

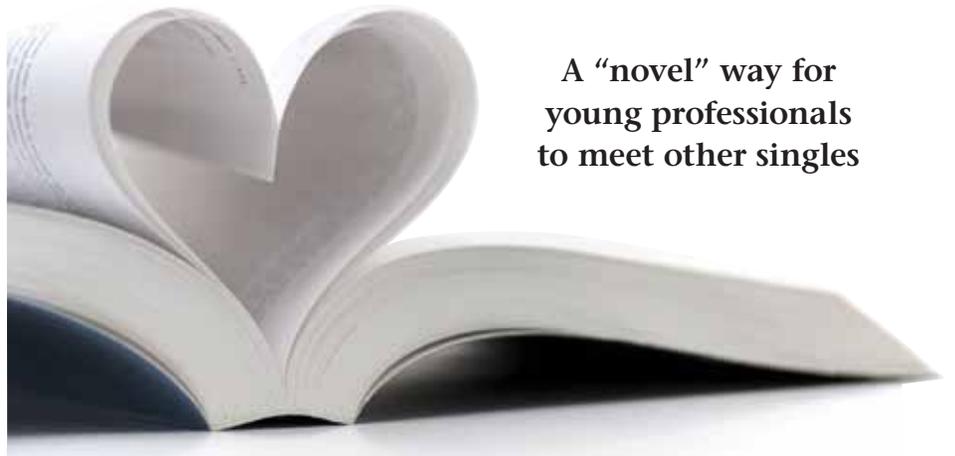
Book Dating for Booklovers at Arlington County Public Library

by Beth DeFrancis Sun

The “book dating” program at the Shirlington branch library in Arlington County has been drawing a lot of attention lately, due in large part to its novelty. Single young professionals are invited to bring in a couple of books—whether favorites, disappointments, or yet-to-be-read titles—to be shared during timed, three-minute “book dates” with other single patrons. The event is intended to draw young people into the library while providing an opportunity for them to meet other singles in the area. What happens next? Well, that’s a different story.

When asked where the idea for Shirlington’s book dating program came from, Librarian and Program Developer Mary Prisbrey laughs and says, “Although I’d like to *say* it was my idea, it actually wasn’t. I can’t take credit for it. I actually found the idea by Googling.” Prisbrey goes on to explain that she stumbled upon a similar program in Fargo, North Dakota while looking for ways to bring young people into the library. Prisbrey has since been in touch with “Lacey,” the librarian who developed the program in Fargo, who admits that she didn’t actually create the idea either. So it’s anyone’s guess who “invented” the idea, and which library sponsored the first-ever book dating program.

How does the program work? Prisbrey explains that it’s speed dating—each one-on-one session is timed for three to four minutes



A “novel” way for young professionals to meet other singles

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(although some people would like it to go longer)—and Prisbrey says she uses bells and whistles to enforce this time restriction. Most participants seem somewhat experienced with the speeding dating process. “They really run with it,” says Prisbrey. “They jump right in.”

One of the challenges has been the uneven gender ratio, with a disproportionate number of women registering for the events (during the second session, for example, there were 24 participants, and only 6 or 7 were men).

Prisbrey is quick to point out, however, that it’s really a way for young *singles* to meet—not necessarily a “dating” event, so women are finding women friends this way. Prisbrey describes how several women were actively engaged in an animated discussion at the end of one of the sessions, and it seemed clear that they were bonding. “If it ends in romance, that’s great,” says Prisbrey, “but it’s really just a ‘singles’ event in a library, rather than a bar scene.”

Those who participate in the event get a chance to win a pair of tickets to see a play at Signature Theatre (right next door to the Shirlington Branch library), plus local restaurants donate refreshments. The first event was catered by Ruth Chris Steak House, the second by Extra Virgin (Italian cuisine), and the third event featured cupcakes donated by CakeLove. Johnny Rockets and Capitol City Brewery have also offered food

donations. "It's not really about the food though," explains Prisbrey, "so any food donations are extra ... and very welcome." Prisbrey admits that the Shirlington branch is lucky in that they're located in Shirlington Village where there are so many restaurants and businesses.

When asked about "lessons learned," Prisbrey says that it's important to be flexible and keep the lines of communication open so that you get as much feedback as possible. "One big lesson I learned is to keep the food under wraps until the end of the program. Because participants are required to change seats, moving with plates of food becomes rather messy." She's also still experimenting with the "rotation" process. During most speed dating events, she explains, women are typically the ones to stay in place, while the men rotate. But Prisbrey has had to experiment with variations on this. Currently, the way it works is that men and women, men and men, and women and women have all had a chance to "talk books" during three-four minute segments. Prisbrey does

hope to see more young men sign up in the future, however.

Prisbrey hopes to encourage more guys to participate by offering free tickets to *sports events* (in addition to offering fee tickets provided by Signature theatre). She

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also explains how they'll make an announcement to all library patrons just prior to the book dating sessions, in hopes that they'll gain some additional guys that way.

Prisbrey explains how speed-dating events will often end with the "host" discreetly facilitating the exchange of telephone numbers among those who connected.

Prisbrey admits that the Shirlington Library branch didn't feel comfortable being involved in that exchange of personal information, so "everyone is on their own" at the end of the event.

Currently advertising for the book dating program takes place via the Arlington County Library website and blog, Twitter, and Facebook. The program has also received local news media attention, and has been promoted by nearby neighborhood associations. For example Shirlington Village and the Park Glen Condominium on Columbia Pike have promoted the event in their neighborhood newsletters.

Although the program is new, it's gotten off to a good start, and the Shirlington branch library expects to have "book dating" appear on its events calendar in months to come.

The library's hope is that the book dating program will help create new chapters in the lives of nearby singles, and perhaps even lead to some romantic endings. **VI**