

Free Sample Chapter from The Book Club Chronicles, part 1.

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Chapter 1: The beginning.

Claire is game for literary adventures, maybe because she spends her work life pushing numbers around.

Many who live in Hyde Park, which is the community around the University of Chicago, take classes at the Gleacher Center to explore new topics, make friends and in some cases to recruit teachers for book clubs, which are rakishly named boot-leg courses: In one living room it could be Aristotle, in another Machiavelli, in a kitchen WB Yeats, novel writing, novel reading, poetry writing, poetry reading, study of almost anything philosophic, literary, or artistic that appeals to a small group of the devoted.

The Tale of Genji, advertised as a classic of Japanese literature and, perhaps, the first ever novel is being offered at the Gleacher Center. Arthur Waley's was the first translation into English: In 1976 Edward Seidensticker translated it again, permitting a new generation of readers to fall in love with The Tale.

After buying the book and sitting down together in the classroom, we looked at each other and then at the book: 54 chapters, 1090 pages. Claire whispered to me, "In eleven weeks? This had better be an easy read."

The notion that The Tale could be a quick read was dispelled when we read a few pages of Chapter 1, 'The Paulownia Court.' Every sentence a jewel, every character precisely drawn: Poetry that cannot be skimmed or rushed through. Returning to Hyde Park on the bus, we were dazed at the erudition of our new teacher, giddy with the beauty of the Tale, already speaking of the characters as if we have known them as neighbors. Excitedly, we recounted how Genji's mother was driven out of the palace by the jealousy of the other court women, who because of her inferior status were offended at her

preferential treatment. How the motherless Genji was allowed behind her curtains to see Fujitsubo, his father's new love who resembled Genji's mother. That when banished from seeing her, Genji never ceased to yearn for her and thought of her as perfection.

“Eleven weeks, Annie it's absurd. This could take a lifetime. Are you thinking what I am thinking?”

“Oh yes! Richard lives in Hyde Park, and, being a graduate student, probably can use the extra money. I wonder if we could persuade him to teach us privately and really spend enough time, like three quarters, starting next fall. Katherine would love this book, not that she would read before class. We need a few more people. If we have enough ladies, we can afford to pay him more. Claire, we have stumbled onto a gem, both Richard and this book. We can't let this opportunity slip away. Let's talk to him next week.”

Richard, elated, did agree to teach us. A magic time: the teacher not yet jaded and the students all eager to absorb. We meet this time in my kitchen, though we change kitchens as lives and seasons change. Children, the dying, mostly parents but not always, grants to be worked on, weddings, sabbaticals abroad, crises of any sort move the group to another temporarily serene kitchen, or living room. I will describe the kitchens I knew at that time, though we started our sessions in my kitchen, during the end of the growing season, just before golden leaves carpet the Hyde Park sidewalks.

Even with my writer's eye, it is no easy task to describe myself. I asked Claire for her opinion; she said it is mushy, as usual, but fair.

I have hazel eyes, which can turn green, and a cupid's bow mouth, and seem always on the edge of laughter, all softness. My figure is no longer that of a slim girl, yet

I do have muscles, tactfully covered with flesh. I wear no jewelry, no makeup, my brown curls are lightly dusted with grey; to complete my disguise I wear neutral clothes, yet I am not as placid as I try to appear. During the growing season, my kitchen is the preferred haven. My circular oak table is surrounded by inherited unmatched chairs. A cobalt blue vase holding casually arranged flowers and baby's breath sits modestly on the table. The sunlight streams through the French doors into my kitchen, dappled by the fresh leaves in the sudden Chicago spring, perfumed with flowers in high summer, glowing golden in the fall. This is where I live: Homework with children, laughing with friends, reading in a soft chair in the purloined quiet times. The chimes hanging in the doorway were my mother's: They speak melodiously of her after her physical presence departed. I am comforted by the chiming, but still barely reconciled to her death. I wrote and edited grants for years at the University, and when the children left home and my mother was dying, retired. I missed the structure of the every day job, and missed some of my co-workers, but it was time to cut back and then time to leave. I couldn't tell what my husband, Bill, thought about my change. I couldn't tell what he thought about many issues, perhaps just as he couldn't tell what I thought.

Claire arrives at my back door; her face alight with the coming joy of returning to the Tale. We have been friends and neighbors for what seems forever. We share yearnings that change – from the busy years in raising children, paying the bills, trying to maintain a body to see us through, and surviving the times of women's liberation and all the strains it put on relationships with the other gender. Talking during our young years at ball-games, on the phone, and then as the years rolled by, talking on our cell phones, walking along the lake early in the morning, always in touch, friends of the heart.

Claire tries to jar me loose from my chosen facade, and figures Bill is the one who has subdued me. She has heard of the fights, the conflicts, my side of the complex story of my marriage. I have concealed from her, as I have from myself, dreams of my lost love, dreams that still have the ability to wake me in the night. She sees only that Bill has turned into a bully and that I have effaced myself after tiring of the conflict. She doesn't realize that he may realize that I was never entirely his, never loved him completely.

In the winter months we often move to Claire's kitchen which, like Claire herself, is rigorously organized. Claire's table is square with matching chairs lined up like soldiers on parade. She puts a pencil on the table in front of each chair, and a water glass (they all match). A water jug is in the exact middle of the table. One vase with flowers arranged by a flower shop sits in the center of the buffet that, of course, matches the table. Claire has restored her old Victorian house. The heating, electricity, and the woodwork are all immaculate, as is Claire herself: dark hair in a bob, tall body disciplined and vital, with all her movements tidy and concentrated, as is her speech. She is aware that she can be intimidating, yet her friends know that her tart tongue hides a loyal nature. The snarling remarks about her first husband, which at first startled those who do not know her well, are now expected. The more sophisticated think that she is venting in the approved modern style, while others are not so sure.

Katherine wafts in, exuding a delicious scent, her hands gesturing as her red curls bounce. Her high heels and frocks could be taken as a sign of vanity, but they are the outward sign of her ebullience and theatrical nature. When younger, her heels were higher and her frocks more daring; but now she has settled happily into her older and more sumptuous flesh, not being made for self-denial. Her husband looks upon her with

amused indulgence, or so it seems to the rest of us. As he sat next to her, listening to her giggle and saying something absurd, he fondly patted her thigh, and said: "That's my girl." A man who knows how to love. Now, Geoff is fading, losing weight, becoming transparent with his illness: His eyes still glow when he gazes on her.

Early in another book club we discovered that she rarely (make that never) reads beforehand. Claire, in one of her prissy moods became upset, but then she noticed that Katherine would skim through a chapter and, like a heat-seeking missile, focus on the one scene that illuminated the whole. Claire subsided when she realized that, like my talent for gardens, Katherine has a talent for identifying the essence of what we are reading, while her hands wave theatrically.

When we meet at Katherine's, there is always the sense that something exciting just happened there, or will happen soon. The table and chairs have stacks of books scattered here and there (a common Hyde Park habit). Adventure seems to be just around the corner, waiting to be summoned. She has occasionally taken on tasks for worthy institutions, for she has comported herself as a doctor's wife, a faculty wife and has never stinted on her responsibilities. Those of us who know her well realize that she is capable of taking on the world. She takes classes in all imaginable topics, and some not so imaginable, but always her Geoff is her darling: she's always available for him.

Franny arrives last, how to explain her? She knocks on the front door and I leave the kitchen to let her in. We know, or think we know, that she is beset by insecurities. She is not, as yet, a deep friend. She exercises with the fanaticism of a person who thinks she will keep the devil away, weighs and keeps track of every bit of food that crosses her lips. She's always dressed in the very latest of styles, which she can do because her husband is

a big noise in the markets downtown. Capes in fashion this season? Franny has a cape. White shirts with ruffles the rage? Franny wears a white shirt with a ruffle. She seems to get no more enjoyment out of her wardrobe than she does out of her food or exercise though she peers with pleasure at the rings that decorate her fingers. The rings seem unusual in that they do not appear on the fashion pages, but seem pieces of sculpture. We wonder what is going on – is it her husband? We see the look Sam bestows upon Franny, a bedroom look. He wraps a large hand around her petite wrist and tugs gently. She returns to the circle of his arm as if cold outside it. I'm sure that one day the mystery will be solved, but don't want to upset what may be a precarious adjustment but to what? She is new to the group and none of us, as yet, have seen her home. Quiet speculation provides amusement. Is her home rigorously traditional? Immaculate? Does she scrub the floor with a toothbrush every day? Then we think of the faintly exotic scent she wears and the rings on her fingers. Are we reading all the clues correctly? Franny has a job somewhere, but she is not exactly mysterious about it, but is unresponsive to questions. Is she shy? Does she run errands for a mobster? We don't know.

Richard arrives: I remember my first sight of him at the Gleacher Center: exuding seriousness, wearing a three piece suit, books in his briefcase. He's of medium height, medium build, and medium hair; medium everything, except for his brilliant blue eyes and a hint of severity about his mouth. He unpacked his briefcase, removed his watch from his vest pocket and placed it on the table. He placed his English translation (Seidensticker) and his Japanese version of Genji within easy reach. He left and came back carrying a cup of water, checked the blackboard for chalk, and then was ready to start teaching. He informed the class of his fluency in modern Japanese and in Heian

Court Japanese, which are classified as separate languages at the University of Chicago, and that he spent several years in Japan. If we had questions about the text, he would check it against the Japanese version.

Richard starts our new book club precisely at 7:00 PM, with a timed 10 minute break at 8:00, and then ends at 9:00. He signals the end of our session by closing his books, returning the watch to his pocket and rising to his feet. The ritual that signals the end of the class, like the ritual of a doctor shaking hands as he finishes with a patient. He tolerates little chatter and no digressions. This could be a graduate school seminar with the rituals, the intensity.

“For those who are not acquainted with the Tale, let me give you some background.” He tells us of the Heian times, the court society, how strange we would find it, the poetry, the aesthetic nature of the times and how the Tale was written by a court woman for court women, who would eagerly await the next installment. He waxes enthusiastic about the perils of translation – the Tale was written in Japanese, Chinese being reserved for the higher status men. Characters do not have names as we know them but are referred to by their places in the hierarchy; women are referred to by a gown they may be wearing. If a Minister of the Left becomes a Minister of the Right he is referred to by his honorific. Who is being referred to in the Tale is therefore, to a westerner, a muddle; to add to the muddle, point of view can change many times in a passage so the unwary westerner can’t figure out who is talking to whom. Of course, since it was written for a small audience of court women, there were no problems at the time. A thousand years later, in a different culture, we would have difficulty with a literal translation.

Anyone who is late knows to come in without ceremony, take a seat at the table, and never interrupt the proceedings. Book club manners; and off we go, away from our everyday lives and into the lives of the Heian aristocracy with the Shining Prince, Genji, around whom the early chapters are organized. We join Murasaki and Fujitsubo and those others who lived so long ago. To us they are real, even though they live only because of one woman's imagination and artistry. Do we imagine that our lives will be just as tumultuous as those ladies in Heian Japan? Today, as in all ages, loved ones die, misunderstandings drive people apart, their very natures drive people apart, fate or chance or what God wills bring hard times, children are born and grow up, disappointments are common. Some call it fate, some call it sorrows from an earlier life, some call it life. We are comforted to think that, beneath all the differences, humans are much alike. Aware always, though, that *The Tale of Genji* is cloaked in artistry and the eerie strangeness of an impenetrable culture. Perhaps we are drawn into the stories the same way the Heian ladies were. But, perhaps, that too is an illusion.

We are all intent on the work of art we study, released from the distractions of our lives. Claire lights up at the renewal of her acquaintance with the characters. Katherine, who has somehow absorbed the essence of the Tale looks enthralled, she enhances every class with seemingly oddball remarks that somehow make sense. I look forward to seeing the look on Franny's face when she realizes that under Katherine's red curls and frivolous manner lurks a sharp mind. Just as I look forward to my friends immersion in the Tale. As always, a good class leaves me exhilarated, taken away from the drudgery of the

every day: Alive again, ready to work on my own writing, though I know I can never match Murasaki Shikibu.

Richard, when he leaves, bikes through the Hyde Park streets on an old three-speed that no one would deign to steal, to 'the house of dead languages,' named by the other graduate students who share it with him. Among the other communities in Hyde Park is that of the bikers. Men and women clad in khaki pants and sweaters, whether full professors or graduate students, prudently helmeted, clips around their pants legs, books or briefcases or musical instruments slung into wire baskets on their venerable bikes. Usually biking through the numerous parks, or down tree-shaded side streets, riding along serenely; others ride no-hands, hands in pockets, faces aglow with pleasure. Some stop biking in the slippery weather, but not all. When the weather turns, as it inevitably does in Chicago, Richard wears a cape. No, he doesn't just wear it, he flings it around him flamboyantly.