

Showing Up, Column 94

by Kurt Meyer

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As noted previously, I'm really not a "club guy". My general view of clubs is captured in a line from Groucho Marx: "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." Okay, I've mellowed a bit, which prompted me to apply for membership in the Cliff Dwellers Club, located in downtown Chicago, and founded in 1907 by former North lowan, author Hamlin Garland.

It was a classic case of my Garland interest overcoming my club reluctance. True, were it not for four of the world's greatest grandchildren living in Chicago, I may not have applied. But with fresh membership established, I accepted a recent offer to lead a Cliff Dwellers' in-person book club discussion the last Saturday in March. (That's right... a club within a club.)

They even let me select the book, after suggesting their preference for something by Garland, ideally set in Chicago. Given that they had already read Garland's one Chicago novel, "Rose of Dutcher's Coulee," I recommended a book by Henry Blake Fuller, Garland's close friend for three-plus decades.

In 1901, Fuller published "Under the Skylights," three short stories set in Chicago, the centerpiece being "The Downfall of Abner Joyce". Let there be no doubt: this 140-page roman à clef (French: "novel with a key") is a brutal takedown of Hamlin Garland, then a blustery, unvarnished "force of nature," fresh off the farm. By the story's ending, however, Abner is becoming civilized into Chicago society, growth encouraged by the cultured woman he falls for – and ultimately marries – Medora Giles (in real life, Zulime Taft).

It's a common tale: immature male strives to "up his game" first to interest, then to be tutored by a more sophisticated female. (Yes, occasionally the gender roles are reversed.) In his title, Fuller suggests that as Garland's refinement increases, he's in danger of losing the very traits that give power to his writing: authentic stories like "clods of earth gathered from the very fields across which he had once guided the plough"... "written not so much by the hand as by the fist".

I asked club members, is this truly Abner / Hamlin's "downfall" or is it his natural maturity, his evolution? As is often the case, much is left to readers' interpretation, and readers' reactions were mixed. Although the Garland-Fuller relationship overcame this hurtful satire, critics note it may be because Garland recognized some validity to Fuller's portrayal.

Let me conclude with several notes on the history of book clubs, a phenomenon that has blossomed in recent decades. Ben Franklin launched a book club of sorts in colonial days, called the Junto Club. (<http://www.benjamin-franklin-history.org/junto-club/>) Members were avid readers, primarily Philadelphia intellectuals devoted to the humanities. A branch of the Club became the American Philosophical Society, the country's first learned society, still thriving today.

Junto meetings were also the origin for the country's first lending library, the nation's first all-volunteer fire company, plus the University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Hospital. Now

THAT'S one remarkable book club! I'm curious whether Junto Club activities will be cited in Ken Burn's series about Franklin, starting soon on public television.

Another name that surfaces regarding early book clubs is Margaret Fuller, a distant relative of the previously mentioned Henry Blake Fuller. Margaret Fuller – described by one account as “the first American female war correspondent, a magazine editor, and all-around feminist renegade” – founded the first bookstore-sponsored club in Boston in 1840. By the mid-1800's, book clubs were thriving throughout the Midwest, a combination social-intellectual gathering.

So, are you part of a book club? (I am, and Paula belongs to two active clubs.) If so, does it feed your soul, socially or intellectually? If you're not already part of one, it's easy to get started: reach out to friends, find a date, select a meeting location, and choose a book. I dare say, you might enjoy the adventure. I certainly have.