

the northern line

the magazine of north london U3A issue 83 September 2023

Y OF CHARLES BAGGOT, A TRUSTED FRIEND OF SOUTHWOOD

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u3a

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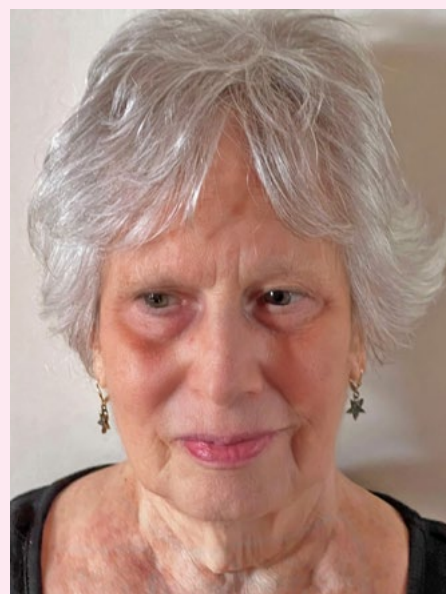
Editorial

Today's sermon is about kindness. I had covid last spring and was unable to attend any groups for a couple of weeks. When I went back, almost everyone, whether I knew them well or not, took the time to ask me how I was, and this went on the next week and the next. I was extremely touched by their kindness and concern.

U3A was founded for people in their third age – defined as a time when work and family responsibilities are over (though think again if you're in the sandwich generation!) – to learn from each other in interest groups set up by their members. There are no bosses; nobody runs the show; there is no pressure. Ideally, there is kindness.

How can we be kind? We can offer to help members who are struggling with something, such as technology or sensory or cognitive problems. We can bear in mind that we represent a plethora of outlooks: politics, religion, how to run the group. We can avoid forcing our views on each other and treat each other with civility. Those who hold positions are volunteers – facilitators, not dictators. And everyone has the right to speak. End of sermon.

In this issue we visit some of our reading groups and find recommended reading to while away the hours, as well as reasons to join the group! Christine Stammers chillingly introduces plants that are fighting back against human domination. And Hilary Segall



whets our appetites with delectable Middle Eastern cuisine. Among others... ☺

HAPPY READING!

LENI GREEN

EDITOR

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Front and back covers

This photograph, by **Caroline Goodman**, shows how plants can take over when they are left unattended.

For more about invasive plants, see article by **Christine Stammers** on page 5.

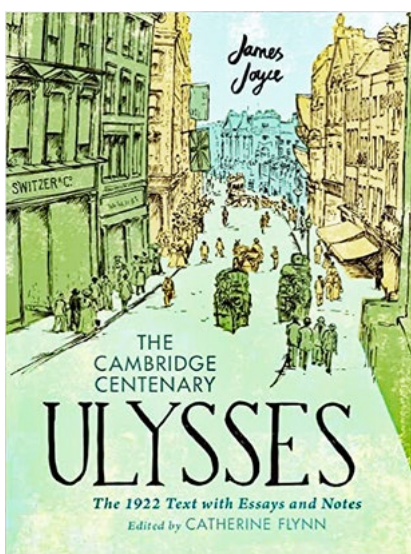
Bookworms

As autumn approaches, there will be a chill in the air and darkness will appear in the afternoon. What better time to curl up with a book? Here we showcase some of our NLU3A reading groups: how they work, and some recommendations for everyone.



Lepisma saccharina. It loves books: munching them!

Modern and Contemporary Literature



We have been meeting continually since NLU3A was founded. Members study the phenomenon of 'modernism' in a variety of literary forms – at present poetry, in earlier years the novel or drama.

This year we have been reading Maya Angelou, Ted

Heaney with forays into 'the modern' in Shakespeare, Wordsworth and currently Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Writers and works are proposed by members and we have a large number in 'the waiting room'. In the case of shorter works, everything is read twice – at the outset, and again after discussion – sometimes with revelatory outcomes.

Recommending literature to others is hazardous, so here are just five works which spring to mind as highlights:

- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- *Ulysses* by James Joyce
- *Four Quartets* by T S Eliot
- Prose, poetry and drama by Samuel Beckett
- Prose, poetry and drama by W B Yeats

KEITH RICHARDS

Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus

Reading in Translation

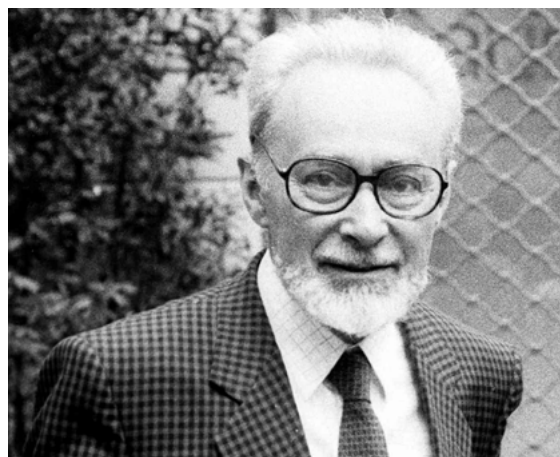
In 2012, I said at a new members' meeting of NLU3A that I would be interested to read about other cultures, about their ways of living and thinking. The response: 'Why don't you start a group?' And before I knew it, Reading in Translation was born.

We take turns in choosing the books. The only rule is that the choices must have been written in another language – and they cannot be too long!

Some of our favourites are:

- *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie
- *The Periodic Table* by Primo Levi
- *An Englishman in Madrid* by Eduardo Mendoza
- *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

MIRIAM MAZOWER



Primo Levi

Reading the Classics



I joined Reading the Classics about 10 years ago. There are eight of us attending, and apart from a recently joined member, we have been together for ages. So it feels like a group of friends meeting up!

We take it in turns to host the monthly meeting in our homes, apart from three of us who live

too far for the other members to travel to.

Members bring suggestions of books ('classic' also includes 'modern classic') to the group and decide on the most popular suggestion. We have a great time bringing our views of the work being discussed to the gathering and have a general discussion about characters, plot, writer, literary style, and social and political background.

This year we've read (and can recommend):

- *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie
- *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens
- *Silas Marner* by George Eliot
- *The Painted Veil* by W. Somerset Maugham
- *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh

LIGIA HOLLY

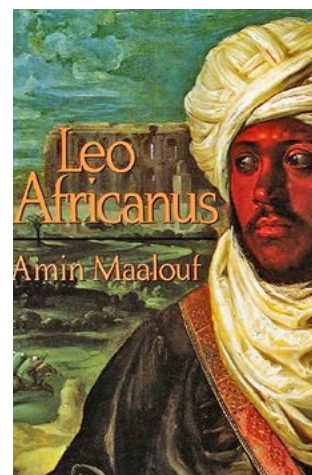
Reading the World

We meet fortnightly in members' homes (around Muswell Hill) and alternate novels with memoirs, poetry or short stories and occasionally plays, followed by tea.

We take it in turns to present a book: whether a translation or one written in English by a non-British writer. We agree the programme for the coming months, and whoever presents the book acts as coordinator for that session.

This term we are meeting eight times and examples of the programme are:

- *Leo Africanus* by Amin Maalouf (Lebanese-French)
- Short stories by Pushkin (Russia)
- *The Sixteen Trees of the Somme* by Lars Mytting (Norwegian).



VICKY OLLIVER

Sharing Novels and Poems



Toni Morrison

We started the group in 2005, wishing to renew the pleasure we'd had from a similar group in Yorkshire. This year, we have been reading novels from 1800–1850. Members take turns to choose and 'present' a novel, while the poems are chosen by the group coordinators.

Here are some American and Canadian titles that we have read and found good for discussion – not exactly light reading, but all very worthy of close attention:

- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- *An American Pastoral* by Philip Roth
- *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence
- *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson

DOUGLAS AND DOROTHY BARNES

As I see it

‘Age shall not wither us...’ **Patricia Isaacs** explains

Of course we are all getting older – no getting away from that! How we deal with the ageing process varies significantly from one to another, but membership of a U3A can keep the mind, and possibly the body too, alert; some U3A members around the country take part in vigorous and demanding activity. Even if your body is letting you down, regularly collecting ailments and disabilities, an enjoyable life is still available.

More and more, older women are penetrating that glass ceiling, notably in the world of entertainment; this year 11 designers were shortlisted for Oscar and Bafta awards, and only one was a man. These women were all in their 50s or 60s. And there are, increasingly, excellent roles for older female actors, a new

and welcome development, helping to prove that we are not invisible after 50.

And so to the question of anti-ageing drugs. Are they a good thing? Is it a good idea to assist populations to increase by lengthening the end of life? Do we really want to live to 140? Beauty products, too, promise us ever-lasting youth and beauty, and it seems to me that we should draw a line between pretence and reality, allowing ourselves to grow old without shame. Once past youth, we care less about what others think of us and so are able to express ourselves in outward appearance and inner beliefs with a new degree of freedom.

I have little time for those who put a great deal of effort into



trying to look young, to pretend they are younger than they are. Old age will happen to you, to me, to them, so let's get on with making the most of it. ☺☺

PATRICIA ISAACS IS A PAST CHAIR OF NLU3A

Suburban terror

Plants – beneficial and beautiful? Not necessarily, warns **Christine Stammers**

There is just round the corner from my comfortable home a street which I shall not name, as the residents are living there with considerable peace of mind, unaware of a serious threat to their homes and themselves. It is the plant counteroffensive. For too long, plants have been ripped from their natural habitats and transplanted into tiny, desiccated suburban front gardens where they have been over loved, ignored, trampled on, hacked back, restrained, let rip, gawped at, overfed, and underfed. Now they are fighting back.

We start with a flower, beautiful, white, delicate, symbol of peace and tranquillity.



The terror story continues on next page:

But not all plants are benign. Take the privet hedge, a humble plant in millions of gardens. Here they are working together to trap people in their homes by blocking front paths and pavements.



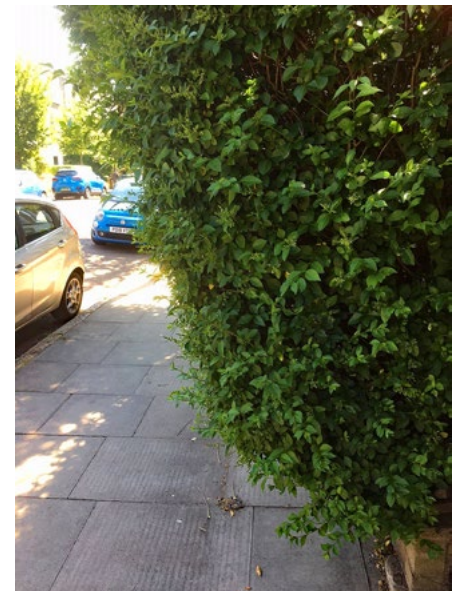
Spiky cacti prevent people escaping their homes by the windows with their long, curving, viciously spiky leaves.



Ivy plants are growing over garden walls, ready to entwine their tentacles round the legs of passersby, and draw them in to death by strangulation.



Other plants are cooperating to smother the houses, keeping out the light and air that people need to thrive.



Even in death, plants are to be feared.



Some residents have tried to protect themselves by concreting over their front gardens,



But let one single rose plant or a single cactus grow free and the results could be catastrophic.



Beware of the tiniest of plants; they have the potential to grow into mighty enemies.



All terror photos by Christine Stammers

The tragedy is that the human beings have brought this on themselves by spending huge sums at plant nurseries buying tools, plants, seeds and fertiliser, so the plants grow bigger and bigger. They have mowed, watered, dug, drained, etc. to care for them, or left them dying by neglect, so the plants have got bigger and stronger, or weaker and angry – and they are fighting back! ☹️

Singing for Pleasure needs YOU!

We are a friendly, successful music group that sings in harmony as well as in unison. We have over 30 members – but very few of them are male, so there's a lack of lower voices. If you like to sing in lower registers, why not give us a try? Tuesday 10.30am to 12 noon, St Mary's church hall, Hendon

Lane N3. And of course you are more than welcome if you like to sing high, or in the middle, as well!

Contact:

Rena Prozzer, rena.prozzer@gmail.com, or 07956 966647.

Eating with your eyes

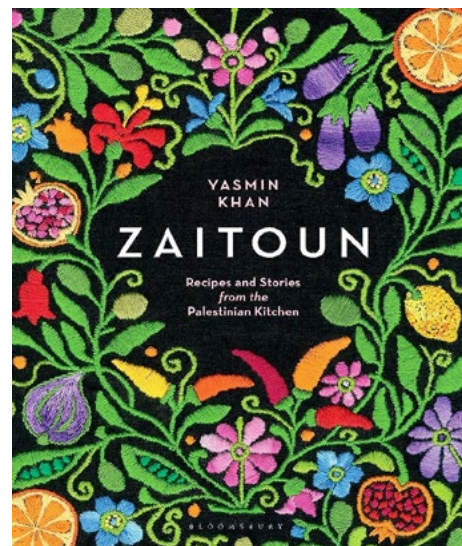
Hilary Segall takes us on a mouth-watering, as well as eye-watering, culinary adventure

I dly reading the *Telegraph* cookery page some time ago I became interested in a new cookery book by a Middle Eastern author, Yasmin Khan. The book was entitled *Zaitoun*, which means 'olive' in both Hebrew and Arabic. The author spoke passionately about the food and its influences, mentioning that Greek, Turkish, Syrian, Lebanese and Jewish cooking were some of the cuisines that had a huge part

to play in creating Palestinian food.

What floated into my mind was that the whole of the Middle East, its cuisines and cultures, is a huge melting pot, both metaphorically and literally. What we think of as Israeli salad – cucumber, tomato and pepper – was billed as a Palestinian salad; in Claudia Roden's book it's a Greek Salad (*horiatiki*) and in

Continued on page 8



Turkish cuisine it's *coban salatasi*.

Just thinking about these simple examples I delved more deeply into my cookbooks (most of which tend towards the Middle Eastern/Mediterranean style of cooking) and looked for the same recipes but with different names and a few different twists to them. For example, Claudia Roden, in her *Mediterranean Cookery*, lists three variations for a pepper salad – the only difference being the dressing used – harissa, chilli, cumin and cayenne are just some of the spices she adds for variety. In Ottolenghi and Tamimi's *Jerusalem*, chicken is prepared in a variety of ways – mostly with fruit: apricots, currants and tamarind or clementines with arak to name but a few. In *Samarkand*, by Caroline Eden and Eleanor Ford, chicken is cooked with potato and prunes (I can confirm it's delicious!), while lamb is cooked with fruits



Grains in Marrakech. By Caroline Goodman

including pomegranates. The list is endless and so are the choices and books. What becomes very apparent is the way food is viewed in these places.

We've all seen cookery programmes with any number of different celebrity chefs extolling the virtues of a Middle Eastern/Mediterranean diet, but if we really look closely, we can understand why. By and large poverty ruled in these areas – meat was a treat, but its deficiency was offset by an abundance of vegetables, which have always played a huge part in the cuisine.

Many of us have been on holiday and wandered around markets with heaps of fresh produce: gleaming aubergines;

ripe, sweet tomatoes; glistening peppers in all shapes and forms; and herbs, everywhere herbs. If you just look at the stalls, you want to eat – indeed, we do 'eat with our eyes'. If a meal is put in front of you that is brown, beige or just dull, you have no appetite to eat it. But put a plate of freshly chopped tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers dressed with good olive oil and sprinkled with chopped parsley and some lemon juice, the odds are that you will want to dive in!

In the southern part of Europe meals are often made entirely of vegetables. However, here, if a meal of vegetables is produced it's 'not a meal' – though that attitude has changed and with it the phenomenal rise of vegetarian and vegan restaurants.

So, I hope your appetite has been whetted by some of the foods mentioned and that while your stomach will tell you that you are hungry, your eyes will tell you what to eat! ☺



A large plate of Jordanian mezze in Petra, Jordan. Photo by Unai Guerra from Wikipedia

Thief alert

Thieves are making substantial profits by following parcel delivery vans. If no-one is at home, drivers may put the parcels in porches, on the step or in the garden. This is when the thieves move in and take the goods. It has been

estimated that as many as 5.5 million packages are stolen in a year, with the average package worth £115. So be careful when you designate a 'safe' place for drivers to leave things! (Thanks to the National Pensioners Convention for this item.) ☺

Why volunteer?

Because it's good for you? **Michael Johns** thinks so

I was amused to see among the obituaries for Martin Amis that he once said in support of his conviction against socialism: 'It goes against human nature. The idea of people acting out of social altruism is not part of human nature.' He was so wrong. The latest review by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) found that 16 per cent of people had volunteered at least once a month in 2021–22. Not enough to replace the main ways that services are provided in the economy, which is through the market or funded by taxation, but certainly enough to be a significant feature of a mixed economy.

So, why do people volunteer? The top five reasons given to the

NCVO are:

- It makes me feel I'm making a difference
- It gives me a sense of personal achievement
- I meet new people
- It broadens my experience of life
- It improves my mental health and wellbeing.

I know all these apply in my case. And there's an enormous range of things you can do as a volunteer: I have helped maintain a patch of ancient woodland, sent educational books to African schools, taught adults and young people with reading and writing difficulties and helped manage sheltered housing for elderly people.

If you're thinking about volunteering, one basic decision

you need to make is whether you want to use existing skills (and stop them getting rusty), explore new skills, or – as I would recommend – do a bit of both. And you need to be clear what time you can commit and then deliver what you promise.

So, how to find



Michael helps clear round a pond in Queen's Wood.

Photo by Linda Leroy

volunteering opportunities? On Team London's volunteering page www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/volunteering/search/ there were over 10,000 different opportunities at the last count. Or, within NLU3A, there are lots of options – from leading groups or catering for social occasions, to various roles in helping to keep the organisation running. To find out more, just contact me on chair@nlu3a.org.uk

Why not give it a go?

MICHAEL JOHNS IS CO-CHAIR OF NLU3A



Mature students learning writing at Working Men's college, Camden.

Photo by Michael Johns

American History Group welcomes new members

This enthusiastic and friendly group covers the history of the US, Canada, Mexico and South America, with a special interest in the US. The usual format is for a member to give a talk on a subject of their choice followed by a discussion. No prior knowledge of these topics is needed. If a new member needs detailed information on a subject

we have already covered we try to provide it. We meet fortnightly on Wednesdays at St Paul's Church, Finchley, starting with coffee at 10.15. Meetings finish at around 12.00 noon.

Kathleen Greaves
Group convenor
kmgreaves34@googlemail.com

Thinking nationally

Frank Fisher introduces the national U3A website, which has much to explore and which you may not have known about

For many years I wanted to be able to solve cryptic crosswords but made little progress. However, recently I participated in an excellent course on the subject provided on Zoom by the national U3A. I have now joined an NLU3A cryptic crossword group and am even able to do reasonably well in solving the crossword in my favourite broadsheet!

I have also taken part in other courses and lectures run by the national U3A, including Japanese culture, maths and mindfulness. However, not many north London U3A members seem to participate in these so I thought I would list some of the facilities the website at u3a.org.uk has to offer. Scroll down on their home page to 'what we offer' to find out more and explore the rest of the website for yourself.

Under 'learn online' you will find links to many free lectures, courses and workshops, some of the latter aimed at group coordinators. There are also 'how to' guides, which include tutorials on internet

This does not allow anything deemed 'political' by the moderators, so an unofficial 'the political philosophers group' was formed.

communication, including Zoom, Gmail and WhatsApp. In addition there is information on many national projects, initiatives and competitions, including the now annual U3A Week. The first one, in 2022, celebrated the organisation's 40th anniversary.

There are also links to current and past issues of the national newsletter and a form on which you can subscribe to have it emailed to you.

As well as the website, there are a number of Facebook groups, either initiated or inspired by U3A. An official one is facebook.com/groups/U3Akeepingintouch. This does not allow anything deemed 'political' by the moderators, so an unofficial 'the political philosophers' group' was formed. There are a number of other unofficial Facebook groups aimed at U3A members, which can be searched for on facebook.com. You need to create an account if you don't already have one.

I hope I have inspired more of you to make use of the national website and keep in touch with the Third Age Trust. ☺

It's not Molly's fault

Survey...survey...scream! Why Francis Beckett missed his train

After the now-routine 25-minute wait listening to someone else's favourite music, interrupted at regular intervals by a recording assuring me that my call was important to the company, I was connected to Molly.

She seemed to think, as I did, that my request was entirely reasonable, but when she consulted her checklist, she found she was not permitted to agree to it. She asked her boss, who confirmed this. I told Molly what I thought of her employers;

she said she was very sorry; and I said it wasn't her fault. We parted amicably enough.

And then came the text message. The company wanted my opinion. 'How did Molly deal with your call, on a scale of one to five, when one is poor and five is excellent?'

I was trapped. If I give a low score, Molly gets it in the neck. If I say: Molly did the best she could, so I'll give it a high score, then I become another of the company's millions of satisfied customers.

Companies love asking you to evaluate members of their staff. It gives you the illusion that the company is listening to you (no big company is listening to you these days). It puts the frighteners on their staff. And it provides the company with secret data which will come in handy when they want to fire someone.

And they often want to fire someone. The fewer staff they can employ, the larger their profits.

Years ago, I went into Barclays bank on Ballards Lane. (For younger readers, banks used

to have branches, and their customers could quite often find therein someone with whom they could discuss their account.) The cashier, having dealt with my query, shyly pushed a piece of paper across to me.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a survey’ she said with the patient weariness of someone who has had to say the same thing to every customer for hours. ‘It asks you to rate the service you have had from me. Whether I was polite. Whether I was helpful.’

Soon afterwards they closed the branch and she must have been out of a job. Bank customers are no longer asked to rate the

cashier they met. They meet no cashiers. You do everything yourself.

*The fewer staff they
can employ, the larger
their profits.*

That system saves companies money, but it’s a pain for the rest of us. This June I went to Nice, and one day I turned up at Nice station to buy a ticket to the nearby town of Menton.

There were ticket machines at intervals across the concourse, each sporting a long queue of anxious and miserable travellers,

glancing hopelessly down at their watches and up at the train departure board.

The queues moved at a snail’s pace, because every new customer was coming to the task of using the machine with no previous experience. Each one reinvented the wheel, and those behind them in the queue glared murderously at the backs of their heads, or, worse, tried to help. For several dreadful minutes a German couple, who had pressed the button for instructions in German, were assisted by an Italian, a Frenchman, and me. None of us spoke German. We all missed our trains. ☹️

Autumn events

These take place at St Margaret’s United Reformed Church, Victoria Avenue, N3 1BD, usually on the second Monday of the month. Doors open at 10am, when refreshments will be served. Meetings start at 10:45.

- The autumn term runs from 4 September to 15 December. The spring term begins on 8 January.

11 September: open day

Come and discover new interest groups and find friends, old and new.

18 September: Monthly meeting: How did computers get so powerful?

Information technology is hugely useful – but is it too powerful? Most inventions critical to its success came about for very different purposes and pre-date the computer age by many years. The computer industry has refined these ideas to create a whole which is so much more than the sum of its parts, as **Mike Klein**, the speaker, will explain.

(Repeated from December 2022)



9 October: Annual general meeting and monthly meeting

Stewart Maugham will give an illustrated talk about the musical *Showboat* and will play some of its music.



13 November: monthly meeting

Frank Smith will speak about national borders and travel documents.

11 December: festive lunch

No monthly meeting.

