The reading background of Goodreads book club members: A female fiction canon?[1]

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Purpose - Despite the social, educational and therapeutic benefits of book clubs, little is known about which books participants are likely to have read. In response, this article investigates the public bookshelves of those that have joined a group within the Goodreads social network site.

Design/methodology/approach – Books listed as read by members of fifty large English language Goodreads groups - with a genre focus or other theme - were compiled by author and title.

Findings – Recent and youth-oriented fiction dominate the fifty books most read by book club members, while almost half are works of literature frequently taught at the secondary and postsecondary level (literary classics). Whilst JK Rowling is almost ubiquitous (at least 63% as frequently listed as other authors in any group, including groups for other genres), most authors, including Shakespeare (15%), Goulding (6%) and Hemmingway (9%), are little read by some groups. Nor are individual recent literary prize-winners or works in languages other than English frequently read.

Research limitations/implications – Although these results are derived from a single popular website, knowing more about what book club members are likely to have read should help participants, organisers and moderators. For example, recent literary prize winners might be a good choice, given that few members may have read them.

Originality/value – This is the first large scale study of book group members' reading patterns. Whilst typical reading is likely to vary by group theme and average age, there seems to be a mainly female canon of about 14 authors and 19 books that Goodreads book club members are likely to have read.

Keywords: Book groups; Goodreads; fiction reading; young adult fiction; reading groups.

Introduction

Book reading groups provide a recreational, educational, social and/or therapeutic forum for discussion. Their importance is underlined by their support by national charities, such as through the Reading Groups for Everyone website in the UK. Book groups can operate face-to-face or online and can be general or with a specific goal, book genre, or member type. They may be hosted by libraries, schools, or other professional organisations to encourage reading, or may be informal. The most typical, but not universal, activity is discussing a pre-selected book. A successful book club requires careful planning to choose appropriate books or other activities (Slezak, 2000). Informed decision-making may help to ensure that a group's benefits are widespread and long lasting. In this context, knowing which books members are likely to have read is useful background information. A moderator might avoid recent prize-winning books on the basis that most members would have read them, for example. Book choice information is particularly important for large online clubs, where the absence of face-to-face meetings could make it difficult to get informal feedback. Dissatisfied online participants may

quietly leave a club or avoid joining in response to uninteresting books or unstimulating discussions.

It seems likely that both online and in-person book group members would have different reading patterns to the general public. Joining a book group suggests a desire to reflect on literature (e.g., Swann, and Allington, 2009); this may be more salient for literary works because they are often perceived as being more complex (e.g., Saricks, 2001), whereas others may "lack the requisite reading-group fibre" (Hartley, 2002, p.67). People who join book groups may also have a different social demographic or more free time than typical readers as well as being more likely to be female (e.g., McArdle, 2009; Hartley, 2002).

It is impossible to get definitive lists of the most read books of all time or for any given year because this would require tracking sales, resales and library borrowing (e.g., Moss & McDonald, 2004) for multiple formats. Whilst new books might attract most readers via sales, libraries may support the reading of a larger share of older works. Various sources of public information may give pointers to which books have been most read over a given period. These include newspaper lists of bestsellers using data from publishers or bookstores as well as Amazon sales ranks. There is almost no empirical evidence about the books read by online or offline book group members in any country.The major exceptions are around two decades old: a survey of 350 offline UK reading groups 1999-2000 and a follow-up survey of 130 of these groups in 2001 (Hartley, 2002), as well as a North American 2001 survey of online and offline reading groups (Sedo, 2003). . Although the readers surveyed were not a formal book club, a partial exception is Janice Radway's landmark study of readers of romance in a midwestern U. S. city, who relied on the recommendations of one well-read saleswoman (Radway 1984). Partly because of the difficulty of gathering information about everyday readers, there has been little scholarship in literary studies (e.g., in reader-response criticism) that systematically analyses the choices of contemporary everyday readers, although there is some relevant library science research (reviewed below). To start to address this shortfall, this paper analyses types of books read by members of popular Goodreads groups, irrespective of whether the reading was part of their group activity. The social website Goodreads was chosen because it is a popular site for book readers and contains a unique public register of books read by members.

Background

Book clubs

For this article, a book club or reading group is any collection of online or offline individuals that organise around books primarily to discuss them. This includes traditional book groups that meet periodically online, whether groups of friends or more official sets organised by schools or libraries. It also includes online groups that choose a book theme (e.g., Victorian literature) and have a forum in which the books can be discussed. A common activity is likely to be periodically choosing individual books to discuss. The definition excludes "book clubs" that involve no element of discussion, such as publishers' sales offers that involve buying a minimum number of books each year (book sales clubs). The definition also excludes media-driven mass reading events (Fuller & Sedo, 2013) that involve large number of people reading a book and following others discussing it rather than directly participating.

Book clubs have multiple functions, presumably affecting the books that members read. They may aim to improve reading ability (Kong & Fitch, 2002; Raphael & McMahon, 1994) because discussion aids comprehension (Broughton, 2002; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter,

Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009). They may be therapeutic (Hammer, Egestad, Nielsen, Bjerre, Johansen, Egerod, & Midtgaard, 2017; Lang & Brooks, 2015; Muellenbach, 2018; Rimkeit & Claridge, 2017), for rehabilitation (Hartley & Turvey, 2009; Wiltse, 2011), for understanding religious messages or social issues (Clarke & Nolan, 2014; Gramstrup, 2017), educational (Kan, Harrison, Robinson, Barnes, Chisolm, & Conlan, 2015; Scourfield & Taylor, 2014), a networking aid (Alsop, 2015) or may be social or recreational (Clarke, Hookway, & Burgess, 2017; Long, 2003). The importance of book groups is recognised by some publishers who provide additional resources for book clubs (e.g., www.bloomsbury.com/uk/communities/book-groups; Bookseller, 2004; Fuller, Sedo, & Squires, 2011; Hartley, 2002).

Fiction readers can use books or book club discussions to understand their current and likely future experiences (Smith, 2000), even if the ostensible purpose is recreational. They may enjoy producing a collective understanding of a fictional work, hearing others' perspectives or having a sustained engagement with the fictional characters or author (Lattanzi, 2014; Peplow, 2016). Recreational book club participants seem to be usually female, at least in the USA (McArdle, 2009).

Oprah's Book Club is a well-known and influential example in the USA (Hartley, 2002). It recommends books to read and features subsequent televised discussion groups rather than being a typical book club. Oprah's Book Club encourages personal improvement through reading (Hall, 2003) and emphasises wider social goals rather than pure literary merit (Striphas, 2003). It has an associated Goodreads book group.

Two surveys of UK book reading groups from 1999 to 2001 give insights into the typical books chosen as group reads twenty years ago (Hartley, 2002). It does not report about the other books read by group members. Book groups in the UK from 1999 to 2001 tended to select a range of different types of books. They rarely focused on a single genre but usually chose literary fiction, and contemporary literary fiction in particular (Hartley, 2002). It is not clear whether the same would be true for online book clubs given that there would be no geographic barrier against readers selecting a discussion group more narrowly focused on their main interests. Most books selected to be read by UK groups in 1999 were fiction (82%), British (53%, with 26% North American), male-authored (55%), and written in the previous two decades (61%). The books most read by 284 of these groups from June to December 1999 were recent and relatively literary: *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994); *Angela's Ashes* (1996; Pulitzer Prize); *The God of Small Things* (1997, Booker Prize); *Enduring Love* (1997*); Cold Mountain* (1997; U.S. National Book Award for Fiction). None of these books were in the top 30 most read in 2001 by the 130 groups that replied to the follow-up survey, although the top five from 2001 were also recent and relatively literary: *White Teeth* (2000; Whitbread Book Award and three others); *Chocolat* (1999); *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998); *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999); English Passengers (2000; Whitbread Book Award) (Hartley, 2002). The most popular classic authors in 1999 were Jane Austen and George Eliot (joint 24th); in 2001 the most popular classic authors were Charles Dickens and Graham Greene in (joint 17th). None of the top fifty books were genre fiction (e.g., romances, thrillers) or children's/young adult books (despite the fourth Harry Potter book being released in 2000) (Hartley, 2002).

An online survey of readers in mid-2001 using a combination of convenience sampling, snowball sampling and twenty reading group discussion lists received 252 responses, mainly from Canada (115) and the USA (112), and with 64% being members of an online or offline book club (Sedo, 2003). Nearly all (85%) of the respondents were female, including 93% of those that were members of a book club, so the results reflect a North American online female perspective. Amongst the book club members, the most popular fiction genres were

contemporary (86%), classics (49%), and mysteries (48%). For those in book clubs, the three most recent recommended books were primarily contemporary (presumably literary) fiction, whether in online (67) or offline (54) groups. The online groups were more likely to have selected genre fiction, however, such as westerns (10%), mysteries (11%) or science fiction (7%). Both sets of groups largely avoided non-fiction (6-7%) and romance (1%) (Sedo, 2003).

Strategies used to select books to read for clubs in the UK in 1999 were mostly democratic, either through discussion to reach a consensus or by taking turns to make a choice. A few allow outside authority figures to determine the book, including librarians and newspaper book clubs (Hartley, 2002). Since readers use a variety of informal strategies to select their personal reading (Ooi & Liew, 2011), their book club recommendations might be similarly eclectic. The subsequent discussions seem to work best if there are varied opinions about the book but no member had previously endorsed it so strongly that others did not want to express a conflicting opinion. "A mystery, a conundrum, some ambiguity" also help with discussions, but classic fiction tends to be unsuccessful (Hartley, 2002, p.74). There are no strict rules, however, and groups have had success with apparently inappropriate choices. For example, a female group might enjoy dissecting why novels that they found boring had been "very popular with men" (Hartley, 2002, p. 144).

Books are discussed online in contexts that have varying degrees of similarity with offline book clubs. There is an unknown number of private fora associated with geographic locations, book types or social groups. The r/books subreddit is a general popular forum that allows all kinds of postings relating to books and publishing (Anderson, 2015). Some online fora have active moderators that influence the tone of discussions (Thomas & Round, 2016). These presumably use their own beliefs and intuitions to create the type of discussion space that they want or that they believe would thrive online. The geographic reach of online book clubs also allows them to serve relatively specialist purposes, such as a club for the young adult genre in which most members were teachers or librarians (Sedo, 2011).

Book reviews can also be posted and responded to in sites like Amazon (Kousha & Thelwall, 2016) or the Dutch Hebben.nl (Boot, 2017), although these can function as temporary, mainly passive environments for exchanging or consuming opinions about books. Blogs have also been used to promote reading in a book-group like way, such as by providing facilities for people to discuss their reading with others through public comments (Foasberg, 2012).

Book clubs do not have a simple recipe for success. Offline book group problems include individuals talking too much, off-topic discussions, and unpopular book choices (McArdle, 2009). These can be ameliorated online by participants choosing a club matching their interests and ignoring irrelevant or annoying comments. Online groups cannot provide the physical meeting (and food) that is an important component of offline groups (McArdle, 2009) but may still provide a strong sense of community and fun (Fister, 2005).

Goodreads book groups

Goodreads is a social network site, a place for documenting books read and a place for finding and evaluating new books through others' ratings and reviews (e.g., Desrochers, Laplante, Martin, Quan-Haase, & Spiteri, 2016; Pecoskie & Hill, 2015; Zuccala, Verleysen, Cornacchia, & Engels, 2015). It provides some traditional library services, such as Readers' Advisory "readalike" recommendations (Trott, 2011). Over a third (39%) of Goodreads.com visitors originate from the USA ([www.alexa.com/siteinfo/goodreads.com July September 2018](http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/goodreads.com)), where it was the 201st most popular website in September 2018. According to Google trends

queries (trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=goodreads), its worldwide popularity peaked in 2014 and had fallen by September 2018 to 60% of that value (in terms of the proportion of Google queries). The fall could be partly due to users switching to the Goodreads mobile app, and so its popularity is likely to have decreased less, if at all. Goodreads is neither primarily a social network nor primarily a book review site, with users choosing their own mix of both activities (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017).

Goodreads allows members to form their own discussion groups (www.goodreads.com/group). The most popular of these are themed around a genre or topic related to books such as a reading perspective (e.g., feminist). Goodreads group members may value the ability to communicate about their favourite books with like-minded individuals. They may also enjoy the sense of community fostered by a group (Worrall, 2015).

Most Goodreads members are female and choices of books and ratings tend to follow gender lines to some extent, such as with a female preference for romances and a male preference for comic books (Thelwall, 2017; Thelwall, in press). In terms of age, as of September 2018, an estimated 88% of Goodreads users were under age 54 (https://www.quantcast.com/measure/goodreads.com#/demographicsCard). As a social network site, it might attract young users but as a book based site it could also attract older readers.

Reviews of books posted to Goodreads usually express sentiment and frequently allude to fictional and real people (Driscoll & Rehberg, in press). These reviews can also trigger interactions between participants (Naik, 2012). Unlike the case of book groups, these are presumably ad-hoc and between people that had not previously communicated and may not communicate again afterwards.

Goodreads members can tag (or "shelve") books by genre or other another type of category. This information can be used to see which books they have read and how they would describe them. For example, comparing the Victorian novels most frequently taught and written about by academics to those most frequently read on Goodreads can reveal differences and similarities in reading patterns among academics and general readers. (Bourrier and Thelwall, submitted).

General reading preferences

People read fiction for pleasure, escape, interest and for educational, social or utilitarian goals (Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012). Some factors are known to associate with reading preferences. Based on a 1998 national survey in The Netherlands of independent people over twenty-five years old, people tend to read more literary fiction if they are more educated, it was encouraged at school, or if their closest friend is highly educated (Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999). This shows that both social context and educational background can encourage reading literary fiction. Another study of reading habits in The Netherlands investigated factors associated with the choice to read literary fiction, romances or suspense novels. Literary fiction was read more frequently by females, older people, non-religious and more educated and humanities-oriented people, and by those whose parents were more educated and read literary fiction. Romantic fiction was read more by women, religious people, those with children under thirteen and by people with parents that read literary fiction. Suspense novels (not precisely defined, but presumably encompassing detective fiction and adventure novels) were read more by males, by more educated people, by those with parents that read popular fiction and by those with parents that encouraged reading (Kraaykamp, 2003). In summary, educational background (and social class indirectly), social

context, age and gender all influence the types of books that people read. A wider range of factors influence the choice of individual books, however, including availability, publicity and cost (Birdi & Ford, 2018).

In Finland, a survey found that almost nobody exclusively reads literary fiction. Highly educated women were most likely to read a wide range of literary and non-literary book types (Purhonen, Gronow, & Rahkonen, 2010). In the UK, a survey of the fiction reading habits of 9841 people aged forty-one or forty-two by social class and gender in 2012 found that those in a higher social class tended to read more than others, especially in the genres of sci-fi/fantasy (males only), romance (females only), humour, historical fiction, contemporary literary fiction, classic fiction, crime/thriller/mystery, and action/adventure/war (males only), but not horror, poetry (few readers overall), and comics/graphic novels (Atkinson, 2016). Since those in a higher social class are likely to be highly educated, this broadly aligns with the Finland results that more educated people read a wide range of fiction genres. This fits within the relatively omnivorous cultural consumption patterns of higher social classes found in many previous studies, and the ability to consume different types of culture may even be a status symbol for some (Emmison, 2003; Sullivan & Katz-Gerro, 2006).

In partial contradiction to the omnivore thesis above, one Netherlands study (n=273) found that the features that readers value in a book (e.g., several deeper meanings) associate with the genres that they prefer to read (Miesen, 2004). From a different perspective, literary fiction reading, but not genre fiction reading, is also associated with an ability to understand others' perspectives (Kidd & Castano, 2017). Thus, an individual's choice of genre is not only a matter of personal taste but may have an impact on his or her psychological processes.

Research questions

The goal of this study is to characterise the books most read by popular English-language Goodreads book club members. As mentioned above, they may prefer literary fiction since they wish to discuss books and may therefore like to dissect them. Alternatively, they may reflect more general book reading tastes since the book clubs cover different types of fiction. They may also have relatively narrow reading habits, such as a single genre, or may tend to be more omnivorous.

- RQ1: Which types of books and authors are the most universally read by Goodreads book club members?
- RQ2: Do Goodreads book club members tend to read books that are the most popular, liked or reviewed on Goodreads?
- RQ3: Do book club members tend to read books exclusively related to the book club theme, if there is one?

Methods

A set of large Goodreads book clubs was needed to address the research questions. Using large book clubs ensures that the results for each individual book club are not dominated by the choices of a few readers. At the time of data collection (mid-2018), Goodreads listed book clubs but did not allow them to be ordered by size. Instead, they were listed in order of the date of the most recent activity. This should tend to put large or new groups near the start since a large group is unlikely to be dormant for a long period. To find large groups, the list was therefore browsed from the start, and groups with at least 500 members recorded. A total of 65 large book groups was identified from this step. This seems likely to include all the

largest groups that are currently active. Possible examples of dormant large book clubs include those with a date-specific target (e.g., read 50 books in 2017).

Most book clubs were general (e.g., Book Nook Café), genre-specific (e.g., The Sword and Laser), age or genre-specific (e.g., YA Book Gang) or with another book-related focus (e.g., Nothing but Reading Challenges; Read Women; Around the World in 80 Books; Goodreads Choice Awards Book Club). Three were geographic: Goodreads Indonesia; Indonesians Who Love English Books; and The Filipino Group. These last three groups may be explained partly by the predominance of English in the Philippines and Indonesia, although expatriate native English speakers may also participate in local English book clubs (Hartley, 2002). English is an official language of the Philippines. It is a commonly spoken second language and some Philippine literature is in English. After Indonesia became independent from the Netherlands in 1945, English was selected as a foreign language for international communication, and the curriculum included English literature as well as English language instruction (Mistar, 2011). None of the groups were excluded from the study since all reader perspectives might be insightful.

A list of all members of each of the 65 book clubs was extracted using the free Webometric Analyst (lexiurl.wlv.ac.uk) software crawling Goodreads in April and May 2018, with a maximum of one page per second to avoid overloading the servers. A list of all books read by all members of all groups was extracted from their personal pages, again using Webometric Analyst. Books were only extracted from members with public profiles that could be viewed by anyone. Books were only included if the member had tagged them as "read" (rather than "Want to read", "Currently reading" or something else; "read" is the default tag). The books and their authors were then tallied for each group. Some of these books may have been group choices or recommended by other members, but most of a typical member's books would presumably be unrelated to the activities of their Goodreads groups. The smallest 15 groups were removed, leaving a round total of 50, each having at least one author with at least 573 readers and at least one book with 462 readers. The pruning step was necessary because some ostensibly large groups had few readers with public profiles. The remaining groups had between 1615 and 3000 members extracted, with an average of 2800. Some groups had more than 3000 members but this is the maximum displayed by the website.

Assessing the readership of books and authors within a group is not straightforward. If all Goodreads members entered comprehensive lists of all books read into Goodreads then the proportion of book club members that had read a book could be directly calculated. In practice, however, members list books read with varying degrees of completeness, with some listing none. Moreover, groups may differ in the extent to which members list books comprehensively. To compare the popularity of books between book clubs, the number of readers of each book was expressed as a percentage of the maximum number of readers of any book by the group. For example, the book that the largest number of the-book-vipers members had read was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which had been read by 495 members. This was given a relative readership score of 100% for this club (i.e., 495/495) whereas *Eat Pray Love*, with 159 the-book-vipers members, scored 159/495 or 32%. Thus, *Eat Pray Love* had 32% as many the-book-vipers readers as the most popular the-book-vipers book.

For RQ2, the books and authors were ranked by data from Goodreads book groups (average percentage of group readers, minimum percentage of group readers) and by data from Goodreads in general (total ratings; total reviews; average rating), and the ranks

compared with Spearman correlations. Spearman was used rather than Pearson correlation because some of the data had high kurtosis, so Pearson correlations could be misleading.

For RQ3, the most and least read authors and books were identified for each group.

Results and discussion

To give some general context, the gender of all Goodreads group members was inferred from their first name using a list of popular first names that are at least 90% unigender from the 1990 US census. Correction multipliers of 0.831 (female) and 1.138 (male) were used to compensate for a lower proportion of males being detected by this method (Thelwall, Bailey, Tobin, & Bradshaw, 2019). The method detected 67% of genders overall but only 52% in the Filipino group and 32% and 27% in the two Indonesian groups. The (corrected) percentage of female group members varied from 32% (sci-fi-and-heroic-fantasy) to 98% (chick-lit-book-club), with an average of 72%. Thus, whilst popular Goodreads book groups are about three quarters female overall, some (five in this sample) are male dominated (sci-fi-and-heroic-fantasy, the-sword-and-laser, steampunk-new-weird-bizarro-scifi-fantasy-book-group, the-history-book-club, scifi-and-fantasy-book-club).

RQ1: Popular authors and books

The fifty authors that are most popular amongst Goodreads book club members are mostly contemporary (28 alive in 2018), white (49), and from the USA or the UK (some originally, some after moving). A slight majority are male (28), although the top three are female and higher ranked authors tend to be female (Table 1). The list includes only three Nobel prize winners (Golding, Hemmingway, Steinbeck), although some were active before the prizes were initially awarded in 1901 (e.g., Austen, Shakespeare). It does not include many English-language Nobel winners, such as Alice Munro, Doris Lessing, John M. Coetzee and Saul Bellow.

The author list includes many currently popular authors. It contains 34 of the authors of the top 100 favourite books (one per author) from a May 2018 YouGov survey of 7,366 Americans (https://quartzy.qz.com/1258190/the-top-100-books-americans-love-the-most/). The 16 Goodreads authors in Table 1 that were not listed as YouGov favourites include Shakespeare, Neil Gaiman and Veronica Roth. Favourite YouGov authors rarely read by Goodreads book club members were mainly non-English authors (e.g., Rómulo Gallegos) or those that might have their strongest following within one religious, ethnic or sexuality sector of society, such as Dave Hunt (no book club readers), Rudolfo Anaya (no book club readers), Sister Souljah (1.0% of Goodreads book club readers, on average) and Armistead Maupin (1.7%).

Table 1. The 50 authors most read by Goodreads book club members, in popularity order (most popular at the top). Book club groups are listed where the author is the most and least recorded as read. Group names are shortened in some cases. Percentages are expressed in terms of the most read author in each group.

Author	% av.	Most read in book group*	% max	Least read in book group	% max
JK Rowling	93%	Book nook café (+24)	100%	Christian fiction devourers	63%
Suzanne Collins	83%	YA book gang (+4)	100%	Review literature (1714-1910)	49%
Steph. Meyer	70%	Romance reading challenges (+2)	100%	The history book club	37%
George Orwell	64%	Catching up on classics + (+3)	100%	New adult book club	25%
Harper Lee	64%	Oprah's book club official	94%	New adult book club	36%
Stephen King	62%	Support for indie authors (+2)	100%	Indonesians who love Eng. bks	26%
John Green	60%	The Filipino group	100%	Urban fantasy series	19%
JRR Tolkien	59%	Steampunk scifi fantasy (+1)	100%	New adult book club	23%
Jane Austen	57%	Review literature (1714-1910)	100%	YA book gang	30%
Dan Brown	57%	Crime mysteries thrillers	93%	YA book gang	25%
F Scott Fitzgerald	56%	21st century literature	94%	Goodreads Indonesia	21%
Shakespeare	55%	Review literature (1714-1910)	91%	Goodreads Indonesia	15%
Neil Gaiman	52%	Sword & laser	100%	New adult book club	22%
Veronica Roth	52%	YA book gang	91%	Review literature (1714-1910)	21%
CS Lewis	48%	Christian fiction devourers	100%	New adult book club	24%
John Steinbeck	46%	Catching up on classics +	79%	Indonesians who love Eng. bks	15%
Gillian Flynn	45%	A good thriller	97%	Fantasy buddy reads	19%
C. Dickens	45%	Review literature (1714-1910)	90%	New adult book club	19%
JD Salinger	44%	21st century literature	81%	New adult book club	19%
Paula Hawkins	41%	A good thriller	100%	Urban fantasy series	9%
George RR Martin	41%	Sword & laser	91%	Christian fiction devourers	16%
Cassandra Clare	39%	YA book club	81%	21st century literature	13%
Anne Frank	39%	Book nook cafe	65%	Goodreads Indonesia	16%
William Golding	39%	Chaos reading	60%	Goodreads Indonesia	6%
Margaret Atwood	39%	Read women	77%	Goodreads Indonesia	7%
Nicholas Sparks	38%	Chick-lit book club	75%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	9%
Khaled Hosseini	38%	Oprah's book club official	74%	Urban fantasy series	17%
Paulo Coelho	38%	The Filipino group	78%	YA book gang	13%
Ray Bradbury	38%	Scifi and fantasy	72%	Goodreads Indonesia	10%
Stieg Larsson	38%	Crime mysteries thrillers	79%	Goodreads Indonesia	15%
EL James	37%	New adult book club	93%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	11%
Charlotte Bronte	37%	Review literature (1714-1910)	83%	Goodreads Indonesia	12%
Markus Zusak	36%	Oprah's book club official	63%	Goodreads Indonesia	9%
Mark Twain	35%	Review literature (1714-1910)	61%	New adult book club	14%
Agatha Christie	34%	Crime mysteries thrillers	75%	New adult book club	9%
Lois Lowry	34%	Oprah's book club official	51%	Goodreads Indonesia	14%
Rick Riordan	34%	The Filipino group	63%	Review literature (1714-1910)	16%
James Patterson	34%	Crime mysteries thrillers	80%	Feminist orchestra	13%
Rainbow Rowell	34%	The Filipino group	74%	Urban fantasy series	8%

Roald Dahl	33%	Feminist orchestra	51%	New adult book club	16%
Alice Sebold	32%	Oprah's book club official	61%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	12%
Emily Bronte	32%	Review literature (1714-1910)	71%	Goodreads Indonesia	13%
Louisa May Alcott	32%	Christian fiction devourers	56%	Fantasy buddy reads	14%
Oscar Wilde	32%	Catching up on classics +	70%	New adult book club	12%
Jodi Picoult	31%	Oprah's book club official	73%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	9%
Douglas Adams	31%	Sword & laser	75%	Goodreads Indonesia	5%
Kathryn Stockett	31%	Oprah's book club official	76%	Fantasy buddy reads	8%
E Hemingway	30%	21st century literature	66%	New adult book club	9%
Jojo Moyes	30%	Oprah's book club official	71%	Steampunk scifi fantasy	5%
John Grisham	30%	Crime mysteries thrillers	79%	Feminist orchestra	10%

*In the case of a tie, only one book group is given and the number of additional groups is recorded in brackets.

The most read books are fiction (49), originally written in English (48), and from a mix of genres, with young adult and classics dominating (Table 2). Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* is one of the two non-English books, the only non-fiction entry and has the youngest author. Despite this outlier status, *The Diary of a Young Girl* shares some of the broad themes of popular young adult novels by authors like Suzanne Collins, in which a young teenager is persecuted in a dystopian society.

In contrast to the common choices for book clubs from twenty years ago, the list of books most read by group members is not dominated by books that have won prestigious literary prizes. The one Booker Prize winner (starting in 1969) is *The Handmaid's Tale* and the list includes no other shortlisted books. The sole Pulitzer Prize winner (starting in 1918) is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Even the prominent high selling Pulitzer winner and Oprah's Book Club choice *Beloved* is not included (ranked only 347 for Goodreads book club readers), despite also being rated as the best American work of literary fiction 1981-2006 by one survey of critics and writers (*New York Times*, 2006). In contrast, the Goodreads books, or others by the same authors, include all the top 12 from a National Public Radio poll from 2012 of teen novels (https://www.npr.org/2012/08/07/157795366/your-favorites-100-best-ever-teen-novels?t=1530946220331), with the first exception being S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* from 1967 (ranked 93 for Goodreads book club readers).

The twenty most selected books by from a 2008 survey of US book groups (perhaps prioritising library-hosted book groups) gives contrasting results. It is dominated by modern literary novels. The common books are *The Kite Runner*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (the only older book in the list). A Jodi Picoult book is also present (McArdle, 2009). Thus, it is possible that the types of books discussed by book club members are not the types of books that most have read (or have tagged as read in Goodreads, if a member). Popular Goodreads book club members may also have a different demographic to offline book club members: perhaps being younger and more casual participants. Recommended books may also be chosen not for popularity but for ability to provoke discussion (Taylor, 2008). Whilst some groups may consciously avoid genre fiction (Taylor, 2007), others may embrace it and disagree with claims that literary fiction is worthier (Fister, 2005).

There are no reliable international book sales data to compare the results with but an ad-hoc list of high selling books in Wikipedia gives a tentative point of reference (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books, 3 Nov. 2018). Books that have sold well

over the years but are not usually recorded as read by Goodreads book club members include *The Little Prince* (28% of Goodreads book club readers, on average), *And Then There Were None* (19%), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (17%), and the Victorian imperial adventure story *She: A History of Adventure* from 1887 (no Goodreads book club readers). In comparison, a list of UK purchases from electronic book sales tracking systems in bookshops up to mid-2012 (theguardian, 2012) included many differences. Dan Brown had five books in the top 21 and there were more non-fiction works (popular science, auto/biographies, a cookbook) and three young children's picture books in the top 50. The Guardian list also has a bias towards UK authors. The first obvious classic literary fiction is *To Kill a Mockingbird* at number 65. This list emphasises that non-fiction and children's works are popular reading. It is possible that auto/biographies tend not to be recorded in Goodreads or have more nationally-focused audiences (e.g., for sportspeople, politicians and comedians) and so are less highly ranked within international lists. Presumably few parents reading picture books would bother to add them to their Goodreads library. The same may be true for cookbooks, which people might buy and consult but not record as "read".

Relating the results to prior studies of reading habits, the wide range of types of books that are most popular fits with the reading patterns of higher social class or more educated individuals (Atkinson, 2016; Purhonen, Gronow, & Rahkonen, 2010), although (primarily) horror writer Stephen King and (partly) graphic novel author Neil Gaiman could be anomalies for the UK study since these genres are not frequently consumed by readers in a higher social class (at least in the UK: Atkinson, 2016). The presence of romantic and literary fiction fits with the dominance of females in book groups and on Goodreads. Romance is a strongly female genre in Goodreads (e.g., 95% of reviewers of romances are female: Thelwall, in press) and probably in general. All readers of romance surveyed in Janice Radway's study were women.

Table 2. The 50 books most read by Goodreads book club members, in order of popularity (most popular at the top). Book groups are listed within which each of the top 50 books is the most and least recorded as read. Percentages are expressed in terms of the most read book in each group. For example, the 64% average for Harry Potter 1 means that this book was, on average, read 64% as often by members of the New adult book club as the book that was most read by the group's members.

Book	% av	Most read in book group*	% max	Least read in book group	% max
Harry Potter 1	92%	Book nook café (+17)	100%	New adult book club	64%
The Hunger Games (HG1)	91%	YA book gang (+17)	100%	Review literature (1714-1910)	57%
Twilight (T1)	76%	Chick-lit book club (+4)	100%	21st century literature	43%
To Kill a Mockingbird	68%	The book vipers	100%	New adult book club	37%
Harry Potter 2	68%	Feminist orchestra	87%	New adult book club	46%
Harry Potter 3	67%	Feminist orchestra	85%	Christian fiction devourers	46%
Harry Potter 4	65%	Feminist orchestra	81%	Christian fiction devourers	45%
Catching Fire (HG2)	64%	The Filipino group	84%	Review literature (1714-1910)	40%
Harry Potter 7	62%	Sword & laser	82%	Christian fiction devourers	42%
Harry Potter 5	62%	Goodreads Indonesia	80%	Christian fiction devourers	43%
Harry Potter 6	61%	Feminist orchestra	79%	Christian fiction devourers	41%
The Great Gatsby	61%	Catching up on classics + (+1)	100%	Goodreads Indonesia	20%
Mockingjay (HG3)	61%	The Filipino group	80%	Review literature (1714-1910)	38%

The Fault in Our Stars	57%	The Filipino group	99%	Urban fantasy series	16%
Pride and Prejudice	52%	Review literature (1714-1910)	100%	YA book gang	25%
1984	52%	Chaos reading (+1)	100%	YA book gang	17%
The Hobbit	51%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	96%	New adult book club	17%
Animal Farm	51%	The history book club	93%	New adult book club	18%
The Catcher in The Rye	50%	21st century literature	86%	YA book gang	21%
The Da Vinci Code	48%	Crime mysteries thrillers	90%	YA book gang	16%
New Moon (T2)	46%	Romance reading challenges	72%	21st century literature	22%
Divergent (D1)	46%	YA book gang	83%	Review literature (1714-1910)	22%
Romeo and Juliet	46%	Review literature (1714-1910)	72%	Goodreads Indonesia	12%
The Diary of a Young Girl	45%	Book nook cafe	74%	Goodreads Indonesia	20%
Eclipse (T3)	45%	Romance reading challenges	71%	21st century literature	22%
Breaking Dawn (T4)	43%	New adult book club	69%	21st century literature	22%
Lord of The Flies	43%	Chaos reading	74%	Goodreads Indonesia	6%
The Girl on The Train	43%	Mystery, crime & thrillers (+2)	100%	Urban fantasy series	9%
Lion Witch & Wardrobe	41%	Christian fiction devourers	81%	New adult book club	21%
Angels & Demons	40%	Crime mysteries thrillers	81%	YA book gang	15%
Girl with The Dragon Tattoo	39%	Crime mysteries thrillers	98%	Goodreads Indonesia	14%
The Fellowship of The Ring	39%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	84%	New adult book club	13%
Of Mice and Men	39%	Catching up on classics +	66%	Indonesians who love Eng. bks	11%
Fifty Shades of Grey	38%	New adult book club	95%	Sci-fi and heroic fantasy	12%
A Game of Thrones	38%	Sword & laser	89%	Goodreads Indonesia	15%
Jane Eyre	38%	Review literature (1714-1910)	92%	Goodreads Indonesia	10%
The Kite Runner	37%	Around the world in 80 books	73%	Urban fantasy series	15%
The Alchemist	37%	Around the world in 80 books	72%	YA book gang	11%
City of Bones	37%	YA book club	74%	21st century literature	12%
The Lovely Bones	36%	Oprah's book club official	65%	Goodreads Indonesia	13%
The Book Thief	36%	Around the world in 80 books	61%	Goodreads Indonesia	9%
Insurgent (D2)	35%	YA book club	65%	Review literature (1714-1910)	13%
The Giver	35%	Oprah's book club official	49%	Goodreads Indonesia	12%
The Help	34%	Oprah's book club official	83%	Goodreads Indonesia	9%
Little Women	34%	Christian fiction devourers	62%	Fantasy buddy reads	15%
The Lightning Thief	33%	The Filipino group	64%	21st century literature	14%
The Handmaid's Tale	33%	Read women	66%	Goodreads Indonesia	7%
Wuthering Heights	32%	Review literature (1714-1910)	76%	Goodreads Indonesia	10%
Memoirs of a Geisha	31%	Book nook cafe	56%	YA book gang	11%
Charlotte's Web	29%	Christian fiction devourers	48%	Goodreads Indonesia	6%

* In the case of a tie, only one book group is given and the number of additional groups is recorded in brackets.

RQ2: Author and book popularity differences between groups and Goodreads overall

The top 50 authors and books can be compared based on their average popularity within groups (i.e., the order in Table 1 and 2), the minimum percentage that have read them in any group (compared to the maximum for any group book – see the final columns of Table 1 and

2) and their wider popularity in Goodreads (number of ratings, number of reviews, average rating). The two book-group based rankings (average % of group readers and minimum % of group readers) of authors and books give similar, but not identical results (Table 3, 4, see also Figures 1-8). The rest of this section refers only to the average percentage of Goodreads group readers.

The books that are most often read by Goodreads book club members are not necessarily the most liked or reviewed books on Goodreads overall. In other words, marking a book as read was no guarantee that a book club member liked the book or would write a review of it. The average percentage of Goodreads book group readers has little agreement with the average ratings of all Goodreads users (correlation: 0.068) and number of reviews written by all Goodreads users (correlation: 0.400) for authors (Table 3, Figure 2, 4) and books (correlations 0.284 and 0.266, respectively) (Table 4, Figure 6, 8). Several reasons could account for the fact that the books that are most often read by book club members are not necessarily the most liked or reviewed. Books could be more read than liked if they are on school curricula. In such cases, many readers may have felt obliged to read them. Enthusiastic fans or publicity from a film, fiction prizes or notoriety may also attract new audiences that may try a book but be less receptive to its attractions. This may most disadvantage stories that target a narrow audience demographic. Books might be reviewed more if they are on school curricula (reviews might rehearse class assignments and readers might be primed to read critically), have enthusiastic readers, elicit polarised opinions, or are controversial.

Goodreads book club members do not differ significantly in their reading choices than the general population of readers on Goodreads. In other words, the same books and authors are generally popular with both readers who do and do not belong to a book club on the site. There is a strong correlation (0.673) between numbers of Goodreads book group readers (expressed as percentages) and overall numbers of Goodreads ratings for authors (Table 3, Figure 3) and an even stronger correlation (0.753) for books (Table 4, Figure 7). The relative numbers of readers of these books/authors overall are therefore similar for Goodreads group members as for all Goodreads. Because of these high correlations, it also seems likely that the top 50 for Goodreads book club members would have a substantial overlap with the top 50 for all Goodreads members (Goodreads does not reveal this site-wide information). This would then imply that Goodreads book club members tend to read similar things to general Goodreads members, at least in terms of the most popular books. If most people rate books after registering them as read in Goodreads, the rating count is a good proxy for the overall number of Goodreads readers of a book or author.

Despite the high correlation between books and authors that are read by book club members and those that are read by the general audience of Goodreads members, there were a few exceptions. Authors that were more widely read by book club members than the general population of Goodreads members include, most prominently, Harper Lee and George Orwell (bottom right of Figure 3), both classic authors with political messages. The *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* book series are also relatively more read (rated) by Goodreads group members (after the first book) (Figure 7). This is an unexpected result. Perhaps people who enjoy books the most, or who like discussing books the most, are more likely to continue reading a series.

Some books and authors are also less likely to be read by book club members than the general population of Goodreads. Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson & the Olympians young adult book series (e.g., *The Lightening Thief*) is relatively unread by book group members (the most top left point in Figure 3). In this case, the films of two books in the series

may have attracted new readers, although many of the other books also have been turned into films. The Percy Jackson series is targeted at relatively young readers and won Goodreads Choice awards in the Children's & Middle Grade category every year 2011-2017 (www.goodreads.com/award/show/21332-goodreads-choice-award; for a simpler format, see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodreads). It seems possible that the younger readers of this series may not feel the need to join a book group, whilst older Goodreads members may have grown up after key books were published or may not record their earlier reading in Goodreads.

Table 3. Spearman correlations between two popularity indicators from the 50 selected book clubs (average % and minimum % of group readers) and three popularity indicators for the top 50 **authors** derived from all Goodreads members (average rating, rating count, review count).

Authors: Spearman's rho	Average % of gp. readers	Minimum % of gp. readers	Average rating	Rating count	Review count
Average % of group readers	1	.806**	.068	.673**	.400**
Minimum % of group readers		1	.193	.702**	.326*
Average rating (all Goodreads)			1	.201	.229
Rating count (all Goodreads)				1	.671**
Review count (all Goodreads)					1

*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 4. As Table 3 for the top 50 books.

Books: Spearman's rho	Average % of gp. readers	Minimum % of gp. readers	Average rating	Rating count	Review count
Average % of group readers	1	.863**	.284*	.753**	.266
Minimum % of group readers		1	.355*	.615**	.180
Average rating (all Goodreads)			1	.330*	.155
Rating count (all Goodreads)				1	.301*
Review count (all Goodreads)					1

*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.
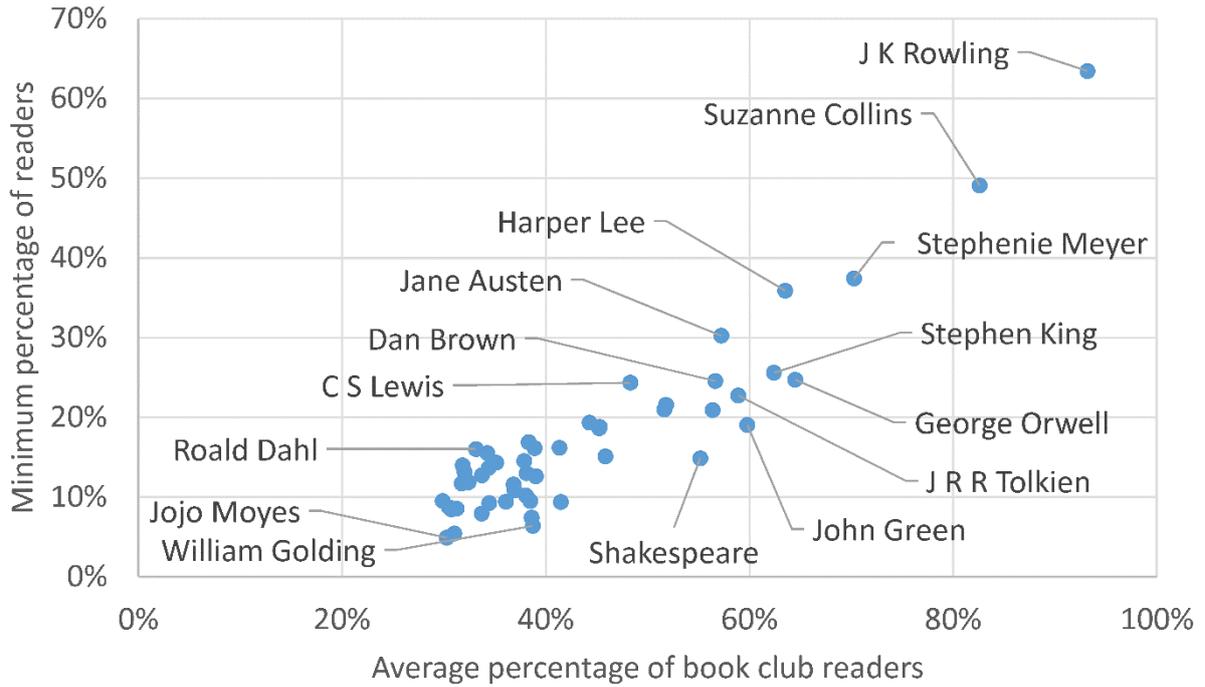
Figure 1. The top 50 authors scored by the minimum percentage of readers in any of the 50 selected book clubs against the average percentage of readers across the 50 selected book clubs.
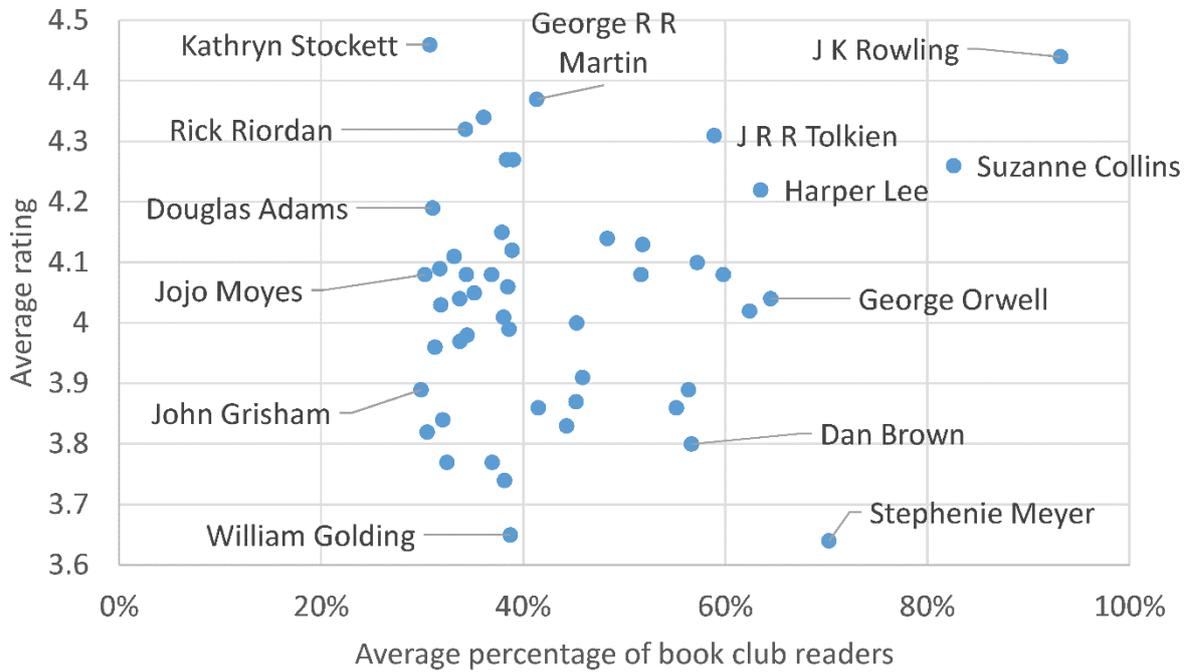

Figure 2. The top 50 authors scored by their overall average Goodreads rating against the average percentage of readers across the 50 selected book clubs.
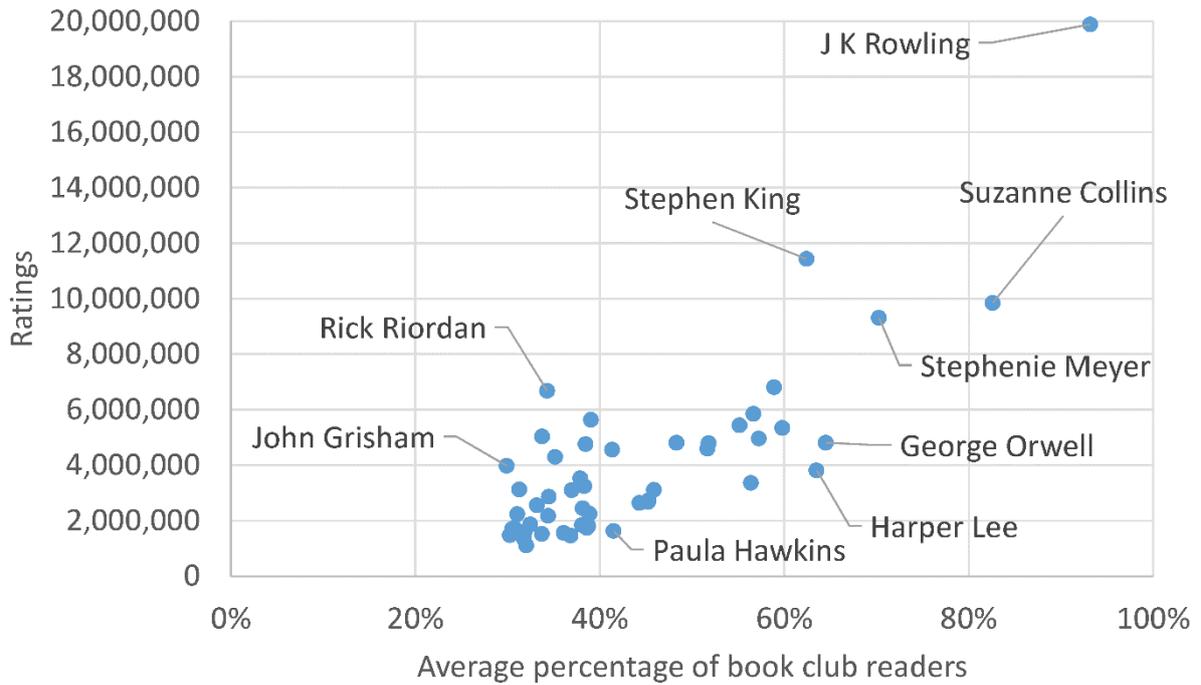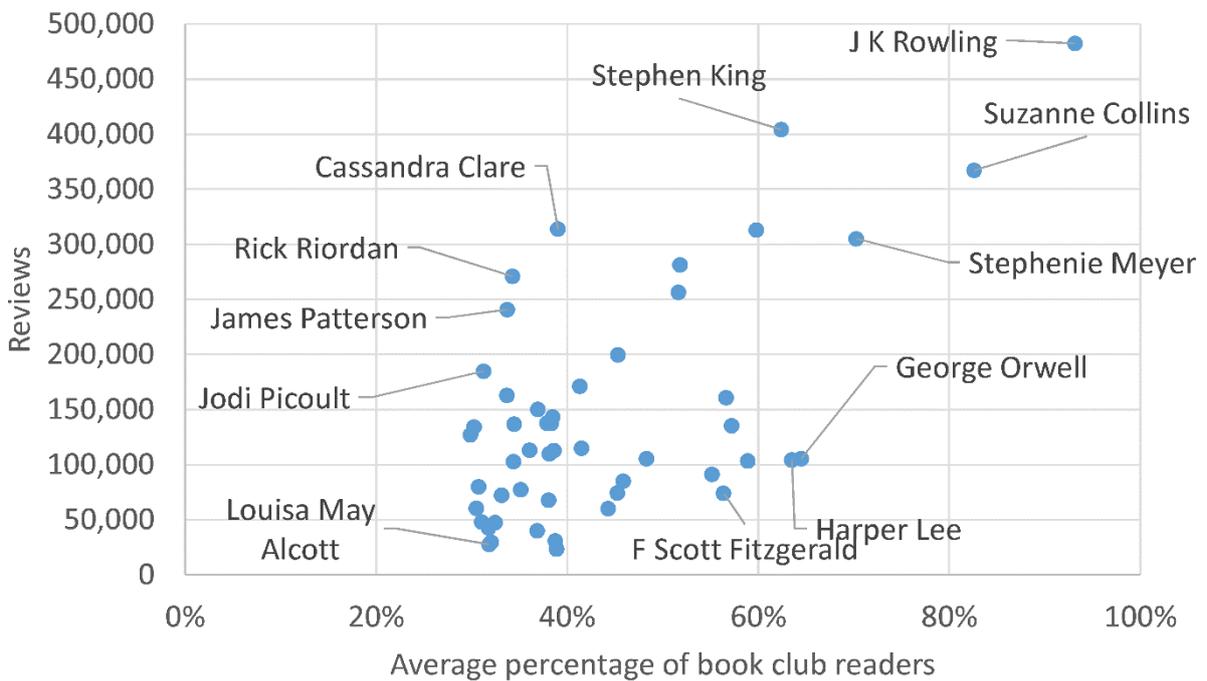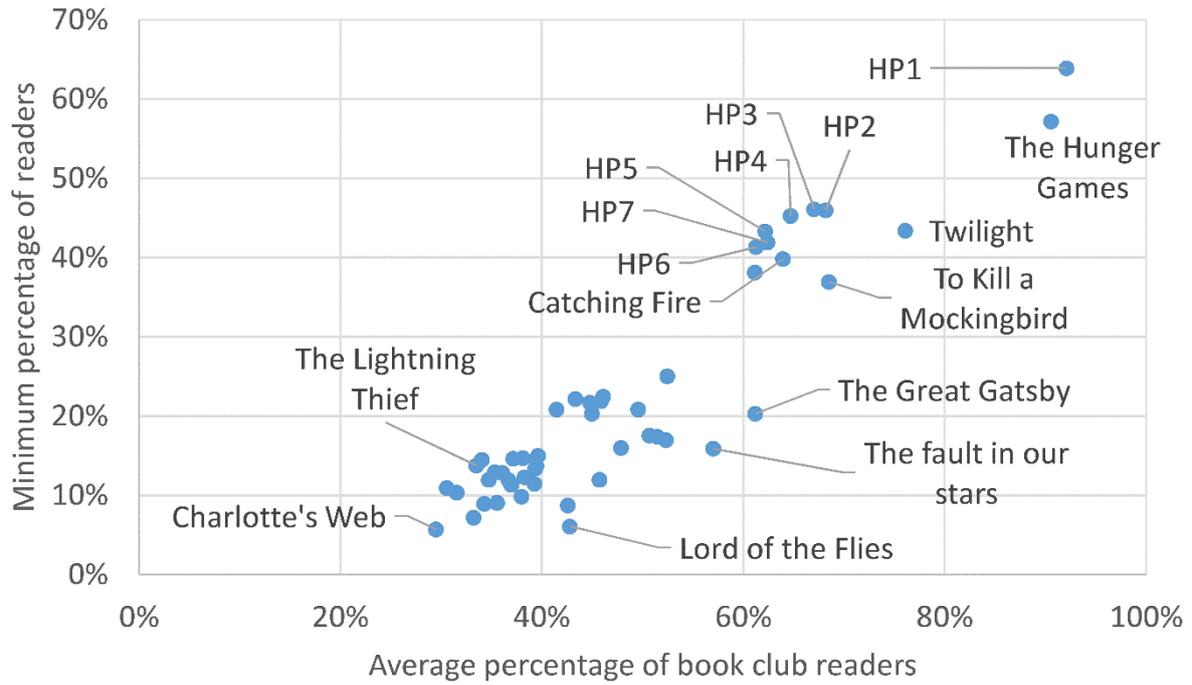
Figure 3. The top 50 authors scored by their overall total Goodreads ratings against the average percentage of readers across the 50 selected book clubs.

Figure 4. The top 50 authors scored by their overall total Goodreads reviews against the average percentage of readers across the 50 selected book clubs.

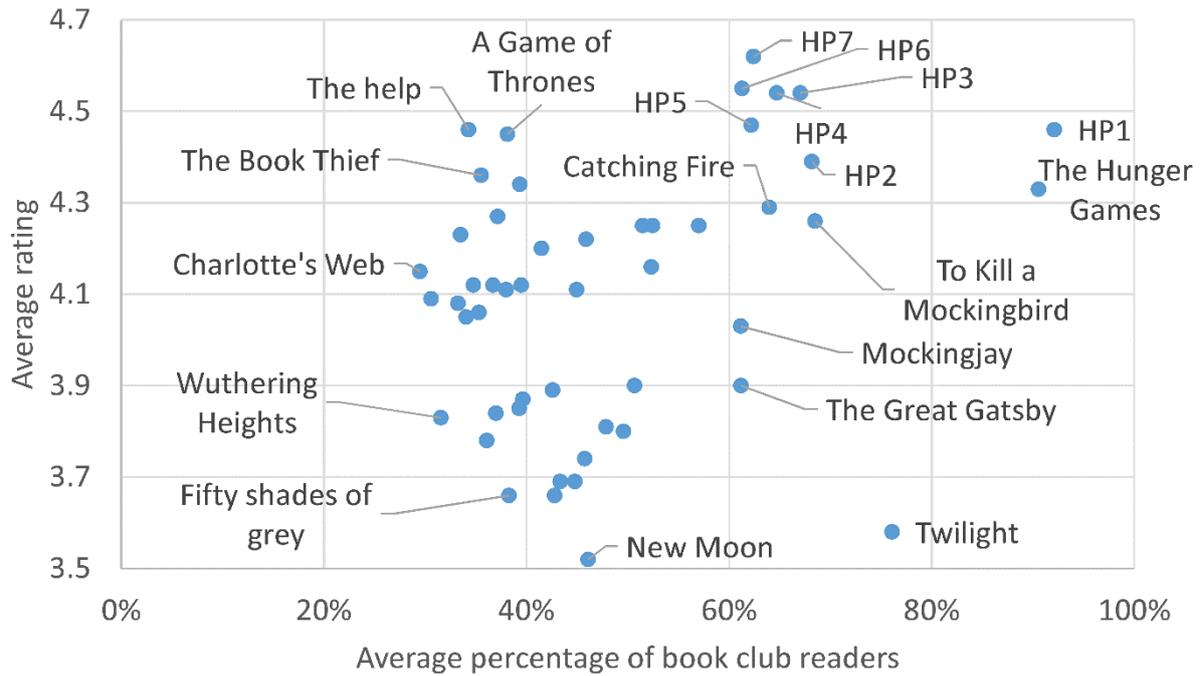Figure 5. As Figure 1 for the top 50 books. HH1-HP7 are the Harry Potter series.

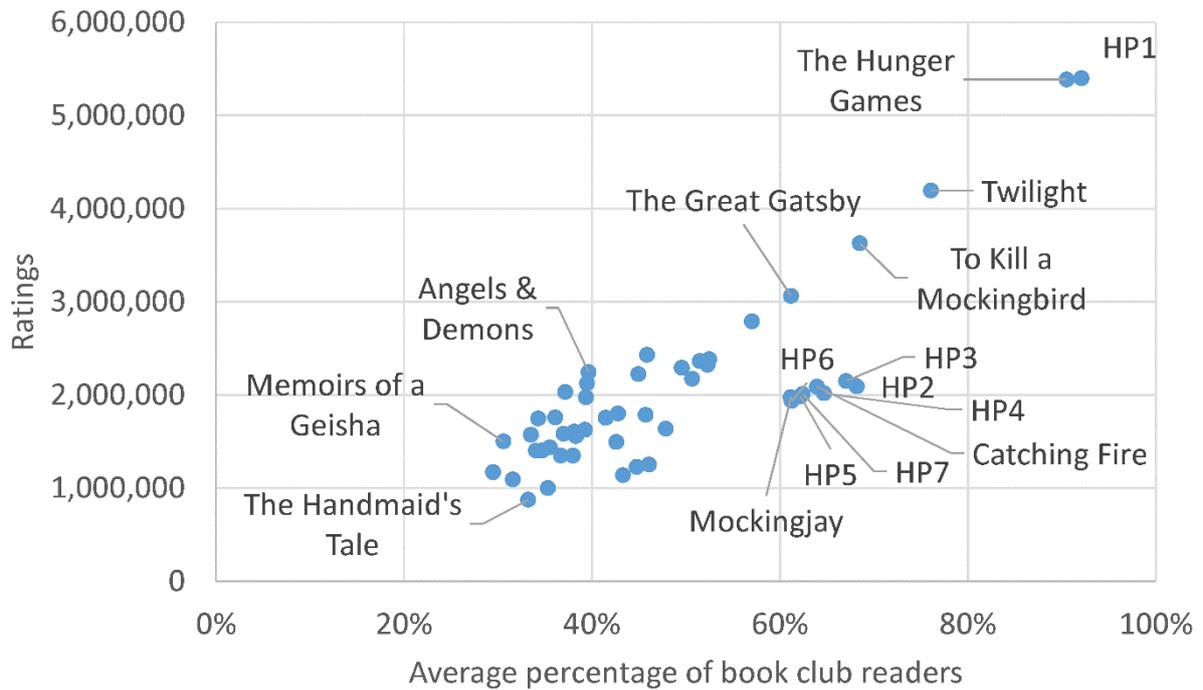
Figure 6. As Figure 2 for the top 50 books.

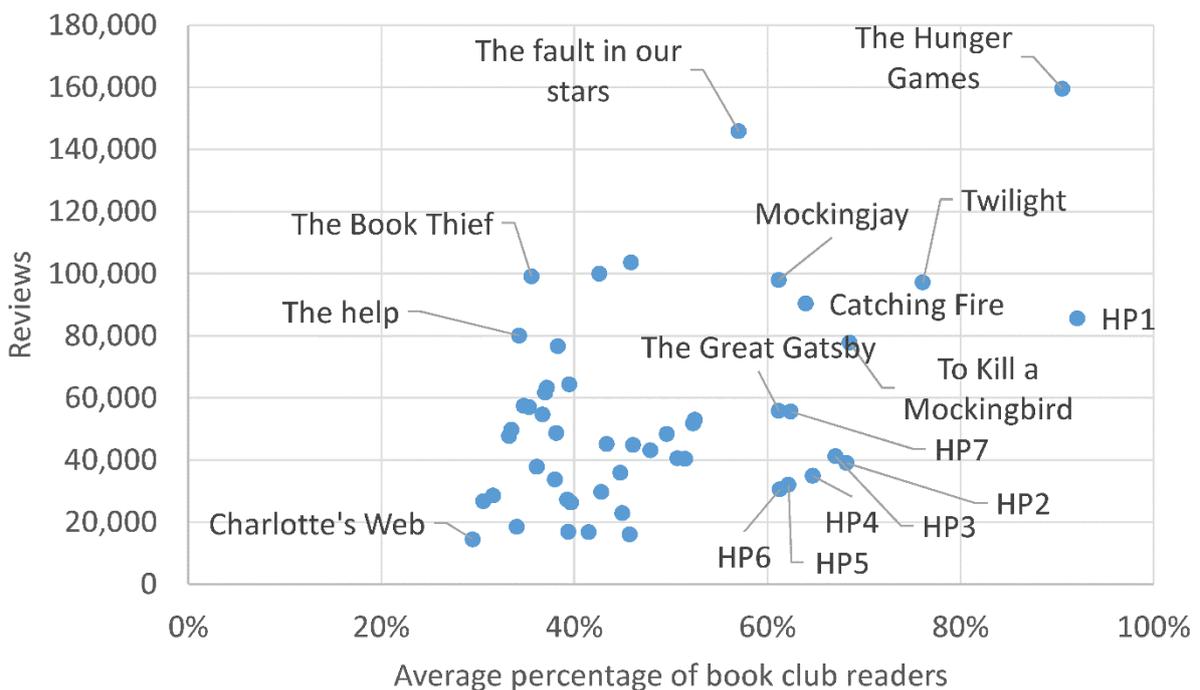Figure 7. As Figure 3 for the top 50 books.

Figure 8. As Figure 4 for the top 50 books.

RQ3: Do book club members only read books related to the club theme?

There are substantial differences between groups in the popularity of individual authors and books (Tables 1, 2). For example, JK Rowling is read by 93% overall, but only 64% of members of the book club Christian fiction devourers, presumably because of Christian criticism of its magical themes. Similarly, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is read by 92% overall but only 62% of New adult book club members, although the cause is unclear. *The Hunger Games*

is widely read overall (91%), but by less than half of Readers review literature (1714-1910) (49%), perhaps due to its publication year.

Shakespeare is an example of an author that is unpopular in some groups (Figure 1) because at least one of the groups (Goodreads Indonesia) has relatively few Shakespeare readers. Early modern drama may not be the first choice of reading for those mastering English as a second language. *Lord of the Flies* also attracted relatively few Goodreads Indonesia readers (Figure 5). Perhaps its position on the curricula of schools in the UK and USA attracts most of its readers, so it may be more valued for pedagogical purposes than reading pleasure.

There are patterns in terms of book clubs in which some genres tend to be unpopular. The New adult book club members tend to avoid classic literature and Goodreads Indonesia members seem to avoid a range of popular authors and books. Perhaps surprisingly, members of Readers review literature (1714-1910) did not appear in the least read column of Tables 1 and 2, despite most of the books having been written after 1910. Similarly, John Green is least read by the Urban fantasy series group (19%), perhaps because it emphasises realism. Similarly, Insurgent is least read by the Readers review literature (1714-1910) group (13%), presumably because it is modern and has modern themes. Thus, whilst book groups specialise to some extent, a substantial minority of members widely read popular books.

The top 50 books and authors most read by book club members do not follow the group theme in most cases because of the almost universal popularity of the Harry Potter series, although in the remaining cases (except Feminist orchestra) the most read book clearly fits within the group remit (Table 5), as some examples illustrate. For Chick lit book club, *Twilight* is a female-friendly book (vampire romance) and arguably chick-lit. For YA book gang, *The Hunger Games* is clearly a young adult book. For many groups, the least read book is opposite to the group theme. For example, *The Fellowship of the Ring* is not Chick-lit (mainly male characters and themes, such as adventure and fighting) and *The Help* has no Sci-fi and fantasy elements.

Table 5. The most-read and least-read books and authors from the top 50 for each group.

Group name	Most read book	Least read book	Most read author	Least read author
Book nook cafe	*Harry Potter 1*	*City of Bones*	JK Rowling	Rainbow Rowell
YA book gang	*The Hunger Games*	*Handmaid's Tale*	Suzanne Collins	Ernest Hemingway
Beta proof readers	*The Hunger Games*	*The Alchemist*	JK Rowling	Jojo Moyes
Goodreads reviewers group	*The Hunger Games*	*Lightning Thief*	JK Rowling	Rainbow Rowell
Chick lit book club	*Twilight*	*Fellowship of Ring*	Stephanie Meyer	Douglas Adams
Drop everything and read	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
Next best book club	*The Hunger Games*	*Lightning Thief*	JK Rowling	Rick Riordan
Romance readers challenges	*Twilight*	*The Book Thief*	Stephanie Meyer	Ernest Hemingway
Support for indie authors	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	Stephen King	Rainbow Rowell
Read women	*Harry Potter 1*	*Insurgent*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
For love of a book	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
Feminist orchestra	*The Hunger Games*	*Fifty Shades of Grey*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
Scifi and fantasy book club	*Harry Potter 1*	*The Help*	JK Rowling	Jojo Moyes
Everyone has read this but me	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
Mystery crime and thriller	*Girl on the Train*	*City of Bones*	Stephen King	Cassandra Clare
Fantasy buddy reads	*Harry Potter 1*	*The Help*	JK Rowling	Kathryn Stockett

Fairy book club	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
Kids teens book club	*The Hunger Games*	*Handmaid's Tale*	Suzanne Collins	Oscar Wilde
Steampunk new weird bizarro scifi fantasy book group	*Harry Potter 1*	*Girl on the Train*	JRR Tolkien	Jojo Moyes
Romance historical or other	*Twilight*	*Handmaid's Tale*	Stephenie Meyer	Rainbow Rowell
Goodreads Indonesia	*Harry Potter 1*	*Charlotte's Web*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
Reading challenges	*The Hunger Games*	*Wuthering Heights*	JK Rowling	Ernest Hemingway
Indonesians who love English books	*Harry Potter 1*	*Lord of the Flies*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
Review literature 1714 to 1910	*Pride and Prejudice*	*Insurgent*	Jane Austen	Rainbow Rowell
Catching up on classics & more	*The Great Gatsby*	*City of Bones*	George Orwell	James Patterson
Sword and laser	*Harry Potter 1*	*Fifty Shades of Grey*	Neil Gaiman	Jojo Moyes
Classics for beginners	*Harry Potter 1*	*City of Bones*	JK Rowling	Jojo Moyes
Apocalypse group	*The Hunger Games*	*Wuthering Heights*	Suzanne Collins	Jojo Moyes
Sci fi and heroic fantasy	*Harry Potter 1*	*The Help*	JRR Tolkien	Jojo Moyes
Filipino group	*The Hunger Games*	*The Help*	John Green	Kathryn Stockett
Coffee books	*The Hunger Games*	*Lightning Thief*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
Around the world in 80 books	*Harry Potter 1*	*City of Bones*	JK Rowling	Cassandra Clare
Shut up read	*The Hunger Games*	*Handmaid's Tale*	Suzanne Collins	Ernest Hemingway
2018 reading challenge	*Harry Potter 1*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	Ernest Hemingway
The book vipers	*To Kill a Mockingbird*	*City of Bones*	JK Rowling	Cassandra Clare
21st century literature	*The Great Gatsby*	*City of Bones*	George Orwell	Cassandra Clare
Urban fantasy series	*Twilight*	*Girl on the Train*	Stephenie Meyer	Jojo Moyes
Book promotions	*Harry Potter 1*	*Girl on the Train*	JK Rowling	Rainbow Rowell
Chaos reading	*1984*	*City of Bones*	George Orwell	Jojo Moyes
YA buddy readers corner	*The Hunger Games*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
Christian fiction devourers	*The Hunger Games*	*A Game of Thrones*	C S Lewis	Douglas Adams
YA book club	*The Hunger Games*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	JK Rowling	John Grisham
Crazy for young adult books	*The Hunger Games*	*Memoirs of Geisha*	Suzanne Collins	John Grisham
History book club	*1984*	*City of Bones*	George Orwell	Cassandra Clare
Crime mysteries thrillers	*Girl on the Train*	*City of Bones*	Stephen King	Rainbow Rowell
Oprah's book club official	*The Hunger Games*	*Lightning Thief*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
New adult book club	*Twilight*	*The Alchemist*	Stephenie Meyer	Douglas Adams
Goodreads choice awards	*The Hunger Games*	*Lightning Thief*	JK Rowling	Douglas Adams
A good thriller	*Girl on the Train*	*Lightning Thief*	Paula Hawkins	Rick Riordan
Perks of being a book addict	*The Hunger Games*	*Fellowship of the Ring*	JK Rowling	Ernest Hemingway

Discussion

The findings are limited by focusing on popular book groups, whereas the results may be substantially different for more niche groups. Members' bookshelves are incomplete reading records, skewing the data against books that tend not to be recorded. In addition to omitting children's books (e.g., *Spot's First Christmas*), genre fiction may also be ignored. For example, the romance novelist Barbara Cartland has relatively few Goodreads readers compared to her lifetime sales. Individual members may also choose not to list any books read before joining

Goodreads and may also record books for impression management purposes to some extent. In the first half of the twentieth century, middle-class Americans were encouraged to display their taste and education through a collection of books on built-in bookshelves (Striphas, 2009 pages 43-45); Goodreads remediates this practice by allowing members to display digital shelves of their books in what Lisa Nakamura calls a "Bibliocentric as well as egocentric network of public reading performance" (Nakamura, 2013). Members seem likely to only record books read for leisure and some may only list novels. A technical limitation is that the percentages calculated are based on the most popular book within a given group. The results for most books would therefore be low in a group if a popular book was selected as a recommended read.

Although many of the books that were widely read by book club members were YA series written by women, while recent prize-winning literary fiction fared less well, it should not be concluded from this that book club members have not read this type of fiction. This result could indicate instead that book club members are less likely to have read the same literary fiction. Indeed, most book group members may widely read contemporary literary fiction, but rarely the same book, so that few individual authors and books appear in the top 50 lists. In particular, most members may have read several Booker Prize winners but rarely the same one (except *The Handmaid's Tale*: 33%).

Comparing these results with the two previous surveys of book groups and book group members from twenty years ago can shed some light on shifts in reading practices over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The first study is not directly comparable because it was dominated by the UK and investigated reading group selections rather than reading group members' general reading patterns (Hartley, 2002). The slight majority of male authors of the most popular books, together with female domination of the top few books in this study echoes the 2001 UK book group choices, so there may not have been a substantial author gender popularity shift. The most popular book group choices in the twin 1999 and 2001 surveys were all contemporary literary fiction, however, and young adult fiction did not feature in the most popular 30 books, both of which are substantial differences. The former is partly due to the short time span of the survey, so that groups that frequently select contemporary literary fiction would have a relatively limited choice. Moreover, the UK focus of the survey and dominance of UK authors selected for book clubs, and perhaps also advice from national newspaper book clubs and television book review programmes probably also channelled book choices somewhat. Thus, the weaker results for contemporary literary fiction in the current paper may not represent a change over time. However, the strong representation in the results above for contemporary young adult fiction and classic children's novels is in stark contrast to its complete absence from the top 30 choices of UK book clubs in 1999 and 2001. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series may have triggered the current resurgence in the young adult genre and their relative absence from book clubs in 2001 is surprising, given that the fourth volume was published in 2000 and half of young adult books in the USA are bought by adults (PW, 2012). The most likely explanation seems to be that book club members read young adult fiction and have read classic children's novels but prefer not to discuss them at reading groups. This presumably applies to book clubs for adults rather than school reading clubs. This may reflect the age of book club members; the median age of the UK groups surveyed was 40-49, with only 1% having an average age under 30 (Hartley, 2002). Goodreads seems likely to have a younger membership.

The second previous survey from 2001 had a hybrid and partly snowball sample dominated by online North American women, and asked about the genres read (reporting

four broad fiction categories), rather than individual books (Sedo, 2003). Contemporary fiction was the most read genre (86%) by book club members in the 2001 survey, despite not dominating the results reported here almost twenty years later. The difference may be due to the wide range of contemporary novels, so that whilst most members might have read some, none have a very wide readership.

Finally, it is worth noting that all the books and authors mentioned here are spectacularly successful, even if low scoring on one or all Goodreads indicators.

Conclusions

The results suggest that the canon of works for Goodreads book club members that perhaps half have read includes 19 books, and there are 14 authors that about half have probably read. These are mainly popular, recent, youth-oriented works rather than classic literary fiction. Unlike most interpretations of the Western literary canon (e.g., Bloom, 1994; www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-novels), the authors of the core 19 books are mainly women, and 6 of the 19 books have a female main protagonist.

- 14 authors have a group readership of at least 50%: JK Rowling, Suzanne Collins, Steph. Meyer, George Orwell, Harper Lee, Stephen King, John Green, JRR Tolkien, Jane Austen, Dan Brown, F Scott Fitzgerald, Shakespeare, Neil Gaiman, Veronica Roth.
- 19 books have a group readership of at least 50%: Harry Potter 1 to 7, The Hunger Games 1 to 3, Twilight, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Great Gatsby, The Fault in Our Stars, Pride and Prejudice, 1984, The Hobbit, Animal Farm, The Catcher in The Rye.

The results suggest that prize-winning literary fiction is not core to Goodreads book group members' experiences. Combining these results with the discussion of reading preferences above, since people that read literary fiction also read a wide range of other types (omnivores), it is unsurprising that the most read books are not all canonical classics. A complete list of books and authors read by the 50 groups analysed here is available online (10.6084/m9.figshare.7188206).

Offline groups may well have different readership patterns, with older books being more popular amongst members. Special purpose book clubs, such as those to help children that dislike reading (Lattanzi, 2014) will clearly have different past reading habits. In comparison to a previous survey UK reading groups (Hartley, 2002), the presence of young adult fiction and mostly female authors is clear, as is the number of theme-based groups.

A possible conclusion from the results is that recent literary prize winners would be a good choice for group discussions, if relevant to the group type, since few members would have read them and their prize status might generate interest. This seems to align with practice for offline UK groups at the turn of the twenty-first century (Hartley, 2002). Nevertheless, if the information used here is used to inform recreational book group activities then prior findings about successful strategies, reviewed above, should be taken into consideration. Most importantly, books should be chosen to provoke discussion (McArdle, 2009). For book group organisers, the results suggest that many members will have a shared core reading background that could be drawn upon in the choice of recommended books or in discussion suggestions. For example, choosing a work that is like, or deliberately contrasts with, a text commonly read by book club members (i.e., one of the 19 that perhaps half of all members have read) may engage readers. Similarly, discussions that allude to any canon work may resonate with a large proportion of members. In contrast, it would be unwise to assume that members had read, and would understand allusions to, many classic works or recent prize-winning literary works. This would be misguided and may alienate other members. For

offline book groups, the canon list above should be taken as a possible guideline about the types of books that members may have read. Expectations should be adjusted according to a group's demographics and purpose.

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