

# The Bar Book Club

By David Ash

A book discussion club can pose difficulties:<sup>1</sup>

Some members may regard them as opportunities to meet people for social contact and general conversation, partially veering off onto a wide variety of non-literary topics, while others wish to engage in serious literary analysis focused on the book in question and related works, with little non-literary interaction. Additionally, some members may suggest a book not because they are interested in it from a literary point-of-view but because they think it will offer them an opportunity to make points of personal interest to them or fit an external agenda. Also, different expectations and education/skill levels may lead to conflicts and disappointments in clubs of this kind.

The Bar Book Club has no acrimony. That this pleasant state exists is due to three things. First, we are advocates, trained to – and ethically obliged to – hide our personal shortcomings behind a veneer of robust and humoured politeness. Second, we were brought together by and continue to be guided by the velvet glove of Kafkas SC, a cat-herder in a previous life. Third, we have the hospitality of Lisa Allen, the Bar Library and the Association itself.

Looking back, the axe has fallen fairly evenly between fiction and non-fiction. The Christmas 2010 choice, for example, was *On Bullshit*. Though chosen by a silk, it is in fact a meditation by Princeton philosopher Harry G Frankfurt.

Our strength is not length. A biography of Patricia Highsmith, the author of the Ripley novels, was a struggle for most of us; it was too

long, and Ms Highsmith herself proved a disappointment.

Nor is our strength unanimity. Other choices proved unpopular, too. Yet this is where the agile advocate has full room to move. He or she is not the agent of their choice, merely a constrained mouthpiece, who is permitted to fall short of and – in this writer's case, even abandon – the championing of the choice without any charge of cowardice.

My own favourite was Charles Portis's *True Grit*. The triangle of the novella, John Wayne's Rooster and the recent Cohn brothers' return to the novella itself is an enduring threnody for an America which may never have existed.

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The diversity of the club provides a means of gauging – and, importantly, recalibrating – the accuracy of our own memories. One evening in particular sticks in my mind, the discussion of one of Wodehouse's Jeeves books. As an historical figure, Wodehouse is an icon of twentieth century English prose, an abiding influence for Orwell and Waugh, to name but two. As an afterthought of parents born in or soon after the Great War, I read, reread and laughed aloud these books in a distant youth. And yet, aided and abetted by much younger colleagues – themselves

offspring of much younger parents – I found myself not rekindling my joy, but trying to regather it.

Maybe at a more general level, humour – even brilliant humour – is the least timeless of genres. To explore the proposition, I expect my own suggestion for 2012 to be *Catch-22*. While it breaks the club rule of strength before length, I will be fascinated to see whether a highpoint of twentieth century satire, both in form and substance, has retained its resonance for me.

Like any successful organisation, the club has developed its own culture and ambitions. One of which we are particularly proud is Oakes SC's assembly of non-practice books by members of the New South Wales bar from now to time immemorial, or about 1827 at last glance. At the time of writing, it is in its seventh draft, and it is hoped to unleash a table on the wider bar for comment soon.

As the club moves into its third year, it continues to cater to catholic taste, protestant modesty and jewish humour. But no ink is dry in the bowels of this Bar. Here you can espouse Jewish modesty or Catholic humour or anything else. The gods of reading forbid nothing, not even Protestant taste. Come soon to the pantheon and publish your prostration.

## Endnotes

1. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_discussion\\_club](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_discussion_club) [accessed 22/10/2011].