

Episode 13: You're Invited!

Omar Brown

Welcome to Libraries Out Loud, a podcast produced by the University of Buffalo Libraries. I'm your host, Omar Brown, Education Technology Support Associate at Silverman Library on UB's North Campus. In each episode of Libraries Out Loud, we'll explore connections between the UB Libraries and the research, learning, teaching and creative activities of our faculty, students, and staff.

Lori Widzinski

Hello and welcome to another episode of Libraries Out Loud. I'm Lori Widzinski, Associate Librarian and Project Manager for the University Libraries, and I'll be your host for this episode. Today, we focus on two groups organized by Library staff members, the University Libraries Book Club and the Genealogy Group. To get started, I'd like to introduce Kathy O'Brien, Assistant Director of Assessment and Resource Planning for the UB Libraries. And Kathy is a longtime member of the UB Library's book club. Hi Kath!

Kathy O'Brien

Hi Lori, thanks for inviting me.

Lori Widzinski

You're welcome. Thanks for joining me. Would you tell us a little bit of background about the UB book club and what your role is?

Kathy O'Brien

Sure. The Book Club actually began in 2006 thanks to the efforts of the Library Staff Development and Training Committee. It was an informal group that met monthly to discuss a book over lunch. As library staff members moved on to other places or retired, the book club gradually evolved from in-person meetings to the Good Reads platform that we've been using since 2013. I joined the group in 2014, and I volunteered to serve as co-chair with one of my former colleagues.

Lori Widzinski

Great. So, does our group meets exclusively online or do you meet in person too?

Kathy O'Brien

Well, as I mentioned, the book club initially met in person before the shift to online. So, in 2018, we conducted a survey to touch base with the group's groups members to see what their preferences were on meeting times, the number of books we wanted to read each year and where to meet. Based on the survey results, it turned out that most people prefer to mix of online and in-person options. We decided that the person leading the discussion would choose how to conduct the meeting. Then when COVID hit, we switched to Zoom meetings like everybody else in the universe and continued some discussions in Good Reads. This past July, we scheduled our annual summer meeting to choose this year's selections and made it a hybrid, in-person and Zoom meeting. I think we'll likely continue that model for future meetings.

Lori Widzinski

How do you decide which books to group will read?

Kathy O'Brien

It's kind of a mix. So, books are usually selected during the summer months so that we can give everybody an idea of what's coming up for the next year. And any member can suggest a title for the upcoming year and members can volunteer to lead the discussion. Once we've selected the titles, I put them on our UB Libraries Book Group page on Good Reads. So, whether we're meeting in person or not, good reads is an easy way for us to share ideas and discuss each book. We're currently reading five books each year, and while there's no formal structure or criteria imposed on members when they choose a book, we often try to keep some semblance of variety in genre or subject matter. We often have at least one nonfiction title, historical fiction, maybe occasional mysteries or something with a local element. Some of my favorite discussions have been around the nonfiction titles, including *Between the World To Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Packing for Mars* by Mary Roach.

Lori Widzinski

Well, full disclosure I am a current member of the Book Club and I really enjoy all of our discussions. And one of my favorites was our conversation around the book *Outsiders Five Women Writers Who Changed the World* by Lyndall Gordon. We had a really spirited and fun discussion about that book. But what are some of your personal highlights in terms of book club discussions?

Kathy O'Brien

Well, I'm with you. I like that book as well. And I think what makes the club interesting is that often we're reading stuff that not each one of us would have read before in our discussions do get spirited, but some of the highlights for me is the opportunity to interact with individual authors. So, for example, in January 2018, author Darren Wang joined us to discuss and

answer questions about his book *The Hidden Light of Northern Fires*. It's a work of fiction based around the small village of Town Line, New York, which seceded from the union during the Civil War. Town Line is located between Lancaster and Alden and Darren incorporated a lot of local history into his book. As a result, we all came away being surprised about how much we didn't know about the role of this village in the Civil War area, and it's really a treat to get the author's perspective on his research and his whole process. Another favorite of mine was our discussion with local author Charity Vogel on her book *The Angola Horror The 1867 Train Wreck that shocked the Nation and Transformed American Railroads*.

Lori Widzinski

And I think it's great that the club has a focus on local authors because it adds such a nice element to the discussions. Do you try to coordinate with any community reading initiatives?

Kathy O'Brien

We do. It's not like an official thing, but we when we when been aware of the One Community, One Book initiative sponsored by Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, we've tried to align our choices. So, we've joined them in reading a *Farewell to Arms* in 2018 and *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* in 2020. Similarly, we've also tried to choose titles related to the UB Distinguished Speaker Series or the Babel Series organized by Buffalo Literary Center.

Lori Widzinski

Does the book club open to new members and can anybody join whether they're affiliated with the University or not?

Kathy O'Brien

Absolutely. New members from UB or the community are welcome addition to our discussions. Anyone can join and invite others to join by sending me an email at kobrien9@buffalo.edu, That's kobrien9@buffalo.edu

Lori Widzinski

And I can't let you go without asking one very important question. What titles are on this year's list?

Kathy O'Brien

We've got some more good ones this year. So, we start in September with the *Glass Hotel*, a novel by Emily St. John Mandel. And next up is *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*, a work of

historical fiction by Marie Benedict. We'll also be reading some sci fi fantasy later in the year, *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Lori Widzinski

I'm really looking forward to that one.

Kathy O'Brien

Me too.

Lori Widzinski

Well, thank you Kath for joining us, and I'm really looking forward to our next meeting.

Kathy O'Brien

Me too. Thanks for having me.

Lori Widzinski

Our next guest is Jill Hackenberg, UB Sciences Librarian and chair of UB's Genealogy Lunch Group. Hi, Jill.

Jill Hackenberg

Hi, Lori.

Lori Widzinski

As we turn our conversation to Genealogy, would you share some of the group's background for us?

Jill Hackenberg

I'd be happy to tell you about the group. We've been going strong at UB for at least 20 years. Right now, there are about 25 people who regularly attend meetings, and of those, about seven people come to any typical meeting. So, attendance really depends on the members work schedules. We do have Genealogy Group members that come from all parts of the UB community. For example, there are current employees and students, alumni, and others from the Western New York area. Our members come from across the University and not just the

UB Libraries. People who have participated in the group represent the School of Engineering, the Gender Institute, the School of Social Work, School of Architecture and Planning, the UBIT offices and, of course, the UB Libraries. We meet monthly on the first Wednesday via Zoom from noon to 1:00 in the afternoon.

Lori Widzinski

Yes. What are some of the topics the group discusses?

Jill Hackenberg

Everyone in the group wants to learn more about researching their family lineage and details about their ancestry. We typically discuss the databases and print sources one can use to gather the print records necessary to begin building a family tree. The records might run the gamut from birth, marriage and death certificates, military service, wills and estate documents, census records, business listings and city directories and cemetery records, among others. Many times, someone will bring questions about where to turn after they get stuck or encounter significant challenges. We call these brick walls and almost everyone has them in their family tree. Members of the Genealogy Group will share ideas of how to break through the brick wall so to speak, and maybe find workarounds for missing records like birth certificates. So, at each meeting, we'll have a variety of topics.

Lori Widzinski

And we have a variety of members with varying levels of experience, but where would someone go to begin their family tree research?

Jill Hackenberg

Well, everyone listening today is welcome to join our genealogy group. We have both new and experienced members. And for someone who is new, I recommend that they start out by making a basic family tree with the names of the relatives that they know about, and then maybe talk with the elders of the family about additional names from their generation. And it's always a good idea to ask the elders of the family about family names and also where they and their cousins lived, and definitely the maiden names of any of the women of the family. And all of this data will help when searching the databases for the census and other related information.

Lori Widzinski

While I'm sure everyone has seen the DNA kits for sale to learn more about your ancestry and what can we learn from the results of those tests?

Jill Hackenberg

DNA testing is very popular. It's estimated that thirty-five million DNA kits have been sold. That is an amazing number. These tests can help identify distant relatives up to maybe four generations back with some accuracy. Normally, a person will receive an ethnicity estimate and a list of names of individuals who share DNA snippets with the test taker. Obviously, for adoptees or those who don't definitively know who their grandparents or their parents are. This can be a goldmine of information to explore. There are multiple vendors that sell the genealogy DNA tests, and within our UB Genealogy group, we have members who have taken tests from each of these vendors. So, help is available to assist in deciphering the results.

Lori Widzinski

OK, and once you get the results back, then what happens?

Jill Hackenberg

Well, it's best to create a family tree on the website where you bought your DNA kit so that the day the results come in, you're ready to analyze what's presented and look at the surnames of the people who shared DNA with you. These are the DNA test takers from the same vendor, so this helps break through the brick walls that I mentioned earlier. It's especially useful if one of your surnames is Smith, Jones, or Miller. for example. There are ways to sort through the names to organize them in a structured way. Many websites, books and Facebook groups are on the internet to help with this discovery and organization process. Of course, our group talks about these steps and how each person can do it in a slightly different way, which dovetails with what they want to learn about their own lineage.

Lori Widzinski

It's really interesting and it sounds like fun.

Jill Hackenberg

Yes, it's really fun. I started constructing my own family tree about 15 years ago, and my own heritage is German, English, Irish, Swiss and French, namely the area called Alsace-Lorraine and our UB Group has members finding old records from many countries such as Italy, Greece, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, Scotland, Ireland, England, Poland and Finland, plus many more.

Lori Widzinski

So, in addition to the DNA test results, what are some other places where people can find information about their family history?

Jill Hackenberg

Yes, newspaper articles are a rich source for family names and stories that often appeared in the social column, especially if the family lived in a small town. I'm discussing mainly newspapers from the 1700's and 1800's. Frequently, out-of-town visitors would be named in the around-town section of the newspaper.

Lori Widzinski

Yeah, I've noticed that, and I've also noticed in my own family research and from attending the group meetings that the census is a really important place to look in a good place to start.

Jill Hackenberg

Yes. Census documents can be a rich source of detail about the family. You learn who lived at the house and how old they were, perhaps what year they emigrated to America, where their parents were born. And sometimes details about the farm if they were farmers and grew crops, for example. My own lineage includes a man who owned a dairy and on his property. He also grew grapes and made enough wine for the family's personal use and perhaps enough left over to sell to his neighbors. And speaking of the neighbors, the census is valuable and one other significant way you learn who the immediate neighbors were for the family you were focusing on. So, since the census is arranged by town, then by street, all of the neighbors will be listed, including the house numbers for each. So, this might provide clues about how families became friends, perhaps inter-married and perhaps served as witnesses to either marriages or estate documents. In 2022, the 1950 United States Census will be released to the public. This will be a milestone because all of us then will be able to view the information about our families from the year 1950.

Lori Widzinski

Wow. Another thing I've discovered, too, Jill, is that old photographs are really helpful when trying to figure out people's names, of course, especially when they're labeled.

Jill Hackenberg

Yes, and our group, we've had conversations about how to best preserve worn and fading pictures and documents. When one of our members learns of a new technique in preservation or database searching. They will share what they learned with the group, including those times when they had a big breakthrough or big discovery.

Lori Widzinski

Yeah, well, I experienced a breakthrough in researching my great, great, great grandmother. I only knew her first name, didn't know her birth name. And in researching land transactions for her son who was my great, great grandfather, I discovered her maiden name on one of the documents. So, researching then her family opened up an entirely new branch of the family, dating back to the 1600's and the Winthrop fleet, which was one of the early migrations from England to the colonies, went to Massachusetts.

Jill Hackenberg

Wow, what a great find. And the 1600's, amazing. When we have the people sharing about these "aha" moments during our meetings, like you just shared, those are some of the best meetings of all.

Lori Widzinski

I agree. I agree. And also, I am also a member of this group to which a lot of fun being on the Genealogy Group. What if our listeners want to learn more Jill?

Jill Hackenberg

If you interested in joining us for an upcoming meeting of the genealogy group, you can email me at jmh7@buffalo.edu and I can send you the information to join us on Zoom. Again, we meet the first Wednesday of every month, and if you would like to learn more about some eBooks or articles or blog posts to help you to learn more about Family Tree research, I can send that to you as well. You don't need to come to our meeting to receive that type of information.

Lori Widzinski

Wonderful. Thank you very much, Jill.

Jill Hackenberg

It was my pleasure to talk to you today.

Omar Brown

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Libraries Out Loud and stay tuned for our next look at the UB Libraries on campus.