

## **International Book Club Leader Marita: "Bringing People Together Through the Love of Books"**

*In the Library's "Good Reads" section "Book Clubs in Lithuania and Abroad", we talk to Marita Sinden, the leader of an international book club based in Bremen (Germany).*

**What inspired you to start this international book club, and how did the first meetings look? When was it started?**

*I started the book club in February 2020, just a few months after moving to Germany in late 2019. Having left behind a beloved book club in London, I found myself missing those monthly literary discussions and the connections they fostered. I was eager to recreate that experience and meet new people, but self-doubt held me back from taking the leap.*

*The turning point came when I met another international mom at a random event. When I mentioned my book club idea, she was immediately interested and agreed to join. Having that first committed member gave me the courage I needed to move forward and start promoting the club.*

*I quickly set up a website and Facebook group, then began inviting people through posts in various Facebook forums. Our inaugural meeting took place in February 2020—and then COVID hit. Rather than letting the pandemic derail our new venture, we pivoted to Zoom meetings and have continued our monthly discussions online ever since.*

**Who typically attends the club—where are members from, what are their age groups, and what kinds of cultural or professional backgrounds do they bring?**

*Our membership is very diverse and reflects our international focus. While the club is open to everyone, our discussions in English and emphasis on "International Literature" naturally attract members from different countries and cultural backgrounds. We've welcomed readers from various ethnicities and nationalities, each bringing their unique perspectives to our literary conversations. Current members are from Germany, Syria, Australia, USA, UK, Thailand, India, Iran and many other countries.*

*Age-wise, we span multiple generations—our youngest member was a 23-year-old student, while our eldest was a retired teacher. This range creates rich intergenerational dialogue during our discussions. Professionally, our members come from varied backgrounds, though what truly unites us all is our shared passion for literature and the joy of discovering stories from around the world.*

**What kinds of books or genres does the club tend to gravitate toward? Are there any strong preferences or recurring themes?**

*As an international book club, we focus on international literature in translation. Most of our books have a socio-political background, but not exclusively. The themes we explore are diverse—from the Canadian Residential Schools to the Thai Student Revolt to the MeToo movement—and they all lead to interesting discussions.*

**Can you describe the format of your meetings—how often do you meet, and where do your discussions take place (e.g., cafés, libraries, online)?**

*We meet once a month, usually in a cafe, but have also met in members' houses or in the park if the weather permits. We choose our books through a voting process where anybody can suggest a title. With 2-3 suggestions on offer, members pick their favorite, and the book with the most votes wins.*

**Are there any traditions, rituals, or special events that the club has developed over time—like themed evenings, potlucks, or reading challenges?**

*Beyond our monthly meetings, we've expanded into social events outside of reading—attending Bremen's annual Freimarkt folk festival together, visiting Christmas markets, or going to the theater. Some of us have even developed friendships that extend well beyond book club.*

**What do you think are the main benefits for members of being part of this international book club—both literary and personal?**

*Members get to meet other like-minded people and discover books they might never have chosen on their own. Through our discussions, they gain fresh insights and perspectives they wouldn't have encountered otherwise.*

*On the literary side, our focus on international literature in translation opens up whole new worlds - members are exposed to authors and stories from countries they might never visit. They learn about different writing styles and narrative techniques that aren't common in Western literature.*

*The socio-political themes we explore also help members understand global issues from an insider's perspective rather than just reading about them in the news.*

**Have there been any memorable stories, surprising moments, or emotional discussions that stood out in the club's history?**

*There have been several books that sparked incredibly animated discussions. "Mornings in Jenin," about a girl growing up in the Gaza Strip, brought out passionate responses from members with different perspectives on the Middle East conflict. "Five Little Indians," which retells the brutal treatment of Native Americans in Canadian residential schools, led to emotional conversations about historical trauma and its lasting effects.*

*One of our most surprising discussions came from "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." This Czech classic, when read through the lens of the Me Too movement, cast the protagonist in a completely different light than many of us expected. What some members initially saw as romantic, others viewed as problematic behavior, it really showed how our contemporary understanding can reshape how we interpret literature from different eras.*

*These kinds of discussions are exactly what make our book club special. Members often say they leave meetings thinking about things in ways they never had before.*

**What challenges have you encountered running a multicultural book club? How do you handle differences in opinions, language barriers, or attendance fluctuations?**

*It's actually quite relaxed running the club. Of course, there are different opinions to account for—sometimes quite passionate ones—but all in all, it's been quite harmonious. We've learned that these different perspectives are actually what make our discussions so rich.*

*Attendance does fluctuate, especially with people's work schedules and travel, but we've settled into a rhythm that works well for our members. We usually have a core group of regulars, and others drop in when they can. It keeps things flexible and stress-free, which I think is key to our success.*

**Have you collaborated with other organizations in Bremen or other cities in Germany (or even abroad) or do you have plans to?**

*(external engagement and community ties) - No, you are our first book club.*

**What are your future hopes or goals for the club—new formats, outreach, or types of books you'd like to explore?**

*I'd love to continue our world travel through literature and keep having these engaging and thought-provoking discussions. We're always looking to explore new regions—there are still so many countries and authors we haven't discovered yet. I would love to invite some of the authors to join our discussions. Maybe collaborate with more international bookclubs.*

*Most importantly, though, I want to keep the club feeling welcoming and accessible. As long as we're bringing people together through books and creating those meaningful connections, we're achieving what we set out to do.*

**The Bitė Book Club of the Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Public Library has established friendly relations with the international book club operating in Bremen. Book lovers intend to organize a series of remote literary discussions, and the first book that the clubs will discuss in November is A. Škėma's novel "Balta drobulė" („The White Shroud“).**

*Interviewed by Virginija Švedienė*

*Photos of Marita Sinden and members of the Bremen International Book Club*