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READING THE READER:

A SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN
READING HABITS



A summary of findings from the
2016 Macquarie University /
Australia Council for the Arts
Survey of Australian Book Readers.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION3

ABOUT THE RESEARCH3

OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHTS4

WHO'S READING?6

HOW MUCH ARE THEY READING?9

WHAT ARE THEY READING?11

WHY ARE THEY READING?14

HOW ARE THEY READING?17



(Front cover)
Desert Writing, UWA Publishing.
Credit: Paz Tassone



INTRODUCTION

This report presents a summary of findings from the third stage of a major study of Australia's changing book industry, by the Australian Research Council and Macquarie University. Findings from previous stages exploring the changing circumstances of authors and publishers are published by [Macquarie University](#).

The Australian book industry has undergone significant disruption and transformation in recent years with the development of digital publishing, distribution and retailing; the advent of hand-held digital reading devices; the entry of new global players to book retailing; and the increasing presence of social media.

The Australia Council for the Arts partnered with Macquarie University on the final stage of the book industry study, a major survey of readers undertaken in 2016. The Australia Council supports the excellence, diversity and vitality of Australian literature and a vibrant literary culture for all Australians. This research provides insights into contemporary preferences, attitudes and reading behaviours, and aims to help provide an evidence base for the literature sector.

A more detailed academic version of the research results is published by Macquarie University at: [Australian Book Readers: Survey Method and Results](#).

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The survey of book readers was developed in consultation with a wide range of industry organisations and participants, including authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians and educators.

There were three components to the research:

- A series of focus groups: three groups with Year 8 students at Ryde Secondary College and five groups at Parramatta Library – three with book clubs that meet at the library and two open to the general public.
- An online survey of Australians aged 14 years and over undertaken by Roy Morgan Research in October 2016. The final sample of 2,944 was nationally representative in terms of age, gender, geographic location, income and ethnicity.
- A seminar with masters degree students at Macquarie University.

For detailed methodology see the Macquarie University publication *Australian Book Readers: Survey Method and Results*.

Note: Due to rounding, proportions presented throughout this report may not total 100%.

OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHTS

Digital technology has affected the creative practices of Australian authors in many ways – from new writing processes and publishing formats to the ways they interact with readers and promote and sell their work. Similarly, digital publishing has presented both challenges and opportunities for Australian book publishers.

This final stage of the research report *The Australian Book Industry: Authors, Publishers and Readers in a Time of Change* focuses on readers and reveals a strong culture of books and reading in Australia. Although developments in digital technology have radically changed many daily habits and pastimes, reading books is one of the nation's favourite leisure activities, ahead of browsing the internet and watching television.

The research summarised here explores the role of books in the lives of Australians, along with the ways in which books are chosen, acquired, read and valued. The results highlight the ability of books to help readers transcend their day-to-day lives, providing them with relaxation and immersion in other worlds. Whether through the escapism of a thriller, connection to another person's experience through a biography, or insights into the human condition through literary fiction, Australians are enjoying the rewards of reading.

This report presents a summary of the research analysed in detail in Macquarie University's [Australian Book Readers: Survey Methods and Results](#). Some specific observations and insights are discussed below.

Australians:

1. value and enjoy reading and would like to do it more

Nine in ten Australians enjoy reading for interest or pleasure and seven in ten would like to spend more time reading books. Although Australians spend more time browsing the internet and watching television, they are more likely to rank reading books as their favourite leisure activity than either of these. The most common reason to read for pleasure is to relax and release stress. The vast majority of Australians believe that books have a value that's greater than their monetary cost.

2. are mixing new digital options with conventional ways of reading

Many Australians incorporate digital technology into their reading habits, while conventional ways of engaging with books and reading have endured. Most Australians continue to buy books from bricks-and-mortar shops, while half are buying online with its advantages of price, availability and convenience. The vast majority of readers continue to read print books, while over half are including ebooks in the mix and 12% are listening to audio books. Word of mouth and browsing in physical bookstores are still the main ways Australians find out about new books. At the same time nearly a third are interacting with books and reading through online platforms such as fan fiction sites, podcasts and social media.

3. are reading more than book sales would suggest

Almost as many people borrow books as buy them, most commonly borrowing from friends or relatives. Second-hand outlets are the third most popular source for buying books, after major book chains and overseas websites. Second-hand and borrowed books expand a book's readership and public profile and point to a larger book reading culture in Australia. The benefits of this are difficult to gauge for individual titles as the financial returns for authors, publishers and many booksellers are limited.

4. like mysteries and thrillers the best

Australians are embracing popular genres. At the same time, there is a strong level of interest in some of the more challenging and reflective forms of reading.

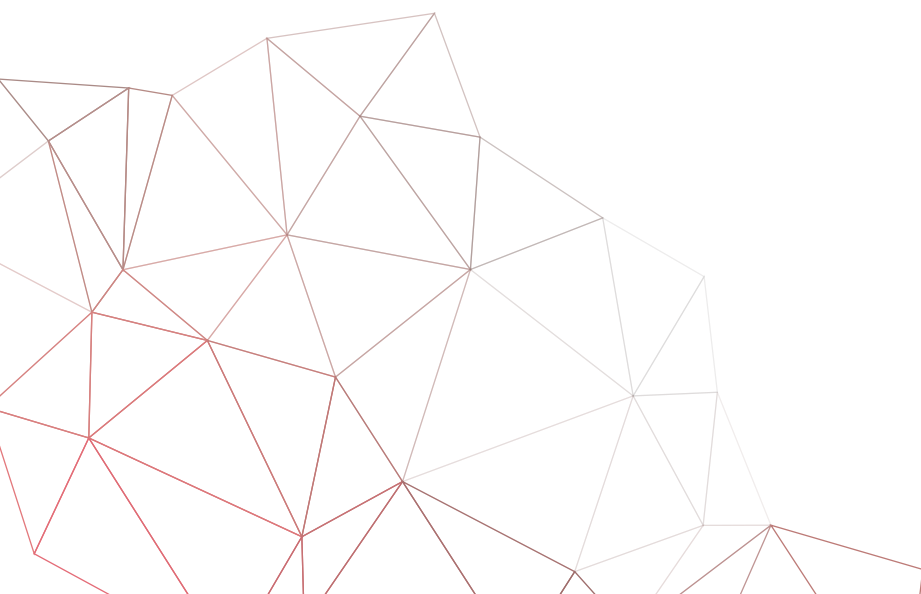
The crime/mystery/thriller genre is the category most widely enjoyed by readers, and also takes the top spot for favourite category. The autobiography/biography/memoir genre is the most commonly enjoyed non-fiction category.

Looking beyond current reading habits, around half (51%) of all Australians (including those who are currently non-book readers) are interested in reading the types of books that may be eligible for literary prizes such as the Man Booker and the Miles Franklin and 45% enjoy literary classics. A similar number (48%) are interested in literary fiction by Australian writers past and present.

5. value Australian books and the Australian book industry

The majority of Australians (65%) like to read fiction by Australian authors and 59% like to read non-fiction by Australians. Readers aged 50 and over are the most likely to consciously choose Australian-authored books, while younger readers tend to like Australian books without thinking about the nationality of the author. There is a strong level of interest (42%) in books and writing about Indigenous Australia.

The majority of Australians also acknowledge the cultural impact of Australian books. While 71% think it is important for Australian children to read Australian books, 69% also think that Australian books help people understand themselves and the country in which they live. Similarly, 61% think an Australian book industry is part of Australian culture, 63% that books written by Indigenous Australians are important for Australian culture, and 60% that it is important that books by Australian authors can be published in Australia.



WHO'S READING?

Nine in ten Australians read for interest or pleasure

With an increasing number of leisure activities available to consumers, books face more competition for time and attention than ever. Although watching TV and browsing the internet are more prevalent, reading books is ranked as the most enjoyable leisure activity by more Australians (Figure 2). Only 5% of Australians aged 14 years and over never spend their leisure time reading books.

FIGURE 1: Frequency of Top 5 leisure activities

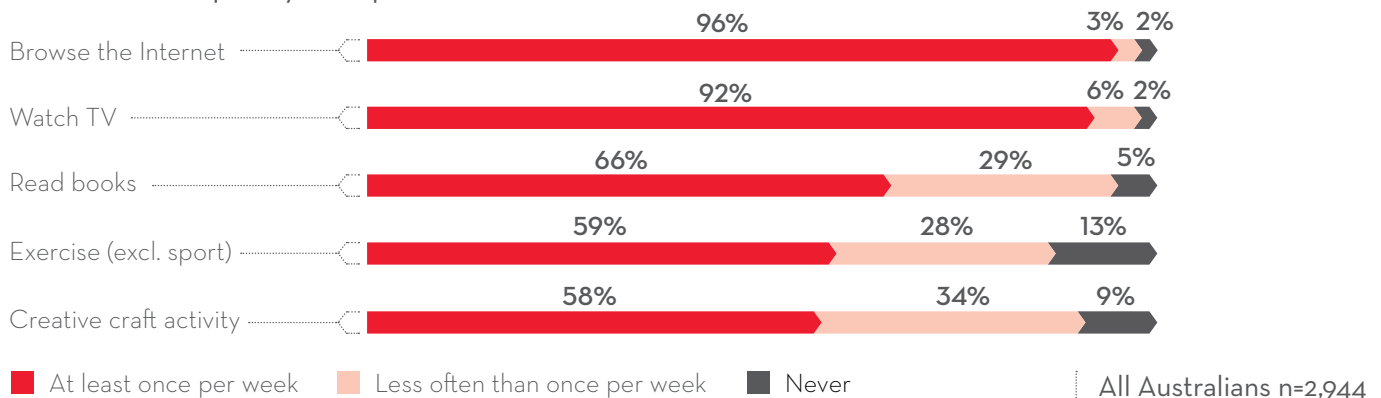
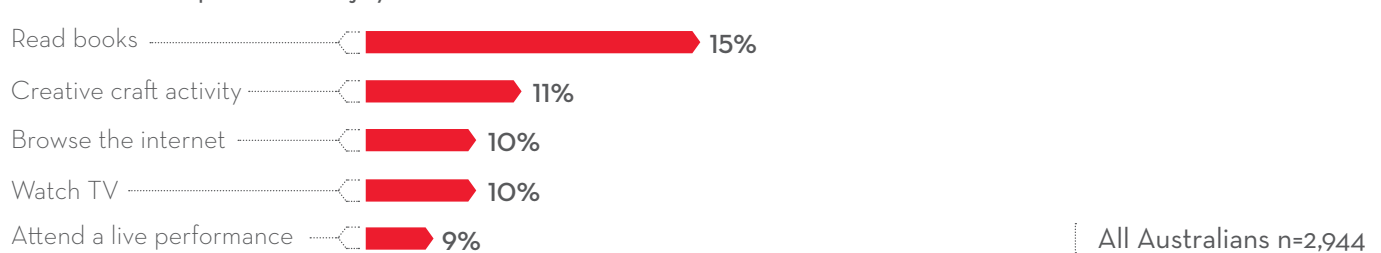


FIGURE 2: Top 5 most enjoyable leisure activities

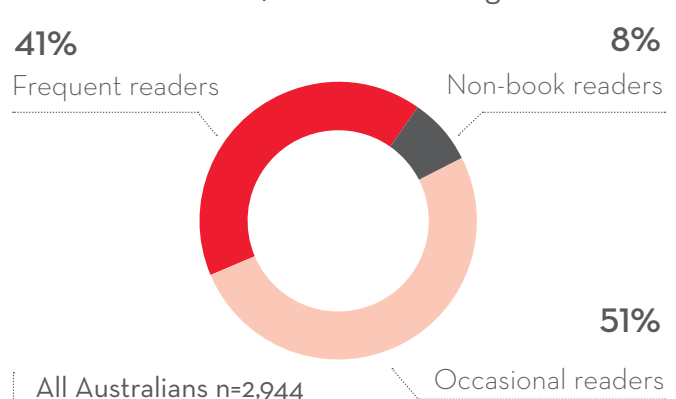


TYPES OF READERS

To understand different types of readers, the study examined the number of books read by Australians in the last twelve months. Based on people who read at least one book (in full or part) in the last year, 92% of Australians can be classified as book readers and 8% as non-book readers. Readers can be further separated into occasional and frequent readers as outlined in Figure 3.

- **Non-book readers (8%)**
have not read a book in last the 12 months
- **Book-readers (92%)**
 - **Occasional readers (51%)**
are those who read between one and ten books in the last 12 months
 - **Frequent readers (41%)**
are those who read more than ten books in the last 12 months.

FIGURE 3: Reader/non-reader categories



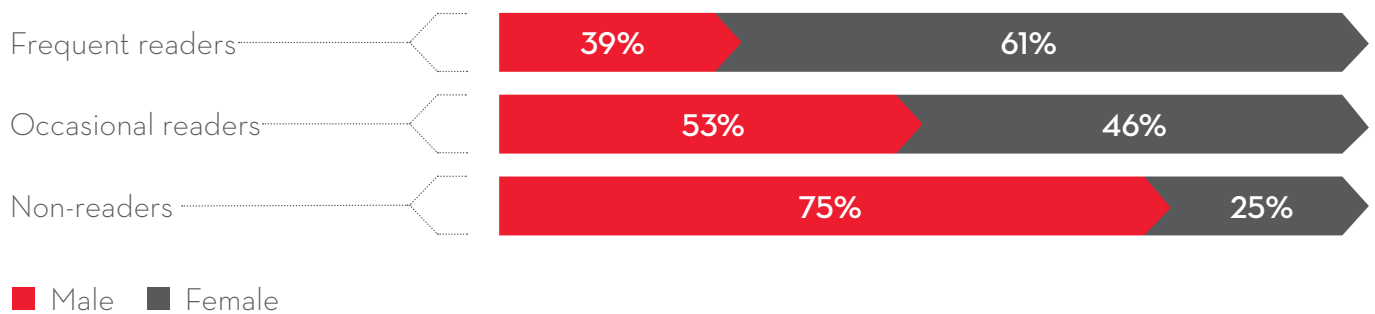
DEMOGRAPHICS OF READERS AND NON-READERS

The most frequent readers tend to be aged over 30, tertiary-educated and female

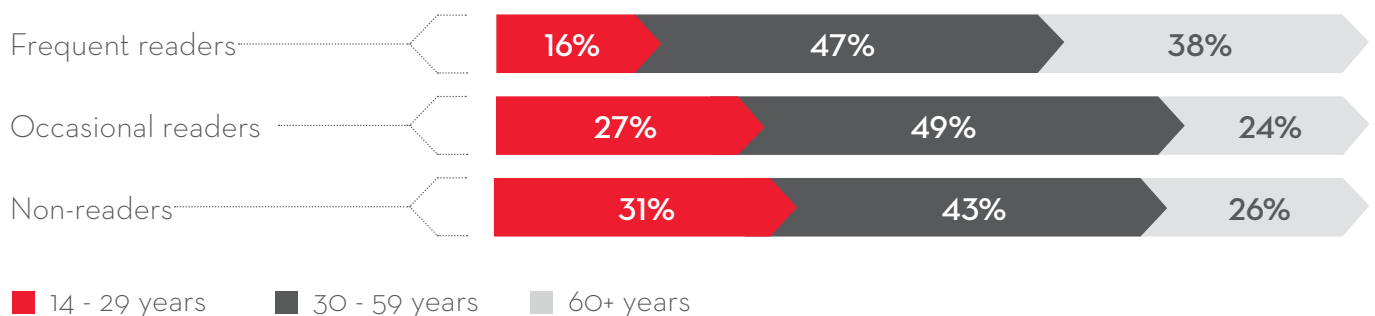
Australian readers are more likely to be tertiary-educated, female, and aged 30-59. Almost two-thirds of frequent readers are female. Non-readers are three times more likely to be male than female, and more likely to have secondary school as their highest education level. Nearly half of frequent readers are aged 30 to 59 years (47%), with those aged 60 years and over making up another large segment (38%). Only one in six Australians aged 14 to 29 (16%) are frequent readers.

FIGURE 4: Reader/non-reader categories

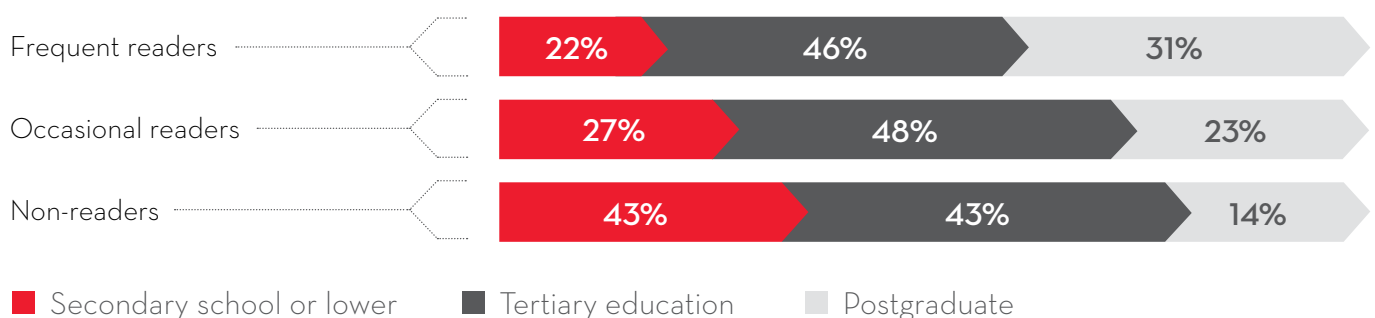
GENDER



AGE GROUP



EDUCATION



All Australians n=2,944

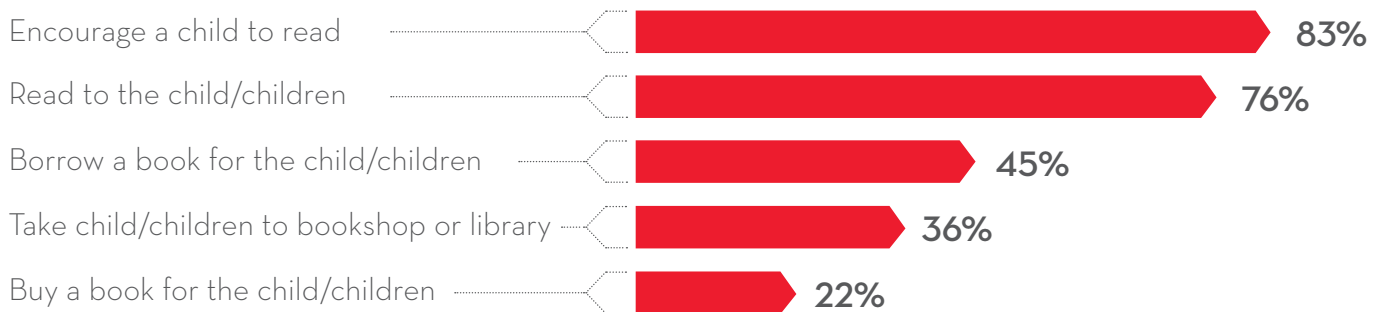
READING AND CHILDREN

Three-quarters of Australians with children encourage them to read regularly

The majority of adults living in Australian households with children aged under 13 read to the children, or encourage them to read frequently¹. Overall the survey results suggest a general recognition of the benefits that books and reading provide for children.

FIGURE 5: Reading and children

Proportion of Australians with children who frequently¹:



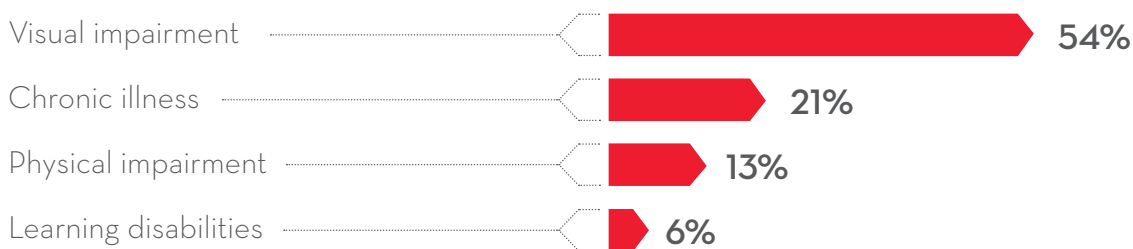
Australians with children under 13 years n=669

CHALLENGES TO READING

Reading difficulties caused by physical and health conditions affect nine per cent of Australians

Around 9% of survey respondents reported a physical or health condition that makes reading books difficult or challenging. Of these, the most common condition was visual impairment, affecting 54%.

FIGURE 6: Physical or health conditions that make reading difficult or challenging (among those reporting difficulties)



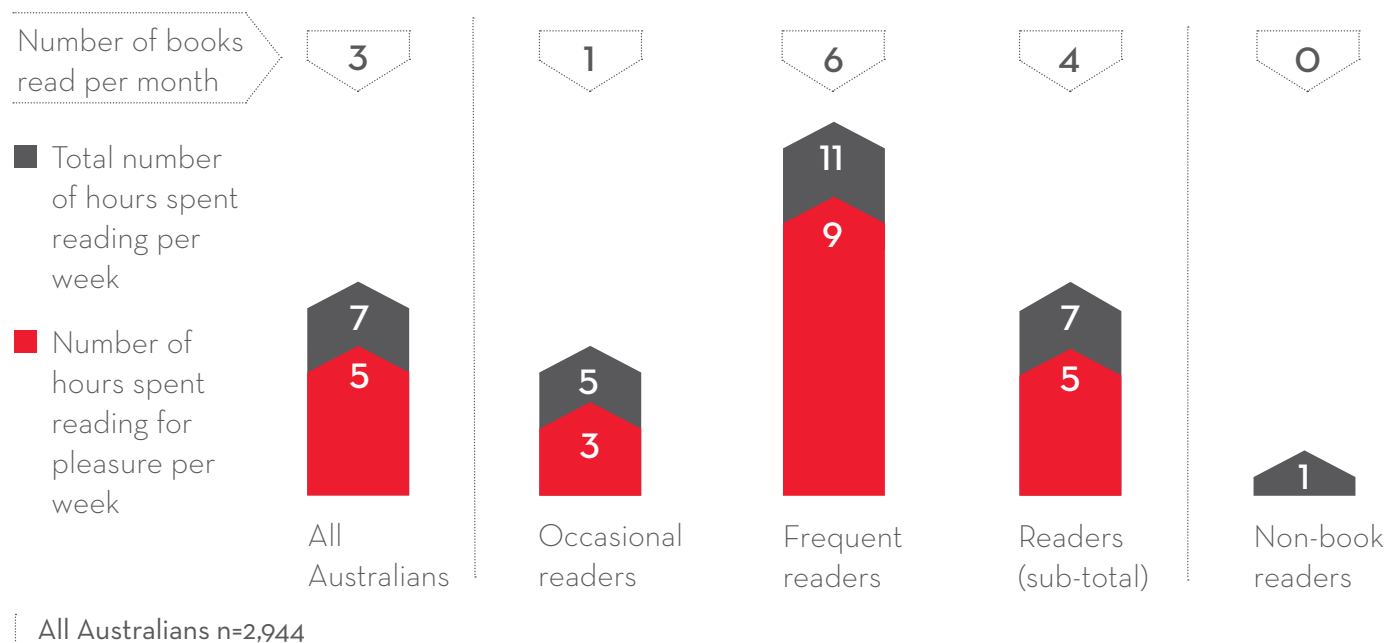
Australians reporting physical or health conditions n=258

¹ Frequently = 'every day', 'most days', 'most weeks'

HOW MUCH ARE THEY READING?

On average, Australians report that they read more than three books per month (in full or part) and spend five hours reading books each week. Frequent readers report reading six books per month and almost eleven hours reading books each week, with 80% of their reading time devoted to reading for pleasure (as distinct from reading for work or study purposes).

FIGURE 7: Average reading rates

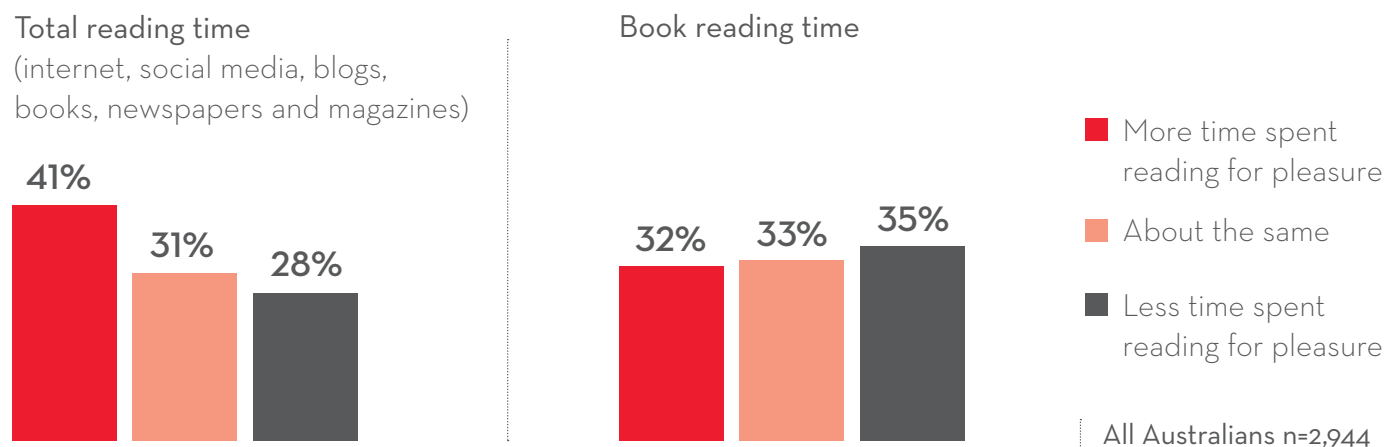


READING ACTIVITY COMPARED TO FIVE YEARS AGO

There has been a shift towards spending less time reading books but more time reading overall

Based on respondents' estimates of time currently spent reading compared to five years ago, there has been a strong shift toward spending more time reading overall (including internet, social media, blogs, magazines, books and newspapers), and a slight shift toward spending less time reading books.

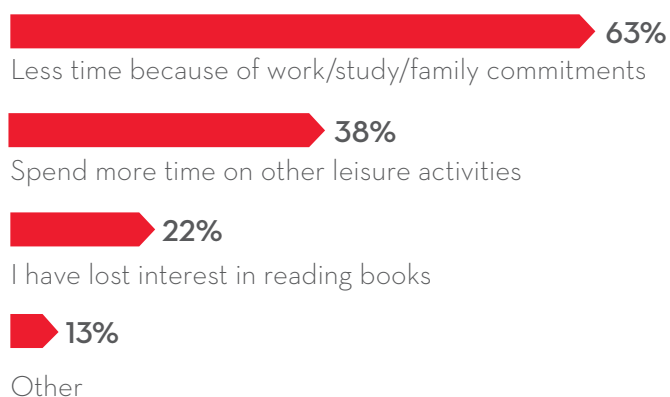
FIGURE 8: Total reading time and book reading time compared to five years ago



Social media and the internet have some effect on book reading time

The most common reason for spending less time reading books is work/study/family commitments, reported by 63%. The next most common reason is increased time spent on other leisure activities, reported by 38%. Among this group, browsing the internet and engaging with social media are the most common activities – over half (51%) spend more time on social media these days, including up to 76% of those aged 14 to 29 years. Those aged 40 years and over are spending more time on other types of screen media: online streaming services such as Netflix, watching free-to-air television and/or playing video games.

FIGURE 9: Reasons for spending less time reading (among those reporting less time reading)



Australians spending less time reading n=1,026

WHAT ARE THEY READING?

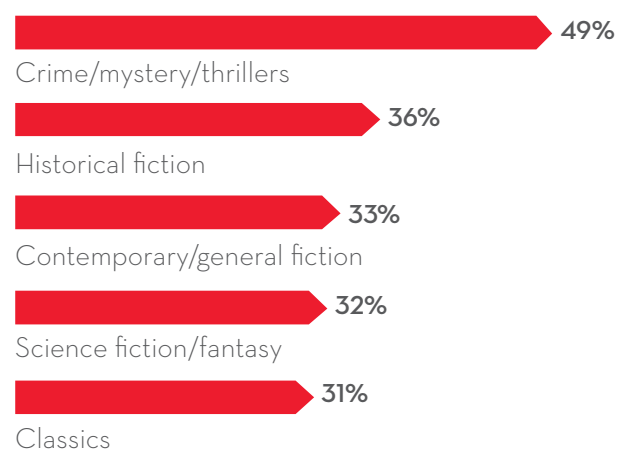
TYPES OF BOOKS

Crime/mystery/thriller is the most popular fiction genre, read by almost half of Australians

Half of all Australian readers currently enjoy reading crime/mystery/thriller books, while a third of readers enjoy historical fiction, contemporary/general fiction and science fiction/fantasy. Young adult/teen novels are read by 15% of the population², and poetry by almost 10%, ahead of other genres such as graphic novels and horror.

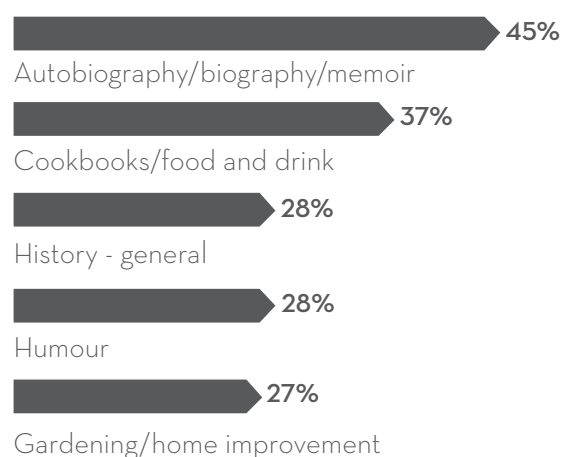
Autobiography, biography and memoir is the most widely read non-fiction category, read by 45% of Australians.

FIGURE 10: Top 5 most commonly read fiction genres



Australian readers n=2,697

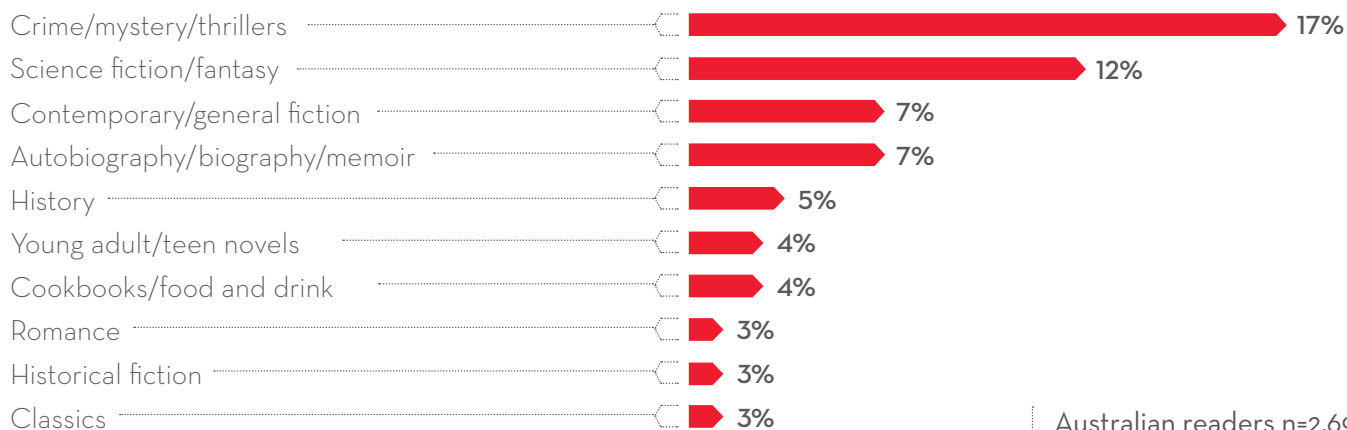
FIGURE 11: Top 5 most commonly read non-fiction genres



Australian readers n=2,697

Readers were also asked to rank their three favourite reading categories. Combining all categories across fiction and non-fiction, crime/mystery/thriller stories are the overall favourite. Adult fiction accounts for the top three categories, and six of the top ten in total.

FIGURE 12: Top 10 most favourite genres across all categories



Australian readers n=2,697

² Note the survey sample was Australians aged 14 years and over.

AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

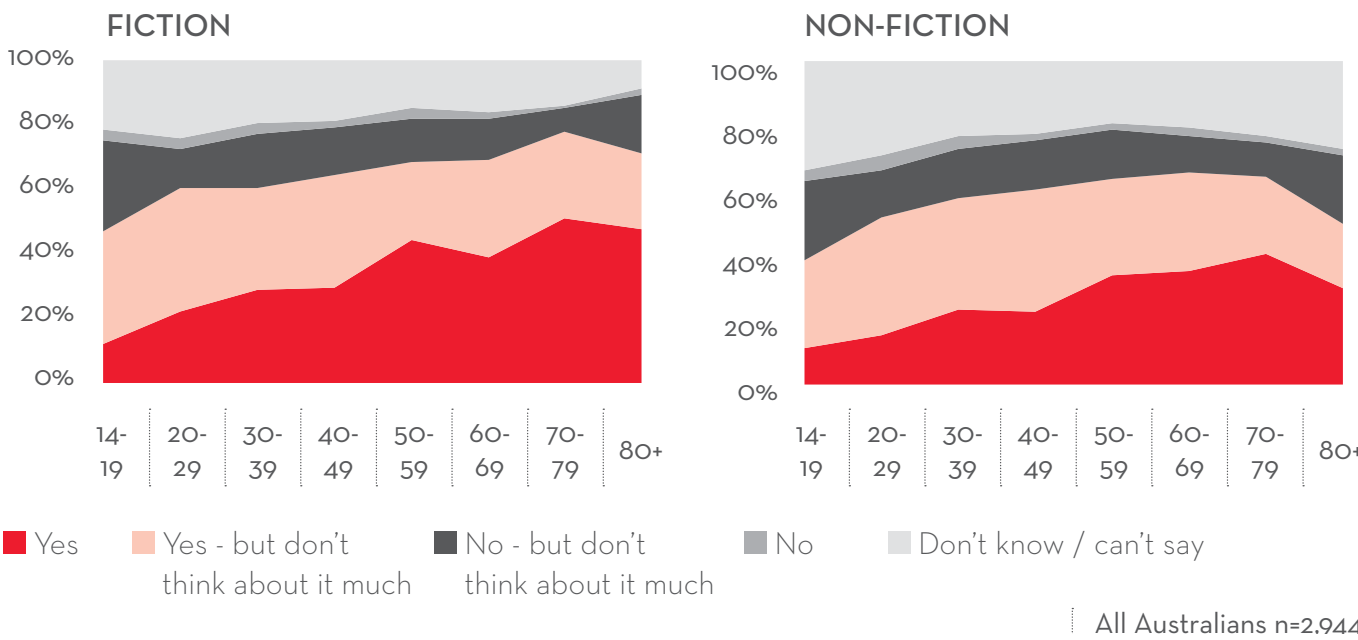
Two in three Australians like to read Australian-authored fiction

Around two-thirds (65%) of Australians enjoy reading fiction books by Australian authors – one-third have a clear positive attitude towards Australian authors and another third like these books but do not necessarily think about the author’s nationality. Similarly, 59% like non-fiction books by Australian authors.

Older Australians are the most likely to consciously choose Australian books

Australians aged 50 years and over are more likely to consciously choose Australian-authored books, while younger age groups tend not to think as much about the nationality of the author. For example, 44% of people aged 50 to 59 like Australian-authored fiction books, and an additional 24% like them but do not think much about it. However, among those aged 14 to 19 only 12% like Australian-authored fiction books, while more than one-third like them but do not think much about it, and more than 20% do not know or cannot say.

FIGURE 13: Proportion of Australians who like books written by Australian authors, by age group



LITERARY FICTION

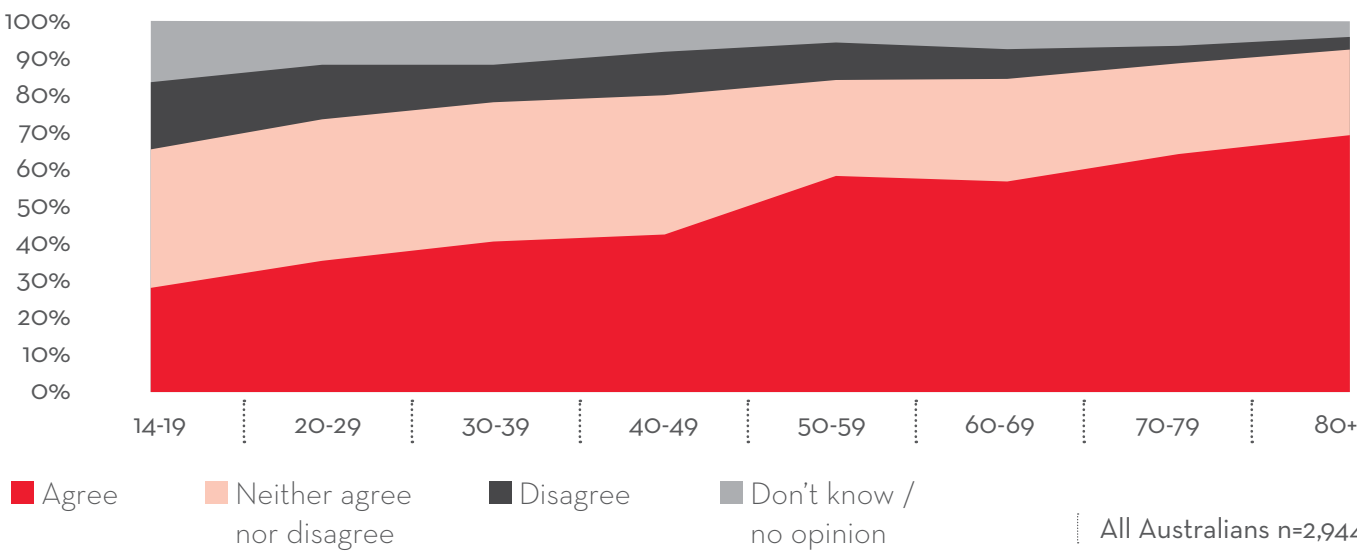
Around half of Australians are interested in reading literary fiction

When readers were asked about the types of books they currently enjoy reading for pleasure (Figure 10), literary fiction was selected by 15% of respondents. While many are not currently reading literary fiction, there is strong interest in these types of books. Half of all Australians (51%) - including those who are currently non-readers - say that they like reading books by contemporary writers that may be eligible for literary prizes such as the Man Booker and the Miles Franklin. Similarly, 45% like to read literary classics such as Dickens and Austen, and 48% enjoy literary fiction by Australian writers past and present.

This difference may be driven by a genuine gap between interest in literary fiction and current reading habits. It may also be the result of narrow perceptions of what constitutes literary fiction in the absence of a stated definition.

As with general fiction and non-fiction by Australian writers, enjoyment of Australian literary fiction is more pronounced among older age groups.

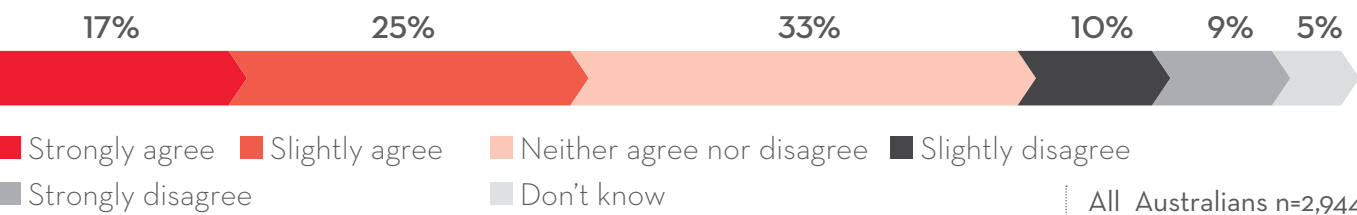
FIGURE 14: Proportion of Australians who like to read literary fiction books by Australian writers, by age group



INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

As with literary fiction, there is a gap between interest in reading Indigenous Australian books and current reading habits. Around 12% of readers currently enjoy reading non-fiction books about the histories, stories and cultures of Indigenous Australia. Overall a higher proportion of Australians (42%) are interested in books and writing about Indigenous Australia

FIGURE 15: Books and writing about Indigenous Australia are of interest to me



WHY ARE THEY READING?

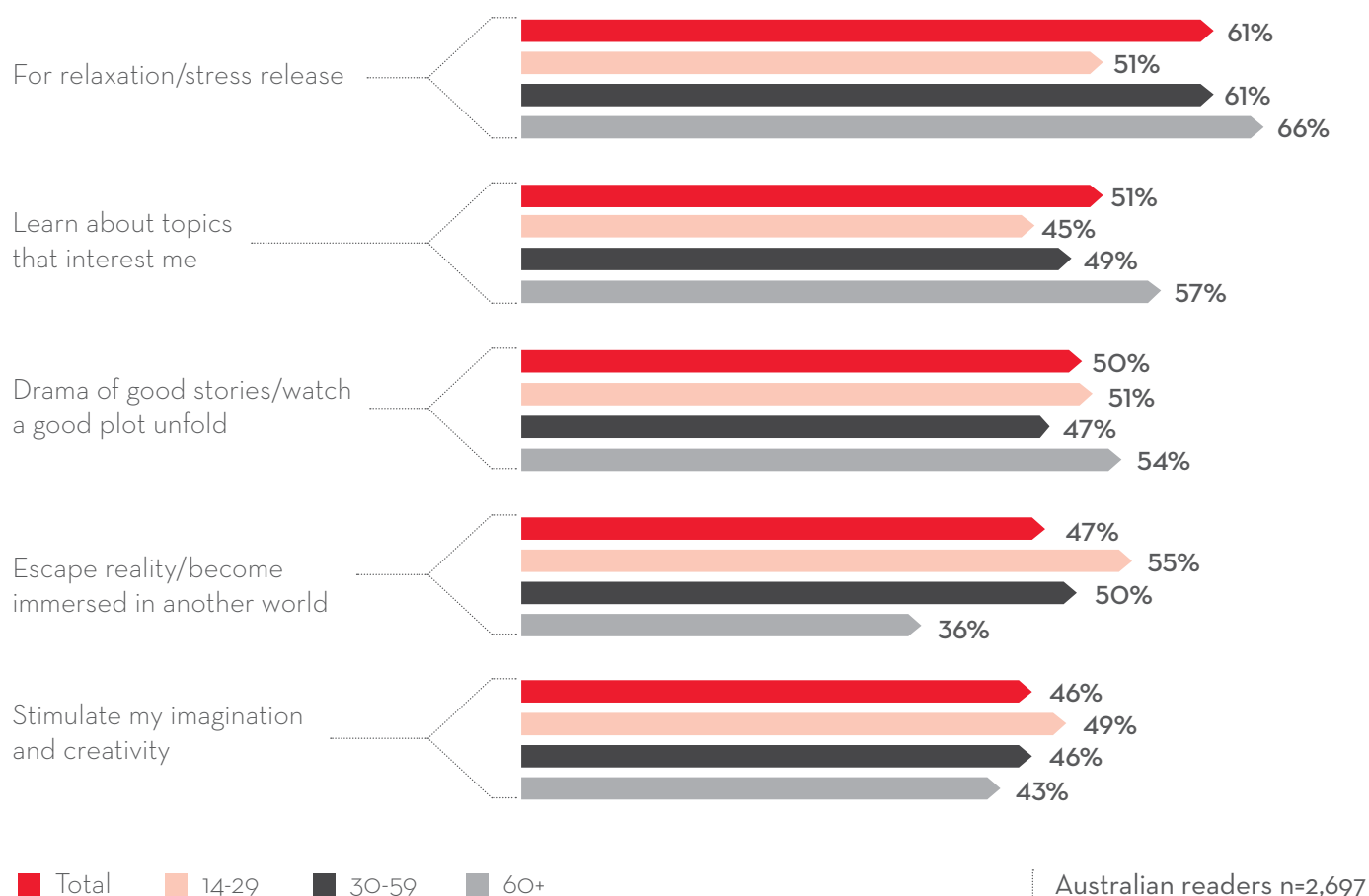
REASONS FOR READING

Australian readers read books to relax, learn and enjoy good stories

People read for a variety of reasons including enjoyment, learning and health benefits. The most common reason overall is for relaxation/stress release (61%). The top five reasons overall by age group are shown in Figure 16. All age groups strongly identify with a range of reasons for reading. Those aged over 60 are most likely to read for relaxation/stress release (66%), those aged 14-29 are most likely to read to escape from reality and become immersed in other worlds (55%).

There were some additional reasons that were important for certain age groups. For example, pass the time/keep myself occupied was a common reason for almost half of under 30s, and to read good writing was popular with 44% of people aged 60 years and over

FIGURE 16: Top 5 reasons for reading



Nine in ten Australians enjoy reading and the vast majority would like to spend more time reading books

Nine in ten Australians enjoy reading books for interest or pleasure and two-thirds said that they enjoy it a lot. Over two-thirds (68%) also stated that they would like more time to spend reading books, and indicated that a general lack of time was the most common barrier to reading more.

ATTITUDES TO BOOKS AND THE AUSTRALIAN BOOK INDUSTRY

The Australian book industry is valued by the majority of Australians

Australians overwhelmingly feel that books are important and valuable from both a personal and societal perspective. Figure 17 shows the level of agreement with attitudinal statements relating to books and the Australian book industry. These positive attitudes are shared by readers and non-readers alike.

FIGURE 17: Australians' attitudes to books and the Australian book industry



Seven in ten Australians agree that books have a value that's greater than their cost

While 57% of Australians think books are too expensive, a higher number (71%) feel that books make a contribution to life that goes beyond their monetary cost.

Seven in ten Australians agree that it is important for Australian children to read books set in Australia and written by Australian authors

Six in ten Australians believe it is important that books written by Australian authors can be published in Australia

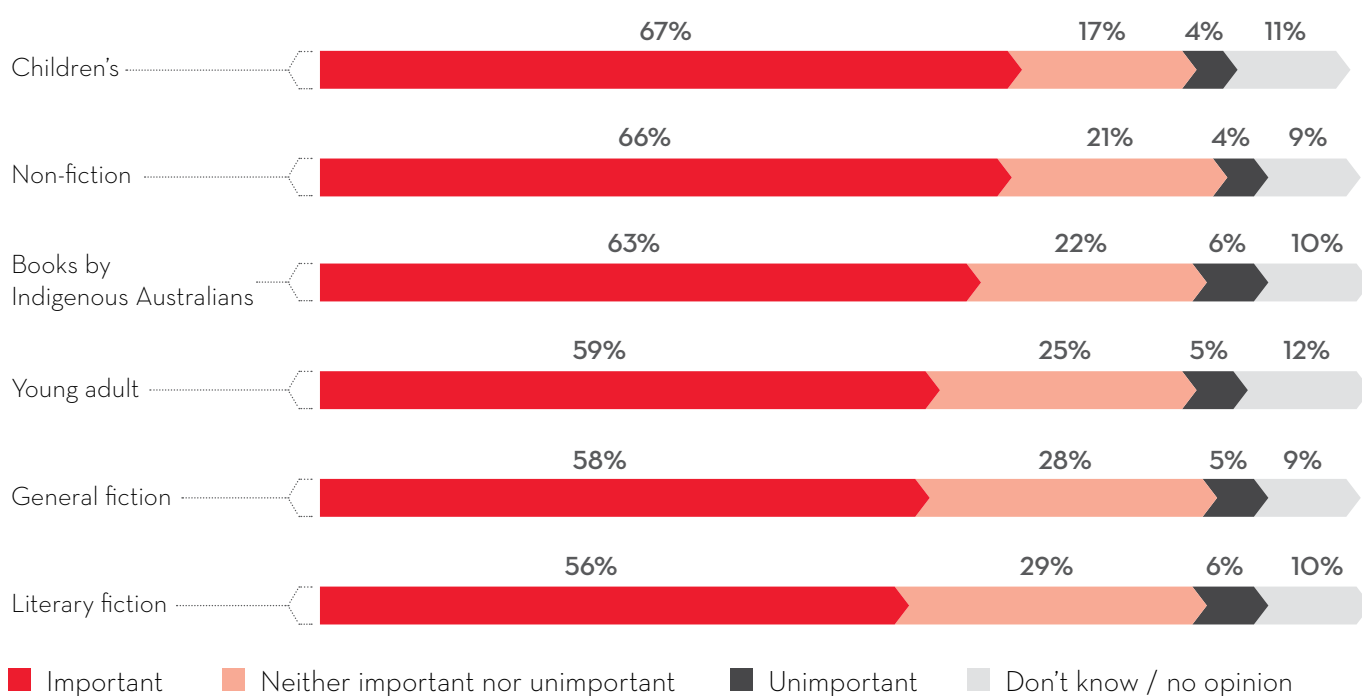
Well over half of respondents (59%) also agree that Indigenous Australian publishers are important for books about Indigenous Australian cultures.

Books by Australian writers are important for Australian culture

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Australians believe that books by Indigenous Australian writers are important for Australian culture.

More than half (56%) believe Australian literary fiction is important for Australian culture. This belief was strongest for readers in older age groups.

FIGURE 18: Importance of books by Australian writers for Australian culture



All Australians n=2,944

HOW ARE THEY READING?

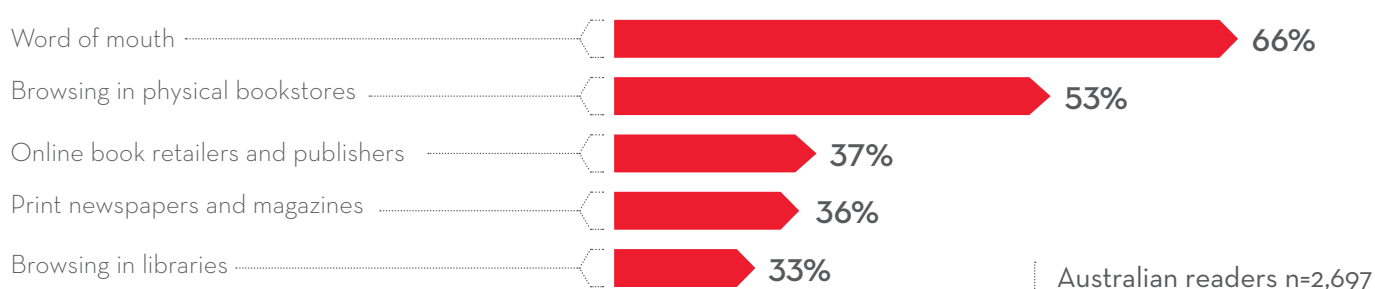
FINDING OUT ABOUT BOOKS TO READ

The most common ways to discover books are through word of mouth and browsing in physical bookstores

Readers are more likely to find out about books through physical world sources than through online and social media sources. The two most common sources overall are word of mouth (66%) and browsing in physical bookstores (53%). The top online and social media sources of information are online book retailers and publishers (37%) and Facebook (27%).

Print newspapers and magazines are still popular and the fourth most important source overall at 36%.

FIGURE 19: Top 5 sources of information about books

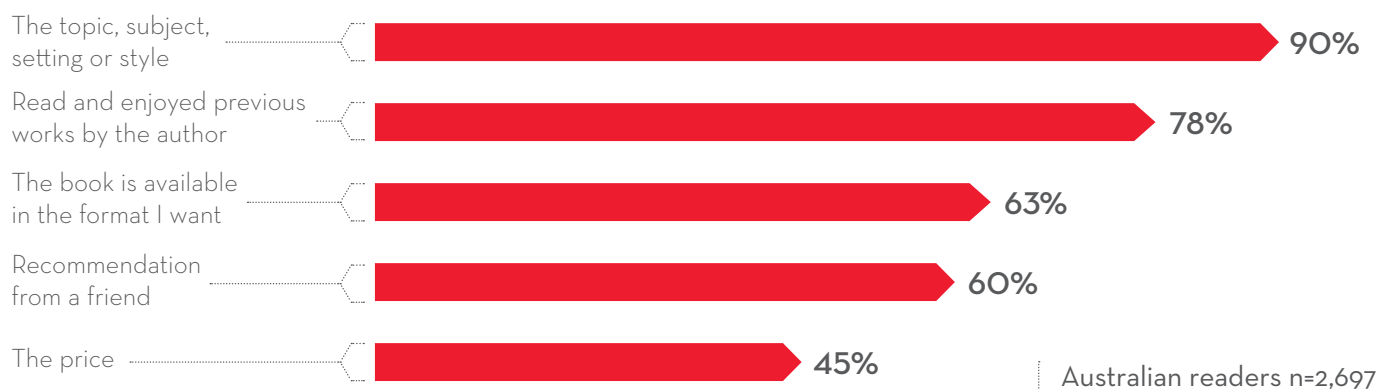


CHOOSING A BOOK TO READ

The most important factors when choosing a book to read are the topic/subject/setting/style or having enjoyed previous works by the author

Personal preferences are the most important factors in book selection. For more than 90% of readers, the topic, subject, setting or style of the book influences their choice. For 78% it is having read and enjoyed previous works by the author. Factors such as professional book reviews (22%) and prize wins or shortlists (21%) are less important overall, and are most relevant for readers who nominate literary fiction and non-fiction among their top three favourite genres (Figures 10 and 11).

FIGURE 20: Top 5 most important factors in choosing a book to read



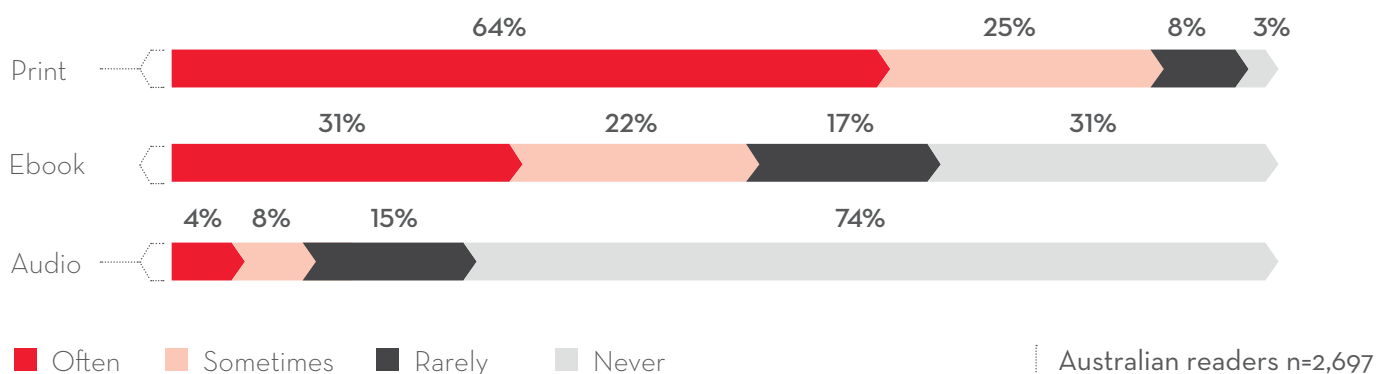
FORMAT

Print books are still more popular than ebooks

Australian readers still overwhelmingly choose to read print books. Almost nine in ten (89%) read print books often or sometimes³ compared to 53% who read ebooks and 12% who listen to audio books.

Australians aged 60 and over are more likely to read print books often than younger age groups, and are also more likely to never read ebooks. Audio books are most popular with middle-aged readers (30–59 years).

FIGURE 21: Frequency of reading print books and ebooks



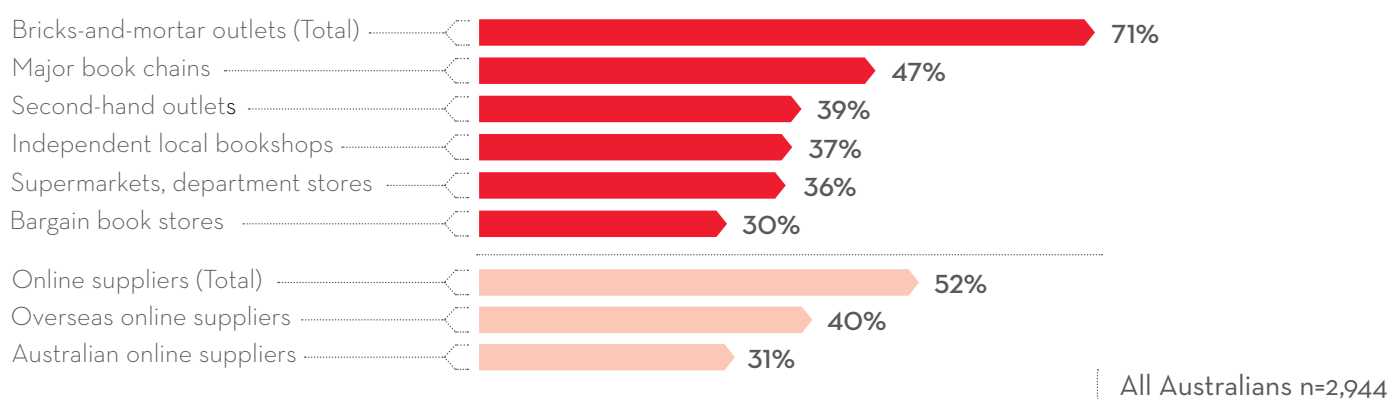
BOOK BUYING BEHAVIOUR

More Australians buy books from bricks-and-mortar stores than online stores

Overall, more Australians purchase books from bricks-and-mortar stores (71%) than from online suppliers (52%). Major book chains are the most popular stores with 47% buying often or sometimes⁴ from these outlets. Buying from second-hand outlets (39%) is slightly higher than shopping at independent bookshops (37%) or discount department stores (36%). Overseas online suppliers are more commonly used than Australian.

Almost half of respondents (43%) bought at least one book in the previous month. Of those, 92% bought for themselves, a third (33%) for a child, and 29% as a gift.

FIGURE 22: Purchasing books from outlets often/sometimes



3 & 4 Frequency ('often', 'sometimes', 'rarely', 'never') was self-determined by respondents

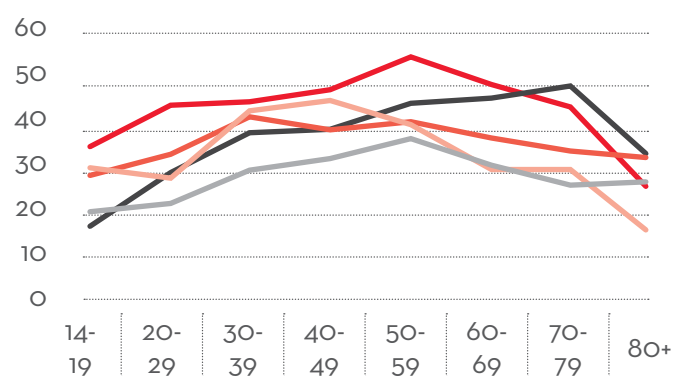
Buying from all types of bricks-and-mortar stores tends to be most popular with the middle-aged groups (30-59 years). However, second-hand outlets are the most popular bricks-and-mortar stores for people aged 70 years and over.

Overseas online suppliers are more popular than Australian online sources for all age groups.

The major reasons for choosing to buy books online are similar to the reasons for choosing major book chains – availability and convenience. Price is also an important factor in buying online, while the ability to see and hold print books is a factor in buying from major book chains. The most common reasons for choosing independent local bookshops are customer service and the desire to support Australian booksellers.

FIGURE 23: Buying behaviour (often/sometimes) by outlet and age group

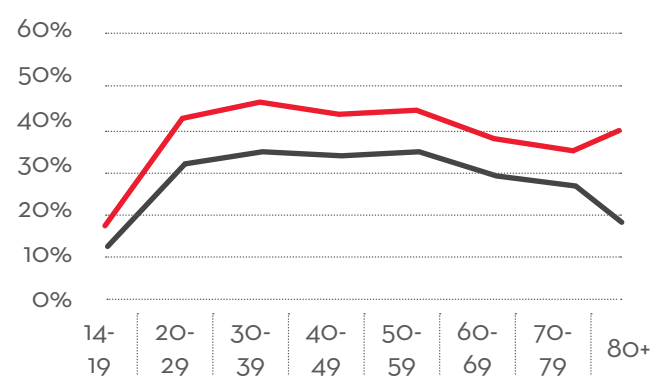
BRICKS AND MORTAR STORES



- Major book chain
- Second-hand outlet
- Independent local bookshop
- Supermarkets, department store
- Bargain bookstore

All Australians n=2,944

ONLINE STORES



- Overseas online
- Australian online

All Australians n=2,944

BORROWING BOOKS

Almost as many people borrow books as buy them

Four in ten Australians (41%) have borrowed one or more books in the previous month. Of those who borrowed books, sharing among friends is most common, with 43% obtaining books this way, followed by borrowing from public libraries at 39%.

ONLINE INVOLVEMENT WITH BOOKS AND READING

Around one in three Australians use social media and the internet in relation to books and reading

Overall, 31% of Australians use social media and the internet in relation to books and reading. The most common activity is reading stories or poems on Facebook or other general social media sites (17%). Generally, Australians aged under 40 are more likely to be involved online than older age groups. However, listening to podcasts/streaming book events is fairly consistent across age groups.

FIGURE 24: Top 5 online involvement activities with books and reading

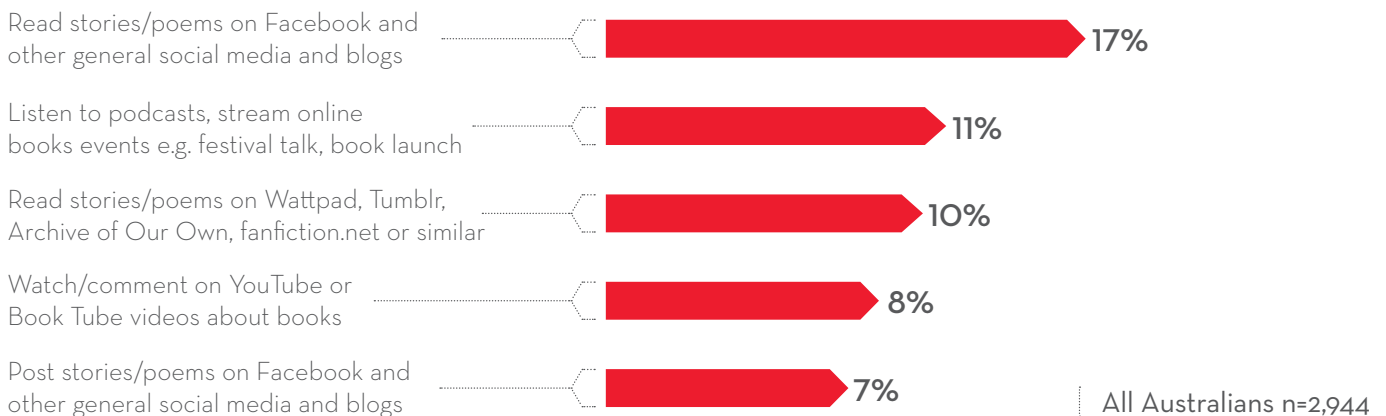
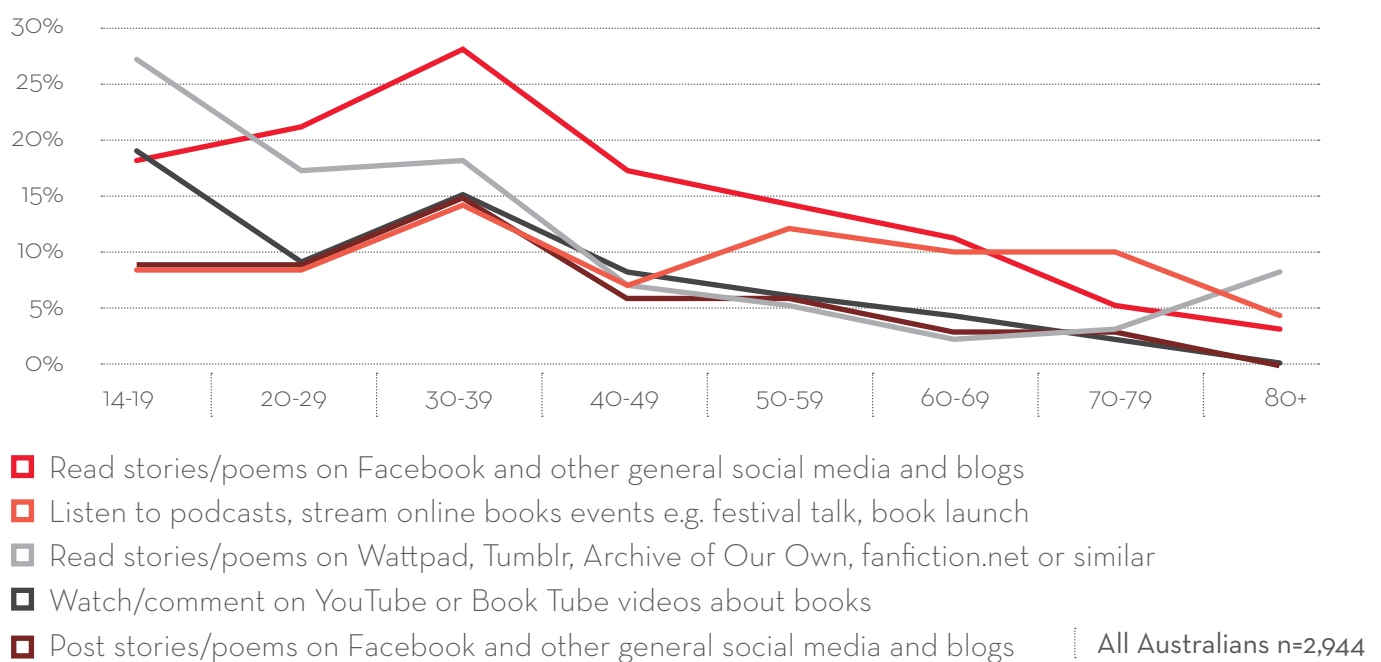


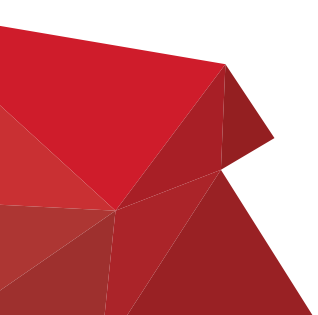
FIGURE 25: Top 5 online involvement activities with books and reading by age group



FURTHER INFORMATION:

Read the extended discussion and analysis of this survey from Macquarie University - [*Australian Book Readers: Survey Method and Results.*](#)

Visit the [*Australia Council for the Arts*](#) website to explore trends by age group, gender and reader type in a series of interactive dashboards.



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