

Goodreads Reading Trend Analysis (2020-2025)
An examination of rating patterns, genre popularity, and user engagement

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Executive Summary

This analysis examines reading trends on Goodreads from 2020-2025, analyzing rating patterns, genre popularity, and user engagement across 1,200 of the most popular books published during this period. The study reveals concerning platform-wide trends alongside evolving genre preferences that offer insights for readers, authors, and publishers.

Five major trends emerged from the analysis:

1. Platform-wide average ratings declined 1.5% from 4.008 stars in 2020 to 3.946 stars in 2024, with a modest recovery to 3.992 stars in 2025.
2. Romance (283 books) and fantasy (275 books) dominated publication volume across all years, alternating in yearly popularity and demonstrating readers' sustained appetite for emotional connection and escapism.
3. User engagement collapsed by 66% from a 2022 peak of 58.7 million ratings to just 20.1 million ratings in 2025, suggesting potential platform migration.
4. A quality paradox emerged: memoir (4.27 stars), nonfiction (4.25 stars), and business (4.39 stars) consistently rated highest despite appearing less frequently in top lists, revealing a disconnect between what readers consume most and what they value highest.

5. The 2022 engagement spike appears linked to "review bombing" incidents that temporarily inflated rating volumes while deflating average scores.

The dramatic decline in engagement following 2022, combined with persistent user complaints about platform features and interface limitations, suggests Goodreads may be losing ground to alternative platforms like StoryGraph. The cyclical alternation between romance and fantasy dominance indicates publishers might optimize release timing by tracking these patterns. The quality-quantity disconnect presents opportunities for authors writing in underrepresented genres to achieve exceptional reader satisfaction despite lower visibility.

This analysis is limited to Goodreads data using single-genre classification and represents only the top 200 books per year. An identified anomaly—the complete disappearance of audiobook genre data in 2025—warrants further investigation and highlights the need for cross-platform comparative studies in future work.

Methodology

Data Source

In this examination of reading trends from 2020 to 2025, I used the "Most popular books published" list on the Goodreads website, which is accessible at https://www.goodreads.com/book/popular_by_date/2025. To look at the other years in

question, I changed 2025 to 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024.

Tools and Technologies

In order to collect this data efficiently, I used Python to code the scraper. I used the Selenium and Beautiful Soup libraries to access content on the website, the CSV library to append data to the CSV file storing the collected data, time to add some buffer to requests, and re to find strings and patterns within the collected content.

I used Python with Selenium and Beautiful Soup for web scraping due to Goodreads' dynamic page loading requirements. Tableau was selected for data visualization because it efficiently handles multi-year comparisons and allows for quick iteration on chart designs. The analysis was limited to the top 200 books per year as these represent Goodreads' "Most Popular Books Published" lists.

Metrics Analyzed

I decided to analyze the number of reviews, the star ratings, and genres of each book across the years.

Analysis Approach

Data visualization and analysis were conducted in Tableau Public, chosen for its ability to create interactive dashboards and handle the 1,200-record dataset efficiently. All visualizations were designed to highlight year-over-year comparisons and genre-based patterns.

Data Processing

I scraped the data from the Goodreads list pages and placed it into a CSV file titled "goodreads_popular_books_2020_to_2025.csv". I had columns representing the rank of the book in the list, the genre, the author, the number of reviews, the star rating, and the genre of the book. Note, for the simplicity of my scraping, I chose to only collect one genre for each book (where each book had a list of genres). This scraping process got the accurate data from the list.

Limitations

As recently mentioned, I only collected the first genre in the list of genres for each book in the list. Additionally, the dataset represents only Goodreads data. That is, the full reading community isn't represented (since readers may choose to use other platforms such as StoryGraph or Fable to track their reading). Further, as noted in a later section, audiobook data stops in 2024. Moreover, the data stops at the most read, or popular, books for each year. This was only 1200 books over the six years with 200 books per year.

Findings

Through analyzing the data in Tableau, I found six trends within the data: a platform-wide rating decline, the dominance and evolution of genres, a spike in engagement in 2022, genre quality patterns, and engagement by genre. In the following subsections, we will take a dive into these findings.

Finding 1: Platform-Wide Rating Decline

In this section, we will dive into the decline in ratings on the Goodreads platform based on user engagement.

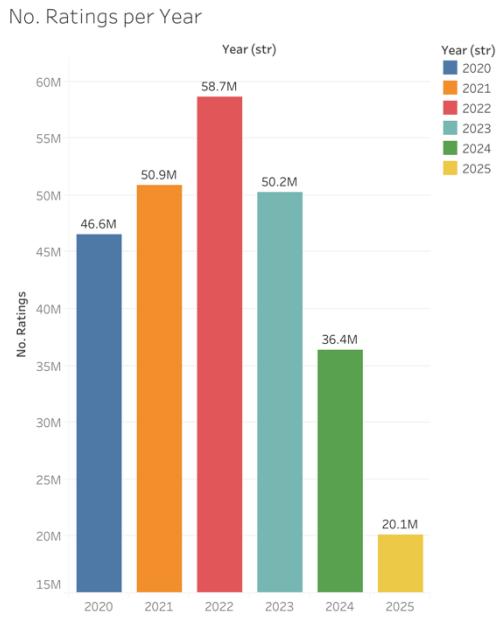


Figure 1: Number of ratings per year

Looking at Figure 1, we can see that the number of total ratings (or reviews) have increased from 2020 (46.6 million reviews) to 2022 (58.7 million reviews). Since 2022, the number of ratings has decreased to 20.1 million reviews in 2025.

This 66% decline from peak engagement represents a significant shift in platform usage patterns. While the 2022 spike may be partially explained by review bombing (discussed below), the subsequent drop suggests either user migration to competing platforms or decreased engagement with book tracking altogether.

In 2022, Goodreads was receiving multiple complaints about the changes in their platform. This included complaints about changes made to their reading

challenge feature, their interface feeling outdated, a lack of additions for requested features, and even movement to alternative reading trackers (such as StoryGraph, a reading platform that has half-star ratings and content warnings).

Additionally, in 2022, users engaged in 'review bombing'—coordinated campaigns where users flooded book pages with low ratings and negative reviews to extort authors or engage in personal attacks, sometimes targeting books before their official publication dates. Sometimes, this even happened for books that haven't been published yet. This "review bombing" could explain the spike that occurred in 2022.

Finding 2: Genre Dominance and Evolution

In this section, we will look at the top five genres from 2020 to 2025 both overall and per year.

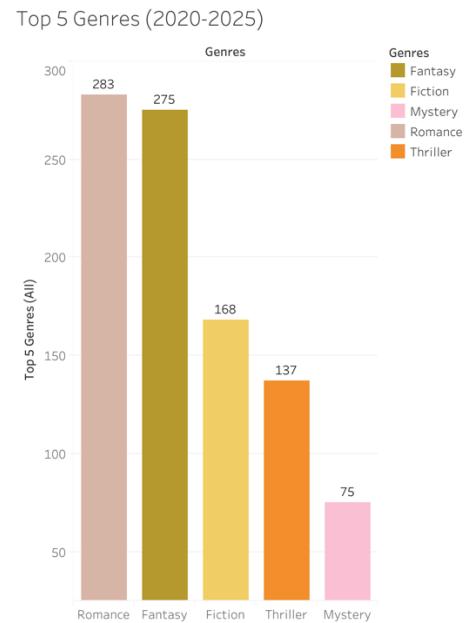


Figure 2: Top 5 genres from 2020 to 2025

Top 5 Genres (2020)

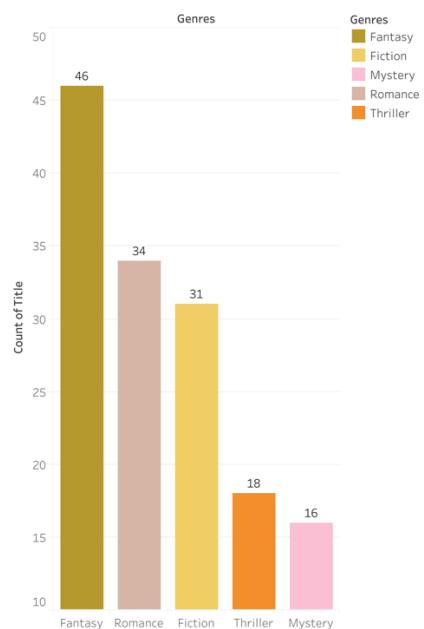


Figure 3: Top 5 genres in 2020

Top 5 Genres (2022)

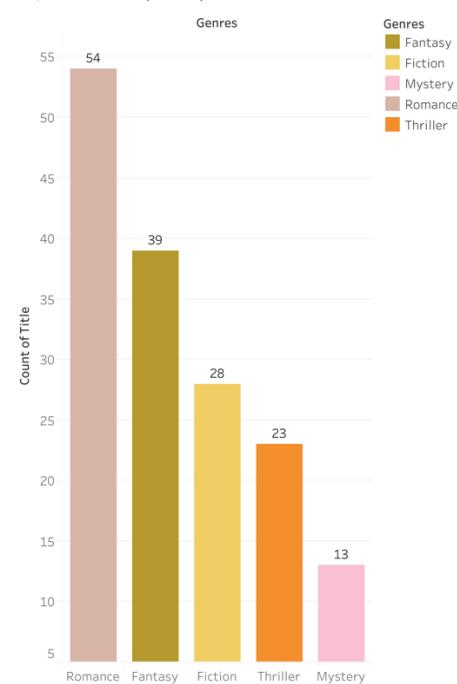


Figure 5: Top 5 genres in 2022

Top 5 Genres (2021)

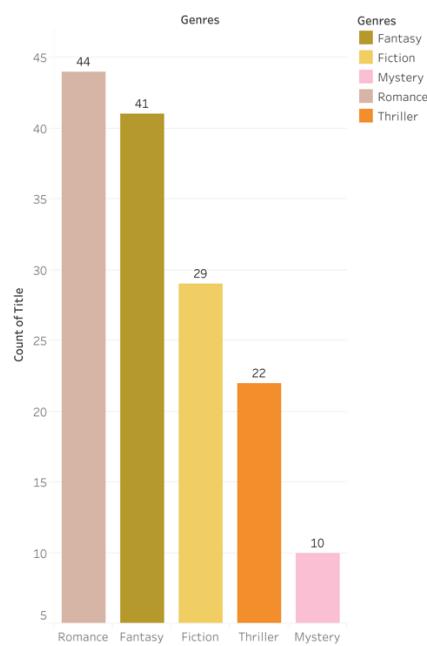


Figure 4: Top 5 genres in 2021

Top 5 Genres (2023)

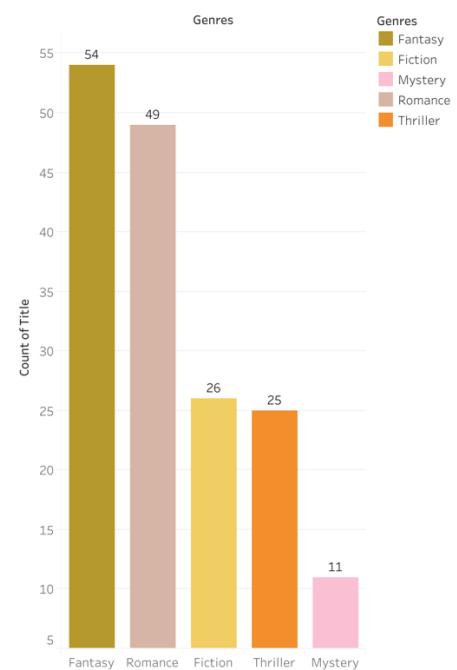


Figure 6: Top 5 genres in 2023

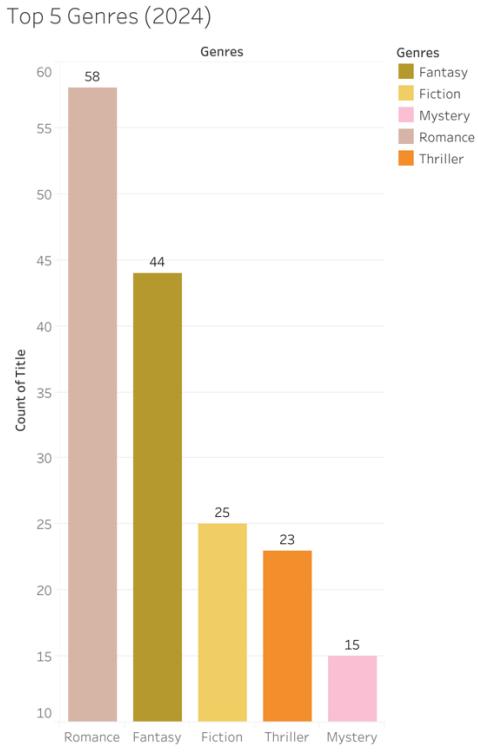


Figure 7: Top 5 genres in 2024

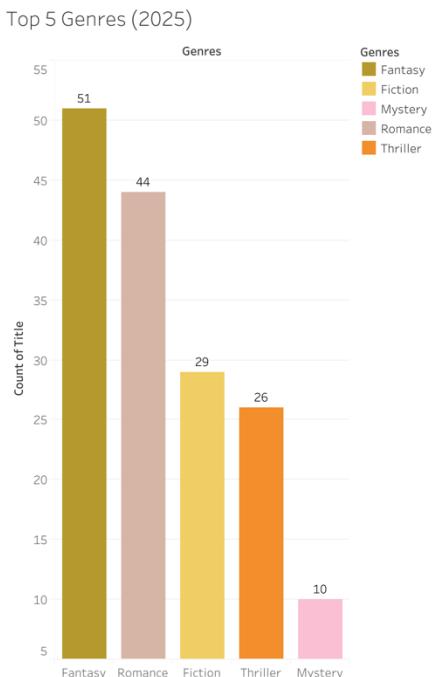


Figure 8: Top 5 genres in 2025

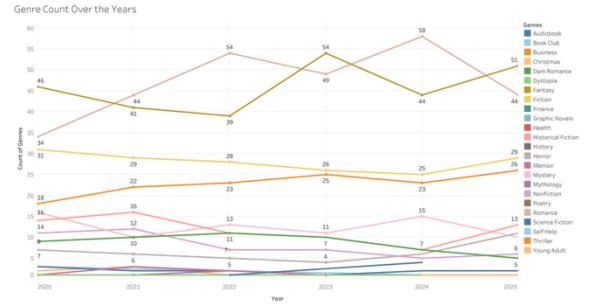


Figure 9: Genre count over the years (2020-2025)

In Figure 2, we can see the top 5 genres in the entire dataset across 2020 to 2025. Romance comes in strong as the top genre in the most popular published books with 283 books published from 2020 to 2025. Fantasy is a close second with 275 books published across the six years.

Romance and fantasy have alternated dominance since 2020, with each genre leading in different years—fantasy in 2020, 2023, and 2025; romance in 2021, 2022, and 2024. For example, in Figure 3, fantasy is the most popular genre in 2020 with 46 published books that made this list. In 2021, romance takes the lead with 44 published books in the list. This alternating pattern continues until 2025 (in Figure 8), where fantasy has 51 books in the list of popular published book, only seven more books than romance in the same year.

In Figure 9, we can see the general count of genres from 2020 to 2025. Figure 9 shows that the number of fantasy and romance books published from 2020 to 2025 have been interchanging every year.

(Note how the genre “audiobook” has no data in 2025. Possibilities for this could be related to collection of the data, because the popularity of audiobooks had intensely

dropped, or because there were no audiobooks released in 2025. This will be discussed in depth in a later section.)

While romance and fantasy genres have been neck-in-neck for the past six years, it shows readers are drawn to two main things: (1) something they can feel, and (2) fictional worlds to escape their current circumstances.

Why These Genres Dominate

The alternating dominance of romance and fantasy suggests readers seek two primary experiences in popular fiction:

Romance offers emotional connection and wish fulfillment—the promise of love without the complexities of modern dating. With predictable happy endings and relatable characters, the genre provides comfort and satisfaction.

Fantasy provides escapism through immersive world-building and adventure. Readers can explore complex moral questions through fantastical scenarios, experiencing heroism and magic unavailable in daily life.

Finding 3: The 2022 Engagement Spike

In this section, we will be looking into the spike in the number of reviews in 2022.

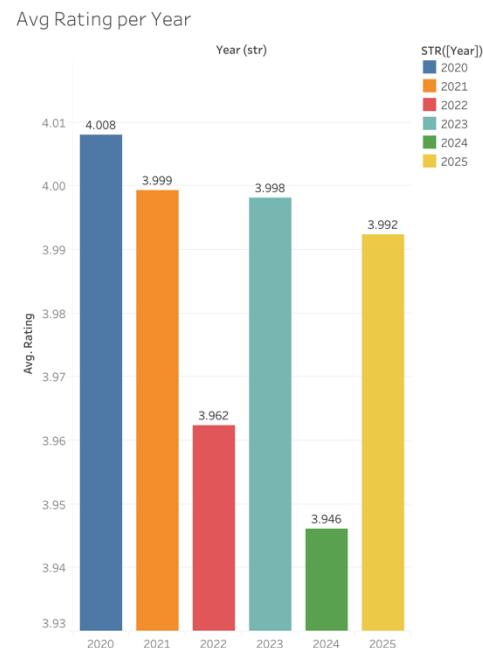


Figure 10: Average rating per year

Again, as mentioned in Finding 1, Figure 1 illustrates an increase in engagement for readers. To reiterate, this peak in number of reviews was linked to users “review bombing” book pages of 2022.

In Figure 10, we can see that the average rating in 2020 was 4.008 stars, which declined in 2021 to 3.999 stars. In 2022, we had an average star rating of 3.962 across all books, which was the second lowest rating from 2020 to 2025. Considering how Goodreads users were “review bombing” and purposefully rating books lower, this dip in reviews follows.

Finding 4: Genre Quality Patterns

Next, we will be looking into patterns on Goodreads relating to ratings per genre overall from 2020 to 2025 and per year.

Avg Rating per Genre (2020-2025)

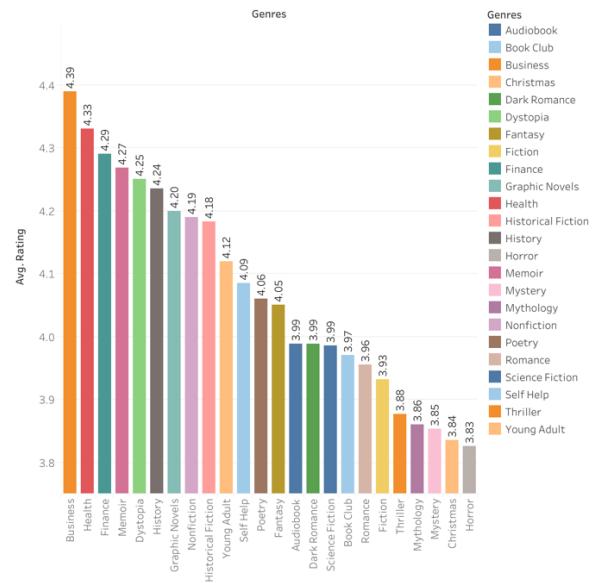


Figure 11: Average rating per genre from 2020 to 2025

2021 Avg Rating per Genre

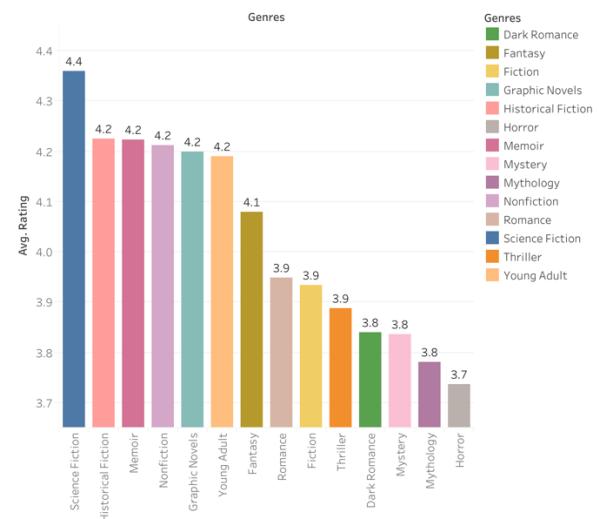


Figure 13: Average rating per genre in 2021

2020 Avg Rating per Genre

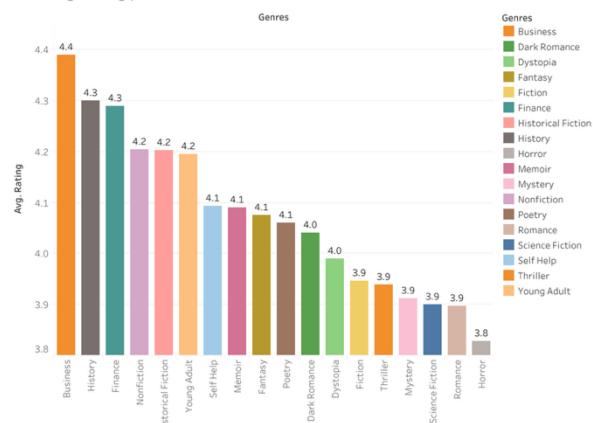


Figure 12: Average rating per genre in 2020

2022 Avg Rating per Genre

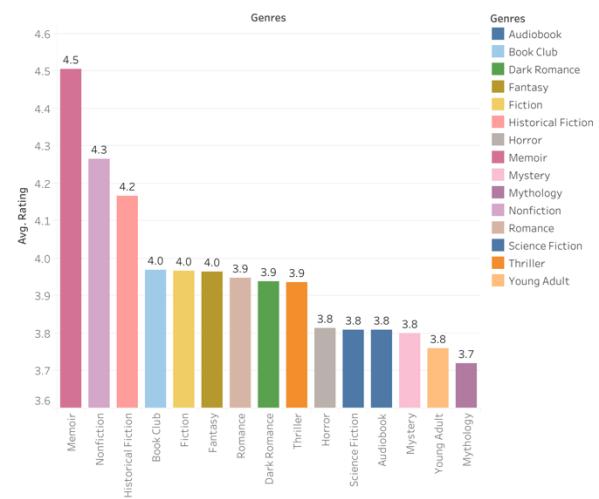


Figure 14: Average rating per genre in 2022

2023 Avg Rating per Genre

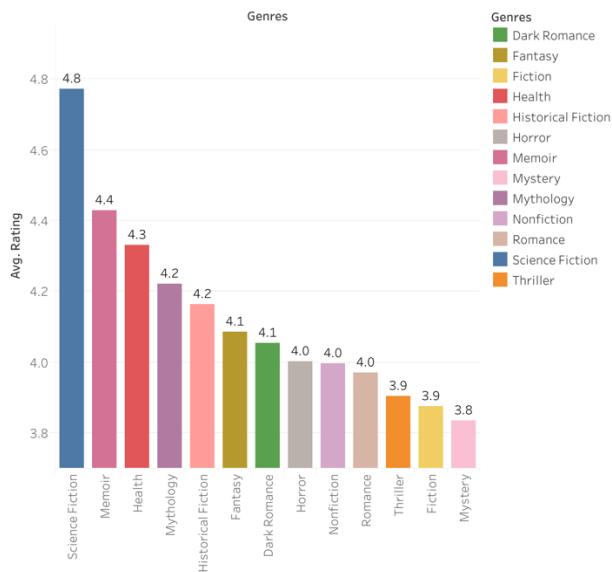


Figure 15: Average rating per genre in 2023

2025 Avg Rating per Genre

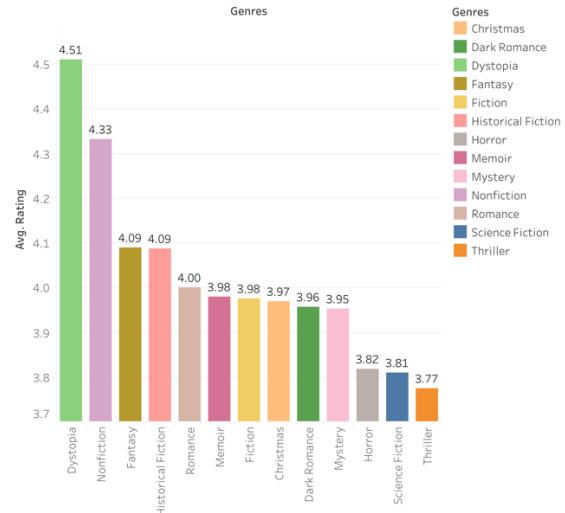


Figure 17: Average rating per genre in 2025

2024 Avg Rating per Genre

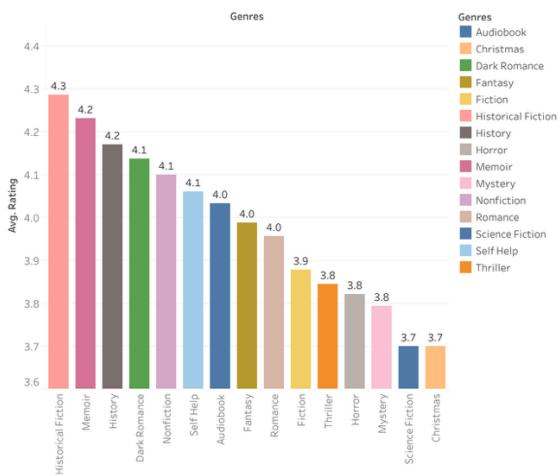


Figure 16: Average rating per genre in 2024

In Figure 10, we can see the ratings of the genres—from 2020 to 2025—from highest to lowest. Placed at number one, we have business with a rating of 4.39 stars. Health (4.33 stars), finance (4.29 stars), and memoir (4.27 stars) all rank closely after business. Then, we have the dystopia genre placing at fourth with a 4.25-star rating. That is, considering all of the data from 2020 to 2025, business is the highest-rated genre.

However, the highest-rated genre varies by year, with no single category maintaining consistent dominance. For example, as seen in Figure 12, business (4.4 stars), history (4.3 stars), and finance (4.29 stars) are the top three genres in 2020. In Figure 13, science fiction (4.4 stars), historical fiction (4.22 stars), and memoir (4.22 stars) are the top three genres in 2021.

Similarly, in 2022, we have memoir, non-fiction, and historical fiction as the top 3 genres. In 2023, we have science fiction, memoir, and health as the top three genres.

In 2024, historical fiction, memoir, and history are the top three genres. Lastly, in 2025, dystopia, non-fiction, and fantasy are the top three genres.

The Quality-Popularity Disconnect

A striking pattern emerges when comparing ratings to publication volume: the highest-rated genres (business 4.39 stars, health 4.33 stars, finance 4.29 stars, memoir 4.27 stars) represent just 1-6% of the top 200 books across all years, while the most published genres (romance 23.6%, fantasy 22.9%) average 3.96 stars and 4.05 stars, respectively.

This suggests readers consume popular fiction for entertainment but reserve highest ratings for books offering tangible value—whether practical advice (business, finance, health) or authentic human experience (memoir).

With memoir being within the top three genres with highest average ratings, we can understand how it makes it into the top five genres from 2020 to 2025. The ratings of the other four genres in this list of top five genres across these six years is because they had the highest average rating compared to other genres.

Finding 5: Engagement by Genre

Lastly, we will look at the engagement by genre from 2020 to 2025.

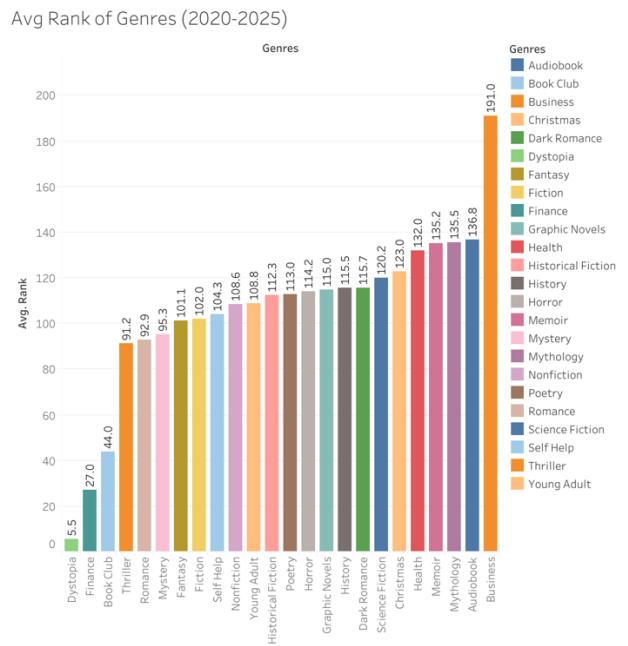


Figure 18: Average rank of genres between 2020 to 2025

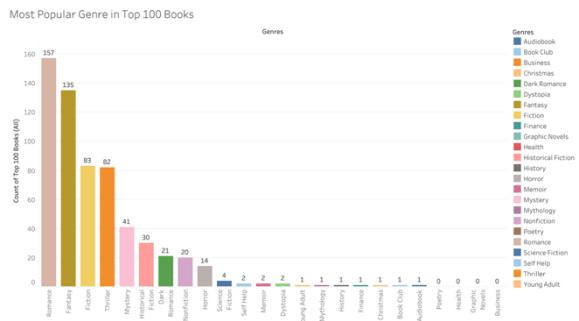


Figure 19: Most popular genres in the top 100 books between 2020 to 2025

As seen in Figure 18, dystopia sits at rank 5.5 (on average) across all ranked lists from 2020 to 2025. We can see that memoir ranks at about 135.2 on average, considering its average rating placing it in the top five genres from 2020 to 2025.

Figure 18 shows the most popular genres in the books that ranked in the top 100 from 2020 to 2025. Romance, fantasy, and fiction are the top three genres, with 157, 135, and 83 books written in each category, respectively, from this list of top

100 books. That is, even with the top five genres found in the previous finding, books with fictional genres were most written between 2020 and 2025. This would mean that authors enjoy writing more in genres romance, fantasy, and fiction.

Anomalies and Data Quality

Some anomalies I discovered was the trend in audiobooks stopping at the end of 2024 and the 2022 spike and “review bombing”. I had limited my collection of genres per book to just one genre for simplicity of scraping. Each page of the most popular books published in each year from 2020 to 2025 on Goodreads only had 200 books per page, which might not have accounted for all of the books published in that year.

Firstly, we will look at the audiobook trends. In 2025, “audiobook” wasn’t a genre that was represented in the collected data. From 2020 to 2024, however, “audiobook” was a genre that had made the list of popular books released in the given years. This could have been because of a lack of audiobooks published in 2025, or because the audiobooks published didn’t make the popular published books list. Another potential explanation for this could be that the way I collected data (collecting only one genre from the lists) could have hindered these results.

As shown in Figure 18, for example, “audiobook” had made the most popular genre in the top 100 books from 2020 to 2025. Similarly, in Figure 9, we notice a sudden stop in the blue line correlating to

the genre. That is, this genre wasn’t excluded from my analysis. However, it could have impacted the genre counts and the placement of audiobooks in genre rankings and ratings.

Next, we will be discussing the 2022 engagement spike and “review bombing”. The spike to 58.7 million ratings could represent genuine engagement from users, as discussed earlier in the article. Therefore, 2022’s average ratings for genres could be less reliable. That is, with the average rating being 3.962 stars (the second lowest in the data to 2024’s star rating of 3.946) this average rating for 2022 could be unreliable since readers were posting lower ratings to books. Additionally, in Figure 14, ratings are visually lower than ratings in prior years, even if the range of ratings (3.7 to 4.5 stars) seems to be normal compared to other years. Lots of genres, including mostly fictional genres, in 2022 seemed to not even hit 4 stars in ratings. Again, this may be because of “review bombing” from users.

Third, we will examine the single genre limitation. I had made the decision to collect only one genre per book. This could have created bias, since books might be miscategorized if the main genre of the book isn’t listed as the first genre or isn’t listed as the most relevant one. Additionally, some books might span multiple genres equally. Therefore, this would affect genre popularity counts (discussed in Finding 4), thus affecting the analysis and conclusion of that particular subsection.

Finally, the top 200 books per year limitation. The lists published by Goodreads

only contained the most popular books of each year from 2020 to 2025. So these lists could be biased towards certain publishers or marketing budgets, considering that this is part of the promotion of publishing books. That is to say that these lists might not represent all books published in these years—it would just represent the most popular ones. Additionally, these lists might miss emerging trends in less popular books and/or genres during a specific year.

Conclusions

This analysis of Goodreads reading trends from 2020-2025 reveals a platform and reading community in transition, marked by declining engagement, evolving genre preferences, and a persistent disconnect between popularity and quality.

The most concerning trend is the dramatic 66% decline in user engagement from 2022's peak of 58.7 million ratings to just 20.1 million in 2025. While the 2022 spike appears inflated by "review bombing" incidents, the sustained downward trajectory suggests readers may be migrating to alternative platforms like StoryGraph or disengaging from book tracking altogether. This decline coincides with widespread user complaints about Goodreads' outdated interface and lack of feature development, indicating the platform may be losing its position as the dominant reading community hub.

Genre analysis reveals that reader preferences remain firmly rooted in escapism and emotional connection. Romance and fantasy have maintained their

dominance throughout the six-year period, with 283 and 275 books respectively in the top 200 lists. These genres alternate in yearly popularity, suggesting readers oscillate between seeking emotional intimacy (romance) and fantastical adventure (fantasy). This pattern likely reflects readers' ongoing desire to escape real-world complexities, particularly relevant given the 2020-2025 timeframe encompassing the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

However, a fascinating quality paradox emerges when examining ratings alongside popularity. While romance and fantasy dominate by volume, memoir (4.27 stars) and nonfiction (4.25 stars) consistently receive higher average ratings. Business, health, and finance—genres that rarely appear in top lists—rate even higher when they do appear. This disconnect suggests that while readers consume fiction for entertainment and escape, they reserve their highest ratings for books offering genuine insight, personal growth, or practical value. Authors and publishers should note this distinction: writing in popular genres offers visibility, but delivering quality in underrepresented genres can yield exceptional reader satisfaction.

The audiobook genre's mysterious disappearance in 2025 represents an unresolved data anomaly that warrants further investigation. Whether this reflects a Goodreads platform change, a shift in categorization practices, or an actual market change remains unclear and highlights the importance of cross-platform analysis in future studies.

Finally, the overall rating decline from 4.008 stars in 2020 to 3.946 stars in 2024 (with a slight 2025 recovery to 3.992) may reflect several factors: rating inflation correction, increased critical engagement from readers, or the impact of review bombing on community standards. Regardless of cause, the trend suggests readers are becoming more discerning—or at least more willing to express disappointment.

For the reading community, these findings underscore the value of diverse reading habits that balance popular fiction with highly rated nonfiction. For authors and publishers, understanding the cyclical nature of genre popularity and the quality-quantity disconnect can inform both writing choices and release timing. For Goodreads itself, the engagement decline should serve as a clear signal that platform improvements are necessary to retain its community.

- **Temporal deep dive** such as looking into seasonal patterns, release timing impacts, and monthly trends
- **Audiobook investigation** since data regarding audiobooks in 2025 was nonexistent from the collected Goodreads data, and even comparing audiobook trends to traditional book (i.e., printed book) trends
- **Predictive modeling** to predict future genre popularity, ratings, or user engagement based on historical data/patterns

Future Work

Some expansions for this project could include, but are not limited to:

- **Platform comparison** such as comparing Goodreads data to Fable and/or StoryGraph data
- **Demographic analysis** if it becomes available (e.g., popular books in the United States compared to Canada, and/or comparing top books in North America to Europe/Asia or other continents)