

Once again, these are the salon days

By Carin Zissis

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"If you wish to have any standing in society," wrote the French novelist Stendhal in 1832, "it is necessary that 20 people should be interested in speaking well of you. Remember that you will get promotions only by means of the salons."

For members of the Back Bay Salon, who have been meeting monthly since last April, there are less calculating reasons to meet.

"It amazes me how many people I talk to mention that they'd like to have a place where they can converse with others," says Linda Morgan, the salon's organizer and a would-be novelist. "People need some forum where they can exchange ideas."

The Laconda Room in the Prudential Center's Marché restaurant doesn't exactly bring a 19th-century French drawing room — from which the salon tradition drew its name — to mind. The windows overlook Huntington Avenue traffic, and the sounds of customers and peppy music filter

through from the restaurant's main dining area. But a long table with high-backed chairs offers the Back Bay salon members a space to gather at 7 p.m., with some people ordering dinner and others just coffee.

Usually 10 to 12 people — professionals, educators, artists, and writers ranging in age from 40 to 80 — take a seat. Some come every month, with newcomers learning of the group by word-of-mouth, or from the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay.

"My parking sticker is still Back Bay. I'm on the wrong side of the tracks, though," says Irene Maksymjuk, explaining that she lives across Huntington Avenue from the neighborhood. While most participants are Back Bay residents, some have moved and find the salon to be, as Morgan says, "a way to maintain connections."

In spite of the group's somewhat lofty name, members aren't self-conscious about their participation. "One of the things I liked about the idea of a salon," says Ruth L'Esperance, "was that it wasn't going to be

a bunch of my friends talking about stuff."

"That was part of the idea," adds Maksymjuk. "We were looking for, you know, having conversations where you could have a chance to encounter points of view or opinions or perspectives that you might not usually."

Armed with topic questions distributed in advance by Morgan, the group comes prepared with thoughts or with passages by writers and philosophers.

"What does sex have to do with friendship?" asks retired professor Dave Lewit, paraphrasing writer Max Frisch, diving almost immediately into the evening's topic, "Friendships — Making and Keeping Friends in our Mobile Society."

Previous topics have included: "Lying — Wherein Lies the Truth?" and "Music — What it Means to You." Anyone can suggest a topic, and clearly nothing is considered too broad.

As this month's salon draws to a close and Lewit puts on his coat to go, Morgan turns to him.

"Let's do 'evil' next month," she proposes with enthusiasm.

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LINDA MORGAN,
*organizer of the Back
Bay Salon*