

Episode 11: The Book Group

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speakers: Lena McMillan (Scottish Families), Beverly (Volunteer with Scottish Families)

Introduction:

This is Life with Alcohol and Drugs. A podcast from the charity, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

Hi everybody. We're here today to talk about the Scottish Families' book group, and we've got two members with us. We've got Lena and we've got Beverly. It would be great if you could introduce yourselves. Lena, do you want to go first?

Lena:

Yes, thanks, Rebecca. My name's Lena McMillan, and I am a Family Support Development Officer with Scottish Families, working in the Forth Valley region. I've been involved with the book group for just over a year now I think.

Beverly:

I'm Beverly. I'm a volunteer with Scottish Families. I suppose I'm a family member as well. My father, he was an alcoholic, he is no longer with us. And I've been with the book group probably since the beginning as well.

Rebecca:

When you said a year, I was like, what? I thought it had only been like a few months. I can't believe it's been a year. That's amazing. Do you want to tell us about the book group? We've not really talked a lot about it online, but that's all going to change; we're all going to be promoting it and doing more about it online. And Lena, I know you've written us a review and stuff, and that was in our last newsletter. Why don't you tell us about the book group and what it's all about?

Lena:

Okay, so I kind of fell into the book group. I started working with Scottish Families in the November, and I think there was a bit of chat already happening about the book group and I got invited to be a part of it. And we went into that last year. Shuggie Bain was the first choice. That was great. It was a bit marmite it would be fair to say. A few people said that although they thought it was a great book to read, it was quite a difficult book to read as well.

From that, there was a lot of interest within Forth Valley itself for a book group, and then I was invited to take over kind of the running of the book group. I feel a bit awkward saying that. I'm shrugging my shoulders as I say that because the group really belongs to the group and we try to make decisions democratically and make our book choices that way, so I'm really keen that I'm not influencing what's

happening in the book group, but rather that I'm just kind of helping to direct and guide where the book group's going.

We choose, we have a book each month, and the books are sent out to any of our family members who want to take part. People are part of the book group but don't necessarily want the book every month. It comes down to personal choice. Then we offer discussions about the book once a month, but I have two sessions, so the second Tuesday of each month is a daytime chat and the second Thursday of each month is an evening chat, and that's just to make it as accessible as possible. It started out as a daytime group, and lots of people wanted to join but couldn't because of their other commitments. So we now run a daytime and an evening group.

Rebecca:

Great. Beverly, how did you get involved?

Beverly:

I think I came from the sort of Shuggie Bain place as well, as so many people did, as I recall, I think I read Shuggie Bain and I think I emailed you, Rebecca, and said, 'Oh my god! I've just read this amazing book, and I think it would be really interesting for Scottish Families because so much of what Douglas Stuart wrote about is relevant to the work you do and you must read it.' I probably raved over my email about how fantastic it was. Then I think it was when we had the first initial book chat about Shuggie Bain, I think the book group just grew from there.

Rebecca:

Yes. Definitely. When you say it now, I remember it because it had been something that we'd been planning for a wee while, but we never knew when to take it off, because it was Sarah, our Fundraising Manager, who had started with the book group but then Lena, I think you came in and she was like, okay, I think you are perfectly suited to it. It was definitely an idea that we'd had and then when you emailed, Beverly, we were like, right, it's time to do it now, and that's how Shuggie Bain was the first book. There you go - I think you heavily influenced it, Beverly, you were the big one in that.

There have been quite a few different books, obviously, because it's been a year, there have been eleven or twelve books that you've probably read now. What sort of ones have you gone for? I think it started off as always having it about alcohol and drugs but I think it changed to what people wanted it to be, so what books have you been reading and do you know anything that the families have told you about them or what was one that really stuck with families?

Lena:

Yes, you're right. There was a shift away from drugs and alcohol, it wasn't that Shuggie Bain wasn't well-received, it really was, but a lot of people said that this is what life feels like 24/7, and actually, what we're looking for in the book group is a way of escaping what's going on at home. And one of the lovely things with the group last year was that I invited everyone to nominate a book each month, so each person chose one book, and that introduced different authors and different books that I would never have picked up off the shelf, which was really great.

I suppose one that really stands out for me was we had a local author, so Talk of the Toon, which is set in the 1980s, and then the local area to where I am, so the Forth Valley area. We read that book and the author came and joined us for a conversation one evening as well and she told us her story. She was very animated and just very easy to listen to, and her journey to becoming an author and how much of

her story was based on her experience of growing up and her experience of the 1980s as well. So that was really, really well received.

Probably *The Young Team* as well would be another book that would stand out. And what was interesting there, Rebecca, was having had family members say that we really don't want to have any books about drugs and alcohol, so a year on from *Shuggie Bain* we read *The Young Team*, and they have probably been our two most popular books. We always rate the books. So I find that really interesting that people say they don't want to read about these subject matters, but when we do bring them in, they are something that people can really identify with. But we will be leaving the subject of drugs and alcohol for a while now until we revisit that.

I don't know, Beverley, if you've got any stand-out books from the year?

Beverley:

I mean, *The Young Team* for me is probably...I think I said in the last book group that it's probably in my top five books ever. I absolutely loved it. I've been recommending it to everybody, saying, 'You must read it. It's just fantastic.' I know that some people find it challenging because of the language and there's quite a lot of swearing in the book, but I just think it's a fantastic read, and I would definitely recommend it.

The one book that surprised me, and I think we read that quite early on, was Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*, because I love crime fiction but I've never been a fan of sort of 'cosy' crime fiction. I didn't think I was going to enjoy it but I thought I'd read it because I don't want to let the book group down, and I loved it. It's such a great...I think that was a really popular choice as well. It was such a good book, great characters. I think people really enjoyed it. And it was cosy but in an interesting and exciting way, so that's a good example of where you find books in the book group that I would probably never have picked up myself and you find yourself enjoying them.

Lena:

I think that thing you said about a cosy read, Beverley, as I think there's a real appetite within the group for books to not be too challenging and for it to be something that's really easy to curl up with and to escape into during the month and then come together for a chat. That's actually just reminded me because I know his other book came out last year. In fact, I think he's now promoting his third book so we'll need to put that on the list for later this year as well.

Rebecca:

That's awesome. I do like that it doesn't stick around the drugs and alcohol theme, and I think that's really important. As you said, Lena, that escapism; why would you want to read about something that's already happening, but as well, I know there's a lot of family members who feel that it's like an education-type thing for them and it can really help them. So it's really just whatever people's choices are, and I guess that goes back to what you said about the book group voting for what book it's going to be and things. Yes, it sounds awesome.

I'm a reader myself but I'm more of the fantasy/romance genre, so probably not crime. Crime is definitely not my thing, Beverley, my aunt loves it but I hate it. Yes, I'm a very different type of person when it comes to books, but I think it's important to read as well, I think it gives you that little escapism away from things. I read my Kindle when I'm drying my hair or when I'm having my lunch, you know, one chapter, that kind of thing.

I think as well, with the number of people that you've got coming to the group, it shows just how important it is to read. In your own personal opinion, why do you think it's important to read books? Is it the escapism away? Is it the education? Is it just enjoyment? We talk a lot about it being self-care, but what does it mean to you?

Lena:

So, for me personally, books have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My mum tells me that I was reading novels by the time I was four, and I think that just reflects the fact that she had a lot of children. I'm the eldest, and she had a lot of children under the age of five, so she saw that I had an appetite to read more than the chapters she was giving me each day, and I just ran with it. As a child, I think it was just always my favourite pastime. I'd just curl up anywhere and I would read anything, literally anything. We lived in the middle of nowhere and we would go to the library once a fortnight, and I would finish the two books that I was allowed to bring home the same night. I'm old enough to remember things like the Yellow Pages and the Telephone Directory, and I would literally sit and read those, the back of cereal boxes; just anything at all.

And like you, Rebecca, as an adult I read all the time. I read while I'm drying my hair, I read if I'm on public transport, I always, always have something to read on me. I prefer the physical form of a book but I read them on my phone as well because it's just there. As a parent, I do a lot of like taxi runs to clubs and I just find myself sitting outside wherever the club's taking place and it's just my reading time as well. It's a lot about slowing down the pace of life for me, but I do read to educate myself as well. I've always done that. I've always read. So, if I want to know more, like when I was studying to become a counsellor, there was definitely lots of theoretical books to read about that. And as a parent I've read to get different perspectives on the different stages that the children have been at and how I can educate myself. And then I'm just reading current affairs and knowing what's going on in the world. And cookery books, they're probably a really big passion of mine. I don't actually cook all the things that I read but I could sit and read recipes and chef's stories about why they've put that into the book. Yes, I could just read anything all the time, and it just helps me feel calmer I suppose and switch off. I'm a bit of an over-thinker, so when I'm reading I'm not over-thinking things.

Rebecca:

What about you, Beverly?

Beverly:

I've a similar background to reading as Lena does, because I grew up in a small village and I know my mum used to take us in a Thursday to the mobile library that used to come probably once a month to the village square, and we would get to choose our books. I always wanted to have more books than you were allowed. I was really excited when I was able to graduate to the sort of grown-up book section of the library. You know, everybody in my family has always read books. Then I went on to study French and German at university, so a huge part of that is foreign literature, you know, I spent a lot of time reading French and German. It's just always been a part of my life, wherever I've lived, even when I've lived overseas, I've always been a member of a library so that I could go and get books.

When I lived overseas I would do a lot of comfort reading because there was a big book store that had English-language books, and we would go there and buy detective fiction, but quite, you know, nothing sort of noir or anything, but quite comforting, UK-based fiction because it would remind me of home. Now, I still go to the library here now. In fact, I've got a book that I've got to go and pick up that I've had on reserve. I read to educate myself as well. With everything that's going on in the world, I think it's a

great resource, the library, to inform yourself. Yes, I've just always read and I can't imagine not having books around me all the time.

Rebecca:

Maybe we should get a Scottish Families Library?

Beverly:

That's quite a good idea.

Rebecca:

It would be cute, but as well with the book group, you send out copies of the book to everybody. I think that's a really nice little touch as well so everyone's got one that they can go and read. I would say as well, rather than looking at the book group and what you've read there, but what's your favourite book of all time? I know you've mentioned, Beverly, I think you said your top five books and The Young Team is in one of those, but what is your favourite book?

Beverly:

I've got two: one is a film also, which is Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day. That's a very well-known film with Anthony Hopkins. He's my favourite author of all time and I read everything he's written. I think he's an amazing writer. And the other is If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things, by John McGregor. I think they are similar writers in that they write very simply, very simple stories, but just very well done. Those would be my two top books.

Rebecca:

And Lena, what about you? What are your favourites?

Lena:

That's a hard question, Rebecca. It's like music: it's like what am in the mood for? And I'm a bit like that with books as well. A couple of books that come to mind are really from when I first left home. I left home at 16, so I was quite young, and a bit like what you were talking about, Beverly, you were talking about that wanting a bit of comfort and maybe missing home a wee bit. My mum's Irish, and there's an Irish author called Maeve Binchy, and she wrote these books that were just like curling up with a cuppa and your favourite blanket, they are just really comfortable, but all about people living in the villages in Ireland and the different characters and how they came to know each other. Mum had given me this book and, of course, as a teenager I didn't want to read anything that my mum had given me, but I did read Echoes when I first left home and it would be my go-to thing if I was feeling a bit down. That and Gone with the Wind. I kind of knew them word-for-word.

A few years ago I came across a book called Tuesdays with Morrie, and Morrie was a college professor and the book is written by one of his students who had become a journalist and then discovered that Morrie was terminally ill. He then went and spent his Tuesdays with Morrie, and it was a book that I gave to so many people because it was about marking and celebrating someone's life whilst they are still here, and it's really, really powerful. He also wrote The Five People You Meet In Heaven, which is another favourite of mine. Mitch Albom is the author's name. But there are so many lists, Rebecca, because there are like my favourite ones from childhood and my favourite ones from travelling. I always

bring a book back from anywhere I go on holiday. Yes, loads. I just fill the shelves to bursting with them really.

Rebecca:

That's brilliant. I always think it's funny when people ask me what's my favourite book, because I always feel like a total narcissist, but my favourite book is Rebecca! That is my favourite book, I'm just like, yes, not because it's my name, I just think it's a brilliant story. I've not watched the adaptation yet, the film, but I might have watched the older one, not the newer one. That just shows you doesn't it; books stay with you for your whole life.

Lena:

I think that's a thing there as well, because you mentioned there about watching, and I can get really disappointed sometimes in a TV or a film adaptation, because what I love about books is that I create images in my head, and I can so strongly identify with characters and I've got a real sense of who they are and what they look like. Then, obviously, a director or someone else puts their slant on it and sometimes it's just a total let down. I felt like that about *The Great Gatsby*. That's another of my favourite books actually, and I was so excited to go and see it at the cinema and then I just came out thinking, Oh, I wish I hadn't done that!

Rebecca:

I had the same with *Game of Thrones*. My response was always: it's not in the book. It drove my partner mental but I was like, it's not in the book. That didn't happen in the book. I know the books haven't finished yet, we're still waiting on the next book for it. But yes, so much stuff didn't happen in the book - that seems to be the go-to saying if it's not there. I'm sure some films have done the book justice but, as like what you said, when you've put yourself into that world and given yourself the characters; you know what they look like in your head, and then an actor comes in and it's their face, it's not your character and it's like, no, that's not who I pictured.

Lena:

That's one of the questions, we don't discuss it every time in the book group but we do sometimes talk about if it was made into a TV programme or a film, who would play the different characters? And it's really interesting that everyone has a different take on that. I love that.

Rebecca:

Oh right, okay. That's interesting.

Lena:

The one I remember everyone talking about most was *Salt Sisters*. Beverley, I don't know if you remember that book? That was like a wee crime novel. That divided a lot of opinion, actually, that book. It was about two sisters, and the setting in that was really descriptive and I think people were kind of...some people said that it was making them think of like *Emmerdale* in some places, with some of the buildings. So that kind of went off on a track down there.

We talked about a Billy Connolly book, didn't we? Obviously, that was really interesting when we did the Billy Connolly book as everyone pretty much said that they could hear his voice as they were reading the text. Then sometimes we have people who have audio books as well. So somebody had had

They Young Team as an audio book, and it's the author himself who reads that one. So that was really interesting to have that conversation as well.

Rebecca:

So now we're into March, what's the book this month?

Lena:

So, at the moment we had a discussion yesterday and we've got one tomorrow, and that's on The Herd by Emily Edwards, which is to do with the right to vaccinate or not vaccinate. So although it's actually to do with MMR, it's quite timely with Covid, so that's been really interesting. And Girl A is going to be our book for April. That's, I think, possibly in production already as a TV adaptation, so it's quite good to read before that comes out. But Girl A is essentially about a girl. Girl A survived this house of horrors, from abuse from her parents, and when her mum dies, it's about herself and her siblings going back and they want to turn the house into something good. It's just her working through the relationships with her siblings. So yes, a bit of a change of tempo from the last couple of books that we've read.

Rebecca:

Maybe you should come up with different themes for the month? Like have a summer book, a Halloween book, a Christmas book? Even though I think all Christmas books are either the Christmas horror or the Christmas romance, so they kind of fall into the same thing.

Like as you said at the beginning: it's been a year. It's amazing that it's come that far. I think it's brilliant that it's still going on. And you've got quite a few members now as well. Can anybody join? How is it that people can join?

Lena:

So, the book group is growing every month. Month-on-month we've got new people wanting to join. It is limited to our family members within Scottish Families, but it's Scotland-wide, so it's going to stay on Zoom. It started on Zoom and it will stay on Zoom. So we currently have members from pretty much the Borders, up to the Highlands, which is really good. So, if anyone wants to get involved, you can get in touch with me directly, probably through my email is best: lena@sfad.org.uk. Or any family member who is working with any of the team in Scottish Families can just mention it and a team member can get in touch with me and we can set it up from there.

Rebecca:

Okay, brilliant. Well, thank you to the both of you. I think you definitely sold the book group, and I think people are going to be interested to come along as well because we do support a lot of people in Scottish Families. And Beverly, as you're a volunteer as well, we've got volunteers as well, so I think people will be very interested in how to get involved.

Thank you to the pair of you.

Lena:

Thank you, Rebecca.

Beverly: Thanks.

22/03/2022



Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.