Excursions

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Essays: (Re)Connecting Academia

Katharina Hendrickx
Reading Domestic Noir Novels Together in Brighton and Hove

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When I first started my PhD in 2018, I did not expect that I would venture into fieldwork and, specifically, into audience research within the first eight months. My initial plan was to do a 'classic' literature PhD, involving textual analysis and examining the themes within the subgenre of 'domestic noir'. As domestic noir is a relatively new subgenre, the aim of my PhD is to understand its literary ancestry, characteristics, and popularity. A few months into my Doctoral studies I recognised that, for studying the popularity of the genre, it was crucial to also engage with its readership, who are mostly women. This then led to a complete restructure of my PhD to include all-women's book clubs taking place in different Brighton and Hove Libraires. Over three months I met over thirty women across the six smaller book groups to read and discuss domestic noir novels. This experience, even though it started purely to gather data for my PhD on the reception and engagement with domestic noir, had a more far-reaching impact than I could have anticipated at the beginning.

Beyond gathering data for my PhD, I was also invested in making the reading groups a space that would also be beneficial to the participating women. Here, the real impact of the book groups was the solidarity and community that emerged through reading the novels together over three months. The book group meetings developed not only into a space where we

discussed personal experiences – many of the participants felt comfortable sharing their own struggles and experiences with everyday sexist incidences, domestic violence, sexual harassment and oppressive, gendered expectations and structures – but also wider feminist concerns. The reading groups then turned into support groups allowing women to discuss their individual struggles and their different relationships with men. The domestic noir novels then provided the participants with a springboard for these discussions. This community of women readers that emerged during my fieldwork is still continuing as a smaller book club, which I started after the end of the domestic noir book clubs for my PhD. I invited all participants to continue reading crime novels together and twelve participants, across the six book groups, chose to do so. We still meet every month and are now an official Brighton and Hove Libraries book club.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic we have been meeting online and keeping in touch via WhatsApp and email to include members that are not comfortable joining us on Zoom for our monthly meetings. Before the pandemic, we also moved beyond the space of the library, doing more activities often associated with book clubs, such as going for a drink or meal after our monthly meetings and discussions. This change in my research has shown me that creating the connection between academic research and the wider world can bring about possibilities that are unexpectedly rewarding and that have enabled me to go beyond just 'doing research' during my PhD. For me, this meant creating a community of crime fiction-loving women to be a part of.