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## A Book Club Courts Liberals

By [MOTOKO RICH](#)

The progressive movement has prided itself on its ability to get its messages out by harnessing the Internet, through organizations like [MoveOn.org](#) and blogs like Daily Kos or The [Huffington Post](#).

But now a liberal-minded group is returning to an old-fashioned model: a book club.

Starting on Monday, the new Progressive Book Club is inviting readers to join and buy three books at \$1 apiece in exchange for the obligation to buy four books over the next two years.

The brainchild of Elizabeth Wagley, a former fund-raiser and communications adviser for nonprofit groups including Doctors of the World, the Progressive Book Club is trying to update the paradigm of such familiar institutions as the Book-of-the-Month Club, as well as the 44-year-old Conservative Book Club.

Ms. Wagley said that she believed the new book club would fill a void for progressively minded readers. “The right has always understood the power of ideas, the power of books as legitimizers of ideas,” she said. “I see the opportunity with the book-club structure to create a powerful tool to showcase the ideas of the left.”

As with a classic book club, members of the new club will be offered a slate of books each month, reviewed and chosen by a panel that includes the novelists [Michael Chabon](#), [Erica Jong](#) and [Barbara Kingsolver](#); John Podesta, president of the Center for American Progress; Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of The Nation magazine; and [Todd Gitlin](#), the author and a journalism and sociology professor at [Columbia University](#).

The first lead selection is “The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker” by Steven Greenhouse, a reporter at The New York Times. Other offerings for June include “Outright Barbarous: How the Violent Language of the Right Poisons American Democracy” by Jeffrey Feldman, and “Mudbound,” a debut novel by Hillary Jordan. The club will also offer about 200 older titles like “Common Sense” by Thomas Paine and “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson.

The new book club, which is being financed mostly by individual investors, is entering the market at a time when the publishing industry is struggling and the book club segment in particular has come under significant pressure. [Bertelsmann](#), the German media conglomerate that owns the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Doubleday Book Club and the History Book Club, among others, last year reported severe losses in its American book clubs as membership plummeted.

In the early days of book clubs discounts were a large part of the appeal, but competition from online booksellers like [Amazon.com](#) has eliminated that advantage. And recommendations, once another draw, are now easily found on the Internet. “When we started we were bringing people information about books that they wouldn’t have heard about otherwise,” said Andy Schwarz, general manager of the Conservative Book Club, a sister company of Regnery Publishing, a Washington imprint of conservative books. “Now it’s much

easier to get information and learn about books.”

Mr. Schwarz, who said the Conservative Book Club sells an average of 30,000 books a month and has a total of 90,000 members, added: “It’s getting harder to get new members. We’re holding steady, but we’re not growing as much as we’d like.”

Ms. Wagley said that it was not so much the number of members that mattered as the influence that the club’s selections could have on intellectual debate. The Conservative Book Club, she said, “has been able to shine a spotlight on the books that are in the club.” In doing so, she added, the ideas in those books have spread to “the universe of conservatives.”

Readers sympathetic to progressive causes can already learn about books on blogs or by reading reviews in newspapers or on any number of book-related Web sites. But Ms. Wagley said that the new book club would provide a central place for title recommendations and would promote books by smaller publishers that might have difficulty receiving attention elsewhere.

Michelle Berger, the Progressive Book Club’s chief operating and marketing officer and a 10-year veteran of Bertelsmann’s book clubs, said readers still wanted someone to “cut through the clutter” of titles. The new club, she said, would also improve on the old model by eliminating paper catalogs and offering a social networking component on its Web site, as well as the opportunity for members to form local book discussion groups.

Steven Waldman, a founder of [Belief.net](#), a faith and spirituality Web site, and author of “Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America,” another June selection, said he was most excited by the possibility that club members would meet one another. With traditional book clubs “it was always sort of a fiction that you were in a club,” Mr. Waldman said. “It was just a marketing arrangement. You never met the other people in your club. Now you can meet them. I love the idea of people who are buying my book talking to each other.”

As with other book clubs, authors will receive royalties of 4 percent of the cover price for books sold for \$1 apiece, and 8 percent of the cover price for books sold at regular club prices, which will be competitive with prices on Amazon.com or at [Barnes & Noble](#). Typically authors are paid about 15 percent of the hardcover price after they have paid off the cash advances they receive when they sign book contracts.

Margo Baldwin, publisher of Chelsea Green Publishing, which produces books about progressive politics and environmentally sustainable living, said authors may forgo some royalties on the book club sales, but they would enjoy promotion they might not otherwise receive.

To make buyers feel as if they are contributing to something more than book sales, club members can designate one of 33 organizations to receive \$2 from any book that a member buys at regular club prices above \$10. Participating organizations, which will also advertise the Progressive Book Club on their Web sites and help recruit members, include the [Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law](#); the Foundation for National Progress, which publishes Mother Jones magazine; and the Wellstone Action Fund.

Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, publisher and founder of Kos Media, which publishes the Daily Kos blog and is

one of the book club's "alliance partners," said he did not expect the club to generate much revenue for his company. "I'm not doing this for financial reasons," he said. "I'm doing it for movement-building reasons."

Some in the publishing industry questioned whether liberals need a specific book club. Voicing an oft-repeated maxim, David Rosenthal, publisher of Simon & Schuster, said, "One might say the entire book industry is largely a progressive book group."

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