

Reading Together While Apart: Continuing to connect PVD's literary community



Authors joining Twenty Stories for its first online Saturday Night Stories series on Saturday, March 28; image courtesy of Twenty Stories

After coronavirus (COVID-19) concerns caused What Cheer Writers Club (whatcheerclub.org) to close its co-working space and podcasting studio in downtown PVD and to cancel in-person events beginning on Monday, March 16, program manager Jodie Noel Vinson contacted members to encourage the community of writers to support each other and continue to share their work through Slack. Alongside streams for announcements, podcasters, various genres of literature and general discussion, What Cheer introduced an #online-events channel that within a day surfaced invitations to Facebook Live events including a RI Black Storytellers talk on sharing stories with audiences of different ages, a PVD PechaKucha with 20-second bursts from 20 people on managing isolation, and a reading accompanied by a stiff drink or a cup of tea.

As bookstores around the world confront a public health crisis of indeterminate length with punishing effects on their operations and the communities they bring together, PVD's indies have looked to online sales as a short-term salve to maintain their long-term lifeblood. Books on the Square (471 Angell St, booksq.com) turned the parking lot at the rear of its store into a books-to-go pick-up zone for phone,

website or email orders. Planned author events, book clubs and children's storytimes, however, have been cancelled or postponed. Riffraff in Olneyville, Symposium Books downtown and Twenty Stories in Fox Point are experimenting with adapting, and even expanding, some of their in-person activities onto digital platforms.

Remember, if an upcoming book club or literary livestream helps you choose the next addition to your reading list: the events might be online, but their hosts are local. While your nearest or favorite independent bookstores are closed, you can still buy books from them directly at a time when every purchase makes a difference to their overall health.

Art of translation with Riffraff

A note on Riffraff's website (riffraffpvd.com) reminds its visitors how the Olneyville bookstore and bar (60 Valley St, #107A) "was opened with a deep, abiding appreciation for the in-person experience, for face-to-face conversations about books and everything else." (Read *Motif's* profile of Riffraff at its second anniversary and a Q&A with Riffraff's co-founders.) So long as its doors remain closed, Riffraff's events are postponed with the exception of its book club exploring the theme of women in translation.

On **Tuesday, April 7 at 7pm**, Riffraff will use Zoom to host a discussion of *August* by Romina Paula (Feminist Press, 2017). The introspective and at times discomfiting novel of a homecoming in the wake of a friend's death was first published in Spanish in the author's native Argentina (*Agosto*, Editorial Entropía, 2009) before making its way into English — and into the US — thanks to the craft of Jennifer Croft, who was later recognized with a Man Booker International Prize for her translation of *Flights* by Nobel Prize-recipient Olga Tokarczuk.

While Riffraff offers a \$1 discount for book-club purchases made through its bookstore, now managed by email or online form, the only requirement to participate is to have read *August* in advance. If you need a drink as an accompaniment, co-owner Emma Ramadan recommends a Fernet con Coca.

Super-casual symposium with Symposium

During its decade and a half in business, Symposium Books (240 Westminster St, symposiumbooks.com) has hosted a range of author readings, reading groups, record release parties, zine launches and art gallery openings. While the COVID-19 closures put Symposium's events lineup on hold, the bookstore took a "super casual" and "zero pressure" approach for its latest book club pick, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018), with an invitation to chat on Tuesday, March 24.

Instead of focusing discussion around the entirety of the novel, now in its 80th week on *The New York Times* best-seller list, co-owners Anne Marie Keohane and Scott McCullough asked social-media users to start chiming in after reading as few as 10 or 20 pages. While it's unclear if they'll repeat the effort for their next book-club selection, yet to be announced, they'll share updates about future book chats open to all via Facebook (Symposium Books), Instagram (@symposiumbooks), and Twitter (@SymposiumBooks).

New Saturday series with Twenty Stories

Twenty Stories (twentystoriesla.com) announced Saturday Night Stories, a new series streamed in two parts, with an Instagram Live reading followed by a Zoom salon. (Read *Motif's* recent feature on how Twenty Stories has adapted its business during the pandemic.) The idea surfaced after an in-store event

planned for Friday, March 13 turned into an Instagram Live video stream to celebrate the publication of Andrew Altschul's novel *The Gringa*.

From his home in Fort Collins, Colorado, Altschul will collaborate with Twenty Stories and San Francisco-based literary magazine ZYZZYVA to host an evening featuring five authors with new books or whose book tours have been canceled due to coronavirus.

The first round will take place on **Saturday, March 28 at 9pm** featuring:

- Margaret Wilkerson Sexton (*The Revisioners*, Counterpoint, 2019)
- Daniel Handler (*Bottle Grove*, Bloomsbury, 2019)
- Rachel Vorona Cote (*Too Much*, Grand Central, 2020)
- David Daley (*Unrigged*, Liveright, 2020)
- Roya Marsh (*dayliGht: Poems*, MCD/FSG Originals, 2020).

Twenty Stories will stream five five-minute readings on Instagram (@twentystoriesla). To incentivize purchases through its online events, the bookstore will invite anybody who places an order for at least one of the authors' books to a subsequent salon on Zoom for a freeform conversation with the writers. The series will continue on **Saturday, April 4** and **Saturday, April 11** with authors yet to be named.

And readers of *Exquisite Mariposa* by Fiona Alison Duncan (Soft Skull Books, 2019) will join Twenty Stories, again on Zoom, for its fiction book club on **Sunday, March 29 at 11am**.

Even more local literature online



Jodie - Club Staff 9:23 AM

For anyone who's not a coffee drinker over here on #coffeebreak, what are you drinking? Just returned from India & my husband has just poured me the perfect chai...

IMG_9951.JPG ▾



Jennifer (She/Her) 1 day ago

Lovely mug! I started off with a morning Nespresso and will be brewing my favorite green tea with dried rose petals shortly. 😊



Chad Descoteaux 9:39 AM

I work a non writing job early in the morning and drink a lot of Mountain Dew for the caffeine content. If there are any Futurama fans out there, it's what I imagine Slurm would taste like. 😂😂😂😂



Jillian - Club Staff 9:45 AM

already almost done with my first carafe of coffee and it's only 9:45 😊

OuKxzn9kRbGmL0vt4dLTBA.jpg ▾



Susannah - Club Staff 10:18 AM

my grandmother was a librarian, and this mug was tucked away in one of her corner cupboards... stovetop espresso every morning for me!

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Friday mornings at 11am, What Cheer Writers Club hosts a #coffeebreak with members on Slack; screenshot provided by What Cheer Writers Club

For What Cheer Writers Club's own events, they've moved over to Zoom. On **Saturday, March 28 at 1pm**, Jamie Michalak and Kelly Murphy will share their experience collaborating to write and illustrate their forthcoming children's book, *Crumb's Treasure* (Candlewick, 2021). On **Thursday, April 2 at 5pm**, a virtual Member Meet Up will include a Nonfiction Showcase with 10 writers reading 5-minute shorts or excerpts from longer works. On **Fridays at 11am**, members are welcomed to a virtual coffee chat. On **Sundays at 12:30pm**, local science-fiction and fantasy writers gather together. Providence Writers Group is also meeting **every first and third Sunday** via Zoom, and a new organization of Science and Environmental Writers in Rhode Island (@SciEnRI) aims to get together online. Besides updates on its Slack channels, What Cheer Writers Club sends a newsletter detailing a robust collection

of literary activities and news relevant to local writers — with more to come in the weeks ahead.

“These times are revealing the shape of our community and that it can look many ways across different mediums,” wrote Vinson, What Cheer’s program manager. “But more than anything, it is revealing how essential our community is.”