

TALKING POINTS FOR BOOK CLUBS

Gang of Four

By Liz Byrski

The inspiration for *Gang of Four* was the 'crone's retreat', a practice in some tribal communities where women leave the tribe for a year at menopause and return as elders or wise women. I was drawn to this idea because in western societies mid-life is so often portrayed as a negative time for women.

Many women report feeling invisible as they reach their fifties and in popular culture we are so often portrayed as boring, pathetic or unsympathetic characters, the nosey neighbour, interfering mother-in-law, awkward, bossy relatives. But the women I know are dynamic, energetic, warm, vibrant and adventurous, and the fifties is often a time when they make relationship and professional changes embarking on new partnerships, jobs and enjoying time to pursue new or long held interests.

1. What do members think about the portrayals of older women in popular culture?
2. Are we different from previous generations of women in the way we approach this time of our lives? If so, what factors have contributed to this change?
3. What does the friendship of other women mean to us? Why is it so precious and is this too, different from in previous generations?
4. Can you imagine taking a year out of your normal life to make the sort of journey that the women in the book make?
5. Did Doug give in too easily to Isabel's plan to go away for a year? Would most men hang out longer, make it harder?
6. When Isabel came home had Doug really changed or had he simply found a new way to talk about their relationship?
7. Have any book club members heard about the 5W organisation that Isabel uses to meet women on her travels? (Website: www.womenwelcomewomen.org.uk) Is it an effective way of fostering international friendship among women?
8. This book is about women's friendship and the things they share, but it's also about the secrets they keep from each other. Do members keep secrets from their closest friends? Are we making assumptions about the nature of our friends and our friendships if we keep secrets from them?
9. What feelings did members have about Sally's reactions, first of all to the news of Sophie's accident, and later to her understanding that there was nowhere for her relationship with her daughter to go?
10. Robin felt that it was 'undignified' for her to be having an affair with a married man now she was over fifty, but it never occurred to her to think that it was undignified for Jim to be having an affair at that age. Do we still cling to old ideas about older women's sexual behaviour?
11. Is it true that older women are 'invisible' in our society, particularly in relation to popular culture?
12. The women in the book are all successful in their own areas but have they had to give up other things to achieve this? Does it matter?
13. Grace was horrified at the idea that she had become so much like her mother. Why do so many of us fear this even when we love them dearly?

Thank you for reading *Gang of Four*. I hope you enjoy your discussion.