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A professor's ongoing legacy: 40 years of good reading

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A professor’s ongoing legacy: 40 years of good reading

Book clubs have become more and more popular in recent years, and one connected with Furman just marked its 40th anniversary.

In 1968, Rudy Bates, professor of English from 1964 to 1991, was teaching a course about the American novel in the university’s evening division. As many of his students over the years would testify, Rudy could be a challenging and often daunting instructor. But he was a great teacher, especially of the novel.

The students in this particular class enjoyed their studies and their teacher so much that, at the end of the course, they asked Rudy if they could continue to read novels together. He agreed, and they formed what was informally known as “The Book Club.”

When the first meeting was held in June of 1968, Rudy and his wife, Joyce, weren’t sure what to expect. As they prepared to leave their house for the meeting, Rudy said, “I don’t know why we’re going. Nobody else will be there.”

But about 15 folks attended the first meeting. Every month since, with only rare exceptions, the club has met to discuss a book and to enjoy each others’ company. Through June The Book Club had read more than 400 books, almost all of them novels. See the list of books at http://fcweb.furman.edu/~john.batson.

Each club meeting draws about 12 to 14 people. Members have come and gone through the years, but two regulars remain from the original group: Joyce Bates and Edith Cox ’74. I was invited to join in 1995, after becoming friends with Rudy while sharing beekeeping duties with him for several years.

We are often asked, “How do you choose your next book?” Joyce usually answers, “By whoever yells the loudest.” Although we read a variety of recently published works, every now and then someone will say, “It’s time for a classic.” That triggers thoughts of such writers as Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway and — of course — Rudy’s favorite, Charles Dickens.

We rendezvous at members’ houses, discuss the book over a glass of wine, then have coffee and dessert. When the meeting is over, Edith adds the latest title to the list that she has kept all these years.

For our December meetings, we gather at a restaurant and often celebrate Dickens’ contributions to Christmas. Sometimes these holiday meetings feature readings from Dickens. At one gathering we toasted each other with “Smoking Bishop,” a warm drink that the reformed Ebenezer Scrooge merrily shared with Bob Cratchit at the end of A Christmas Carol.

And we always end with a quote from Tiny Tim: “God bless us, every one.”

When Rudy Bates died in 1996, all of us felt a great loss. But we never considered ending our monthly book club tradition. Instead, we established the R.D. Bates Memorial Scholarship Fund at Furman. Each year since 2000 the English department has presented this cash award to a rising junior or senior who shows a demonstrated interest in the works of Dickens or Victorian English literature. We always invite the recipient to join us at our next meeting.

This June, to celebrate four decades of reading pleasure, we chose to re-read the first book the club selected: William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner. As usual, we enjoyed the lively discussion. And we raised a special glass in appreciation for the man who helped us start it all: Rudy Bates.

— JOHN BATSON ’74
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Contributions to the Bates Memorial Scholarship Fund may be sent to the development office at Furman, 3300 Poinsett Hwy., Greenville, S.C. 29613.