

U3A Book Group 2 Average Voting Scores for books read in 2016

Book Title	Author	Style	Content	Enjoyment/ Interest	Range
Mr Mac and Me (2014)	Esther Freud	6.7	7.1	6.7	5-8
The Rosie Project (2013)	Graeme Simsion	6.8	6.3	6.6	5-8
The Sunrise (2014)	Victoria Hislop	5.8	6.0	5.8	2-8
Empire of the Sun (1994)	J.G. Ballard	6.4	6.7	6.6	5-8
The Housemaid's Daughter (2012)	Barbara Mutch	7.1	7.9	7.8	6-8
Sea of Poppies (2008)	Amitav Ghosh	7.6	8.6	8.6	6-10
The Secret Life of Bees (2001)	Sue Monk Kidd	6	5.7	5.7	0-7
The Whole Day Through (2009)	Patrick Gale	6.6	6.6	6.1	4-9
Levels of Life (2013)	Julian Barnes	5.6	5.1	5.4	3-7
The Poisonwood Bible (1998)	Barbara Kingsolver	8.4	8.2	8.3	5-10
A Patchwork Planet (1992)	Anne Tyler	5.6	5.3	4.9	0-8

All the books we read this year were written in the last thirty years, most of them in the last decade. Apart from Levels of Life, (which was a mixture of essay, short story and grief memoir), they were all novels but Empire of the Sun had autobiographical elements. Seven of them gave historical background, including the three most popular choices:

Sea of Poppies was set in nineteenth century India, bringing together characters from various castes and backgrounds who were travelling on an old slaving ship. It was news to some of us that the British East India Company forced Indian farmers to grow poppies then fought the Opium Wars against China to make them legalise opium, which could pay for Britain's imports of tea, silk and porcelain from China. Hong Kong was given to Britain as part of this insalubrious deal. The often grim historical facts were made more palatable by the great interest we felt in the characters and occasional touches of humour.

The Poisonwood Bible, set around 1960 in the Belgian Congo, again combined historical facts and information about the way of life with interesting characters. It was narrated by the wife and 4 daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce evangelical Baptist who took his family from America on a mission to convert the Congolese. The poisonwood plant, which gave him a rash, symbolised his attempt to impose his beliefs and way of life without any attempt to understand local culture. When Nathan tried to use a local word to say Jesus was precious his pronunciation made it mean poisonwood. Humour in some of the language and situations contrasted with the sadness at a personal and political level.

The Housemaid's Daughter, set in South Africa, explored the relationship between an Irish woman and her black maid in the context of historical events, including the formalisation of the apartheid laws. This book received the most consistent votes with an almost unanimous 8 for enjoyment, in contrast to A Patchwork Planet which had the widest range of votes from 0 to 8.

Anne Eagle