

ARCHAEO BOOK CLUB: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY

An issue that is commonly shared amongst archaeologists, particularly working in academia, is a reduction in the amount of time and energy to indulge in a good book. Especially when studying or conducting research, the reading of academic articles and excavation reports takes precedence over the simple act of reading for pleasure. I myself was also afflicted with this particular problem, and although I was able to return to my love of reading through audiobooks, which I could listen to while on my way to work or cooking or cleaning, I found myself returning to familiar reads that gave me comfort, rather than taking the time to find something new. In order to push myself out of this comfort zone, I decided to join a book club. This was in the height of the COVID19 pandemic, and luckily I managed to find an excellent group who are based online on Discord called "Scientists Who Read". The introduction to new books and a new community was refreshing and extremely welcome, but I found myself wishing that I could share a similar experience with those who were also involved in some way in the field of archaeology. I looked everywhere I could, but as far as I could determine, no such book club existed. And so, I decided to start one myself. Thus, the Archaeo Book Club was born!

The book club started back in July 2022, and has grown from an initial handful of interested people to a community of nearly 100 members from all over the world. It is predominantly based on Discord, although we also share updates through social media and reading platforms such as Goodreads, Fable, and Storygraph. Each month, we vote on books related to a particular theme (past themes have included "Ancient Egypt", "Women of the Past", "Time Travel", and "Indigenous Voices"), and have one month to read the winning title, at which point we host a live discussion moderated by one of our three admins. The format of Discord as a community platform means that continuous discussion can also carry on in text format through our many chat channels, so even if people are unable to attend the live discussion, everyone can still share their thoughts and ask questions. In addition to our so-called "book worms", we also have our "scribblers", which is a writing group that was established to support the budding writers in the club, both for works of non-fiction and fiction. Every two weeks we have a live Scribbler's Corner event where people can share their current works in progress and ask for feedback, and we also offer the opportunity for co-working through specialised channels.



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I know that several of our members – particularly some of our students – have created some very special friendships and support networks through these channels, which makes me extremely happy!

The original aim of the book club was to explore how archaeology is portrayed in popular fiction. Too often, archaeologists are confronted with those classic stereotypes – Indiana Jones, dinosaurs, treasure hunting, to name but a few. And of course many of these misconceptions are perpetuated not just through blockbuster films and tv programs, but also through written fiction. The aim of the book club was therefore to read different kinds of books related in some way to archaeology, and one of our central discussion points at each live book chat is to explore the way in which archaeology / history / a particular time period or culture was represented in the book of choice. I can already say that in many cases, we have been severely disappointed – too many books that allegedly focus on archaeology instead link to government conspiracy or glorified treasure-hunting. However, we have also discovered fantastic examples of books that manage to combine an engaging story with accurate portrayals of the particular archaeological theme. Since the book club started, we have branched out and now do not always focus on fiction but also include popular non-fiction and alternative forms of prose. We also host read-alongs of books written by our book club members – such as *Even If We're Broken* by AM Weald and *Foul Days* by Genoveva Dimova – and have already had one very successful book launch event (for *Even If We're Broken*) and will be hosting another – hopefully equally successful – event in mid-September for *Sunsets and Other Dangerous Things* by Dani Frank.

All of this is an attempt to demonstrate that what started out as a pet project of my own, to encourage myself to read more and explore how archaeology is depicted in popular fiction, has developed over the last two years into so much more than that. Of course, we still read monthly books and have fun discussing them, as you would with any other book club. However, the Archaeo Book Club has turned into one of the most friendly and supportive communities that I know. Many of our members are no longer actively involved in archaeological (or similar) research, and so relish the possibility to remain a part of that world and explore their passion for the past alongside others who share their interest. The encouragement that our members offer each other in pursuing their own projects is truly heartwarming to see, and the space has become one where people feel safe enough to share worries and questions that they cannot find answers for elsewhere. Even those members who do not actively participate but follow along at their own pace have expressed their gratitude that such an opportunity exists, and I must say that it has only developed into the space that it has thanks to our wonderful book club community. My fellow admins and I do of course keep an eye on things to make sure that it remains a safe and supportive space, but we have very little to do in terms of regulating.

This article did not follow the original track that I intended. My initial plan was to offer a concise insight into the Archaeo Book Club and encourage others who share a love of archaeology and reading to join us (which of course you are all very welcome to do!). But while I was following the updates for this first issue of *Adventuress Archaeology* and seeing the incredibly inspiring list of women who will be featured in it, I decided to focus more on the necessity for support, particularly for women in archaeology and those who are no longer actively involved in the field. It is all too easy to suppose that you no longer have a place in that world, or believe that you can never achieve these things on your own, but I hope that through spaces such as the Archaeo Book Club, we can continue to create accessible, friendly, and supportive communities for everyone who shares a love of the past.

- Matilda Siebrecht

Find them on IG @ archaeobookclub

