

Creating a community for book lovers around the globe: Rebecca Hilton, Expat Book Club

by *Emma Naito-Bhakdi*

Rebecca Hilton (a past editorial contributor to Expat Life) started an online book club in hopes of creating an engaging community, unbound by (most) geographical limitations, for expats who shared a love of books.



As an expat and a mom to young children, and living outside of BTS range, the possibility of joining a book club here seemed an impossible dream. So when a friend told me about an online book club for expats, I immediately joined up ... and in the short time since, have been having a blast. I asked Rebecca Hilton, founder and administrator of the Expat Book Club, about her brainchild.

Please first tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm a British mum-of-two and have spent the past four years navigating life overseas - first in Bangkok, currently in Germany and soon Paris! In the UK my I worked in marketing and change management for a large multinational company and I left my job when we moved to Thailand. I have now learned this - putting their career on hold to move overseas for their spouse's job - is a familiar story amongst expat women. Although I initially felt a bit lost without work, I have come to see this period of time as a gift. I have been able to get the family settled, to spend time investing in friendships

and to do some voluntary work. It's also allowed me the space to focus on my passion - books and writing.

Please tell us a bit about your online book club. When did you start it? How does it work? Who are its members?

I set up the online book club at the end of August this year and the response has been overwhelming - it's only been two months but we now have almost a thousand members! Our members are women living overseas who want to connect via a shared love of reading. The group is on Facebook and each month a new book is selected. At the end of the month we discuss the book on our Expat Book Club Live Chat. This is a Facebook Live video where a group of us discuss the book and take questions from people watching at home so that, even if you aren't in the room with us, you still feel part of the discussion. We then post questions on the group so everyone can share their comments and thoughts.

I also host the Expat Book Club page on my website, Making Here Home, and publish a monthly article giving reading recommendations and the Expat Book Club's verdict on our Book of the Month.



So ... why an online book club? What inspired you to create it?

I had the idea for the Expat Book Club after I wrote an article called 'Last night a book club saved my life'. Since moving overseas, my book club groups have been a lifeline. I was a member of a book club in Bangkok and when I moved to Germany I started a book club because I really treasure these monthly get togethers. There is something wonderful about a group of women coming together to talk about books and ideas rather than the kids and the everyday 'stuff'.

I think we all have a need both to connect with others and to engage our critical thinking. There is a pleasure in being able to express our responses to literature - and to listen to other people's responses - but it's not something we often get the opportunity to do. I also love the idea of a big group of people reading the same book at the same time and then discussing all the details. So often you read a book by yourself and then have no-one to talk to about it - unlike watching a movie. And then I started thinking about all the women who move overseas who would love to be in a book club but can't find one near them - a club they could join and remain in no matter how many times they moved. A place where they felt welcomed, where their expat experience was understood. And so the Expat Book Club was born. Facebook seemed to be the most convenient place for it, and so far it is working well.

Are there specific aspects of a regular book club that you hoped to capture in this online format?

I want this group to be a virtual happy place. Regular book clubs are about connections and engagement, and that's what I want to replicate here. We encourage differences of opinion and debate - but we criticise the books, not each other. Expat life can be lonely, but books can be a real refuge, and I am hoping that's what the Expat Book Club can provide.

Whenever the chance arises, we will do the Expat Book Club from different countries. Last month I was in Dubai and got together with 10 members from the online club. It was fantastic to meet these women in real life and we had a great evening and the group are going to get together again to discuss our next book which is just brilliant!

How is an online book club different from a regular book club, apart from the fact that not everyone is even in the same time zone?

Time zones are tricky! This is why the videos and comments are left open so people can view and join in later. The benefit is the size of the group - if we met up in real life we'd need a sports hall to accommodate all the members! People can read at their leisure - if they don't finish a book on time, they can catch up later. Also it's easy for people who may not have childcare or who are working ... it's easy to fit this into your life. Selfishly, I am thrilled that I can still be in this club when we move again next summer!



Do you have any challenges that are unique to an online book club?

Time zones are hard but we are trying to do the Live Chat at different times each month - the first one we did in the evening, the upcoming one we will do in the afternoon to catch people in Asia. With a group this big it's impossible to please everyone, but if the club encourages people to read more and engage more then that's a good thing.

Anything that has surprised you so far in doing this?

The reaction has been a surprise - it has been really popular so far and I have loved seeing how passionate people are about reading. I am happy to say that, out of this, a real life book club has sprung up in Paris - so we really are connecting people through reading!

What are your hopes for where you want the Expat Book Club to be in the future?

I want the Expat Book Club to continue to be a fun group where people are engaging with the books and each other. I would love to get some interaction from authors - it would be fantastic to have an author join our Live Chat, for example. Ultimately, I would like The Expat Book Club to be able to give something back by supporting women's literacy in developing countries.

So, how does one join the Expat Book Club?

Join us on Facebook and on Instagram! Wherever you're from, wherever you're living, you're welcome here.

Thank you, Rebecca! I, for one, am looking forward to joining my first Live Chat (if the kids actually go to bed on time ... fingers crossed!), and then finding out what the next book will be!

