



Calgary Women's Literary Club, Central Park Memorial Library

photo by Marc Rimmer

no small talk here, folks. Neither is there spinach-dip-in-a-bread-bowl or Yellowtail merlot on the table at Calgary's longest running book club where the focus is strictly on, wait for it ... books.

Started in 1906 by Manitoba transplant Annie Davidson, this literature-loving club—still vibrant through the Great Depression, the two World Wars and the modern predominance of chattier, less bookish living-room clubs—has proven as dogged as its indefatigable founder. According to Margaret Sparkes, the 26-member group's current program committee chair, "Mrs. Davidson started by simply inviting some like-minded friends who loved books over to her house." That invitation soon proved so popular that the women met instead at roomier Knox Presbyterian church—that is, until Mrs. Davidson used her formidable resources to get Calgary's first library built.

Petitioning door to door for the (male-only) "yes" votes required to convince council it was time Calgary had a book-lending system, Davidson finally got her library in 1909—but only after she secured an \$80,000 donation from American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

Since then, the Calgary Women's Literary Club has come together at Central Park for two four-week sessions every year, during which time members present papers on authors and books relating to a theme chosen

by Sparkes' committee. "This year it's historical fiction," says Sparkes, who recently illuminated her friends on works by Scottish author C.J. Sansom. Presenting members are asked to read as many books as possible by the author they'll speak about, touching on facts from the chosen writer's life as well as their syntax and tone.

Sparkes is first to admit that the formal structure of the club may not appeal to everyone. "I'm sure it sounds terribly stuffy and scholarly," she says with a laugh, "but it's just a great way to be introduced to writers you'd never otherwise know about." She promises skittish potential new members that, rather than an English Lit lecture, the presentation is a bit like a friendly, informative book report. To boot, every presenter makes history: a copy of each paper delivered is added to the archives at the Glenbow Museum.

The group also invites guest speakers to present at their meetings from time to time, including the likes of Gail Bowen, Harry Saunders and, most recently, Sara Tilley from the University of Calgary's Distinguished Writers Program. While she certainly didn't say it out loud, you can't help but wonder if Sparkes holds out hope that the inspiration for the club's next theme—Nobel Prize winners—will come for tea and to share some short-story-writing advice. **S**