common was the community and we became fast friends.

I'm sure that probably she had said, 'I'm in this book club and would you be interested in joining? We have an opening...', but there was a gap in the group, and that intrigued me because it was some of those core people that I really wanted to get in with before. I just thought, I enjoy reading. I tend to enjoy the same types of books. You know, I could just print out the whole list of Danielle Steel books and then just cross them off as I read them kind of thing, but never really explored other genres or anything like that. So I thought, I really should push myself to read books that I wouldn't normally read. And I would like to get to know this group and be involved in these types of groups. So I went ahead and went to a couple of meetings and joined the group.

I think that book club has enhanced my friendship with Erin. I mean we did the walking thing for a while, which we don't do anymore. But we started doing a wine thing and our husbands are now friends; that normally wouldn't have happened. I don't know if it would have completely happened just from us walking, but that extra connection. Who else? I mean your mom and I have become, you know, not that we call each other every week and hang out together, but, I think we have a stronger connection than just book club. We talked about your wedding and your flowers... different things and we've chatted back and forth. And usually if we're in town and we're going to book club, I'm going to take a bottle of wine with me and have a glass and Adam will come into town and pick me up. I feel pretty strongly about not even a glass of wine and driving, so, there's been times that your mom was just like, 'I'm driving right by, I'll just take you home.' So then we get that little bit of extra time together to visit. I wouldn't necessarily do that. You know, there's the people that I'd want to spend that little extra time with, and then there are other people that, you know, I do book club with them, but that's probably the end of it.

I think of the group as being best of friends, even though pieces of the group aren't. But I think, you know, in a Kevin Bacon kind of way. There are cousins, there are best friends from childhood. There's women that raised their babies together. Alice is a great-grandma, she and Rita raised their babies together and now Alice's a great-grandma. Erin and I went to high school together, but we weren't in the same graduating class. Rebecca and I have, and James, have kids that went to high school together but weren't best friends. Gail and I talked about education all the time because of experiences with Jessica.

Denise wasn't born and raised in town, but is about as close to that as she can be for not having been.

With Charlie, I have a single parent type of... you know, if you were to put your life in different categories, there's just people that would fit under every slot and it would overlap into other slots.

Rebecca's a single parent and there are relationship goals and relationship don'ts, and there are people that I would do that because they did it that way. Or, there are people that I wouldn't do it that way because I saw them do it that way, kind of thing.

If you know that history, you would have to be thinking about that [all the knowledge that you have of the other people in the room based on the experiences that they've shared]. It seems, I am a newbie, but I've popped in and out of the group for a while now and it seems like a place that's very compassionate and right to whatever people have been through or are maybe going through at the time.”

Lynn’s story exemplifies how childhood experiences with a sense of belonging connect to how she identified and sought out groups as an adult. She recognizes moments where she didn’t feel like a member, despite identifying groups that she might have liked to be a part of. She notes longing for connection with others who share a common identity or experience and a search for camaraderie. Friendships were an important part of her life and often existing relationships were what lead to her entrance into a group. Afterwards, if she felt like she was a good fit for the group and vice versa, she was able to expand and build new friendships. In Read ‘Em and Eats, Lynn found a group she wanted to be a part of who were equally as welcoming of her into their space. Through the time she has spent as a member, she has learned from observing fellow members’ experiences and come to recognize the unique ways their individual identities intersect, even if book club membership is the crux of their relationship.

Rita: The History of an Original Member

“I'm not sure how long this book club's been going, but somebody must've told you...”

Well I have the book lists starting in 2008, I said.

“Right. So that's over 10 years. Alice said, let's have a book club and she kind of started the whole thing. And it's just gone on and on. It's worked really well.

I love reading in the first place and then all the people that we were going to do this [book club] were people I liked hanging out with. And it's hard to schedule things. So if you want to hang out and be together, you kind of have to have an appointment, you have to have the fourth Monday of every month being book club and then you get to see each other. Because we once said, let's go to a movie. Four or five of us and go out. It was six weeks before all of us could be- that we had a date that we could all make. So you have book club; we have an opportunity to say, 'oh, we have to be here.' This is the fourth Monday and we get to be there.

People like the comradery and you start out talking about the book and then you end up talking about things that are personal. It seems like a safe and a fairly nice... to me it seems like a fairly safe environment. You're with people you've been with long enough to know that it isn't a judgmental thing because everybody in their life has things they can be judged on, and you get to a point in your life where you know there's just no place to judge. You don't know what tomorrow's going to bring in your own life, so... you're certainly going to have compassion and understanding for other people and we need that. Women need it.

So things that make child-raising difficult or make being married difficult are those things that you are able to share, Alice said once to me. Alice and I had been friends for about 50 years. It's coming up on our 50th anniversary. But when our oldest children who are in their 50s were little... and they would run up and down this street- we lived in a different city- we would sit like this constantly. We'd say 'my husband drives me nuts. When he does this, and when he does that'. 'My husband, you know, and he goes', listen. And then we'd go back in the house and we'd feel good because we vented. She said once 'people pay hundreds of dollars for this, you know. To just go and have somebody listen to them talk about stuff without necessarily saying, well if you change this and change that, then maybe you wouldn't have this problem'. So it was just listening and being there. That was years and years ago.

Book club is an opening up. It's almost like free association. You start talking and then, when you're reading a book, a book itself will bring up thoughts and feelings about your own life and your own experiences that you might not have thought about for a while or saw it from a different point. So when

you go to the meeting, you can talk about the book, which I love. It's not all just group therapy, we do like to talk about the books, we like to share the ideas about the writing. But it's so much more than that. I don't think I've seen in all of these years, I haven't seen any conflict. I've seen people disagree. We don't all like each other's books. They hated my book, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, I think. Not everyone hated it. Two or three people liked it, but it's a great book. It's a Pulitzer Prize-winning book. But yeah. It's not for everybody.

It's a book club friend group and just the same as it would be if it were a Child Study. You know, you each have your own lives and you talk about your own lives a lot. But I would never go over to Sam's... I mean, I can't say never. I might drop over at Sam's house, but it's not something she would expect me to be doing. Alice would and Marie would and, and maybe Gail would and, it's the same way with book club and Child Study. Those were all clubs. We had to hang out with other people.

And that's the same kind of thing that I think I've seen in this group for the most part. Everyone isn't best friends. People don't hang out together outside of book club a whole lot. I think Erin and Sam are good friends. Alice and I are good friends. A lot of the people who were in the original group and some people we are just getting to know like... Sam. So yes, we are all friends in book club and I could rely on anybody in book club if I ever needed anything. I could call any of them. And I know that they would be glad I did. In book club with everybody, you don't say, 'what are we doing?' Or 'what have you got?' 'Are you thinking of something we can do?' There are certain people you would do that with. But not everybody. And that's fine. It's not a negative.

I'm trying to think of other groups that we've had that were like that. We have garden club and we had Child Study, but... a book opens up a kind of a passage, a way of opening up and sharing. It's much more... A much better vehicle for that than garden club or even Child Study because we'd have speakers and talk to them and say 'thank you for coming' and then it was kind of goodnight. And this is all about discussion, right? I don't know if others [groups] are like that. I have to think book clubs in general have a lot more sharing in them than other kinds- than pinochle clubs or whatever. I was thinking that quilting clubs, things like sewing circles, especially in older days when the women all got together, those were

situations. I don't think people were as open or were encouraged to be open. You kept things... you kept your troubles to yourself.

If I wrote a book about book club, the club would be the main character. That's really how that strikes me, as that's the main character. Do you remember the movie *The Big Chill*? Because in that a whole group of people that came together were individuals, but they were also a community that shared common experiences. The longer we exist, the more time that we watch people getting old. We watch people growing up and sometimes they do mix; Child Study kind of blends into book club because I'll remember when James was pregnant for her now adult children and things like that. It's just what it is. I just love it.”

Not unlike Lynn, Rita's history with the group is woven with threads of friendships and relationships that existed before the group's inception. Where Rita and Lynn differ greatly is their orientation to and experience with previously existing groups and their members. Rita was an active member of Read 'Em and Eats from the very start because she was also an engaged member of a group with many common members. Her history with the book club's original founder dates back decades and spans locations. Because of this, Rita's story has less emphasis on what led her to book club, and instead showcases why she has continued to be a member over time. In addition to great affection for individual members, she talks about the great camaraderie she has gleaned from being a member and the different ways inner-group (rather than the whole group) relationships form and exist. The group's lengthy time of participation and engagement together has provided a unique space for sharing that Rita qualifies as “safe”. The group has a set of unspoken norms around engagement and support for one another, which probably contributes to this safe feeling. That, in addition to the manner in which the group accommodates individuals' identities while having an identity of its own, makes Read 'Em and Eats where Rita goes to socialize- even valuing the way the group's structure allows her to protect her time to do so- in a reliable and supportive fashion.

Charlie: The History of a Non-native

“I’m 70. I’m divorced, I have three kids and got divorced. Most of my time really was raising them as a single mother. When I moved to town from out of state after the divorce- in my former city, I was used to having friends of all sorts of different religions and my husband was an American Yogi. And I became very good friends with his guru, because the school would meditate with all sorts of backgrounds of people and say, ‘all I care about is that when we meditate you get a little closer to God or that part of God that’s in you gets a little brighter. And if that happens, I’m happy.’ And he didn’t ask for anything more. So that was my role model.

I came to the town where book club is hosted because my sister was living there. She’s kind of a, well, she had become a born again Christian. We were brought up very liberal. My brother went to American Indian beliefs. In college, I went more towards the eastern religions in Maryland. In college, my sister went very... like born again, end of days, the rapture. So I get to my new town and she goes, this is a very conservative town.’ She says, ‘this is not at all like this city you just moved from and you are not to say anything about what you did there.’ She said, ‘if you even talk about meditation, you are going to get your kids ostracized. And by reflection, they will probably ostracize my kids as well.’ And I thought, ‘Oh God, she’s really gone off the wall now.’ But I said, ‘okay, you know, it’s easy enough to just talk in common terms.’ Sure enough, we got into this Child Study and it’s a really nice group of people who would come and go. And at one point we had a woman come to talk- ‘cause every week we had a speaker- and the plan was teaching kids conflict resolution K-12. But she says, ‘now in the beginning years [of childhood], the really early years, all we’re going to teach them is to just sit down real quiet, close their eyes, take a few deep breaths, and think of a really nice, peaceful, safe place to be. That’s all we’re going to do...’ The people started exploding.

They were like ‘Meditation. That’s some kind of Eastern, new age garbage and it’s from the devil.’ And she’s like, ‘no, no, no. This is not. It doesn’t have anything to do with religion. We were just teaching the kids a kind of center flow.’ And they went, ‘Oh no, we’ve been studying this book, *Angels and Demons*.’ And then says, ‘We’re using it in our churches, as a study guide because it lists all the ways

that the demons can get into your community and can come and can destroy it.' I sat there with my mouth open going, 'Oh my God, my sister was right.' And then I thought, and I said, 'It doesn't seem so bad to get kids to just learn to stop and get themselves centered and get back to feeling good before they deal with things.' They were going on and on, 'No, no. This book outlines it very clearly' and they were going to be the gatekeepers. They are going to make sure that none of this stuff gets into the town.

I went home and I thought, 'Maybe it's time for me to get out [of Child Study].' And then I thought, 'You know, those four people were very outspoken, but everybody else was very quiet. Maybe I need to be the voice that lets people know that they're not the only ones who may feel a different way about this and that there are other ways to look at the situation.' Maybe that would give them the courage to say, 'oh, well good.' Because I think people want to be part of a group so much that if they only hear real vocal people, they're afraid to speak up for fear. They're afraid to go against what they think the rest of the group is going with. And so I started speaking up more in very general terms.

They refused to let the school show *Nightmare Before Halloween*. The teachers were going to show that while they were in a one-hour meeting but that was just, 'that was just devilish. That was totally unChristian.' And I said, 'wait a minute. I said, have you even seen that movie?' I said, 'we watched it, is a darling movie. And I don't see that it's in any way going to hurt anyone's religious beliefs.' And at that point then somebody else would say, 'yeah, I love the music in that.' And then everyone else broke in. Eventually they ended up leaving- the two that were really the ring leaders.

But I think what I love about this whole thing of how groups come together is that without different opinions, it's just whoever yells loudest and everyone's afraid to really go against the tide. I mean I could have yelled back, 'you're a blah, blah, blah'. Which doesn't help. I think that's a lot of what we need in society period... is that you sit and talk about what are the values, and what are the ways that we can meet these common values.

So I came to town 'cause my sister was there and she says, 'I can help get you established and the schools are good...' She was very active at that point in Child Study. And shortly after I got involved [in Child Study], she actually stepped back because she was starting to go in a different direction. I stayed

with it because I was working in a neighboring city. I had a one hour commute to get to work. I didn't have time to go out and get to know the neighbors and I thought, 'I can't just live in this town with no contact with women.' So Child Study was my answer. The people were lovely for a really long time. After I married I moved up here [the city I was commuting to for work] and they had book club going and I think somewhere along the way, one of the people from Child Study said, 'oh, how about book club?' And I really wanted to keep those connections up.

I love the idea of a book club. I really didn't know anyone that was doing a book club that I would like. I just liked the setup. And for me, because I'm retired, I don't get to spend a lot of time with women, other than neighbors. And I think women especially- they're stuck with the home and all that kind of stuff- needs some kind of quality time with other women. I think that's part of it. Part of it is that I love being with women that love reading and being able to talk about a book that I've read instead of just saying, this is a really good book, you should read it. So book club is also really important to me. It's one of my favorite nights because I've been exposed to books that I wouldn't have read on my own. And because as you know, everybody sort of brings a part of themselves to the book. So you get different viewpoints on the book. And the nicer part about this then about Child Study is that when it gets really crazy, we just yell, 'it's just a book.' Everyone can back away."

Lynn and Rita both mention varied experiences with membership in a previous group (Child Study) in their connection to book club. These two mentioned Child Study briefly in their stories, where for Charlie, her interactions with Child Study are a strong influence on how she views group dynamics, health, and norms within book club. Charlie's story highlights the ways groups can be unsupportive and exclusionary when individual experiences, values, or ideas don't mimic their own and the impact that can have on a person as they try (or don't try) to fit in. For Charlie, it meant a shift from accommodating the group despite negative experiences to going against the tide in attempts to create space for differing viewpoints. She notes that lack of welcoming, listening, safety, acceptance left her wanting a different kind of group. Being from a different city and moving into the group meant Charlie was a non-native to the group and then moving away from the city reinforced this status. She still searched for belonging and

found Read 'Em and Eats to be an invitation to maintain the positive morsels from the previous group: relationships, friendships, and supportive and accepting sharing. Book club provided a space for her to do something she already enjoyed with a group of women, where individuals all contributed to the whole in healthier ways than she had seen and felt in other groups.

These three stories are just glimpses at the ways in which individuals came to be members of Read 'Em and Eats, and how their individual experiences over time have led to a great affinity for one another. Though different, all three speak to the great value of the friendships cultivated in the group and how their history together has continued to lead to even more intimate relationships, understanding, and support for one another. These ideas are important to keep in mind as you continue to Part 3: A Seat at My Table, where the stories individuals shared expand upon the ideas of histories and friendship to help build an understanding around how a sense of community and trust are pivotal to the group as a space for sharing and learning with and from one another.

Throughout the remaining parts of my Read 'Em and Eats narrative, you'll see stories from members represented in a variety of formats. These stories were primarily collected through one on one conversations with each of the participating members and were selected based on their ability to speak to the particular themes within each part of this larger narrative. In this part, "How We Arrived", you were presented with three longer format stories from only three individuals in the group. Throughout the remaining parts of this work, you will see stories presented in different ways. You will see parts organized by particular themes that highlight comments from multiple members as one intertwined story that reflects on each theme. You will see a format similar to the one presented in this part, but rather than three individuals, the comments from multiple individuals on the same three story-sharing moments are synthesized as evidence for particular characteristics of the group. Throughout these next sections that focus on the sharing of stories from Read 'Em and Eats members, their words will be in unformatted text while my reflections and discussion will be in italics.

Chapter 3: A Seat at My Table

Throughout my experiences with Read 'Em and Eats, the group showed a level of trust with one another that I hadn't seen in other social groups that I've been a part of. These women prioritize sharing with one another and note the special bond that they have with one another, one they know they can depend on if they ever needed outside of book club. This connection and recognition of both perceived and actualized support from the group makes Read 'Em and Eats reminiscent of a mini community. They recognize roles that other individuals play not only in the group, but how other members' identities intersect with their own. On multiple occasions individuals shared some version of "book club night is my favorite night of the month" or "I just love it"; in fact I think each and every member expressed some version of this sentiment to me through my time with the group.

*In this part of the Read 'Em and Eats story, you'll see comments and narrative from five of the groups' members. This collection, unlike the stories in previous parts of the narrative, is made up of comments from multiple women as they shared their ideas and experiences related to the core themes of **trust** and **community**. There are a few factors connected to Read 'Em and Eats' standard operating structure that I believe contribute to the building of trust and community, and thus the joy derived, in group meetings. Unlike other informal social groups who often meet in public spaces like dining establishments or libraries, Read 'Em and Eats meets in members' homes. From the group's inception, the member who selected the book for the month is the "host" of that meeting. Each of the core members are thus responsible for hosting the group in their homes one time per calendar year. Hosting entails everything you might think of in the traditional sense of the word. Hosts usually describe some version of "preparing their home" which included things like tidying and cleaning, sequestering pets away, and organizing seating to accommodate the group. Also in the most traditional sense of hosting, as the name implies, Read 'Em and Eats share a meal together. So before everyone arrives, each host prepares a meal, a full meal (not just snacks) that's meant to serve about a dozen people.*

I observed two things related to this part of the group's structure. Being in someone's home, seeing them in their "natural" environment that they built themselves (or with their families) helped

challenge my subconscious assumptions about them and allowed me a glimpse into their everyday lives. Then eating a meal prepared by the host, often literally sitting at the table where they eat with their loved ones, felt welcoming and intimate. The conversation was always social, and rarely about the book. Instead, this beginning moment- entering someone's home and eating a meal with each other- created space for people to bring their whole-selves to the group. We talked about our days, what was upcoming that we were looking forward to, any updates from things shared at the last meeting. Through these aspects of the group meetings, I not only got to know each host better, but slowly became enveloped into the community of Read 'Em and Eats. Many of the women mentioned sharing dinner in the homes of fellow members in our conversations. I leave it to two of the group's members to share their experiences and contributions with these aspects.

“I know from friends that had been in book club the first two years, because so many people were from Child Study, meetings ended up just being a chit-chat,” said Charlie about how the meetings came to have this question and answer structure. “Finally Alice brought it down into what it is now by getting the questions lined up.” She continued, explaining how she influenced the way food functioned with the group. “They used to, after the meeting was all over at 10 o'clock, they would have just little snacks. I did a German book and I had hot German food out. They had always had food at the end, but in my case I said, ‘no, it's hot. Let's start now.’ And we did. So that's when we got started with having the big meal beforehand.” While Charlie recognized how her membership influenced the order of book club operations, Erin recognized that the meal and where meetings were held was truly important to the group's functioning. She said, “That's a good point to add is how we choose to have it [book club] in each others' homes and with food. It's a bonding type of thing.” Erin went on to share just how much the home hosting impacts meetings saying, “We've had meetings where someone couldn't have it in their house that month and we've met in a restaurant or something like that. And it just isn't the same. I think that's a huge part of how we've bonded. It's because we're in each other's homes. I think as we've gotten more comfortable with each other, and the longer book club goes on, more of those moments tend to pop out. So I think the feeling of the group has just come with time and familiarity.”

Charlie's story briefly explained the evolution of the meal as a part of the group's standard meetings, while Erin discussed the bigger impacts she's noticed from meeting in peoples' homes. She goes on to connect that aspect of the group's function to her perceptions of their closeness and willingness to share. Many members also discussed aspects of membership that connect back to ideas of community and trust. In this next part of the narrative are excerpts from members on each of these topics. Some members addressed feelings of community and trust directly, while others discussed factors or aspects of the group that I believe directly contributed to or resulted from the trust and community felt amongst Read 'Em and Eats members. The next two sections highlight some of the narrative shared by members during our conversations that reflect these two ideas.

Trust

Gail shared some of the aspects of the group that contribute to those feelings of trust. “Just interaction with women,” she said. “I mean, finding out what's going on in their life and what's happening. Whenever people share something moving or deep in their heart or something really big that's happening in their life, you have that moment... like when Marie talks about John, like when you talked about your husband. And those are the moments that just knock you on your keester and you know, you realize the fragility of it. It's an opportunity to connect deeper with that person and to step up and give them the support and love that they need in a safe place where they can talk about whatever it is that's bothering them because you're willing to feel this thing here.” Those feelings she recognizes in the group—“Sympathetic, caring, safe...” she listed. “I think we're a group of people that genuinely care about each other.” She continues, saying, “I think I do feel closer to people because they have shared things at book club. They'll say something that... you know, we bear our hearts with each other. And you really feel warm toward them because they've shared a piece of their heart with you from time to time.”

Marie shared similar sentiments about the aspects of the group that influence the affinity they have for one another. “Lots of talking. Lots of catching up. Great food. Just people having a wonderful time.” She expanded on this overview by diving deeper into the impacts of individuals' interactions on how the group functions as a whole. “We relate to each other and support each other in talking or in

conversation on start. And of course in talking about the book... sometimes there are disagreements and sometimes everybody agrees. So you never know what's going to happen at one of these meetings. You never know. Even if you're talking about the book, you're also talking about people's lives.” Marie discusses how this natural shift in the group’s conversation enhances the feelings shared throughout the group. “Now, you get some really bad news. You might get some really good news. We get very exciting news. I mean, come on. That's full of emotions.” She concludes, “It's just a great time. Everybody is so loving and caring about each other.”

“You get people that you trust, not only because you've been in their home, they've been in your home. I think that's really another thing women do in our group that they wouldn't normally,” starts Rebecca, acknowledging that for her, Read ‘Em and Eats is a unique group to belong to. “They share the weights that they have on their shoulders. And then through the book, a person shares some of their anxiety, they're met with caring and find out, ‘you know what, that's not as bad as I thought’ or ‘you know what, these people care about me’.” It’s this type of realization that reinforces Rebecca’s feelings of trust in the group. “I'm comfortable in the group sharing because of that. It feels more comfortable,” she says.

“I've had a small number of people that I really trust and I will talk, you know, and spend time with. But I trust almost all of those women. I think I could probably go to almost all of them as long as I stayed away from certain subjects and tell them certain things. There are certain things I would not tell anybody in that group. But for everyday kind of emotional things that we could all relate to... Yeah. I can trust any of them” said Charlie.

These four women shared multiple reflections about the dynamic of the group and how they experience trust with one another. Some shared particular factors of the group’s structure that created environments to build trust, such as hosting the meetings in one another's' homes, eating meals together, and personal sharing that happens in book discussions. Others mentioned particular characteristics of the group’s interactions that reinforced this feeling of reliability and confidence in one another. Regardless of the framing, members of Read ‘Em and Eats each discussed the trust that they had within

the group, some even mentioning the unique nature of that trust, and how the trust they share contributes to a sense of belonging and community.

Community

“Any one book is not important,” says Charlie. “The conversation is the idea... how we're actually getting together and communicating and sharing. I think it's the interaction that really defines the group more than just what the book is or what the topic.” She transitions from the type of conversations the group had, the kind of sharing that links them to other social groups, to the impact that membership has had on her life. “This is my high point of the month because I'm usually stuck up here *[in a town about 40 minutes north of most other members]*.” Charlie continues to discuss the role the group has had in her life, saying, “I mean we have neighbors that we see and I go out occasionally with other girlfriends, but this is my big social time to be with women. Because being with a husband who is so German, I need to get together with women, you know? So book club is a highlight.”

Marie continues in a similar vein as Charlie, sharing how she sees the group as a whole. “They're all so supportive. They're all so warm and cozy. We become like a family, like an extended family.” Being a member of this group, this “extended family” has a significant emotional impact on her. “I miss seeing them if I miss a book club. If I miss seeing them, I'm very unhappy. Unfortunately it's usually something I just can't avoid. Usually, if I'm not there, I'm somewhere out of the state,” she shared, becoming almost wistful. “Basically we just connect. We have such a good connection. All of us. I mean, it's just great. It is a little family and our connections are just great. I think I just really want to be there every time. I think because it's such a warm, safe place and we can talk about anything. And what we know about each other!” Marie concluded with the function of the group in her life. “We all help each other. It's women talking. It's just so good. I mean we all need that support system. In book club, we have a natural support system.”

For Rebecca, the community of the club has provided connections to individuals that she knows she can turn to for certain things. She says, “I really do enjoy the club and I think it's admirable in a town this small, to have a group that keeps going for as long as this one.” One factor she recognized as a key

role in the group's longevity is the sense of community. "I think one thing I've noticed is anybody's welcome and anybody will come. You get the fellowship of everybody there." Through their gathering and this "fellowship", Rebecca has learned about the lives of her group-mates and how that intersects with her own. "You know, you just started to talk to people about their kids and their grandkids and their lives in general. You ask 'did you get your washing machine fixed at this place' or 'just spray things like this' and get input. On top of that, the food is amazing. Because that's another part of a club, everybody does their best when it comes to the food and hosting stuff. It's really enjoyable because you get recipe ideas..." She transitions, "You know, Rita always has her fall festival party and those kinds of things. People play euchre and all that kind of stuff. And, so being a part of this group can get you connected to a whole bunch of things. It's just a really fun experience."

Like Rebecca, Gail highlighted the group as a whole before sharing in greater detail, her philosophy for building relationships and interacting inside the group. "I think book club consists of women who are willing to share and listen. It's a real fun loving laughing group. I like that they joke. It's always just such a nice touch, 'cause I think it kind of takes the edge off." Unlike other members of the group, Gail has many relationships that exist with other members but outside the confines of book club. For her, this influences the way she approaches meetings. She explained, "I tend to kind of avoid the people that I know most. Because I see them all the time. I see Alice. I see Marie. I see Rita. I see Sam. I see... the core group of people there, half of them, a lot. Where the other people I don't see very often. I always want to catch up with them and see what's happening and what's going on to feel closer to them. And maybe the people who haven't known each other for so long, they're feeling like all of these guys have known each other since Child Study. I wasn't in Study, but I did know them for a long time. So I always try to make a point to focus on the people I only see in book club." She reflects on the impact she hopes that makes saying, "maybe that makes them feel more connected to the group and comfortable there. Everybody has their own level of discomfort when they're in a group, Especially if you don't know everybody really well, you tend to stand back and be a little quieter in the second line. Go to the people that you feel comfortable with. And I try to do it the opposite."

Gail's orientation to this kind of engagement to enhance a sense of community goes back to her career as a school administrator. "Part of that is my 34 years experience in education. I mean, my job as a principal every morning was to look around my hallway with all the parents and the kids standing there and see the ones that are jumping all over me, waving at me, showing me their new toy... They got all kinds of attention all day because they grabbed it. But then if you looked around the hallway, you'd see all these families that are tucked away in corners. Families that were shy and feeling disoriented... feeling like they're not a part of the group. So my goal during that time was to try to go to each one of those people. If they weren't involved in conversations with other parents, I could introduce them to a parent like 'did you guys know each other?' And I'm such a chatty person that it was my mission to try and make every single person feel like they talked to somebody in their lobby that morning and because I was the big shot and they were just talking to me people would think, 'Wow. She noticed my kid.' 'She noticed my kid's shoes' or 'she saw me playing basketball'. You just have something to say to bring them into the general conversation. So I have a lot of experience doing that. And I try to do that in book club as well."

While Gail explained her own philosophy on engaging with the group, Rebecca shared the ways she sees other members contributing to group dynamics. "It seems like every member has a kind of role. There's Alice, who is the most positive person in the world. You could go to her with anything and she would help you. Maybe she wouldn't have the solution, but she would be company for someone always. Rita is just a wonderful person. She would always be there for ya. Charlie is very intellectual and she knows a lot. It's just interesting to be around her. James is always a good resource. Erin, she is a person I think who would really understand a lot of things. She's been through a lot and has a wonderful family and now a Grandson. So everybody has something going on and I think that everybody kind of is aware of everybody's strong point." For Rebecca this know-how of the ways individual members contribute to the group is more than just standard dynamics. Instead, the unique contributions or roles of each member contribute to the uniqueness of the community, the space that is created with book club. "I think that one thing about this group, it's really nice that there's no animosity. There's no cattiness or any pettiness or anything like that. It's all just good," Rebecca shared.

The niceness of the group as a whole, and the knowledge of the norms (despite them being unarticulated) connects the two themes of trust and community for Gail. “If I had an issue, I would feel quite comfortable sharing it with Marie, sharing it with Alice, sharing it with Rita, sharing it with James... just calling someone. I am close enough with all the women that if I had a problem that I was really struggling with and I needed more support or more advice, I could call any woman in that book club and I know that they'd meet me for coffee and they help. That is a lot of women to be able to call any one of them say, ‘hey look, I'm in trouble here’ and they'd help me.”

Throughout the comments from these five women, you hear both direct comments pointing out feelings and conditions of trust, as well as come to better understand some characteristics of the group and its gatherings that contribute to that culture of trust. In some instances it was difficult to separate the stories from members into these themes. You might have observed the closely related nature of the themes that define this group and their interactions. I have come to believe that for Read ‘Em and Eats, the two these discussed in this part are inseparable... they have a mutual symbiotic relationship. The trust that members of the group feel toward one another contribute to the broader feeling of closeness and community as a whole, and the sense of community expressed as a group creates an environment where trust can build, grow, and thrive. For this reason, these themes are not meant to be ordered. In Chapter 2: How We Arrived we saw how time and friendship built a foundation for the broader discussion of trust and community here in Chapter 3. Similarly, all four themes—time, friendship, trust, and community—have set the stage for the stories that are shared in Chapter 4: Let Me Lighten Your Load where members shared stories of vulnerability and empathy.

Chapter 4: Let Me Lighten Your Load

“When we did Michael J. Fox, his book”, James was saying, “I have such mixed feelings. I’m Catholic and I’m supposed to believe that you shouldn’t have an abortion and all that kind of stuff. But I wouldn’t have had the twins if we hadn’t done in vitro fertilization. And so there are a lot of things that start coming up that way.” Charlie continued to reflect on how book club discussion made a special space for the lived experiences of members, saying, “And I think this is because most of the novels that we pick, probably any novel that you pick up, you could see something of yourself in it for sure. I think that brings out people. ‘yeah, I could relate to this,’ and then they’ll tell their own experience.” She concluded this particular recounting with a particularly poignant reflection that sets the stage nicely for this section: “This sharing of self is part of the reason why I think the group has gotten closer over the years.”

*Stories represented in this part of the Read ‘Em and Eats narrative are organized in a fashion that is different from other parts of the broader narrative. There were three key moments in the history of the group that came up in almost all of my one-on-one conversations with individual members. In the previous part, we heard multiple reflections from individuals about how the sense of community and trust are built and continue to exist in Read ‘Em and Eats. I believe it is because of the feeling of belonging and confidence in one another built over time through the development of close relationships in the group that members respond empathetically toward one another. It is this unspoken norm of **empathy** within the group that supports a more **vulnerable level of sharing** than often exists in other social spaces. The stories that follow are all a result of vulnerable sharing (and empathetic responses) that made a lasting impression on the individuals retelling them below. Key reflections from individuals have been combined to represent the impact of vulnerable sharing on the group as well as collective group responses.*

Reflections on Suicide

“I am a survivor of suicide.” Erin took a pause and continued, “I had a family member that committed suicide and that has come up in a lot of books. I had a family member that committed suicide and there’s not a lot of people outside my inner circle that know that because it’s just not something that you, you know, that you chat about.” Erin’s story demonstrates the permission that stories read in book

club give to individual members to share their own stories. “That is one thing that I have shared within the group that doesn't come up in regular conversation at work. You know, it's not something that you tell your coworkers. Usually in certain environments... it's just not... it's kind of a downer, you know, and it's just not something that you bring up.” Erin was able to share her experience and the impact of that experience on her life today with the group, because a similar theme came up in one of their monthly books. She continued, “And if you're talking about something that has brought the subject up organically... it's something that just comes up and you can relate to. So you kind of just chime in with your own personal experiences. So even though it's not something that I've chatted about with a lot of people that I've known for a very long time, it's something that has come up in book club because it [suicide] happened in a particular book. So the people that know about my experience are people in book club, or people that knew me when it happened, not people that have met me after the fact.” This story came directly from Erin herself, but the sharing she did in book club around this experience resonated with a lot of the members.

Lynn is one who knew Erin when she was first going through the experience of losing a family member in this way. “I think that book club is a good outlet for Erin regarding the situation with losing her dad. It's not something she brings up every book club obviously, but I think it's...” Lynn paused to collect her thoughts. She changed gears slightly and explained, “She [Erin] and I are close friends. We'd spent a lot of time walking together and talking and I can pretty much talk about anything. So we've talked- not in detail, but it's not like she holds back- about that situation. But I also don't think she's a person that would necessarily talk to strangers about it. And we definitely aren't strangers in book club, but there's people that are closer and definitely people in the group that we don't know very well. Regardless, I don't think that she holds back because of that, you know?” Lynn reflects on the vulnerability that Erin demonstrated in book club, that as an old friend she hadn't witnessed in other spaces- a testament to the safety created and maintained by members of Read ‘Em and Eats. “I think book club is a safe space for that type of discussion,” said Lynn.

Marie prefaced her story with, “You probably have already heard this story, it's probably impacted a lot of people.” Then she continued, “Erin, her father committed suicide and we had read a book sometime and she revealed that to us and how devastating that experience was in her life. We’re talking about someone killing themselves in the book and then she shared that her father indeed... Suicide.” Marie proceeded, “She [Erin] moved some to tears. And we were just comforting her and she kept talking, telling us about the situation with something like that and what transpired afterwards. And it all happened over a long time ago, so we were alike and none of us knew that history. It was pretty startling.” For Marie, a member that did not know Erin at the time of her father’s death, the news came as a shock and the memory of that time in book club still remains vivid. She also acknowledged that part of unspoken norms in the space was to be supportive of one another, responding with compassion and listening. “So that was one of the things, the impact it had on her life was pretty devastating. In the books, they talk about the devastation, how devastating and awful and terrible... and all the different things that they feel throughout. They're mad, they're in all these different things. It pretty much lined up with what she was feeling. That was something she revealed to us.” Like Lynn, Marie shared how the books they read can be catalysts for individuals sharing their lived experiences.

Rita recounted Erin’s sharing, but with a slightly different tone. “Erin’s discussion about her father committing suicide is a great example of how one of those things that comes out, and then somebody else will bring up a problem and we talk about that whole idea. For example, if someone [in the book] died in a car accident, then somebody who had experienced that kind of a thing will say, ‘that happened in my life and this is how it affected me’. And those are things that you're not just going to bring up at the dinner party. It's beyond polite conversation.” Rita’s comments focused on the space that book club creates for sharing, along with ways members regard the group that contribute to broader feelings of safety and support. She resumed, “I keep bringing up Erin because that was one of the first times I really remember. She just talked about her experience very casually... and you realize exactly what that is, that feeling of being in a safe place. That you're not concerned. It isn't going to be gossip. It's not going to be something that gets judged or overanalyzed. You're just going to be listened to and people are

going to know you better than they did before. And that's a good thing. It's not anything to be concerned with or afraid of. I think that's a huge value.” Rita discussed how the space created by the group, combined with the empathy that members exhibit toward one another, all contribute to the group’s dynamic and ways of interacting.

It seems appropriate to end this collection of sharing back with Erin. As Erin mentioned before, talking about the trauma of her past wasn’t commonplace for her. While stories from other members seem most certainly a testament to the impact of her sharing on them, being in a place and space where she felt comfortable sharing was also invaluable for Erin. She offered another example of a book being discussed serving as a catalyst for sharing and how that sharing with this group of women was extremely positive. “There was a time in my life where I felt like I lost purpose in the same year that my youngest went off to college. So I had the empty nest going on, and this is when the economy took a dive in '08 and '09. And the business that I had managed for 11 years closed. So it was a time in my life where I kind of lost my identity. I was a mom and I was the manager of Global Travel for 11 years. That's what I did. And then all of a sudden I had none of that, all at the same time and was home with a lot of time on my hands.” As we sat alone in Erin’s living room, she glanced at framed photos of family and shelves of books. “That was about the time that book club started, which really was wonderful for me because something that I really needed was a purpose. So anytime when there's life changes, I can relate that time in my life to the story.”

Reflections on Grief

Similar to reflections on suicide shared above, Sam shared the loss of her son with the book club members in the past. “I can share. I just don't want to be too dark sometimes. Like if I want to talk about grief or something, some people may forget and it's okay. It's been two years since we lost our son, but some people may forget about that piece,” said Sam. Interestingly, this sharing didn’t land in the group quite the same way as Erin’s story. Where Erin’s story had some kind of shock value, Sam’s loss of a child and the grief experienced by a mother wasn’t recounted at the same frequency when people were sharing their stories with me. Sam continued, “I'm probably a little more comfortable. I mean, I'm not comfortable with it... I probably—through my life have experienced a different kind of grief than other

people. And so I don't want to be dark about it or too intense about it.” Unlike Erin, Sam focuses greater attention on the impact of her story on other members, and keeps that potential impact in mind when deciding what and when to share. That said, Sam’s sharing in particular has very similar threads as Erin’s. She recounts the role of the book in igniting a space for sharing, saying, “It's not really the venue, but also a lot of literature kind of takes that [grief] on... I think it's like when you buy a new car and you notice, ‘oh look how many of these particular model cars are already on the road and I didn't notice it before.’ So it's just more relevant to me. And then other people have other things that are really relevant to them, I think. I think Alice lost her mother pretty much around when we lost our son and we happened to have a book about a funeral, which I was like, ‘God, I don't know if I'm ready’, but it was actually kind of cathartic, you know. I probably wouldn't have sat with you in the library and talked to you about it, but the literature brings a venue of topics, and that's what it's supposed to be. Good art or literature makes you feel something.”

Sam’s story continued to resonate with Lynn, who recounted a recent meeting where I was in attendance that made her particularly aware of Sam and what she might be feeling related to conversations on grief. Lynn explained, “I think everybody reached out to Sam with the loss of her son as much as they could, but she just kind of backed off and seemed a little bit closed off... to do her own healing. I think for Sam talking about losing him, that is tough. There was a book that we just did that she got a little ruffled about that [loss and grief] and I felt bad. There was something that was said and it hit home for her. It was something to the effect of ‘you shouldn't assume something about a death because that's very hurtful to the family.’ So it wasn't anything about the book. The teacher who was killed in Tecumseh. Everybody was putting in their two cents.” A very interesting observation about Lynn’s recounting of Sam’s loss and the lasting impact that grief has had on her life shows up in a group moment outside of book discussion. Unlike Erin and Sam, Lynn’s story comes from an adjacent conversation, one that happened during the meal prior to the actual book discussion. “I felt really bad in that moment because Sam... I mean, the people that were talking did not mean it in any context to be hurtful to her, but her reaction seemed to be more like ‘this chatter of what you think happened and how—the conversation

gets out of hand.' There was just so much speculation and it doesn't matter at all. Just the whole situation sucks and that's all that really needed to be said. I think that definitely hit a nerve for her... just people talking about what happened and how it happened and what should have happened and why did that happen. All that chatter is so hurtful to the family. That's just an incredible loss and none of that matters.' Her example highlights how members are (or are not) conscious of the ways their comments may affect others based on what they'd shared in previous gatherings. Lynn remembered Sam's story and felt that the ongoing conversation was not being framed in a way that was empathetic to her past.

In the same meeting recounted by Lynn, the idea of grief arose again and Gail reflected on that moment in a way that was more directly connected to the book to further the discussion. Gail began, "At the recent one you were at where we were sitting at the table at Sam's house. We were talking about death and people that died that are close to us, and different ways of handling death and how we felt about that. And I think I made the comment that you're dealing with the death experience. You're dealing with it all the time, all the time... All. The. Time. And it's so crucial to you." Gail recounted the way one book, one discussion, brought out a space for her to discuss the uniqueness of grief. Without naming her loss, she seemed to be reflecting what it was like to lose a loved one herself, and how support comes and goes while the reality is one you live with on a daily basis. "Everyone else deals and kind of moves on and maybe touches it once in a while but moves on. It's not as life altering for them as it is for you personally. And sometimes it's hard to remember..." She paused and let her thought linger. Continuing, Gail said, "Do you think everybody's feeling what you're feeling all the time? People move on and you're left to deal with it." Charlie extrapolated, "Every now and then someone will be really pretty blunt about having lost a family member to some kind of problem or... lost a baby or child..." she paused for a deep breath and continued, "...and it just bonds you because you know that they've gone through so much." Charlie's comment is a testament to the impact of sharing on the nature of relationships in this group. It seems that even though members might feel an individual pressure to filter what they share for the sake of the group, or that their sharing doesn't make a lasting impact on how other members regard them, the act of sharing in this vulnerable manner is a key ingredient in bonding this group together.

Reflections on Cancer

Marie, a cancer survivor in the group shared, “Alice knew and so yes, it [my cancer diagnosis] was a shared...I mean I think that they already knew. But I know some people, they have cancer and they just don't want to tell anybody.” Marie recognized that not everyone is willing to share such an intimate experience with others, but she has made the intentional choice to share her story in hopes that it can help others going through anything similar. She continued, “They don't want anybody to know. My sister was like that and she didn't want anybody to know. But I've always been... with that, I just want people to know. I don't care. If I can help somebody else through my journey, I'm happy, you know.” She paused and smiled. “I don't know what my journey is going to be and if I'll be okay. But it looks good. I don't know how I would've felt if they would've said it's terminal. I had cancer 10 years ago. Then I had cancer diagnosed a year ago, January... again. Luckily it was a very tiny spot and was removed. No radiation, no chemotherapy. But I had to... I did a double mastectomy and reconstruction. So I'm still in that process. They said it would take over a year and I thought, ‘Oh my gosh. Over a year.’ Well I'm still not done. I have two more surgeries. It's a long process.” Facing two bouts of cancer wasn't Marie's only connection to the disease and the toll it takes on individuals and families.

Because Marie is one of the founding members of Read ‘Em and Eats, many long-standing members also had relationships with Marie's partner, John. John too faced a cancer diagnosis that eventually took his life. Marie continued, “Then last August 27th, my husband passed away, so I've had a hell of a time. After my husband, I had the worst time reading anything. I just could not focus on anything. But before I had plenty of time to read. After he died, I just couldn't do that. My brain took a time out. I didn't want to think about things. I had to be busy. If I sat down to read a book then I'd be thinking and not thinking about the book... thinking about other things, things I didn't want to think about. So I had to just keep busy. As long as I was moving or cleaning or, you know, doing something or was with somebody else, it made my life easier.” Where book club and opportunities to share her personal journey helped Marie find solace, she didn't find the same comfort in books when her husband passed away. That said, she did trust the group with feelings around her loss. “I guess when we were just

talking about the fact that I lost my husband, my husband passed away... I was able to relate how I was touched by the things that they did for me during that time and how much that helped me to know that they were there. You know, they all came to his visitation. Some people brought food. I had tons of cards from them and kept getting cards afterwards. Throughout the year it's been... they've been very supportive.” Their presence and the actions they took to show their support provided Marie with an extended system of individuals who were there for her. Maybe a factor of timing and Marie’s membership in the group when John passed, or the relationship that many members had with him, contrast with the story Gail shared in reflections on grief. Marie continued, “They just don't know what that means to me. It means so much, you know? And I know that I could call any of them and say, ‘What are you doing. I'm lonely. I need help.’ So far that's been okay to do that.” The beauty of this group is that they showed up, and continue to show up for Marie- their fellow group member.

Watching Marie take on the identity of a cancer survivor, and then seeing her husband fall to the disease was something that resonated with other members, as Marie had kept them up on her family’s health through regular sharing. Rita spoke to the group presence- how they show up for one another—in her reflections on Marie’s story. “Marie has lost her husband and she'll talk about it and she'll cry. And that's perfectly okay,” explained Rita. Rita, who knew John and experienced a different kind of loss when he passed, felt Marie exhibited (and continues to exhibit) a great amount of vulnerability with the group. She, and others in the group, witnessed the moments when Marie allowed the full feelings of her reality to be visible more publically. “That's exactly what we want to be there. You can't do much for a person who's lost their husband, but you can listen to them and let them cry when they’re here. And many of us she knew or could cry along with because we knew him. That's a huge value,” she concluded. In Rita’s final reflection, she shares her own sentiments that demonstrate empathy that is regularly provided by the group, a regularity which has set a standard that vulnerability in sharing is met with attentive presence, caring, and compassion.

Back to Marie: “But that's basically a quick version of my life. The book jacket version. And I have met somebody and he and I are very close. I really like him a lot. He's totally like my husband...was

an entrepreneur, always worked for himself, has rental properties. I mean, it's just crazy how alike we are. He had somebody living in his basement. I had a woman living in my basement. His wife died and then not quite two years later, his only daughter passed away. So, I mean, he's been through terrible things because they both had cancer.” Marie’s story, though fraught with some experiences you would never expect nor want, has taken a positive turn. She has been pleasantly surprised by life after a recent history of loss and health crisis. She reflected, “I was someone that would probably never get married again. I’ve had a really nice marriage. I felt satisfied. But he just came along. It was just a surprise.”

Interestingly, this chapter of Marie’s story also made its way into the reminiscences of fellow book club members. For example, Lynn shared the impacts of Marie’s more recent experiences. “With Marie losing John, we were all anxious to do what we could do for her. The first time I’ve seen her since was at her house when she told the group that she was dating this guy. I told Gail, ‘She’s just glowing.’ And Gail said, ‘I’m thrilled for her.’ Because I’m pretty sure that she and her husband had been friends with Marie and John so there was a 50/50 shot that Gail’s reaction would be good or not good.” Lynn’s commitment to Marie and the relationship they’d built throughout years of book club went far beyond conversations in monthly meetings. Hers is a parallel story to Marie’s that indicates not only a recognition of the unfortunate realities of Marie’s experiences, but a dedication to Marie’s broader happiness. Lynn continued, “And then there’s Alice who has some pretty strong opinions. And she doesn’t come around to new things easily. Life’s too short. I think you need joy and love in your life. And I don’t think that anybody who has a life partner right now can judge Marie because we don’t know what it’s like.” Lynn took it upon herself to advocate for Marie outside of book club, even going as far as sharing how putting herself in Marie’s shoes helped her make meaning of the experiences with death and loss in her own life and approaching survivors of loved ones with a new, more empathetic perspective. “I’ve given this a lot of thought since my mom passed away. It’s easy for me to say to my dad, ‘My sister-in-law’s parents invited you out for dinner. Why don’t you go?’ But then that’s three people sitting at a table for four and an empty chair. And so I can’t judge that Marie’s dating somebody because I’m not living her life.”

Throughout the three broad stories of how members were there for each other during times of grief and loss, multiple members spoke to the impacts of vulnerability exhibited by their friends and fellow members. I was not present for any of the initial sharing that sparked these comments, meaning the sharing occurred over one year ago and members are still talking about the lasting effect of hearing these experiences. Their comments reflect not only the impression left by the initial sharing, but their responses to the individual. These conversations resulted in a level of group sharing that I witnessed briefly in meetings, but lacked opportunities for follow up on impacts. The safe space created in book club for this kind of sharing means continued meaning making for individuals on the event shared and how it relates to not only the original person's life but their own experiences.

Chapter 5: Thinking About Things in a New Way

“And, we learn from each other. We have different perspectives. Everybody is respectful of one another and we can get excited and talk over each other. But it's not in a mean way, it's in an excited way.” -Erin

*In the previous three sections of the narrative of this group, we heard about the friendships that have resulted from the group's long history together, how those relationships blossomed into a sense of community and trust amongst members, and how the feeling of both community and trust creates an environment where members can be vulnerable in their sharing because they know they'll be met with care and empathy. The themes that arose out of my conversations with Read 'Em and Eats members were sometimes difficult to disentangle. They are interconnected and sometimes nestled within one another. That said, in this part, Thinking About Things in a New Way, the themes continue to build off those highlighted in previous sections. Here, members discuss ways the **unique perspectives** brought to the table by various members connect to **learning**, an outcome that wouldn't be possible without the group's commitment to engaging with one another in a **respectful** way.*

Diversity

For Rebecca, belonging to book club means being part of a group that supports her exploration and challenge of herself. “There are other things that I normally wouldn't have done,” she shared. “Alice and Rita and James and some of the others... your mom and I see each other sometimes at exercise and she's joined yoga with James. So you get into things and it gets you out of your bubble, gets me out of my comfort zone of what I normally would do.”

Alice added, “The glorious thing is that it really doesn't matter if other people like it or not. It's not about whether or not people liked the book. It's about hearing *why* they do or don't like the book.” For Rebecca this meant, “Being curious about what the book really meant to other people.” She continued, directing her story toward the unique perspectives contributed by each member. “Some of my questions would be more pointed towards somebody to get their perspective. I don't know if it's just necessarily me,

but I think everybody in the group kind of has a different role that they play in the dynamics of the group. Everybody contributes something.” Many other members contributed similar sentiments.

Rita reified Rebecca’s comments, going into greater detail as to how this diversity is exemplified through book discussion. “It’s just everybody’s got their own perspective. Everyone’s got their own thoughts. There are books I’ve read I thought, ‘There’s nothing here to talk about. It’s going to be really hard to go do this one and just sit there and not have anything to say because there’s nothing to say about this book’. And then it’ll end up being incredibly lively because every time people just have different points of view. It’s just amazing because everyone sees something so different and it’s fun.” Rita expressed this sentiment with a joyful tone, which added emphasis to the pleasure that she takes from such conversations.

Erin and James each called directly on diversity as an asset of the group. Erin reflected on the ways diversity connects to learning- a topic discussed in greater detail later- and recognized her own position as contributor of a new idea or perspective. “And I like the diversity of it,” she says. “There’s a diverse group in terms of age and how people see things and I think we learn from each other and it’s not in a preachy kind of way. It’s in a, ‘Oh, I didn’t think of it that kind of way before now. That’s really a nice idea. Good point’. Sometimes I’m just that person that sees things differently.” James also weighed in saying, “Reading stuff I would never pick on my own and the food. I love it. Someone makes dinner so that’s fun. But I just love these ladies. It’s just a fun group and the diversity. I think the ages are diverse. The choices are diverse.”

Diverse perspectives, ideas, and values in a group don’t always result in amicable dialogue. For Sam, the varying positionalities she perceived within the group could have been the cause for some uncomfortable moments, but the group has surprised her with their open-mindedness toward one another. “I think a lot of times it’s some of the discussions where really you’d get to know a lot of people. I know they’re different, some people are more liberal or conservative. In an earlier meeting, I chose a book with abortion and I was like, ‘crap, let’s try to avoid that’. But it went really well. So I had some preconceived notion that that might be an uncomfortable topic and it might bring out too much with different views, but

it was fine. I think sometimes people are a little more open than I thought they were. I might've been judgmental... I don't know if the word is critical... but anticipating something that didn't happen.” Like Sam, Charlie recognized the different value-foundations present in the group but goes on to share some insights that could explain why Sam was pleasantly surprised.

“After this many years, this many meetings, it's hard to really sit and define. The personality,” said Charlie. “These women are different. I mean some of us are liberal, some probably more conservative, but it's like there are basic things that we can all agree on. And there are basic underlying traits to humans, which come up in all our books and allows us to talk about things that maybe aren't part of our world, but that we know about. I mean there are people that have suddenly confessed and, my gosh, you never even think about what people have been exposed to in their life.”

What is represented through the comments from Charlie, Sam, James, Erin, Alice, Rebecca, and Rita is a recognition of the difference that is represented in the group and the value of that difference. The unique contributions of members in book choice and book discussion help the group understand differing perspectives represented in the books they read and in their own lived experiences. It seems that there are some unspoken norms, protocols for engaging with one another, that guides the way members interact with one another and as a part of the whole. Members are challenged to think and explore beyond their own worldviews, and can even be surprised by the openness exhibited by the whole. This latter idea of implicit norms further connects to the next idea brought up frequently by members, respect.

Respect

For Erin, it's simple. “Everybody respects each other which is cool—and things that maybe we didn't see, we see from a different way.” While Erin's sentiment was simple, she captured a key point shared by many other members. Not only is Read ‘Em and Eats a group with diverse perspectives, but members appreciate that diversity because of the respect that they also share for one another.

“I notice it a lot because there's a lot to do with eye contact and different groups that you can look at just about anybody and talk to that person. But you're talking to everybody at the same time. I really love that it is that kind of one unit made up of several parts,” says Rita. “And it's wonderful to have

people reaffirming when you're talking, that they're reaffirming that what you have to say isn't necessarily Gospel, but it's your viewpoint and therefore it adds value to the group. And that's a real important thing.” For Rita, the group shows the respect they have for one another through certain characteristics or behaviors. Eye contact is one such behavior. Rita’s story showcases the manners in which the group is reaffirming one another’s points of view, while also highlighting how such affirmations reinforce the acceptance of difference and helping members feel valued.

James also reflected on a particular aspect of the group that connects to respect. For her, this aspect is a personal practice. “Maybe it was the Wyoming book, when the main character was drunk and she had an abusive boyfriend... I was leery to bring that up because that's a topic that people are very opinionated about. And it's also a topic if someone's gone through that, you don't want to relive it. So sometimes I think, ‘Oh, I'm not gonna say much about that specific thing because it might reel someone in and be a trigger for them’.” Not all the members shared in this practice with James, but her intentionality around her comments and consciousness about the harm they could bring to others is a reflection of the group values around respect.

Rita also shared how, when built on a foundation of respect, the group often experiences peaceful conflict. “We don't always agree. In fact, we often disagree,” she shared. “Alice and I have gotten into it a couple of times because we absolutely disagree about most things in this world. Except basic value. We have our basic values, but you have to wonder why we were ever friends sometimes.” An important reminder is that Rita and Alice have been friends for fifty years! Rita continues, “There’s so much insight in those moments. I think other close relationships are that way too...They're far more likely to get into deeper confrontational discussions. Then at book club, we’re all peers in this environment and share the same kinds of things and problems that everybody does.”

Most members recognized, at some point or another, that they don’t always agree with everyone else in the room. For Sam, differences in the group that cause conflict or disagreement are outweighed by the things members share in common. “I mean I think it depends on where you are because if you seek your own friends out... usually there's few friends that we know who have different political views than

us. In book club, we have that [*friends with different views*], but we have the same views about raising children or whatever it is. And as a member, you know the history of that.” The common ground that the group has established helps members like Sam listen to and bond with members who have views that are different from her own.

For James, all the benefits outweigh the potential discomforts of disagreement. She shared, “Sometimes I’ll come home and say, ‘oh my God, they said...’, I’ll tell my husband ‘that person thought this’, and he says, ‘If you don’t like what they have to say, why do you go?’ Because I love book club. He said, ‘well sometimes you come home and go **aaah**.’ But it’s okay to me... for me to have an opposing opinion.” James whispered, “but I don’t a lot. I mean I do sometimes say ‘I don’t agree with that,’ but if they have an opinion, I’m like, ‘okay, that’s your opinion. I’m not gonna sit there and argue it.’” In James’s recounting, she expresses the frustration or surprise that can sometimes accompany a dissonant opinion. She shares those moments with her partner and despite his questioning of the value of her membership, she expresses great affection for the group both in declaration of the group broadly and in her willingness to accept her fellow members despite their differences.

Are there tradeoffs in a group that is so accepting of one another? Sam shared some observations and reflections that she has had about the group and one’s positionality. “Are there some people that are really sheltered? They haven’t had a lot of experiences? Maybe. Sometimes I wonder if there’s a little racism. I think we all have some kind of prejudice and racism and we don’t always recognize it about particular things or maybe we just don’t know. I just found a couple of times I’ve went home and thought, ‘Huh. I’m not sure. Maybe I should have spoke up more or listened differently.’ When I was young and worked at the training school, we had a lot of cultural training. Everybody has bias and everybody has prejudice. We make assumptions. You have to be conscious of that and try to work to be more open. But I also think those discussions haven’t been with malice. It’s just who the people might be.” Valuing diverse perspectives, as well as the acceptance and respect exhibited by members for one another are unspoken norms that influence how and when Sam pushes back on her fellow members. Despite recognizing some

areas for growth or problematic comments, she keeps an optimistic outlook on the group and assumes best intentions.

*Through the stories and comments at the start of this section, members demonstrated the significance of the group's diverse membership. But a diverse group without decorum- a sense of obligation in their behavior towards one another- is unlikely to result in the kinds of trust and vulnerability that have been accounted for by this group. The key of Read 'Em and Eats' functioning as a diverse group, who are also friends who are caring and empathetic toward one another, is respect. Through Sam's observations, we see that a "call out culture" does not exist in the group. Instead, members assume the best intentions were meant by their peers even with problematic comments or topics. There is a great affection expressed for the group and comments that recognize a willingness to accept fellow members for their whole selves, even if that means disagreeing on particular topics. Respect is reflected in multiple group behaviors such as eye contact, reaffirmations, valuing each other, and finding common ground despite differences. Some members even go as far as recalling the lived experiences previously shared by their friends in the group and tailoring their comments in ways that they intend to not be triggering negative history. Rita goes as far as articulating a sentiment very reminiscent of *e pluribus unum*—while many individuals make up the group, they are first a group. This sentiment, tied in with the diverse perspectives and respect for those perspectives builds the foundation for the exchange of knowledge and lived experience.*

Learning

"I think reading different books that I would never pick for myself totally changes my view of things," said James, recognizing that the sheer exposure to new content helps her expand her worldview. Rebecca wasn't dissimilar in her comments, but extrapolated the impact beyond just new ideas. "I got introduced to book club and it gave me an idea of different books that I wouldn't normally have chosen for myself. And it's nice because the way I read, or the way I was taught to read as a child I think is, I just read it. I mean, I get something out of it, but I didn't really hear like the characters in my head. Sometimes we would read a book and somebody would say, 'Oh, that was so funny, about Blah Blah.' And I, in my

head while reading, do not hear humor. So with book club I started to learn more about listening to the characters. It's just nice to bounce off each other. It gives me a better sense of what was going on in the book," reflected Rebecca. The practice of discussing books has changed the way Rebecca thinks about reading, what she takes away from stories and characters.

Alice recognizes another important take away. "We learn a lot about the book and about each other and it's always so fascinating to see how detail is brought out. The book affects different people so differently. Maybe I loved it and someone else just hated that part. So it's always interesting." Alice helped bring forth the idea that not only does the practice of reading books and discussing them help members learn from the books, but that the variety of perspectives shared in the dialogue also helps members learn about one another.

Learning is a presumed goal of the group by some members. Rita shared, "There's a wonderful thing of being able to learn and understand something that you just normally aren't a part of. Everybody wants everyone to engage and never assumes you wouldn't understand this because you're just too old or you're too young; it's not that way at all. We get to share in each other's experiences that way." The way members connect their lived experiences to the narrative in the stories they discuss is how Rita recognized additional moments for learning. When members haven't had or can't relate to a particular experience in the story, a fellow member's own experience can help them understand.

Similarly, Gail recognized sharing experiences is an impactful part of book club membership. "I think it happens because you've had an emotional experience around that topic before you come to the club," she said of events or experiences represented in the texts. "So you're already crying, you've already thought about it, you've already experienced it, you've already tied it to your own life or your own pain, and so now you're feeling like you've had a chance to process it ahead of time." Reading the book and thinking about its connection to your own life creates an opportunity for members to make connections to their own lives and make meaning of those experiences. Members noted that this is not an opportunity that comes up often in other spaces. Gail in particular noted, "In regular social circles, you don't have time to process, you're already in the conversation and you don't really know how you feel about a topic and

you don't know if how you feel is really appropriate. And so there are all these social norms that get in the way.”

For Gail, Read ‘Em and Eats creates a unique space for a kind of self-reflection and sharing that is unlike others. “It’s safe and it gets you started,” she shared. “It gets you thinking too. How often do you think about sex and motherhood, right? So now suddenly you are thinking about it or something in it is tied to your own life and you go, ‘I had that experience once and this is how I dealt with it.’ Like a cheating husband, but it doesn't have to be that big, just something little and you go, ‘you know I had that feeling, I can remember feeling this way when...’ and then you just talk about that. But then it gets other people to thinking ‘oh yeah I've had that feeling too.’” Alice felt similarly about the unique space created by the club. She shared, “Even though it's a social group and everybody are friends, the group is able to talk about things that they wouldn't necessarily be able to talk about if they were out to dinner or playing cards or doing other activities because [*the book and discussion*] just brings up instances that don't just come up to normal, regular, everyday conversation.” Continuing, Alice said, “You really can expound on that and really discuss it in how it's related to your life and your own situations. So you feel like you get to know each other on a deeper level than you would just as acquaintances.” For the group’s founder learning happens about the book, about yourself, and about one another. “I think we all enjoyed the fact that most of us aren't taking classes anymore, but we're all pretty bright people and the group brings that out. It gives you a chance to read and research and really discuss and, and that's very satisfying.”

Despite all being out of school, some even retired from a lifetime career, multiple members recognized the ways the group and their activities contribute to or foster learning of some kind. This was always mentioned with an air of joy and excitement. Erin captured the positivity around this part of the Read ‘Em and Eats book club experience, saying, “I think because it's such a collaborative thing. We're all contributing and learning from each other and taking different perspectives on what we're discussing. And it wouldn't be the same if we only had two people or two points of views. I think our best discussions are when we have a good group of people. I love the group. I love the way we format it and I look forward to it. I like to learn, but it's learning that doesn't seem like you're trying to learn. I've heard

numerous members saying, ‘you know, it's my favorite day of the month.’ I don't want to miss it. I love that part of it, but it doesn't feel like [learning]. It feels like fun and camaraderie. It doesn't feel like going to school and it doesn't feel like I have to worry that my answer is wrong.”

For a group who elected to come together with an expressed purpose of reading and discussing books, learning and learning beyond the books that are selected is most certainly an unspoken, if not an unintended, result of the group's gatherings. But in conversations with each member, learning (about the books, yes, but also about themselves and their fellow group members) regularly came up in conversations. It is something I know I experienced as a member, but being the youngest and newest person to the group, I wasn't sure the learning I was experiencing was group-wide. In my conversations with members, they shared the ways their worldviews had shifted by openly listening to the reflections of their diverse peers. Getting out of their comfort zones and changing the way they approached reading and hearing stories. In learning about the book, the group's conversations helped them learn about each other. The opportunities to share their reflections and the ways they connect their lives to the experiences written in the book create moments of meaning making that aren't always available in other social settings.

PART 2: NARRATOR AS MEMBER

Chapter 6: The Meetings

Throughout chapters three through five, you read stories from individuals about their experiences as members of book club. The stories shared in the previous sections of this narrative were selected from the one-on-one conversations we had together. As narrator in those chapters, I made a commitment to center the stories and voices of my collaborators, the other members of book club- only sharing my own voice in moments of synthesis, debriefing, and interpretation.

What hasn't been represented thus far is my voice as a member. In Part 2: Member as Narrator, there are two very different types of stories where I have centered my own voice and experiences. First, are my reflections from particular Read 'Em and Eats meetings that were written based on my experiences as a participant-observer in the group and the reflective field notes I recorded at the conclusion of each monthly meeting. There are short comments included in these from other members, but my own jottings and memories were the primary source for documenting the meetings.

As many moments shared in my conversations with individual members happened prior to my participation in the group, these meeting reflections aim to show how the themes from this broader narrative showed up throughout the meetings I participated in. Second, is my story, the one that was happening concurrently to my membership in book club, a story of my learning with and from this group. I've chosen to conclude Part 2 with my own personal narrative, and how my membership in the group contributed to my understanding of my life circumstances and surrounded me with support to express my experiences in a way that was unique to many other groups.

The Storyteller's Secret

The Storyteller's Secret by Sejal Badani was a unique month, mainly because it was co-hosted. The book itself was selected by Rita but was hosted at Denise's family lake cottage. Both women contributed to the pre-meeting meal. The direction was to arrive early and enjoy the lake. So I arrived at 5:00pm, about an hour prior to the planned start time. I parked behind Denise's house- a white two-story cottage with green trim- and walked around the front to find a significant group of members sitting on the dock, on the back of Denise's boat, and on a floaty in the water. People were catching up with one another

and passing around a snack of fresh fruit. When Alice arrived we moved inside to start the meeting. An annual group photo was taken just as dark gray rain clouds rolled in.

The Storyteller's Secret is primarily set in India and outlines the experience of an American Indian woman flying to her mother's family home to learn her family history. Because I studied abroad in India I brought Indian sweets to supplement the meal and wore the salwar kameez that I purchased during my time there. Overall, most members enjoyed the content of this book. The conversation was quite lively. Because it was such a large group my snippets from the discussion are more disconnected than I hoped but still show the ways in which individuals call on their lived experience to make meaning of themes in the book or comments from others. In the book the main character and her husband experience multiple miscarriages, which was the common theme for the beginning conversation.

Alice talked about the relationship between the husband and wife, saying "men are fixers and he couldn't fix it". James chimed in with the example of her brother who says, "do you want me to listen or do you want me to fix it?" and Erin commented on the protagonists' parents, saying that "as parents this is particularly difficult because you want to make life easier for your children". Rita shared that "people grieve differently and this book provided insights into what different types of grief look like." The conversation turned to today's society and miscarriage. Charlie shared that "in the political climate that currently exists policymakers are contemplating people getting charged with murder-like offenses when they lose a child and that these policies completely lack care or consideration for the pain that parents and mothers are going through." Rita confirmed by saying that miscarriage doesn't get the recognition that something like the death of a child after they've been born does. Lynn shared that she personally experienced miscarriage and vividly recalls what the aftermath was like for her; her relationships with others changed sometimes for the worst. Gail chimed in saying that "today there is often an undercurrent of blame" and that she's "unsure of whether or not that has changed from the past to today."

The second part of the conversation revolved around the theme of understanding parents and family histories as well as social changes over time. James shared that her mom was an open book so she knew most things about her, unlike the main character in our story while Sam shared that she didn't see

her parents as people when she was a child, something she thinks happens for most children. The conversation turned to the realities of parenthood and how as children we can't imagine the lives that our parents lived to get to where they are today. Joann shared that her dad was one of 12 and when he was just old enough he and his brother packed up and walked to nowhere to alleviate the burden on his parents. He lived on the street for quite some time after taking it upon himself to leave, something she couldn't imagine.

I have shared my reflection and synopsis of field notes for our meeting on "The Storyteller's Secret" because I believe it reinforces themes of trust and community. Two women came together to co-host this meeting, and in doing so sharing "center-stage" that often came with being host and sharing the responsibilities of preparing the meal. Despite the unique nature of this co-hosted meeting, I believe it is a great reflection of the kinds of trust and community this group feels with one another. Denise was willing to open her family's vacation home to the group despite the imminent arrival of other guests and even asked members to come early and enjoy the setting. She and Rita worked collaboratively to plan and execute a meal, showing great faith in one another to follow through. It demonstrates the community in the group along with the nature of their sharing and how their comments build upon one another to continually evolve and shape the group conversations

A Matter of Chance

A Matter of Chance by Julie Maloney was Lynn's book choice. So, of course, we were at her house. A single-story ranch style surrounded by well-tended and brightly colored gardens, it was a tight fit once all the members arrived. As per usual we ate dinner beforehand; hot dogs and hamburgers prepared by Lynn's husband, along with a variety of other kinds of snacks and goodies. Everyone crowded around her eat-in dining table, all nine of us. When everyone was done with dinner we decided to stay put and have our book discussion right there at the table.

The premise of this book is generally about a mother's experience after her daughter is kidnapped for a prolonged period of time. A lot of the discussion centered on motherhood. I believe everyone present except myself identified as a mother at the time. The first comment was that love, to love

someone, is to be vulnerable to loss. That motherhood is the greatest love of all. Erin told a story about a friend whose husband had stage three pancreatic cancer. The prognosis was good for him eventually. He had gotten used to his new identity as a cancer survivor and was optimistic for years, that is, until his doctors found a tumor had wrapped around one of his arteries. She relayed what this couple had said to her. "We try all our lives to protect our kids from pain and now I'm the one causing the pain." Sam chimed in and said, "we do the best that we can in the moment. We don't try to cause harm. We don't have malice. We do our best." Rita furthered this point saying, "this never ends. Even when your child is older than 18 it stays. You're always someone's child and yours are always yours."

The group also talked about how there were differences between being the mothers of girls and the mothers of boys later in life, especially as their children grew up to be married. The discussion circled around the role of in-laws. Gail talked about what it was like to be the mother of boys who become dads themselves. "Grandbabies change it all," she said, "the moms of mothers don't have to think as much but the moms of dads have to tread lightly. They don't want to step on the toes of their children's spouses creating a situation where kids have to choose between parents and grandparents."

Another conversation emerged out of the idea of the evolution of parenting over time. Charlie shared her mother was the first woman out of the University of Michigan's business program. Then she got married and became the "perfect 50's housewife" managing volunteers, leading girl scouts, etc. Her dad wasn't present. She shared that her husband was more present but that she still held 95% of the childcare responsibilities in her household. She wondered how her kids share those responsibilities now and observed that it seems to come more naturally to share more equally. A common theme members perceived of their parents was the idea of education playing a role in finding a spouse. One member shared what her parents always told her: "a smart woman is never smarter than the man she is with. A woman goes to college to find a well-educated man." James furthered this by saying that her parents thought the reason you go to college was to get a "Mrs. degree". Erin chimed in adding, "but this is not how we raise our sons or how we raised our daughters. We've raised our daughters not to take it." Sam mentioned that her daughter yelled at her grandma for referencing that success was having a husband.

The second theme of this book's conversation was around the idea of forgiveness. Multiple members chimed in with thoughts around the role of forgiveness in our lives and how that differs from person to person. They shared that forgiveness is deeply connected to understanding but isn't the same as forgetting or approaching the person in the same way that they approach you. Some thought the individual who was hurt benefited most from the act of forgiveness; so that they can have closure and a choice to move forward from the pain. Sometimes there's great uncertainty around this especially when motivations are unclear. Guilt is often involved. Or regret. Erin shared a comment related to taking people's actions with a grain of salt saying, "some people like to sit in fresh shit just because it's warm."

The discussion also briefly turned to grief and how individual people process grief differently. Erin shared that she is a "tell it all person". "I share with everyone and then feel at peace and move on, where my husband just sleeps it off." She went on to mention that stigma often prevents people from talking with one another. Others added comments about fear and trepidation. People don't know how to show up for others who are experiencing grief. Gail shared that when she lost a parent and shared with the group, everyone grieved with her for a couple of days. But years later while she is still experiencing loss, those around her had moved on. Rita and Charlie both talked about a lack of closure for a missing child or military personnel missing in action. Erin mentioned that she knows a parent who lost a child and though this parent has two other children, "She is consumed by grief and is unable to give the other two the attention that they need."

I chose to share "A Matter of Chance" in connection with this part of the Read 'Em and Eats narrative because it is a good representation of the safe space created to support individual sharing and how that individual sharing snowballs into group sharing. Without one member being willing to be vulnerable and tell a personal story, we might not have heard the experiences of others in the group. It is interesting how many themes that came up from the resonating stories in my one-on-one conversations- grief, loss, cancer- were also present themes in the conversations had during this particular meeting as a result from different members sharing, as these are not topics easily brought up in other kinds of groups or spaces. When a member shared a very personal life experience, like a miscarriage, she was met with

compassion and supported through additional members' sharing. While this meeting could illustrate other characteristics of this group, the topics addressed are strong examples of how vulnerability met with empathy in Read 'Em and Eats interactions.

The Wife

This month's (March) book club discussion was on *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer, a popular title recently made into a film starring Meryl Streep. The author identifies as a woman as does the main protagonist and narrator of the book. It is set in a time in which gender stereotypes and roles were rampant in United States culture, when women made large sacrifices for the sake of their husbands and families, and when the female community was disempowered from sharing their voices.

This month's meeting was particularly interesting to me. I assumed many of book club's members lived through or were children of women similar to the one depicted in this book. We started off the meeting like all the others. We passed around a bucket of candy with a single question taped to each one. Each member pulled a piece of candy and thus, a question. In previous meetings, I observed that as each member read their question and shared their response, other members of the group would chime in and build off of one another. The stories told evolved as individuals shared their own lived experience or input. This particular instance- *The Wife*- was different. Members read their question, shared their response, and occasionally another member added a thought but the discussion was specifically limited to the content of the book.

There was consensus that neither of the main characters of the book were likable. The husband in the book manipulated and took advantage of his wife's talent. His wife let him. There were instances noted of various transgressions. Drug use, sex, selfishness all distracted from caring for their family. But no one seemed to relate the instances in the book to their own personal experience. I was the first one to share a personal example and only did so because of an immediately applicable example that happened in my own life.

I shared that I made my husband breakfast on a Sunday morning. He got up from the couch and took his dishes and mine with him when he left. I remember thinking, "wow I'm so glad he did that. That

was so thoughtful.” Then later I got up and walked into the kitchen only to find both of our dirty dishes sitting on the counter directly above our dishwasher. The reality infuriated me. My husband and I were going through a lot of challenging life instances at the time so I filtered this story for the group. I was more attentive to *what* I would share and *how*. An especially important factor in my personal filtering was knowledge that this month’s host recently lost her husband to a battle with cancer.

Only two other members of the quiet large group shared stories after I contributed mine throughout the entire meeting. Charlie shared that in her first marriage her husband loved to host parties so in addition to raising their children, she cooked all the meals, entertained, and did all the dishes. She spoke specifically of one instance when she suggested to her husband that they use plasticware dishes, cups, and silverware. She didn't have a dishwasher in the home and she did all the dishes for every party by hand. Suggesting this to her husband, she turned around and saw that he disregarded her suggestion and already put all of the glassware out and on display. At the end of the night she begrudgingly collected the dishes and started to wash them. Her husband intervened and said he could tell that she was tired and there was no need to do the dishes tonight. She spoke of her relief and its instance... that is until she woke up the next day. She was under the impression that her husband was volunteering to do the dishes, a task that she always did. Upon waking up she saw that he had only excused her from this activity for the evening and that there was still a giant pile of dirty dishes.

The third member of the group who shared specifically built her story off one quote from the book in which the main character thinks to herself that “everyone needs a wife”. Everyone needs a person who takes care of their needs over one’s own. Lynn shared that she and her first husband were divorced and she was living alone with her daughter. A friend was going through a divorce and needed a place to stay with her two sons. Lynn worked full-time and her friend who moved in with them was accustomed to being a stay-at-home mom, so they fell into easy patterns with one another. When Lynn would go to work, her friend took care of the house and made sure dinner was ready. They co-parented their children, not directing one small human to an alternative adult based on who they were related to. Instead, they had a great unit where two adults with very common interests were able to feel fulfilled in their daily activities

and come home to a place where they felt safe and valued, happy to be rearing their children together. Lynn commented, “if only we could have identified men for conjugal visits- our only need that wasn't being taken care of- we could have lived that way forever.”

The conversation was around whether or not the woman in the book who sacrificed her career to advance her husband's could have had a career of her own instead. The group decided that at the time it would have been less likely but nowadays, reasonable. Then Charlie shared some facts she remembered from various articles and documentaries about women, equity (or lack thereof), and workplace environments. I was surprised to see the level of shock group members expressed at these particular facts, facts that I had experienced on a daily basis like being talked over, discounted, ignored, and interrupted. None were surprising to me. In fact the basic reaction from my fellow group members, the shock that they shared, was the most surprising to me. It made me realize that these kinds of conversations amongst women are very important but are often invisible even in groups like this that seem to be safe spaces for other kinds of sharing.

I wanted to share the two post-meeting reflections from The Wife and Behold The Dreamers because of how much they differ. Because of the content of the book and what I witnessed in previous meetings where books were catalysts and there was vulnerable sharing, I had expectations going into The Wife about the deep sharing that would occur. Instead, the actual experience differed. Up until this meeting, I hadn't been particularly interested in the content of each book and while I'd read them so I could fully participate in the conversations, I never considered the content of the books as connected to my particular research questions. That said, the conversation about The Wife when I assumed the group would closely identify did not elicit deep sharing or a collaborative building off of one another's experiences. Instead it seemed that when the content of the book is drastically different from one's own life experience, it is then that members share more of their lived experience, knowledge and personal history. As a result of this meeting, I paid more attention to themes and characters in the books we read, and how those connected or didn't with how members chose to share their experience or knowledge with the group in those instances. Maybe because the author was a woman and the main character was a

woman and in book club we're all women- in particular many of the women have lived through a similar time period as depicted in this book- we as a group were too close to the subject matter. We were upset by the book's content, but not surprised. Because we were close enough to this subject we didn't need to make meaning by sharing personal stories. Instead, personal story sharing was potentially painful and maybe resulted in a dedication to solely book content [little personal sharing] that I didn't see in other meetings.

Behold the Dreamers

I started my drive from Lansing to just outside of Saline for what was my second official book club meeting where we were discussing *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue. The book is a story set in 2008 that outlines the experience of a family of African immigrants, one who was studying at the local community college under a student visa and the other who was an asylum seeker. They had a son and the stars aligned so that the husband (the asylum seeker) could also have a work permit. He gains a role as chauffeur for an upper level management individual at Lehman Brothers in New York City. The book outlines the toils of the United States immigration process along with the intimate and personal sacrifices in details individuals navigating that process have to endure.

Charlie called on her own family's immigration history. She shared that her relatives moved to the United States from Germany and attempted to save their young men from a world war. She shared that while her relatives boarded a boat with their sons to the United States they said what was essentially a lifelong goodbye to their daughters who remained in Germany. She talked about having two threads of family, one here in the United States and one that she has never met in Germany.

Erin is a first generation American citizen. Her spouse went through the official channels to become a US citizen after their marriage. She shared the amount of time, energy, and work it took for him to learn the ins and outs of the US citizenship test. She even challenged the group stating she was confident that her husband knew more about the United States government and history than many US born citizens because of that process.

Sam shared her experience as a grade school and middle school teacher in an area that had a predominant migrant worker population. She discussed a professional development day where her school took the teachers to an agricultural field where migrant workers were employed. She said it was then that she realized how unreasonable it was for teachers to ask students who were children of migrant workers to take home schoolwork from the day and translate it into their native language. Then do the homework. These students weren't going home and pouring over their school books for hours into the evening; they were working alongside their families. She realized how important it is to meet students where they're at and recognize the amount of labor it takes for English language learners to engage in US public schools.

Lynn used her experience working for a University to help empathize with the experience of the fictional mother in this book. She shared ways she came to think differently about the international students and some fellow employees at her institution. "I liked the stories in that because my office is across from the international group. I enjoyed learning a little bit more about that process... we have a guy right now who is here on a green card and he works in our office. I thought about this in the shower today... so politically speaking, we "don't want immigrants to come here and take away the jobs that you and I could have" because we're entitled; we're American citizens and they're not. But that particular job at our institution is best done by someone who has had the firsthand experience of coming over here, leaving their family millions of miles away; of moving to a country where people may speak a different language. All this to have experiences that they can't get in their home countries which maybe they later go back to to help lift up that community, which changes the world. So that was interesting to just like read a little bit more about that stuff. That's kind of, you know, some of the reasons why I wanted to do this was it just helps to bring up topics that I wouldn't normally think about."

At this particular meeting many members of the group shared personal stories and narratives from their lived histories with the group. They were connecting threads from the book and the storyline to their own experiences or those they'd heard passed down from generation to generation in their own lineage.

The engagement and dialogue in this meeting is a good representation of the diversity of thought and experiences within the group, the respect that members have for those differences, and how they

learn with and from one another both through the book's content and the sharing that occurred. In this meeting, I saw members call on their lived experience to make meaning of what they read in the book and expand on stories shared by other members. Despite differing experiences being shared, members took a very "yes, and" approach to sharing. When one member would share a story, another member often would use that story as a jumping point for their own; affirming the stories shared by fellow members and building upon them with their own experiences. This diversity and respect resulted in a kind of learning that for some members, directly impacted their day-to-day lives or careers.

Chapter 7: Communal Wisdom Through an Experience I'd Never Wish on Anyone

When I began collaborating with Read 'Em and Eats in November, I thought I was lucky to have an excuse to read fiction while completing a doctoral program. Because of my family history with the group, I also knew many of the members and had some existing relationships. "Good books and time with some cool women, while completing my dissertation," I thought. "Win-win [win]." From anecdotal observations throughout my communities, I had some ideas about communal wisdom exchange and creation in social groups (obviously, or I wouldn't have selected this topic of research) but I never expected that life would present me with the opportunity to experience this wisdom sharing first hand.

The moment that changed it all.

In January, after I had been meeting with the gals at Read 'Em Eats for two months, I was sitting on the grey Detroit Sofa Company couch in my living room, watching television, and my husband, Curt, comes down the stairs from our second floor and just stands next to the arm of the couch looking at me. After he lingered long enough without saying anything, I muted the T.V. and said, "what's up, honey?" "I think I have a lump," he said.

"A lump?"

"Yes, a lump," he replied stonily. "I noticed it in the shower." Up until then, I wasn't entirely sure we were on the same page. Turns out we were. "Oh," I replied in a tone frantic yet masked by calm.

"Some women have lumpy boobs. Is the lump new? If it's not new, it may just be a part of your body." I recalled my first annual exam with a gynecologist, concerned that some of my lumps and bumps during the breast exam were cause for concern- learning that I had nothing to worry about. As he proceeded to disrobe, he said, "It's not new..."

"Phew," I thought.

"... but it's bigger than it was before."

While my mind was thinking a series of expletives, my mouth said, "Okay, then we need to call a doctor."

At this moment my brain felt completely disconnected from my body. While I sat there, now hugging my husband, my mind shifted into crisis-management mode. I already knew that people have lumps and get biopsies. My mom had this done, and while it was scary, its result was also benign—nothing to worry about. I also knew that I was the primary health insurance provider for my family, so I needed to make sure Curt scheduled his appointment at the student health clinic at the university (a requirement of my graduate school provided insurance) and that I needed to double-check our policy to make sure we weren't surprised by possible fees and charges. To add to the timeline, Curt and I had taken our marriage vows in September, and this was very near our four-month anniversary; our delayed honeymoon to Europe was scheduled for just over a month from this moment.

Navigating the healthcare system.

The fact that Curt had to start at the student health center for such an important visit might have worried some especially if they had heard the countless horror-stories passed down amongst students but I was okay with this fact. I saw the same doctor as my husband and felt very confident in his capacity. To top it off, when I was at this same university for my undergraduate degree, a friend in my program was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma by the student health center.

Curt saw the doctor at the health center and the results were inconclusive. After a physical exam, the doctor was still uncertain and ordered an ultrasound for Curt. The ultrasound was meant to provide some clarity, but unfortunately, those results were inconclusive as well. The next step was to refer Curt to a specialist, a urologist. The challenge with each of these moments was time. Time to get insurance approval. Time to get an appointment. Time to hear results. This was a lot of waiting. During this time we found out some fun facts. Ninety percent of lumps in the testicles are cancerous. Testicular lumps are not biopsied for fear of spreading cancer in a very small area. In mid-February, we were told that Curt would need exploratory surgery and a possible orchiectomy (complete removal of the testicle) and that the procedure would be scheduled for immediately after our return from Europe.

February

Not having any personal experience with any of these kinds of procedures, I went into long-term planning mode. I called the urologist and requested a referral to a fertility specialist so we could preemptively complete sperm cryopreservation. “We usually don’t refer people until there is a problem” was their response, so I called my OBGYN. After she issued a universal referral for both Curt and me to three different fertility clinics (we had about ten business days between scheduling the surgery and leaving for our honeymoon), I was able to get us an appointment. This is a shortened version of this part of our saga and all I can say is how challenging it was to navigate this system, even though I work part-time in a job that is flexible enough to step out of meetings to take and make phone calls. I kept a journal of who I spoke with when, and requested print confirmation whenever possible. But this was an exhausting process, and while I normally would have said ‘it’s Curt’s body and so Curt should be talking to all the providers’, because Curt is a dentist, his providers were only available for calls while he was also seeing patients. The timing was a challenge overall.

The entire time, Read ‘Em and Eats was one of the communities I wanted to share with in theory, but was also a group that was more difficult to share with in practice. I was, after all, a brand new member. I didn’t have the same history, the same trust, or the same willingness to be vulnerable. I just wasn’t there yet... and I don’t think the members were there with me, either. I was still a newbie. Plus, this early in the story, there were experiences that I now identify as contributing to this feeling of “newness”. While the members had made comments that I thought connected with my experience, and I could have shared what was happening in my life, but I didn’t. Not only was this story not mine to tell; I didn’t have the same connection that I observed others as having with one another. I didn’t feel that safety... yet.

In February there wasn’t that much of an impact in terms of the group and me, because personally Curt and I didn’t know much. What I was feeling at the time was anger related to uncertainties around fertility and childbirth. So much was unknown. We were sitting at Sam’s dining table, surrounded by beautiful art made by her daughter primarily out of wood and acrylic, I believe. We’re eating dinner and

one member brought up that her daughter was expecting. She continued discussing how distraught her daughter was at her recent and unplanned pregnancy. Already a mom of one, she shared that her daughter always wanted additional children but now wasn't a convenient time.

Now, I have always been (or tried to be) sensitive to the fact that having children isn't easy for everyone. My own parents were unable to have additional children after me, and in the past four years I watched as my best friends struggled to get pregnant. So this would have been a moment that I normally pushed back. But this was only my third official meeting. I wasn't sure how the group would react to my disagreement, and I didn't want the member to feel attacked. The status of my family's own fertility and our ability to have biological children was unknown and the fear around that was silencing, which only fed my anger at the time. I didn't comment.

March

When March came around, book club was the week after Curt's orchiectomy. Everyone knew we had been traveling abroad for our honeymoon. What most people didn't know was that our honeymoon was not three weeks long. Instead, we were in Europe for two weeks, got home on a Saturday night and on Tuesday took Curt in for surgery. We then spent the next week- our third "away"- at home so he could fully recover. The surgery was considered "routine" but resulted in a significant identity shift for my husband. On the rare occasion that a joking mood struck, we joked that Curt would be like Lance Armstrong, and maybe we would become avid supporters of the LiveStrong Campaign. (Other personal values conflicted with this possibility, so we never followed through with that idea.) But in all seriousness, whenever I talked with Curt about sharing his story, he'd say it was too personal. "Women share their stories of having breast or ovarian cancer all the time. How is this different?" I'd ask. He couldn't describe it, but always said "it just was," and of course, I wouldn't push it.

We had received his diagnosis but didn't have any information regarding prognosis. "Exploratory surgery," they had said at first. But right before we left for our trip, Curt's pre-operative blood work panel was analyzed and because of high tumor markers his urologist said the surgery would no longer be exploratory. It was "highly probable" that Curt had cancer.

Tuesday of Curt's surgery came and, by this time, Curt had told his closest friends that he was going under. I had asked that each of them to wear sweatpants (Curt's required attire) out and about for the day. It was so encouraging for Curt (and me) to see photos from 17 of our friends *literally* around the world keeping him in their thoughts by wearing sweatpants on that day. Both of Curt's parents and his single surviving grandparent joined me in the hospital waiting room. I went back with him while he was getting prepped. Then the four of us waited, patiently staring at the screen showing Curt's name progress through stages of surgery. When he was done and in recovery, I went back to sit with him. It took him almost four times the average projected time allotment to wake up from the anesthesia. His oxygen would drop and the machines would beep. Eventually, they just kept him on constant oxygen with a mask until he was completely awake. Curt had requested that we make a special dinner for his family, reminiscent of our travels in Europe, so when we got home I made a cheese tray, Italian pasta sauce for noodles, and eventually we ate Alpine-style Raclette. Curt slept soundly on the couch throughout it all.

When it came to book club the next Monday, Curt was almost "recovered". We had made it past the time when he needed my help to get out of bed to use the restroom at night. Made it past the time of alarms waking us up every four hours as a reminder to take medicine. In fact, we even had a new member of our family, an eight-week old Samoyed puppy that we had purchased in December, before any of this started. Curt's biopsy results had come in two days after the surgery. We now knew Curt had Embryonal Carcinoma. This was a rare form of testicular cancer, only four percent of cases, in which metastasis is rapid. Unfortunately, all the urologist could do was tell us that Curt had cancer and refer us to an oncologist. That. Was. It. We were eager for answers and had none. Again, time was not our friend as we waited and waited for more information.

Book club this month was at Marie's. I knew that Marie had fairly recently lost her husband to cancer. Because of this, I decided not to bring up what was happening in my personal life. I still wasn't at a point where I felt comfortable bringing up my own life experiences. I need to say the group never explicitly said or did things that made me feel unwelcome. In fact, my experience was quite the opposite; members were always warm and kind. That said, I just wasn't there yet. I thought it could potentially

cause Marie pain to hear of another cancer-instance so near to the group and the possibility of that pain made sharing seem selfish. This decision was reinforced as I navigated Marie's kitchen, making my plate for dinner. To all of us who were there, Marie shared that she had a "new friend," a man who understood what she was going through because he had... wait for it... also lost his spouse to cancer *along with* his daughter who passed from the disease in her early 20's. Marie seemed to be glowing with the arrival of her new companion, so I didn't want to put a damper on her joy. All the while, I was thinking to myself, "Everyone has cancer. And young people [like Curt] die from it."

The dance of deciding what to share and when was also impacted by how other members of this group reacted to my physical presence. Multiple individuals commented on their perception of my level of fatigue, many saying, "Makena you look tired." Outwardly, I wrote this off as connected to my recent international travel and our new puppy. While I don't suspect any malice or contempt, in that moment I didn't feel like "you look tired" was a comment grounded in empathy. And empathy (lots of it) was what I needed. This perception, whether rational or not, impacted what and how I shared, specifically how I depicted my husband, later in March's book discussion which focused on spousal relationships and the concessions we make for our partners. I wouldn't say I censored myself, but I do recall some internal reframing before I shared personal stories; though few stories shared by anyone in this particular meeting. This internal reframing was compounded with some feelings of defensiveness when others related what I shared to their own experiences.

April

Because of all the time in between Curt's diagnosis and seeing a specialist, we did what any other internet-savvy individuals would do... we Googled. We read countless peer-reviewed scholarly journals and scholarship informed websites trying to make meaning of what was next. Finally, the time arrived to see an oncologist who told us that there were two options to Curt's treatment. He could closely monitor his cancer status with blood work, scans and x-rays and have a fifty percent chance of recurrence in the first year, or he could complete one round of preventive chemotherapy and reduce that risk to four percent, noting that chemo has significant side effects. Because my brain had already moved into long-

term planning and crisis mode, we got into an appointment with our “second opinion” oncologist, whose office has more availability, before the office to which we were first referred. When we heard the opinion from both oncologists who said the same thing, we were stuck. Weren’t doctors and experts supposed to tell you what was or wasn’t the best choice for your given condition? This “it depends on how much risk you are willing to take” was extra scary on top of the already terrifying “you have cancer”. Ultimately the decision was ours, was Curt’s. He took almost two weeks of seesawing back and forth between monitoring and chemo.

This entire time, up until now, Curt had kept his health status private. He shared with immediate family but only told other family and friends when he saw them in person. He didn’t feel comfortable sharing the story with so much information unknown. It wasn’t until we met with the oncologists that Curt decided to share his experience publically. “April is testicular cancer awareness month,” he told me as we were driving home from an appointment.

“Oh really. I didn’t know that,” I replied. It makes sense that there is such a month, but I had no clue when it was.

“I think I’ll write a Facebook post to tell people what’s going on.”

“Finally,” I thought to myself. I rely heavily on my community to navigate life’s tough situations, and because Curt didn’t want to share, I was missing out on some of the support I usually sought out. Instead, I replied, “I think that is a great idea. You got lucky because of a self-exam. Other guys need to know how important those are.” And so he proceeded to write, pausing to ask me for advice and edits, eventually settling on:

I've debated writing this post for a few weeks now, but being that April is Testicular Cancer Awareness Month, I feel now is as good of a time as any to share my story.

Sometime this January, I was taking a shower and noticed a lump on my left testicle. As a medical professional, I knew not to mess around with these things. I made an appointment with my PCP almost

immediately to have it evaluated. An ultrasound followed. Results were inconclusive. My PCP thought it best to see a specialist, so I was off to the Urologist a week later.

Even my urologist wasn't completely sure after the exam, but after looking over the ultrasound images, he advised that we schedule for exploratory surgery and possible orchiectomy. Following his recommendation, we scheduled surgery immediately after Makena and I were to return from our honeymoon in March. Preoperative blood work all but confirmed a cancer diagnosis with elevated tumor markers showing up in my blood.

March 19th I underwent a left radical orchiectomy. The first 24 hours after surgery were painful, but by a week after surgery I was able to do most things normally. The biopsy results came a few days later and confirmed Stage 1A Embryonal Carcinoma. Fortunately, this means at present there is no sign of lymphovascular invasion or metastasis. Blood work and CT scans in the following weeks confirmed my tumor markers had returned to normal range and that there is no sign of metastasis to the regional lymph nodes.

I am currently writing this on my way home from my first oncology appointment, a reality that I never expected to be faced with at this point in my life. The oncologist's opinion is that most likely the cancer is gone and recommended bimonthly blood work and quarterly CT scans to monitor for any sign of it coming back. Unfortunately, he estimates there is a 30-50% chance of it recurring, and most cases recur in the first year if at all. A chemotherapy regimen could be given in that instance and it is highly effective against this type of cancer with a 95% cure rate. I have a second opinion scheduled for tomorrow, but I'm feeling optimistic.

I am generally a pretty private person, so sharing these details is uncomfortable. However, I am sharing because I want to emphasize the importance of paying attention to your body and performing

self-exams. Also, I know, as men, sometimes we can have a hard time talking about anything that threatens to impinge upon perceived manliness. This is a reminder to set that aside and put your health first.

I feel very fortunate that we caught it so early and that I have had such tremendous support from my Rock Makena Riley, and our family and friends.

I'm attaching a link to how to perform a testicular self-exam for reference.

EDIT: A couple of helpful tidbits about TC. It occurs most often in men age 15-35. More common in white men. More common in men with family history, or men who had an undescended testicle at birth. The first sign is usually a painless lump, but can also be a feeling of pain or fullness in the scrotum or swelling.

Thanks for reading!

Love,

Curt

I remember the night he made his decision to do chemo. We were out at a local dentist networking event, chatting with some of Curt's colleagues when he said, "so I think I'm going to do chemo." I looked at him, shocked, because this was the most definitively he'd made such a declaration and he went on. "It's the second day in a row that I've felt like chemo is the best choice, so I think that's it." Just like that, the decision was made. Curt picked the oncologist he felt the best connection to and we scheduled his chemo.

April book club came around and as I entered Erin's home, two things were different. Curt had shared his story with the world and that, along with my now six-month history with the group, helped me feel like I was in a place to share as well. I told the group the news of my husband. It wasn't a big announcement. It was just a comment to an individual loud enough so those around could also hear. In fact, I was prompted by a question about my dissertation. The weight of scheduling interviews to begin my data collection, something I articulated early on that I wanted to have done by March and hadn't

started, was weighing on me this month. When one member who had agreed to collaborate with me, asked, “how are your interviews going?,” I felt anything other than a brief story of my current life would be a lie. Before now, I had kept things to myself, but they didn’t feel like lies of omission. Looking back, I was raw and felt the need to protect myself and I wasn’t yet confident that the group as a whole would provide me with refuge. Now, I had witnessed ways individuals in the group interacted, shared, and supported one another. How the respect they’ve built as a group creates a culture of empathy when members choose to be vulnerable. Now, I was ready to share.

The reactions were common to that we’d received in other places. “He’s so young.” “I can’t believe you’re going through this in your first year of marriage.” “I’m so sorry.” Some even briefly mentioned the names of members they knew had experiences with cancer, or the elevator pitch of how cancer had impacted their own lives. But just like all the others, the meeting went on. We moved through the living room that was hand painted with a scene that reminded me of a movie into Erin’s kitchen and dining room helping ourselves to some homemade Greek fare and having our average social conversations. No one asked me about Curt during that time. I found out later at other meetings that some members hadn’t even heard my news, and expressed regret for not reaching out to me sooner. It was like a weight was lifted... not that it was completely gone, but that I had a group of people who were helping me hold the burden. I’m glad Curt was open to sharing, and I was at a place when I felt supported in sharing with the group at this time. They gave me the grace I needed to work at my own pace and accommodate my family’s needs while collaborating with them to tell their story.

May

In my family life, May was a big month. Curt had decided to do chemo and reduce his risks of ever dealing with a cancer prognosis again. The downfall to that decision, and one of the reasons why it was so difficult to make in the first place, was the side effects and potential long-term risks. The doctors could tell us what kinds of things *could happen* but no one was confident about what *would happen*. The treatment for the kind of chemo Curt was doing was only “one cycle” or three weeks. Most of the data that his doctor and their team had about side effects like infertility, tinnitus, and neuropathy were for

patients who had three or four cycles (the most common treatment for recurrence). Because of the uncertainty around impacts on fertility, we decided to start trying for a baby.

I quickly read *An Impatient Woman's Guide to Getting Pregnant*, stopped drinking alcohol, changed my diet, and started tracking my cycle. I learned very quickly that there are all kinds of sticks you can pee on when it comes to pregnancy, not just pregnancy tests themselves. When an ovulation test gave me a smiley face, we went to work. Then, more waiting.

Sam was May's book club host and the discussion was livelier than the previous month. Motherhood was a main theme of the book and the discussion, and yet again, I felt wary of sharing our steps with the group. This wasn't because I didn't feel like a supported member. Instead, I just didn't want to get my hopes up, tell a bunch of friends, and then have to say "no, it didn't happen." So I was in a place where I could have shared some things and at a minimum asked some questions of my group, but didn't. At this point it wasn't about them and the way the group made me feel. It was about intimacy and uncertainty that was compounded by Curt's treatment timeline. The world was most certainly swirling... it felt like the chorus of a Brandi Carlile (2015) song, "you can dance in a hurricane, but only if you're standing in the eye" (track 2). My life felt like a hurricane, and I was in the center but I wasn't confident with how long I would securely be able to stand there.

This was the month that I started my interviews, and I shared with my first collaborator, James, that Curt and I had "pulled the goalie" (stopped using contraception). I shared in this instance because of the lived experience she brought up in our conversation. That, plus her long standing relationship with my mother (they're good friends—she attended Curt's and my wedding), made my sharing particularly relevant.

June

June, six months after Curt's self-exam and discovery, was the month of chemo. We spent a week staying in the same town as the hospital and made two subsequent visits. Just before Curt began his treatments, we got a positive pregnancy test. "Two-lines!" We were in the very lucky twenty percent of people who got pregnant on their first try. Curt said, "Finally something good happened to us." The baby

was the hope we needed, and that worried me. On top of it all, we agreed as a couple to keep our pregnancy a secret...another secret. Just one day after seeing two-lines on that stick, I got a message from my cousin whose wife was pregnant. I was the “best lady” in their wedding and knew they had been trying for a while. I’d been kept in the loop. They didn’t know we were trying. By this time, my cousin-in-law would have been about 20 weeks pregnant, and she had lost the baby. I suppose I knew that was possible, but I didn’t think it actually happened to people! 20 weeks was half way through... and she had to give birth to her now deceased child. I was fraught to say the least. Not only was my very tiny bundle of cells the beacon of light in the storm of our life, now reality had gut checked me as I realized my baby wasn’t “in the clear” after the first-trimester like I had previously thought. I was simultaneously thrilled and completely terrified that something [else] would go wrong.

During one of Curt’s beginning treatments, I got woozy and he scolded me to sit down. The nurse in the oncology department that day was the first person we told about our baby. As of June 17, 2019, Curt has been cancer-free. We waited until then, when I was almost eight weeks-pregnant to tell our immediate families (sibling, parents, grandparents). Then we told them they had to wait, wait until we felt confident the pregnancy was viable. Again, if bad news was on our horizon, we didn’t want to have to share that with the world. We made them wait until mid-July to tell their friends. From the moment Curt came to me that January day, to the moment we shared the news of our baby with our communities, the entire process has been one where sharing was dependent on timing.

Practical wisdom from other members

Throughout the summer as I had conversations with participating members to collect their individual stories, they would inquire about Curt’s health. I would respond as honestly as I could in the moment, and each and every time they would- of their own volition- share with me their own personal experiences with cancer, caring for a loved one, uncertainty about the future, and more. I have chosen to highlight three members’ responses to my husband’s diagnosis to represent those moments.

Lynn shared her personal experience being her mother’s caregiver as she was battling lung cancer and subsequent metastasis. She shared tips about taking notes during appointments, following up

with providers with any and all questions, and considering the medication they provide liberally rather than conservatively. She shared particular experiences of the effects of chemo and radiation, of her mom being greatly fatigued and generally unwell. She also shared that the other physical side effects of treatment didn't impact her mom and what they had pictured in their minds was much worse than the actual experience.

James asked me about my husband after we concluded the formal interview questions. The way she reacted was to share her personal story around infertility. She shared experiences of navigating medical practitioners and the system that is supposed to support individuals working to conceive a child. She had one daughter without medical intervention who went eight rounds of IVF before doctors determined that her fallopian tubes were clogged and alternative methods needed to be employed in order for her to conceive. She ended up having twin boys. James talked about family planning and the number of kids she and her husband had originally wanted when they were thinking about their family. And as she held her grandson on her lap she shared that it all would work out, that my husband and I had taken the right steps to provide ourselves with alternative options if biological naturally conceived children are an option for us.

Rebecca shared that her brother was diagnosed with melanoma and went through both chemo and radiation treatment to become cancer-free. Unfortunately, his cancer resurfaced and he had to go through treatment again. All that goes to say that her brother lives a happy life with a family. She empathized with the amount of time and the commitment that treatment for cancer takes up in an individual and a family's life. She also shared that often individuals get bogged down with the superficial consequences of their diagnosis. She shared that her niece was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer and after successful treatment opted for a preventive double mastectomy. As she talked with her husband about this option she lamented no longer having breasts naturally, and Rebecca shared that her niece's husband said he loved her not her breasts. This particular statement was powerful because Rebecca had already shared the role she saw of individual stories as fuel for others' hope.

Sharing the communal wisdom.

No one ever plans for something like this to happen. You don't ever think a tornado could hit your house and yet, twisters cause destruction every year. When I started working on the data collection for my doctoral work, I never expected such a life altering reality would arise. That said, without seeking it out, the Read 'Em and Eats group showed up to support me. My husband's diagnosis and my experience dealing with it came up at the end of every conversation I had in this work, one-on-one. I was never the instigator of these "cancer-conversations." Instead, the members brought up Curt and our experience on their own, often at the conclusion of our formal research-fueled conversation. Throughout the interview process, I shared what Curt and I were going through as a way to make meaning of my experience while responding to questions. As I saw in our book club meetings, people responded to my story with a story of their own. I believe members were making meaning of my experience as well, by sharing their own. It wasn't planned, I never could have planned it. But amazingly I was not only witnessing but *experiencing* first-hand the ways communal knowledge and group learning happened within Read 'Em and Eats.

PART 3: SCHOLAR AS NARRATOR

Chapter 8: Research Logistics

A significant amount of work went into the preparation for and design of this project. Because this research happened over the course of a calendar year, I wanted to make sure I was being intentional about how I spent both my time and the time I asked of my collaborators. Additionally, not much scholarship exists directly pertaining to the research I hoped to do, so I was venturing into fairly uncharted waters given my topic combined with my methodology, which is explained in greater detail here.

From the beginning, I was dedicated to ethically conducting this investigation and doing my very best to honor the stories my collaborators shared with me as well as my experiences as a member of their group. In order to do this, I made a conscious decision to “hang up” my researcher hat whenever I was wearing “member hat”. I desperately tried to balance the two roles of member and scholar with the goal of not greatly upending usual group dynamics. I care deeply about the group and didn’t want to be a inauthentic member by wearing both hats at same time. I was afraid that if I allowed myself to keep the research hat on in tandem with the member hat I would unintentionally influence the kinds of stories usually told in the group, by sharing myself in a way that was biased towards my ideas of what was happening regarding communal practical wisdom.

The following materials articulate the process it took for me to get to the narrative of this study. You will find that the information gathered in Chapter 8 is quite different from the bulk of Chapters 3 through 7. Similar style and tone were utilized in the Introduction, and I hope by providing this information here, I not only book end the narrative conveyed throughout this writing, but also help you understand the researcher hat that I tried so desperately to hide throughout my active engagement in the group. Following the conclusion of this chapter, I have shared my interpretations of this work as a whole and the potential implications for educational institutions in an Epilogue. Before reaching the final appendix (where additional research information is documented) I have written an Afterwards to share my reflections on the process of completing this research, other places in literature it could contribute to,

and what it felt like for me to have one foot in the world of academic scholarship, and the other in community wisdom.

The Questions

This study investigated the following questions: In what ways do interactions and exchanges amongst adults in communal groups co-create practical wisdom? How do the individual members contribute to the communal practical wisdom of the group?

The Methods: Participant Observation

“...it is clear that the act of founding or joining a reading group and deciding what its program will be provides an occasion for people to define who they are culturally and socially and to seek solidarity with like-minded peers. For many, joining a reading group represents in itself a form of critical reflection on society or one’s place within it, because it demands taking a stance toward a felt lacuna in everyday life and moving toward addressing that gap.” -Elizabeth Long in ‘Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life’ (2003, p. 92).

In 2008 I graduated from high school and my mother joined a book club. I regularly talked with her about her book club discussions, and sometimes joined their meetings as a guest when the book of the month was of particular interest to me. In 2011, I was a graduate student and identified a lack of “for fun” reading in my regular repertoire, so I started a book club with three other graduate students. Our book club only lasted three months before the pressures and perceptions of responsible time allocation associated with graduate school got to us and we dismantled our group. All of this is to recognize that I have a history with and affinity for book clubs. My choice to use a book club as my collaborating participants in this work relates to its alignment with my group criteria along with my perceived capacity for genuine participation.

According to Tedlock (2005), participant observation originally developed as a method for observing the “joys and sufferings” of a small, homogeneous culture through continued participation in their daily life (p. 467). More recent employment of this method includes a reflective component where the researcher also engages with her own participation within the group. This ethnographic method

enables researchers with “representations and expressions of: direct personal participation in or observation of event; accumulated knowledge of the world in particular sets of circumstances; what it is to live in these circumstances and the personal feelings and emotions which are engendered” (Gray, 1997, p.99).

I hoped to embody a combination of two related approaches in my participant observation. Tedlock (2005) describes public ethnography as “the type of research and writing that directly engages with the critical social issues of our time” (p.473). I see the recognition and valuing of community-based knowledge as well as the loci and creation of practical wisdom as a social issue facing higher education today. Tedlock (2005) goes on to say that public ethnography “straddles the domains of lived experience and recollected memory of time spent interacting in the field, on one hand, with time spent along in reflection, interpretation, and analysis on the other” (p.473). The second approach is Richardson’s Creative Analytical Processes (CAP) ethnographies. “CAP ethnography displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p.962). While CAP ethnographies allow for greater freedom of form, the self-reflective nature of the work makes it more difficult to make truthful claims on behalf of others; author positionality comes to a more direct light. Similarly, public ethnography can be presented in a variety of forms (e.g., essays, books, poems, dramas, films, performances) with the intention of engaging, educating, and moving the public audience to action. As a theory and a practice public ethnography “creates a location within which new possibilities for describing and changing the world co-occur” (Tedlock, 2005, p.473). Because I am interested in who members are as individual knowers (what they know), who they identify as other knowers in the group (people who know other things), and how their interactions and exchanges create something new at the group level (communal practical wisdom), I employ a microethnographic perspective within the public and CAP approaches. The study of “patterns of social interaction among members of a cultural group” is the focus of a microethnography (Tesch, 1990, p.18).

For Sedo (2004) participant observation of book clubs “provided an opportunity to simultaneously experience the book clubs as the women [members] do through reading their chosen texts, learning and participating in their cultural norms, responding in both a learned and natural way, and analysing those experiences as they occurred” (p.73). According to Leblanc (1999), combining observation and interview methods in ethnographic work “presents researchers with a multi-methodological and thus highly reliable means to study people’s lives” (p.20). In practice, as a participant observer I actively engaged in the group, adhering to articulated norms (if any). I read all the texts selected through the course of my participation and offered my text-specific thoughts when appropriate based on the group’s common practices. I recognize that my presence would have some consequences for the group’s interactions, but aimed to participate genuinely in accordance with group norms in an attempt to reduce the reactive effect of my joining.

A key aspect of participant observation data comes from fieldnotes, and attempts to process said notes at a later date. There is a transformation of witnessed events to “*inscriptions* of social life and social discourse” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011, p.12) and in this act are also selecting the inscription of some events or details over others. In an attempt to note key moments for follow-up in individual interviews, but have as little reactive effect as possible, I asked the host of each month’s meetings for their book questions in advance. These questions serve as an outline for the group’s gathering, a very loose structure if you will for the intended conversations of the gathering. I used these questions as signposts in my own field notes, where I denoted lingering questions and *jottings* of key moments as they took place. All other fieldnotes were recorded as *headnotes* immediately following each gathering, noting initial impressions, what I found personally significant or unexpected, what the members seemed to experience or react to as significant, as well as how routine actions in the group are organized and take place. Emerson et al. (2011) recommend that scholars be cognizant of the contrast that can occur between fieldwork and writing fieldnotes. “‘Doing’ and ‘writing’ should not be seen as separate and distinct activities, but, rather, as dialectically related, interdependent, and mutually constitutive activities” (Emerson et al., 2011, p.19). I used my headnotes in conjunction with my jottings to connect, remember, elaborate, and

comment upon scenes from the group's gatherings. Of course, consent from participants is always top priority, and as such I only accounted for those who gave consent to participate in my field notes. If two participants had a dialogue and only one has consented to participate, I only noted the side of the conversation that provided consent and asked the consenting individual to retell the story in an individual interview.

For Richardson (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) "the ethnographic project as humanly situated, always filtered through human eyes and human perceptions, and bearing both the limitations and strengths of human feelings" (p. 965) and for Tedlock (2005) this kind of work is "deeply rooted in ideas of kindness, neighborliness, and a shared moral good" (Tedlock, 2005, p. 474). It is for these reasons, I member checked my interpretations with the consenting Read 'Em and Eats collaborators in non-interview conversations that happened at meetings after interviews had concluded or other social encounters. No members offered revisions. Additionally, Members had the opportunity to read our conversations after transcription had concluded. While most opted out of doing so, a couple of members shared minor revisions, mostly correcting grammar and filling minor gaps in conversation. I also gave members the opportunity to select a pseudonym and any alterations in identifying characteristics. In an effort to be prepared for the reflective work required of an ethnography, I considered Richardson's suggestions for "creative analytical writing practices" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p.974), using poetry to interpret an interview to think about how I position myself in the work, for example. I could write about the book club setting from various subject positions, maybe even situating characters in dialogue with one another, to think about knowing from the various perspectives. Previous experiences I've had (outside of or before academia) might provide a valuable working metaphor for understanding my research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). All of these methods could help me engage in writing as a way of knowing. The resulting work of these CAP methods surfaced in my final work as I transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted my data. Because of the highly engaged nature of the researcher in these new approaches to ethnography, coupled with the variety of formats from which they can be written, shared, or performed, Richardson (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) recommends four criteria for high standards

in this work: substantive contribution; aesthetic merit; reflexivity; and impact. These methods have been employed by Wilma Fraser in “Seeking Wisdom in Adult Teaching and Learning: An Autoethnographic Inquiry” (2018). Similar to Fraser (2018), I made these choices because they are grounded in the work of others before me and created a process for best addressing my research questions.

The Methods: Storytelling

“Storytelling is the glue of human social life—defining groups and holding them together.” - Jonathan Gottschall in ‘The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human’ (2012, p. 177)

The key to many of the stories shared in the narrative of this study is the *interaction*. In the examples that inspired this line of questioning, interaction came out of a variety of contextual factors. Some interaction was a result of collective problem solving and expressing confidence in the group’s ability to tackle a challenge, where others were more casual check-ins and personal sharing. Marsick and Volpe (1999) note that a common characteristic of informal learning is that it is linked to learning of others. All the interactions involved stories: stories of previous successes, of failed attempts, of reverie and adventure. “Human beings are equipped with special capacities to recall stories, read into them in personally meaningful ways, and efficiently store information in forms of episodes that can be recalled later” (Kendall & Kendall, 2012, p.173). It is for these reasons that my research questions focus on the interactions of members in a communal group, and use storytelling as a framework for informing the protocols for this work.

Stories are often how we share our knowledge and experiences with groups. Lave and Wenger (1991) state, “the world carries its own structure so that specificity always implies generality... That is why stories can be so powerful in conveying ideas, often more so that the articulation of the idea itself” (p.34). We can have practical knowledge independent of a group, but the interaction between two or more people, the *performance* of telling a story and the subsequent meaning making that ensues, is where practical wisdom comes into play.

Tens of thousands of years ago, when the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories. And now... most of us still hew strongly to myths about the

origins of things, and we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fictions on pages, on stages, and on screens...We are, as a species, addicted to story. (Gottschall, 2012, xiii)

Storytelling has been used by recent scholars to investigate topics and experiences deeply rooted in United States history, culture, and society. By uplifting stories, these scholars are not only advancing their academic work, but unifying as a community and healing as individuals (Johnson, Grey, & Baker-Bell, 2017). Storytelling is the action of shifting from personal narrative to outwardly expressed voice. It is because of this that throughout the majority of this study's narrative, I consider myself the *narrator* reflecting on my personal takeaways from the collection of stories shared, gathered, and put in conversation with one another. That said, there are moments, specifically in the preface and Parts 6 and 7, where my voice shifts to one of *storyteller*. "Text needs voices, bodies, and gestures to give birth to stories. Thus, a broader understanding of the unwritten and undocumented events that occur but hold no importance to dominant society can occur through remembering and sharing stories" (Nieves, 2012, p.36). Sharing, seeking out, listening to, and amplifying stories is my intentional act to counter hegemonic narratives of higher education, knowledge, and teaching and learning scholarship. "Stories carry power because they have the ability to convey truths even if the stories themselves are not the only ways of seeing the world. Stories re-present experience, and can introduce imagination and new points of view" (Scheppelle, 1989, p.2075).

"Stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings" (Delgado, 1989, p.2412) and thus play a very important role in communal groups. Sharing stories can help illuminate what we might have in common with others—how our identities, lived experience, or practical knowledge might be similar. A personal connection to shared stories can be the initial spark of a friendship, or the embers of a long ongoing relationship (Nieves, 2012). While on the whole, human nature embraces storytelling, there are communities where storytelling is a practice that "reflects people's theory of reality, cultural knowledge, and values" (Johnson et al., 2017, p.5). Despite this, some scholars still function from the idea that theory and story should be separate from one another. "If theory cannot be shown, it cannot be understood" and the way we show theory is through story (Maracle, 1990, p.5). In

this case, stories are considered if they are aligned with the BME Principle, which refers to any narrative shared with a clear beginning (B), middle (M), and end (E) (Rooney, Lawlor, Rohan, 2016), allowing me to stay open to the wide diversity of possible interactions while maintaining a commitment to my storytelling framework.

Stories influence us, shaping our thinking and our actions, all the time. They can reinforce what we think we know, or challenge us to see things in a different way. We can combine the wisdom we gain from the stories of others with our own knowledge to build new, more comprehensive understandings of the world. Stories help us share our knowledge with others, navigate complex problems, and find meaningful patterns in our lives. As we tell our stories we satiate our mind's need for significant experiences while aiding in our own reflection and meaning making. Each time we listen to a story, we pull pieces- threads- that are relevant to our own lives and weave the threads in and amongst our pools of knowledge. And the next time we tell our own stories, we might share in a slightly different way that incorporates this new thread of wisdom.

It is important to seek out, listen to, and retell stories in their entirety, rather than dissected into parts (Kendall & Kendall, 2012). Capturing the emotion elicited by the sharing of an individual's own stories is part of what makes a story whole (Rooney, Lawlor & Rohan, 2016) and to do so requires creating the opportunity for individuals to perform their stories. Telling stories out loud allows collaborators the chance to act out the "themes, vignettes, and exemplars of their lives" according to Mahoney (2007, p.591). Throughout the performance of a story, the listener needs to be aware of the vivid ways the story is actually told, the performer's elaboration of purpose, and the order in which the story unfolds to appreciate an entire story. Kendall and Kendall (2012) argue that these three characteristics of performed storytelling are what separate storytelling as a methodology from other forms of narrative analysis (p.173). This approach to building understanding is well situated within an interpretive framework, as it is focused on "multiple perspectives of stories and who tells the stories" (Creswell, 2007, p.24) and the stories are "data that are relevant to the informants and attempts to preserve their unique representations" (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 588).

The process of eliciting stories involves a reflexive communication process between the performer and the listener. Together a researcher [listener] and her storytelling collaborators [performers] might co-construct additional narratives that reflect the intersection of the researcher in the content or context of the stories performed (Mahoney, 2007, p.581). Both the listener and the performer play the role of interpreter—sometimes collaboratively and other times independently. The interaction, the presence of a listener and who that listener is, impacts which stories [data/unit of analysis] are told and how they are told (Kendall & Kendall, 2012).

To elicit “richer, more meaningful stories”, listeners can be involved in four different “interactive story activities”: reacting, matching, eliciting, and collaborating (Kendall & Kendall, 2012, p. 175). The following explanations and examples are adapted from Kendall and Kendall’s description of storytelling as a research method. *Reacting* involves the listener using a prompt that requests the performer to share their reaction to an event or data. An example could be, “Now that you have seen this artifact of an event in your group, what is a story you would tell to respond to this event/artifact?” *Matching* as an interactive story activity involves the listener asking the performer to share a story that mirrors one that is provided. “Here is a story about how another member of your group used the group to collect information and make a decision. Please tell a story that reveals your own reaction to the group as peer-resources” could be an example of a prompt. *Eliciting* is when the listener is actively requesting specific information in the structure of a story. A prompt could be, “Tell me a story about a time when another member of the group shared a story that impacted you.” Lastly, *collaborating* is when the listener has knowledge or experience that they can share with a performer to enhance the richness of the story being told. In this case the listener becomes a co-performer and the story has multiple tellers.

In addition to the four interactive story activities mentioned above, Kendall and Kendall (2012, p. 169) posit that there are four functions of storytelling which include the: *experiential function* where the performer tells their own observations or how a particular something unfolded; *explanatory function* relates how decisions were made or problems solved; *validating function* reinforces certain values; and *prescriptive function* is meant to influence listener behavior or provide caution toward certain outcomes.

Understanding the function of a story helps the listener develop deeper understanding of context, surface their own preconceived notions about a story's topic or performer, and account for why different performers tell stories of the same account in different ways. Additional interactive story activity prompts could be developed to elicit stories of different functions from the performer. Because the nature of this work is focused on interactions between adults in communal groups, similar prompts that were asked of individual performers could also be adapted for a group setting; in which the group becomes a collective of performers who tell a story by responding to and building off of one another.

There are four sources of data in this work: one from my own notes from my engagement in the group as a participant observer; the other three come from interviews. The four interactive story activities and four functions of storytelling were incorporated into core questions of my semi-structured interview protocols. Two protocols were developed for interviews with individual group members. The first included questions focused on the members as individuals, their personal experiences and how they see themselves as knowers. The second protocol focused on the individual as a member of the group and was used to elicit reactions to my observations as a participant in the group. The third interview protocol was for a group interview with all consenting group members together and was reflective of the second individual interview protocol, just targeted at the group as a whole. All of the protocols used in this work are shared in Appendix A. In order to best document the stories shared during these interviews, I asked for consent from my collaborators to record our conversations. I then transcribed those audio files for coding later using web-based Temi. In the one-on-one interviews the audio recording worked quite well. I utilized a recording app on my mobile phone and began recording before the formal questions started. It didn't seem to disrupt or dampen the conversation. However in the group interview, the audio recording was quite difficult. I used the same mobile app, plus two additional recording devices in different locations in the space, but the acoustics were not good in the room, often members talked over one another, and the final combined transcript from that day's recordings was muddled and difficult to follow. I did all my coding by hand (i.e. no qualitative coding platform was used).

Rather than dependability being focused on triangulation which is based on the “assumption that there is a ‘fixed point’ or an ‘object’ that can be triangulated” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) I have drawn from multiple genres of literature to identify common threads and methods that I use to *crystalize* my work. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) state that the central imagery for validity instead of the triangle is the crystal which...

Combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose—not triangulation but rather crystallization. (p. 963)

Using the four sources of data mentioned above allowed me to listen to both individuals and the collective group. This approach helped me write in a way that crystalized new understanding about adults and the co-creation of communal practical wisdom. Additionally, the ways in which I placed my own voice with those of my collaborators helped crystalize how I came to interpret their experiences. Like Mahoney (2007), I was very transparent in my final product as to how I made sense of the stories shared with me. I’ve shared the ethical considerations that shape the culmination of my work, along with the strategies I employed to elicit stories from collaborators. The process I used to make-meaning of story construction was shared in my own reflective narratives. “The storied descriptions people give about the meaning they attribute to life events is, I believe, the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people’s experience” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.479) and it will be up to the reader to determine if the “rich details and revealing descriptions” of stories (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 483) and my interpretations are helpful in deepening their understanding of the meaning conveyed.

In deciding which stories to retell some researchers took a minimum requirements approach. For example Rooney, Lawlor, and Rohan (2016) used a classification taxonomy which helped them sort stories into the categories of tragic, epic, comic, and romance. They accommodated secondary plot lines but deemed any story with more than two categorizations unsuitable for analysis. Espino, Muñoz, and

Kiyama (2010) wrote *testimonios* focused on individual experiences and values, which they then shared and retold more deeply with one another. They then collaboratively constructed a *plática* with shifting narrators and intentional acknowledgement of multiple realities to illustrate their shared experience. Mahoney (2007) indicated the balance of researcher voice representation with that of collaborator stories was a leading methodological consideration. Mahoney recognizes three questions that were central to guiding these concerns. “Whose voice”, “whose point of view”, and “whose vested interests are being expressed” helped navigate what should be shared and when (Mahoney, 2007, p.583). Grey and Williams-Farrier (2017) used one overarching question and two separate goals to convey their shared experience of exchanging stories and scholarly argument around counter-storytelling. They presented a dialogic theatrical performance built off the thematic analysis of their stories and conversations. That said, the process I used to determine which stories were retold was a combination of that used by Espino et al. (2010) and Mahoney (2007) as I coded and recoded which stories were most representative of the themes that emerged. They also influenced how throughout the border narrative, I chose to put stories in dialogue with one another; using my own voice as a processing thread.

In many of these pieces, stories were represented in narrative form, with characters, context descriptions, and dialogue. I planned to use my writing of this piece as an additional method of inquiry, using creative analytical writing practices posited by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) (e.g. turning notes into a drama, poetic representation, epilogue, and seamless text) to make meaning of my personal experiences as a listener and interpreter of stories. I assumed I would be affected by the performers I engaged and wanted to be able to document their complete stories and the process of learning from them; the process and the product would be intertwined.

Homogenization occurs through the suppression of individual voices and the acceptance of the omniscient voice of science or scholarship or social-script as if it were our own. Writing as a method of inquiry is a way of nurturing our own individuality and giving us authority over our understanding of our own lives. (Richardson, 2001, p.35)

From the beginning, with commitments to telling performers' whole stories in this work, I acknowledged that my "end product" would be much larger than a single journal article. Thus, I imagined that the nature of my written work would look similar to that of Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life* or Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Power and Profit in the American City*, narratives focused with rich dialogue and active researcher voices. I imagined this work to have a structure that goes between Terry Tempest Williams' "The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks" and Malcolm Gladwell's New Yorker essay "Getting In," marrying the ease that comes with reading works of fiction with the informed articulation of foundational or connected scholarly work. It is my sincerest hope that I've been successful in the nature and structure of my retelling and synthesis, so the result of this work not only informs higher education, but is of value and interest to my collaborators as well.

Through participant observation and a series of individual and group story-based interviews with Read 'Em and Eats book club over the course of eight months, coupled with interaction focused CAP and public ethnography writing methods, I hoped to determine the ways in which interactions and exchanges amongst adults in communal groups co-create practical wisdom and how the individual members contribute to that group communal practical wisdom.

The Quality and Rigor Strategies

Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) suggest four core areas that are key to "assessing the methodological rigor and analytical defensibility" of qualitative work (p.28). They assert that an important factor in whether qualitative research is considered rigorous by its corresponding knowledge community is how as a qualitative researcher you account for yourself and share your processes clearly with readers. This is my best attempt at bringing readers into my processes for coming to the conclusions that are shared in the body of this work. To account for the credibility of this work, I utilized a strategy of "prolonged engagement in the field", working with Read 'Em and Eats from November of 2018 through January of 2020 (Anfara et al., 2002). For the reflective meeting notes, I also engaged in peer debriefing with my mother, because she was also present at meetings as an active member, so she witnessed first hand the same moments I did. Because I processed the proposal of this research regularly with my mom, I

did not ask her to participate as a collaborator in the study because of possible conflict of interest. As previously mentioned, all transcribed conversations were offered back to the storyteller for edits and while most opted out of providing any, a few did provide basic grammatical and casual rephrasing. Regarding transferability, I have worked to “provide thick description” (Anfara et al., 2002), made possible by my full participation in the book club in addition to interviews with members. This is another reason for sharing the stories in the way I have; not only does it respect the whole story of my collaborator but it also allows for a deeper understanding of what took place and why that was important to the storyteller. I employed a “code-recode strategy” (Anfara et al., 2002) to ensure the dependability of my claims. After transcription, each interview and reflective field note was coded into a set of themes. As I separated the stories from their complete interviews into thematic sets, I eliminated any stories that on second look didn’t fit with that grouping. There were some smaller threads and outliers in the stories shared that would make interesting fodder to expand upon in future research, but primary content did not align with any of the nine core themes. After finalizing the selected stories I would use to support each theme, I recoded the selections for sub themes that nested into the larger overarching theme. This recoding was key in writing up the italicized synthesis I’ve included in each section. Last but not least, to ensure confirmability of my work, I “practiced reflexivity” (Anfara et al., 2002), sharing how my own experience in the book club allowed me to experience communal wisdom sharing first hand, in addition to reflective field notes as a data source.

The Group

In the process of identifying a group for this study, I came to use a core set of criteria. These criteria are presented below as a series of continuums focused on the following characteristics: membership, community type, group type, leadership, degree of structure and gatherings which were greatly informed by McMillan and Chavis’ (1986), *Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory*. Below are these characteristics along with different possible criteria for a group within each characteristic. The criteria I selected are designated with bold formatting.

Table 1. Group Selection Criteria

<i>Membership¹</i>		
Membership is fixed, meaning no one joins or leaves after the start of the group.	Members include a core group who are present at most gatherings along with the occasional guests as well as “open-enrollment” meaning new members can join any time.	The membership of the group is loosely coupled, meaning a leadership group organizes gatherings but all the other participants fluctuate from gathering to gathering (and thus may or may not have relationships with any other members).
<i>Community Type²</i>		
Community of Practice: the group exists because of a common desire to share knowledge specific to a particular occupation, skill, or trade.	Community of Affiliation or Interest: the group exists because of a shared set of values or concerns.	Community of Circumstance: the group exists because of a shared experience such as surviving a natural disaster or managing a particular disease.
<i>Group Type³</i>		
Pre-formed, meaning the group was created by an organization or body outside of the members and participation is mandatory.	An external body created the group at the request of the membership, and participation is not mandatory.	Self-organizing meaning the group was created by its members (no external organization or body created the group) and members “opt-in” to participating.
<i>Leadership⁴</i>		
Power is hierarchical with members in official leadership positions (e.g., officers) making the decisions on behalf of the group.	No official leadership positions exist but core members are seen as primary decision makers and coordinators.	Power is equally distributed amongst all members and the group uses consensus building to make a decision.

¹ Ziller, R.C. (1965). Toward a theory of open and closed groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 64, 164-182.

² Brint, S. (2001). Gemeinschaft revisited: A critique and reconstruction of the community concept. *Sociological Theory*, 19(1), 1-23

³ Olson, E. E. & Quade, K. (2006). Creating self-organizing groups. In Dynamical Leadership Academy.

⁴ Aronson, E. (2001). Integrating leadership styles and ethical perspectives. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* 18, 4, 244-256.

Table 1. (cont'd)

<i>Degree of Structure⁵</i>		
The group follows a standard procedure or process for each of their gatherings. This may be represented through an agenda of ordered events.	The group has some common processes or traditions but is flexible from gathering to gathering based on members' wants and needs.	The group has no designated structure. Instead each gathering is left up to the members present to curate or design (e.g. open-space).
<i>Gatherings</i>		
The group gathers regularly at pre-scheduled times (e.g. daily, weekly, monthly, etc.) and members only interact at these regular gatherings.	The group gathers regularly at pre-scheduled times but are flexible to adjusting the schedule and members may interact outside of regular group gatherings.	The group does not have regularly scheduled gatherings and the members frequently interact outside of the group as a whole.

Based on the bolded criteria above, and my own capacity to genuinely engage in a group as a participant-observing member, I decided to select Read 'Em and Eats, a book club, as my group for this study. Long (2003) notes that book clubs are unique communities with varying group structures (i.e., meeting schedules, reading selection, membership decisions, and organization of the discussion) and a lack of formal leadership. That said, "some members carry more authority within the group than do others. The founder(s) or original core members have the authority that flows for their initiative in forming the group" (Long, 2003, p. 95). While a book club is a more structured example than that of the men gathering at the local restaurant's community table, Sedo (2004) argued that book clubs are both social gatherings where participants are able to articulate and valorize their experiences, and loci of an interpretive community. For these reasons, I decided to approach the "Read 'Em and Eats" book club as my collaborators in this work.

There are some specific challenges to this book club selection. Because the members have known me for 10 years, it is possible that they filtered their initial responses to my one-on-one questions based

⁵ Douglas, H. (2010). Types of community. In H. Anheier & S. Toepler (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, pp. 539-544. Springer.

on what they perceive my primary goals to be. I believe this challenge was mitigated with the intentional design of my loosely structured, story-soliciting interview protocol. I have sat in on previous meetings of this group as a guest and do not believe the members as a collective behaved or interacted any differently because of my presence. The other concern with this particular group is they may have been less willing to share anything that is critical of the group or other members because of my mother's status as a core member. It is my hope that articulated member-checking processes used during the writing process will encourage members to share openly and honestly with me, knowing that they will be regularly interacting with the work and helping me co-construct the conclusions.

Epilogue

I began the journey of this topic and this writing because I have always been particularly interested in learning that happens in communities not so much in classrooms. I was originally inspired to do this work by an informal group in my hometown. Imagine... at the local restaurant community table, a group of rural men sit drinking coffee together. Throughout their conversation, they casually share current challenges/problems they face while peers respond with their own experiences with similar challenges and how they overcame them. I have watched them, not always the same exact group but often many of the same key individuals come together in this very spot over the course of my upbringing. "Coffee hour" my Dad always called it. The agenda: drink coffee and maybe eat a slice of pie, but what I saw seemed to be so much more. Their exchanges were reminiscent of peer support networks or informal communities of practice while they shared stories and exchanged applied knowledge derived from their life experiences.

Fast forward to my life in my new city where I was attending college, and regularly doing homework or readings from the wifi-enabled seat of a local coffee shop. Another group, a small collection of retirees gather in the same space of the same coffee shop during morning hours. Every time I'm there, they are also there- in the same spot. They read the newspaper and exchange sections. As they share sections with one another they comment on the articles. Then I start to notice things similar to what I witnessed at my hometown community table. The individuals share stories of their own experiences with particular topics or other tangents that the articles inspire. They comment on one another's stories, giving tips, how-to's, and their own anecdotes that might influence action, decision, or perspectives.

The rural men at the local restaurant's community table and the retirees in the coffee shop have some things in common. They are both groups of adults choosing to spend time with one another; they are not being required to meet up because of family or professional obligations and they are not obligated to show up because of dues or enrollment required attendance. These groups are informal. They do not have agendas that dictate their actions when together and they do not have designated leaders facilitating the group. Gatherings of these groups are driven by individual members' motivations, and are communal in nature.

What I saw, and found so fascinating, was that learning didn't appear to be the goal of any of these groups. In fact, the individuals I observed might not have identified as groups at all. They just shared a social motivation and an understanding of where and when to come together. They might not have consciously identified that they were learning together through their stories and sharing, but I could see what I thought was meaning-making happening within these groups. They would tell stories and build off one another. Some would ask for advice given specifics that were shared, and others would return on a later date and tell how they had tried something that they heard in a previous gathering. As these adults came together, they shared experiences and interacted with one another. As they interacted, each had opportunities to contribute knowledge they independently gained to the conversations of their group. The conversations of the group were driven by the contributions of members—their unique worldviews and the ways they made meaning of and connected experiences. Each adult brought their own wealth of knowledge that was situated in their own lives. As they shared this knowledge with their group, as their practical knowledge met human interaction, what did the group do with this knowledge? I was convinced these groups were learning.

Adults in these examples are not unique. Think about the informal groups you are a part of. Maybe you go to happy hour with friends or maybe you are a member of a sewing circle. Do you chat with other riders who share the same bus route as you, or enjoy getting together with family to discuss the good old times from back in the day? These groups do not have to be large; in fact, similar kinds of interaction and meaning making happen in dyads. It is possible that as the group co-creates new meaning, individuals' practical knowledge shifts into shared communal practical wisdom, and if we are all valuable knowers in our communities where it is common to engage in social groups, we are regularly contributing to communal practical wisdom.

I've always thought about and oriented my work toward learning that happens outside of a classroom, and had a hunch that learning and meaning-making were happening even outside of groups or initiatives that explicitly identified learning as a goal. As adults interact with others—peers, colleagues, friends, family, etcetera—in self-selected groups, we share stories with one another: stories of our lives,

our experiences, our successes, and our failures. We live in an oral culture where storytelling is a natural part of human existence (Gottschall, 2012). So, what if in these groups, and through the exchange of stories, we are informally exchanging something else? What if these communal groups are loci of informal education?

Informal learning seems to occur among individuals through their participation in a communal group that tacitly engages in and reflects on experiences. Through the process of interacting and sharing with one another an individual's situated knowledge can be transformed into communal practical wisdom. This process of interacting, sharing experiences and reflection can be made explicit through storytelling and retelling. The purpose of this study was to better understand communal practical wisdom as constructed informally among adults in settings where they are in community with one another. I wondered in what ways do interactions and exchanges amongst adults in communal groups co-create practical wisdom, or what was happening at the group level. I was also interested in what was happening with individuals who were members. How do they contribute to the communal practical wisdom of the group? I decided to join a group as a participant-observer and see if what I thought was happening in other groups I observed was indeed learning that resulted in a shared understanding.

Read 'Em and Eats was a little bit different from the groups I've just described. They are a formal group coming together for a particular purpose but that purpose is not explicitly learning or storytelling; it's discussing a book. An existing relationship with this group made my entrance as a member a little easier than it might have been if I started from scratch. I started attending meetings in November 2018, and just like the other members I read the book of the month, drove to the host's home, and answered my question about the book. As a new member, I had restraint in regards to what I shared and when until I better understood the workings and expectations of the group. As I attended meetings every month, I saw the same kinds of things happening as I had observed in other informal groups. Individuals shared their histories, lived experiences, and stories with one another in reaction to what they read in that month's book, or what another member shared. They built off one another, using what they heard from others to

make meaning of their own experiences or using their experiences to make meaning from what they heard from others.

I did not function as a “fly on the wall” in this group. I was a full-fledged member. I participated wholeheartedly as a part of Read ‘Em and Eats, growing myself within the group to a point where I didn’t hold back anything. I had moments of public disagreement with other members, shared intimate details about my life as it related to the book or others’ sharing, and supported my fellow members during their own times of duress. I have truly felt like a full-fledged member, especially as all the changes began to occur in my personal life. As you read, when I announced Curt’s cancer-diagnosis, the members of Read ‘Em and Eats shared so much of their own lives and experiences with me. As my husband and I transitioned into “cancer survivor” status and announced that we were expecting our first baby, book club threw me a surprise baby shower. Then when I announced our move to another city for my husband’s work, they responded with an urgent, “but you’ll still come to book club right?!” The group has not only been welcoming of me as a scholar, but of me as a human being, and I am so grateful for the 13 months we’ve spent together.

As I participated in and observed this group, I saw how stories played a key role in the interactions and engagement of the group. For starters, and unlike other groups, Read ‘Em and Eats is a book club, so fictional stories are the starting point for all their discussions. As the group reflected on the stories they read, they often began to tell stories from their own lives. In this way, the book served as a catalyst for storying and individual sharing ignited additional storying from others. Many members talked about the uniqueness of the group space for such sharing, noting that they don’t see the same level of intimacy and vulnerability in other groups they are a part of. Some books sparked more sharing than others.

One interesting thing I learned was the long-lasting impact this sharing has on members, and how their deeper understanding of one another’s lived experiences influenced the ways in which they approached the group. Knowing a fellow member’s particular experiences impacted how individuals engaged with one another and the stories that were shared, creating what I can only characterize as a

heightened consciousness for one another's well-being. Members learned new things about one another- their perspectives, values, experiences- in most every meeting even though the group has an extended history. We were surprised, challenged, and even enlightened by each other during every meeting. In fact, multiple individuals said something like "no one liked that book, but it was the best discussion". It appeared that meaning-making happens on an ongoing basis within the group. They share stories to better understand or more intentionally relate to the events described in the books they read, and they share stories to build connections between their own lived histories and those shared by fellow group members. These exchanges don't go unnoticed in the group. Members recognize that they represent a wide diversity of ideas and perspectives whether it be values and political affiliations, age, marital status, education, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity; the group may be completely made up of women, but they are most certainly a diverse group of women. And that diversity coupled with members' willingness to be vulnerable in their sharing creates moments of learning with, about, and from one another. The occasion was rare when little to no personal storytelling occurred, but when that was the case as in the particular example of the book, *The Wife*, I imagine a couple explanations. It is possible that the content of the book's story resonated very closely with members' own experiences, so additional meaning-making wasn't necessary. Many of the experiences in the story that had been criticized by the majority of members through discussion and the tone had shifted to one that was less empathetic than any other I had been a part of. That said, the vast majority of meetings were characterized by deep and thoughtful storytelling.

Throughout my time with the group and my one-on-one conversations with members, I identified a series of characteristics that together, supported this kind of sharing and vulnerability. It is these characteristics that I believe create the kind of space where the sharing and learning I mentioned can occur. First, this group is at its core all in relationship with one another. Not all socialize outside of book club meetings, but they are indeed a social group. The group has also been meeting for over ten years with very little change in membership. It appears that when people become members, they stay members. Because the members have relationships with one another, and they have had time to build a history with

one another, they are more comfortable sharing with each other than they would be with other colleagues or acquaintances. The fact that the group always meet in each others' homes and shares a meal reinforces the bond of these relationships. Because I was the newest member and lacked the history that the other members shared with one another, I was fascinated by the glimpse I got each month into the lives of one of my new friends. When attending a meeting, I'd gain insights about the host's likes, style, and taste, sometimes even discovering a hobby (such as gardening or painting) that I didn't know they had. On top of that, some members would prepare a traditional dish for the group, others would try out new recipes that connected to the story. Every meeting was a blast before it officially got started, which is probably why some members would attend even if they hadn't completed reading the book. Opening your home to guests requires a certain level of trust, and it was always apparent to me that trust was not lacking in this group. They are more than a group; they are truly a community, where you feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging.

All these things (time, history, relationships, trust, and community) are the foundation of how and why individuals feel comfortable sharing vulnerably. These foundational characteristics are enhanced by the manner in which members react toward one another sharing. I believe members are willing to share some very intimate and personal stories because of how those stories are received. Storying in every form is met with a desire to understand and be supportive. There is a kind of unconditional caring that reminds me of my own family. This group is consistently present for one another. They listen actively, ask questions, and share their own stories never in a way that felt competitive, but instead felt like the utmost respect and honor of one another. Because of this reaction, storying has been reinforced and thus sharing and learning is a common occurrence in monthly meetings. As mentioned earlier, the stories shared within the group have longevity. They resonate over time, which also fuels the group's collective wisdom. Together, members have a deep understanding of who knows what in the group, and regularly rely on one another to contribute to group understanding. Sometimes individuals are directly prompted by others to share a lived experience and other times, members will retell a story from another member as a way of building a bridge to their own experience.

Originally, I asked two core research questions in this work. In what ways do interactions and exchanges amongst adults in communal groups co-create practical wisdom? Regarding this question, I believe it is the recognition of these group characteristics (time, friendship, trust, community, vulnerability, empathy, diversity, respect, and learning), the contributing factors that support respectful interactions and vulnerable story exchanges that support the development of practical wisdom. The group's living history and trust that are a core part of the community's unspoken norms directly connect to the ways the group "lives" empathy through their unconditionally supportive relationships and ongoing, dependable presence in one another's lives. These help build what is the safe space within the group, where individuals maintain their own identities while becoming part of a whole, a whole in which it is common to learn with and from one another through storytelling.

My second question (How do the individual members contribute to the communal practical wisdom of the group?) is directly connected to the first. Originally, I thought they were separate ideas, the first focusing on the group and the second focusing on the individuals. What I came to find is that the two are inseparable. Without members, the book club as a group ceases to exist, and the contributions that individuals make to the practical wisdom held within the group are in the stories themselves. Through the sharing of and reflecting on their lived experiences, meaning-making around other stories, and regularly recalling or restorying, individuals are co-constructing the lived history of the group, a collective understanding, and a wealth of knowledge that can be called upon at any time to make new meaning, process experiences, or support one another.

Throughout the process of reading the narrative of this group and my interactions with them, you may be curious about what it is I actually study. Technically my area of expertise is "higher, adult, and lifelong education," which on its surface may seem disconnected from the communal wisdom of a book club. Many efforts exist within formal institutions that could be enhanced by keeping practical wisdom and non-western ways of knowing in mind. Limiting our inquiry of learning in higher education to formal spaces, programs, and structures ignore all of the opportunities for informal learning to occur. "We must

find ways to incorporate praxis, dialogos and phronesis into our institutional curricula even if there is an element of stealth involved” (Fraser, 2018).

I had informed suspicions of what was happening in the groups I witnessed throughout my life, and those suspicions were confirmed by this study. By better understanding how adults co-construct practical wisdom, how they give value to or make meaning of exchanges with one another, and under what conditions they occur, higher education can be more intentional about both creating spaces and opportunities to support such exchanges *and* consciously “getting out of the way” when they occur naturally in our institutions. This time in history, when we’re absent from our campuses and separated from our colleagues, highlights the value of the informal exchanges in our everyday lives. Watercooler conversations or quick check-ins while waiting in line for coffee have gone to the wayside, and I know I am most certainly missing them. Institutions of higher learning have an opportunity when we return to campus to celebrate and respect the spaces that foster friendship, trust, community, vulnerability, empathy, respect and learning across diverse individuals through time in informal groups. It’s difficult to measure the learning that happens there, but I now know that with a certain set of factors, deep and meaningful wisdom is constructed in those informal spaces.

An additional takeaway from this work is the importance of considering what traditional in-classroom learning doesn’t usually account for. For a few decades now, we’ve understood the value in a shift from the “sage on the stage” model of higher education, where the instructors are the ones with knowledge and it is their responsibility to pass that knowledge on to students- what Freire (1973) calls banking, to a model where learning is facilitated in a manner in which students make meaning of it in their own ways. This is known as “guide on the side” (King, 1993. p.30). What this shift doesn’t account for is a change in whose knowledge matters or is valued in a formal learning setting. Classroom learning activities are usually driven by learning objectives, as they should be, but often it is only the intended objectives that are used to design assessments. So in practice, this translates to the only knowledge or learning that is important is that which is measured on assessments, which is driven by the objectives, which come from the instructor. From this study, I observed and experienced first-hand how learning and

meaning making take place around topics that were unintended or unrelated to the content of a book, and came to find that individual reflections and storying in a group can indeed result in long lasting knowledge creation and exchange. Higher education institutions are missing an opportunity to identify the informal wisdom that is exchanged and built in their formal learning experiences.

By identifying that intuitively learning is happening in groups with characteristics like Read ‘Em and Eats, we now have insights as to why there isn't a lot of documentation of this kind of learning in higher education research. I did not separate myself from the “data” in this work. Instead, I became an integrated part of it. I didn’t just observe meetings. I participated in them fully. The amount of time and labor for this work was extensive. But that doesn’t degrade its value. There are countless spaces and environments in both post-secondary institutions as well as spaces of lifelong learning where informal communities and groups exist for reasons other than learning, but where, like in Read ‘Em and Eats, communal practical wisdom is formed. In the classroom, this wisdom can grow in the unplanned or hidden interactions of learners. How we plan activities, what readings are required, if and how we allow learners to contribute to and shape the journey all impact or create opportunity for information learning and communal wisdom development. Spaces also exist where we're not intentionally thinking about learning, but as I saw in this book club, learning is most certainly taking place. As scholars of continued learning and development, we can take this as starting evidence to support the acknowledgment of and opportunities to be present in informal learning and why we should take it seriously as a domain for learning. It is imperative that we remember learning and knowledge don’t look or present themselves in one particular way. They don’t flow in one direction. Read ‘Em and Eats reinforced for me the importance of a broadened definition of education that honors the potential for all participants to migrate in and out of roles as both teacher and learner. If we were paying more attention to the varieties of spaces, forms, and manifestations of learning in *and* out of our institutions, if we acknowledged communal wisdom as a form of ongoing knowing in our communities, if we were thinking about more inclusively and intentionally, we would have a different accounting of when, where, and how learning happens. We

would look more inclusively at who are the people we consider keepers of knowledge; valuing both individual and collective.

AFTERWARD

Now that I have completed this work—collaborator identification and recruitment, active participation, story-based interviews, and analysis, plus writing and my own storytelling—it seems most appropriate to share some of my reflections and observations about this process I engaged in to complete this work.

The narrative you just read, divided into three parts, was completed as the dissertation research requirement of the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) doctoral program at Michigan State University. From the get go—and often unlike many of my co-learners—I identified with the latter part of our acronym. I always said, “I am the ‘AL’ of ‘HALE’.” My motivations and interests, even my previous work and life experience, were more closely aligned with the ideas of adult and lifelong learning. In the process of pursuing my Ph.D., I have also been working towards a Certification in Community Engagement—because I have always defined the best research as that which is done in equitable collaboration and can directly support communities.

Immediately, the way I approached group selection—in conjunction with how I conceptualized myself as a participant observer—was different from what is common in my discipline standard. My goal wasn’t to find a group where I could invisibly lurk in the background, taking notes, and jotting quotes. Instead, I prioritized finding a group where I could seamlessly integrate and authentically participate as a true member. I had an existing connection to Read ‘Em and Eats, and though I hadn’t always been a member, my presence wasn’t completely new (which I believe allowed me to reach authentic participation more quickly than if I was brand new to the group).

So—in order to authentically participate—I felt I had to “check my academic hat” at the door. I left researcher Makena in the car while book club member Makena participated in meetings. Honoring the voices of the group was so important to me—and I felt that in order to do so in my retelling [for this work] I needed to be present as a member. This meant physically, mentally, and—to the greatest extent possible—emotionally in the room as a member.

The resulting experience—the one I reflected back on as I completed my writing and shared this work in my public defense—was one of multiple tensions. I’ve alluded to the transitions between, and juggling of, multiple identities (scholar and member). But there were other tensions as well. The field of “adult learning” lends itself nicely to be partnered with community engaged scholarship—especially research on informal adult learning, which in many cases is already situated within communities. Recognizing and valuing the knowledge that “lives” in communities is at the core of community engagement; two priorities I had from inception of this work. However, it is not as common to integrate these into higher education scholarship broadly. Even amongst the faculty experts who advised and guided me through this experience, there is dissonance around what community engagement looks like in my field (despite best practices that are established for community engaged scholarship as a whole). So in addition to the tension between the parts of my own identity, I experienced some tension between the disciplines I was attempting to marry.

The last tension worth noting here centers around voice and is a bridge between the two tensions I’ve already shared. Throughout the process of writing, I experienced the on-going tension of “whose voice, when”. It was my responsibility, based on the commitments I made in my collaborator recruitment and consent onboarding, to do my very best in sharing stories in their entirety—something I didn’t feel I’d have the knowledge to do if I wasn’t one hundred percent present (first tension). I also wanted to make sure that as I told and retold, I wasn’t co-opting stories. Ensuring that stories stayed true to the original voice of their teller and didn’t subtly (or overtly) shift into my voice as the narrator was very important to me (second tension). I found this tension especially fraught as I considered my own lived experience and sharing what became Part Two of this narrative. Developing a formatting protocol that involved italics, new chapters, and different variations of retelling presentation helped me navigate this last tension.

It is also important to note that while I recognized the second and third tensions as I authored this work, it wasn’t until my defense that I began to unpack the first tension with my committee. When I thought of my audience—who I was writing for—at the core it was the community I partnered with, Read ‘Em and Eats. And in delineating the audience in this way, I separated the scholarly background from the

work all together. I thought, “I’m doing this work *with* book club, but I’m doing this work *for* my doctoral dissertation requirement,” which meant I had to include the writing that would make this work legitimate to both community and academic readers. Ongoing discussion with my committee helped me think critically about holding both audiences (and thus both of my identities and commitments) as I structured this narrative. The result is the format readers now see—three Parts bridging the group, my role as a member, and my role as a scholar.

From the introduction to this work through Part Three and the Epilogue, I drew connections and possible implications to/from the literature and scholarship that was most helpful to me in the conception of this study. That being said, the findings I’ve shared have the potential to be relevant beyond the areas I’ve suggested. Here are just some of the examples. This work could be situated in and contribute to the study of group dynamics. I did not go this route, because of my existing relationship with the group, and their established pre-meeting meal which provided additional opportunities to get to know me.

Alternatively, this work could be more intentionally connected to scholarship on books and book clubs, such as Wolf (2018) and Price (2019). Because *my* focus was more on the stories catalyzed through the selected books—not the discussion of the books themselves—I didn’t go this route. Lastly, this research was conducted in partnership with a very specific group. There are many other types of informal groups where communal practical wisdom could be created—such as support groups or religious communities—and it is possible that areas of scholarship around those groups could draw from this work as well. All of this is to say the possibilities for continued scholarship and broader implications of this work has vast potential, and I am thrilled to have contributed my part.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Institutional Review Board

The Protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to do the interview, I have your consent form, I want to make sure you're still comfortable with what you chose [go over choices]. No pressure—it's okay if you're not comfortable, but if we did audio recording my phone would just sit here on the table and I would use it to make sure that I'm honoring your story/quotes correctly.

Individual interviews A

Before we start, what questions do you have for me?

- OPENER 1: Tell me a little about yourself. For example... (history in the town, marital status, educational attainment, etc.)
- OPENER 2: How long have you been a member? Tell me about why you initially joined?
- CORE 1: What is it about this group, this book club, that keeps you coming back?
- CORE 2: What is your relationship with the other members?
- CORE 3: How would you describe your contributions as a member of this group? What are some examples?
- CORE 4: Are there other things that you do to help the group work well as a book club? What are some examples?
- CORE 5: Tell me a story about a time when another member of the group shared something that made a difference for you.
- CORE 6: Tell me a story about a time when something you said made a difference to another member(s). It's okay if you don't have an example.
- CLOSER 1: Thank you so much for talking with me today, is there anything else that you'd like to share?

If you think of anything else later and want to let me know, I am open to that.

Individual interviews B

Before we start, what questions do you have for me?

- OPENER 1: How would you describe what an average meeting of this group is like?
- OPENER 2: I know the group's members have shifted over time. How has the group itself changed since you've joined?
- CORE 1: If you could pick one moment, what would be the most memorable moment from your experience in book club.
- CORE 2: Through my discussions with members, I've observed that generally as a group, book club takes a more collectivist attitude – focusing on the group as a whole rather than recognizing individuals. How do you see that?
- CORE 3: I know some people like to have some extra time to think on things... do you have any stories or examples of times when talking about the book transitions to talking about everyday life?
- CORE 4: What I've been hearing from interview 1 is that this group creates a special place where conversations that are harder to have (or come less naturally) in other places can take place? Do you have examples of that yourself or that you have witnessed that happening from others?
- CORE 5: Since we talked last time, is there anything new you'd like to share with me about ... something that came up in book club that you hadn't expected to talk about? How did it impact the rest of the gathering?
- CORE 6: Are there things you've gained from the kinds of interactions with members of this group that take place outside of the formal book discussion (e.g. in the car on the way home, during meals, helping clean up, etc.)?
- CORE 7: As I've been listening to the first round of interviews what is clear to me is that there is a special feeling in this group that everyone contributes in special ways – given that, are there different things different members bring to the group?
- CORE 8: Through the past 7 months I've observed the book club as a living reservoir of expertise. For example, many of the individuals I've talked with have- without prompting- shared their experiences with cancer or other related things because of my husband's recent diagnosis

and treatment. Do you have any examples of your own that highlight this group as “knowers” (people with unique knowledge, expertise or experiences).

- CLOSER 1: [show photograph] Now that you have seen this photograph of your group, what story would you tell to describe this group?
- CLOSER 2: If there was a book about book club and you were the author, who would be the main characters and why?
- CLOSER 2: Thank you so much for talking with me today, is there anything else that you'd like to share?

If you think of anything else later and want to let me know, I am open to that.

Whole Group Interview C

Before we start, what questions do you have for me?

How would you describe what an average meeting of this group is like?

- This group has been around for over 10 years! How have you seen the group itself changed since you've joined?
- If you could pick one moment, what would be the most positive moment from your experience in book club and why?
- If you were describing how this book club is unique/special to someone who has never been here, what would you share?
- As members discuss book club, comments seem to be framed from a collectivist perspective – focusing on the group as a whole rather than individuals. Do you feel like that is aligned with your experience, and why or why not?
- What stories or examples can you share of times when talking about the book transitions to talking about everyday life?
- What examples can you share (either based on your experience or something you've witnessed) when book club has created a special place to have conversations that are harder/less natural in other spaces? Why do you think this is the case?

- What stories or examples can you share of something that surprised you from another member(s) and how did that impact the rest of the gathering for you?
- Are there things you've gained or learned from the kinds of interactions with members of this group that take place outside of the formal book discussion (e.g. in the car on the way home, during meals, helping clean up, etc.)?
- In this group it seems that everyone contributes in special ways – given that, are there different things different members specifically bring to the group?
- If there was a book about book club and you were the author, who would be the main characters and why?
- What is it about this group, this book club, that keeps you coming back?
- How would you describe your relationship with the other members?

Institutional Review Board Approval

Notification of Approval

To: Makena Riley Neal

Link: [STUDY00001705](#)

P.I.: Marilyn J Amey

Title: Group Wisdom

Description: This IRB project's submission, Initial Study, has been approved.

Please click on the link above to access the project's workspace, the approval correspondence letter, and any finalized documents (e.g. approved consent document(s), Protected Health Information Forms).

You can also access the correspondence letter directly using the following link:

[Correspondence_for_STUDY00001705.doc.pdf\(0.01\)](#)

As a reminder:

- the Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring that all individuals engaged in human subject research have completed human research protection training prior to engaging in human subject research.
- for non-exempt research where the IRB has required a consent document, a copy of the consent form must be provided to the subjects.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Coordinator, [Jenny Babbitt](#) , directly at +15173552180.

Notification of Approval

To: Makena Riley Neal

Link: [MOD00003011](#)

P.I.: [Marilyn J Amey](#)

Title: Communal Practical Wisdom

Description: This IRB project's submission, Initial Study, has been approved. Please click on the link above to access the project's workspace, the approval correspondence letter, and any finalized documents (e.g. approved consent document(s), Protected Health Information Forms).

You can also access the correspondence letter directly using the following link:
[HRP-625 - Letter - 2018 Acknowledgement of Change for Exempt Determination v19-02 2019-8-29.pdf\(0.01\)](#)

As a reminder:

- the Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring that all individuals engaged in human subject research have completed human research protection training prior to engaging in human subject research.
- for non-exempt research where the IRB has required a consent document, a copy of the consent form must be provided to the subjects.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Coordinator, [Steven A Smith](#) , directly at +15178846019.

APPENDIX B: The Books of Read ‘Em and Eats

2008: *Friday Knight Knitting Club* by Kate Jacobs, *Kabul Beauty School* by Deborah Rodriguez, *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen, *Middle Sex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *Eat Love Pray* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *What is the What* by Dave Eggers, *Lobster Chronicles* by Linda Greenlaw, *Dirty Girls Social Club* by Alisa Vales-Rodriguez, *My Sister’s Keeper* by Jodi Picoult, *Nights in Rodanthe* by Nicholas Sparks.

2009: *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel-Garcia-Marquez, *Drowning Ruth* by Christina Schwarz, *The Red Scarf* by Kate Furnivall, *Dreamers of the Day* by Mary Doria Russell, *Running With Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *The Invisible Wall* by Harry Bernstein, *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* by Andrew Sean Greer, *Sarah’s Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay, *Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford.

2010: *White Like Me* by Tim Wise, *The Year of Living Biblically* by A. J. Jacobs, *Secret Scripture* by Sabastian Berry, *1000 White Women* by Jim Fergus, *The Dream* by Harry Bernstein, *Always Looking Up* by Michael J. Fox, *Three Cups of Tea* by Gregg Mortonson, *Leaving Eden* by Ann La Claire, *Those Who Save Us* by Jenna Blum, *What I Saw and How I Lied* by Jeanette Wells, *Half Broke Horses* by Jeanette Wells.

2011: *The Forgotten Garden* by Kate Morton, *Room* by Emma Donoghue, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *Two Rivers* by T. Greenwood, *The Kitchen House* by Kathleen Grisson, *The Time Traveler’s Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger, *The Lace Reader* by Brunonia Berry, *Prayers for Sale* by Sandra Dallas, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Bark Kingsolver, *If You Lived Here* by Dana Sacks, *Not for Sale* by David Batstone.

2012: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by John Foer, *The Thirteenth Tale* by Diane Setterfield, *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepley, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson, *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Daine Ackerman, *The Tiger's Wife* by Téa Obreht, *Left Neglected* by Lisa Genova, *The Weight of Water* by Anita Shrieve, *These is My Words* by Nancy E. Turner, *State of Wonder* by Ann Patchet, *The Last Child* by John Hart.

2013: *Save Me* by Lisa Scottoline, *The Night Circus* by Eric Morgenstern, *The Little Giant of Aberdeen County* by Tiffany Baker, *Snow Flower and The Secret Fan* by Lisa See, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving, *Gone Girl* by Gyllian Flynn, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, *A Natural Woman* by Carol King, *The Paris Wife* by Paua McLain, *The Light Between Oceans* by M. L. Stedman, *The Language of Flowers* by Vanessa Diffenbaugh.

2014: *House at Tyneford* by Natasha Solomons, *Midwife of Hope River* by Patricia Harman, *Life after Life* by Kate Atkinson, *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, *The Inventions of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd, *Far From the Tree* by Andrew Solomon, *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tart, *The Orphan Train* by Christine Baker Kline, *The Husband's Secret* by Liane Moriarty, *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio.

2015: *Ptolemy Gray* by Walter Mosley, *Beautiful Ruins* by Jess Walter, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce, *Unbroken: A World War II Story* by Laura Hillenbrand, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Veghese, *Dollbaby* by Laura Lane McNeal, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, *The Man in the Window* by Nancy Pearl, *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki, *What She Left Behind* by Ellen Marie Wiseman, *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* by Nancy Huran.

2016: *Henna House* by Nomi Eve, *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty, *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins, *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah, *The Rosie Project* by Gaeme Simsion, *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes, *Written in Red* by Anne Bishop, *Perfect Match* by Jody Bishop, *The House Girl* by Tara Conklin, *The Shadows of the Wind* by Carlos Ruis Zohn.

2017: *Blue Shoe* by Anne Lamont, *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, *Ordinary Grace* by William Kent Frueger, *The Book of Speculation* by Erica Swyler, *Truly Madly Guilty* by Robert Moriarty, *A Reliable Wife* by Robert Goodman, *The Night Bird* by Brian Freeman, *The Sound of Glass* by Karen White, *The Dinner* by Herman Koch, *The Letter* by Kathryn Hughes, *The Undertaker's Wife* by Dee Oliver.

2018: *The Lilac Girls* by Martha Hall Kelly, *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* by Jan-Philipp Sendker, *The Woman in Cabin 10* by Ruth Ware, *The Teagirl of Hummingbird Lane: A Novel* by Lisa See, *The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells* by Andrew Sean Greer, *Gone Without a Trace* by Mary Torjussen, *The Identicals: A Novel* by Elin Hilderbrand, *The Little Paris Bookshop* by Nina George, *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, *Thicker than Blood* by C J Darlington.

2019: *Church of Marvels* by Leslie Parry, *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue, *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, *A Matter of Chance* by Julie Maloney, *Beasts of Extraordinary Circumstances* by Ruth E. Lang, *What the Wind Knows* by Amy Harmon, *The Storyteller's Secret* by Sejal Badani, *The Edge of Lost* by Kristina McMorris, *City of Girls* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris.

APPENDIX C: The Findings and Limitations

Themes/Characteristics

Chapter 2: Our long history

Time: the group was established in 2008 with many of the members having been a part of the group for the majority of its existence. Their memories together create a living history, making *time* a key factor in their group's functioning.

Friendship: connected to the previous theme in this section, with time comes relationships. This group considers themselves great *friends*, even if their interactions are limited to monthly meetings.

Chapter 3: A seat at my table

Trust: with the two themes from the previous section- time and friendship- comes trust. The members of the group note a deep level of *trust* and caring for one another. This impacts their engagement in the group and the ways they support one another.

Community: the ways individuals in this group treat one another combined with their unspoken norms for engagement create a sense of *community* that is unique to the space and fosters the other themes.

Chapter 4: Let me lighten your load

Vulnerability: the two themes from the previous section- trust and community- contribute to the creation of a safe space in book club meetings. This space is integral in the *vulnerable* ways in which members share their personal experiences and knowledge.

Empathy: the other factor of the safe space created in this group is the way members respond when others share. When individuals are brave and vulnerable, the other members meet them with unconditional *empathy*.

Chapter 5: I think about things in ways I hadn't before

Diversity: all the members of the group are quite unique. They vary in their educational experiences, their personal values and belief systems, their racial and ethnic background, their marital and

socioeconomic status... all of which contribute to their lived experiences and how they make meaning of them. They each bring their *diverse* points of view to the group and share through book discussions.

Respect: because members are all unique, there is rarely consensus within the group. That said, the individuals see the diverse perspectives represented by their fellow members as assets, and *respect* one another- even if they don't agree.

Learning: the result of diverse perspectives shared and being met with respect and listening, is often *learning*. The individual members learn about each other through the stories told, and learn more about themselves and their interpretations of the book by telling stories themselves.

The Limitations and Future Opportunities

There are some limitations to my study, specifically in that I engaged with an all women's group in the Midwest, with fixed membership and located in the Midwest. The characteristics of groups where communal practical wisdom is created could vary, and because this research used the singular group of Read 'Em and Eats as collaborators, additional research is required to learn more. Variety in group membership, community type, group type, leadership, degree of structure and gatherings may result in additional or varied findings. Examples of this could be groups of men or youth, online groups, or even groups with fluid membership. All this is to say if the group is changed, the findings may change as well.

In addition to changing up the group type, additional research could be done specifically on communal wisdom in higher education. The key to building upon the body of work I've shared here is the nature of the narrator; bridging the worlds of community and scholarly (as I discuss further in the Afterwards). Other scholars aiming to pick up this work should select groups in which they can authentically participate as a member. In formal higher education spaces, this could mean that faculty look at their classrooms as groups and all individuals (including themselves) as members. It might look like a more intentionally creating space for learners to contribute to what/how learning happens. In formal education this could be utilizing activities in class that allow students to share stories and then work hard to confirm the value of those stories, allow for them to build off one another, and engage in sharing when appropriate. A final suggestion would be designing assignments and/or assessments that encourage

learners to draw connections between course content and their own lived experiences- and those that were shared by others. Specifically utilizing low-risk or culminating assessments, to prompt reflection on the sharing that has occurred in the classroom and work to incorporate some of those stories or “take aways” into your assessment questions. As far as informal spaces in higher education, there are many opportunities; student organizations, residence communities, major areas, and co-curricular activities are just a few examples of where the creation of communal practical wisdom could be occurring.

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