

# the northern line

the magazine of north london U3A

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- The editors may shorten or otherwise amend articles to fit spacing and style requirements.
- The views expressed in The Northern Line are those of their authors. They do not represent those of NLU3A or the U3A movement. ↻

## From the editor

**F**ound in a recent news report: ‘Alicia Melnyk (not her real name), 90, warms her gnarled hands over the fire in her Ukraine apartment.’ My comment: nice description, but what has her age got to do with it? Alas, never is a story written without the person’s age being thrown in.

But at least it didn’t say ‘Grandmother Alicia...’ or ‘Mother-of-three Alicia...’ Because rarely is a story written without the person’s even more irrelevant relationship status being mentioned. Why? For atmosphere? To garner sympathy?

One of our members was recently contacted by her energy company to tell her that as she’s over 65, they’ve added her to their ‘priority services register’. They did not ask her consent for this – just saw her age and put her on the list. ‘Because I’m of state pension age,’ says the member. ‘Not at my request, not even

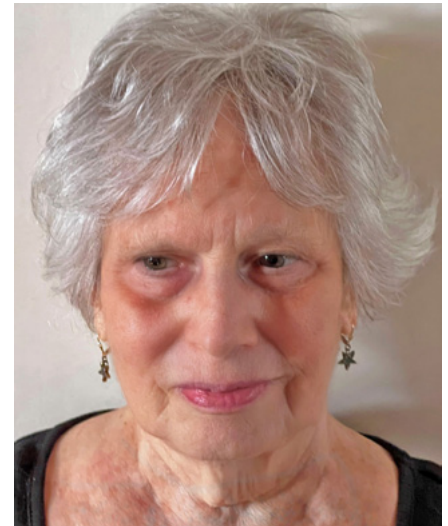
asking my consent – just because I’m over 65!’

Is this a nice gesture or is it simply an example of society-wide ageism? Bingo! You’re officially old. It certainly goes against U3A principles, and in this magazine or u3a Matters, age is not mentioned unless it’s relevant: ‘Jo Bloggs blows out the candles on her 100th birthday cake’.

After a complaint, the energy company in question apologised for their ageism! ‘They now understand that age is not a proxy for vulnerability,’ says the member.

I recently had a five-hour power outage. When we phoned UK Power Networks, which deals with power cuts, to find out why, they asked if anyone was vulnerable, but at no stage did they ask for our age. It was up to us to decide whether we were vulnerable, not some pre-set judgment.

And what would they have



done? Sent round a gas heater? A box of candles? They were already dealing with the outage, and they kept us posted on progress from time to time.

In this issue we visit our two music-making groups, Playing Chamber Music and Singing for Pleasure. We look at the deceptions used in brand marketing and the fraudulent practice of voice-cloning.

Happy reading! ↻

Leni Green  
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**Front cover**  
*Three Musicians* circa 1530.  
Painting by Master of the Female Half-Lengths (Southern Netherlands, active 16th century) circa 1530  
Held by Los Angeles County Museum of Art



**Back cover**  
*Musical company* 1626  
Painting by Rembrandt (1606–1669) held in Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden, Netherlands.

- 400 years later NLU3A are still making music in company. See the articles on pages 3 and 4.

# As I see it

**D**o you know that there are over 1,000 U3As in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that you are one of almost half a million members? These groups are entirely self-financing – no outside funding from anyone – and are truly independent. No one would dare to interfere with our well-known and much-loved structure of self-help, teaching, and learning from one another! Many members offer to lead a group in one speciality or another, which can be immensely satisfying; there is a huge variety of groups to choose from, and social events too.

North London U3A is no exception. I am not a natural

‘joiner’ but when I gave in and paid my subscription in 2009, I knew I had found a home, a way in which to keep my brain alert – the cliché ‘use it or lose it’ is oh! so true! – and to make new friends. To those who say it is not possible to make new friends after a certain age, and particularly after leaving work, I say: nonsense! Join U3A and meet many wonderful men and women; they will enrich your life.

In any U3A, the relatively small subscription is so much less than the price of one cup of coffee a week, and for this you can attend as many groups as you wish: morning, afternoon, and sometimes lunchtime, weekends and evenings, too. If you know



someone who might be interested, persuade them to go along to a local U3A group, or to a monthly meeting. You know they won't regret it. ☺

PATRICIA ISAACS IS A FORMER  
CHAIR OF NLU3A

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## The food of love\*

Making music with others is good for you. It creates social cohesion, improves health and wellbeing, builds confidence – and it's fun! That's no secret to members of our two longstanding music groups – **Playing Chamber Music** and **Singing for Pleasure**. **Keith Richards** introduces the first and **Leni Green** reports on the second

**O**n my 70th birthday in 2001 I hired a cello and a formidable teacher and aimed to reach a standard allowing playing with others. Three years later I approached my friend and neighbour Ginny Saffron, a talented musician who had recently retired, and asked if she would consider forming a small U3A group. She was initially reluctant, but later that year four of us met in her house and held our first session. Two of them – Barbara Penney and me –

\*Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*: If music be the food of love, play on!

remain in the group in 2026; but many others have come and gone – vivid personalities, enthusiastic musicians learning together. At present we meet weekly in North Finchley and are actively seeking new wind and string players. (The venue is too small for brass!)

Ginny led us at first from the bassoon and a variety of instruments. After her sad death in 2012 Bernie Meadows took over and it was a joy to find ourselves playing Mozart, Haydn, Schubert and lesser known

composers. Bernie also invigorated the group with his own music, written with the current players and instruments in mind.

Bernie's recent retirement led to a crisis meeting. How and should we continue? Our cellist, Leatrice Bailey, stepped up and offered to coordinate. Bernie continued 'off stage' as librarian;

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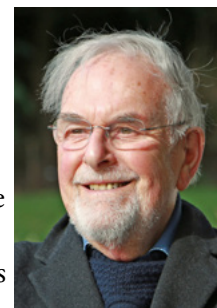




Photo by Hadley Hunter

and pianist and choral scholar Hadley Hunter brought his considerable energy to the project, including production of music copy, which has accumulated over the years. We have almost 200 pieces to choose from.

U3A principles reign. We learn from each other and begin playing with the number of people who appear on the day – sometimes we

are a quartet and on the following week can be a small orchestra. I always leave feeling renewed and in better health, even though my cello days are over. A fall in 2016 left me with little sensitivity in my bowing arm, so I had to give up that instrument. Bernie acted immediately and the group acquired a continuo player on the piano – a role I now share with

Hadley.

It is hard to believe that there are not more U3A members who would like to ‘play chamber music’ with us.

For info, email Leatrice Bailey, leatricemyra@gmail.com

KEITH RICHARDS IS A  
FOUNDING MEMBER OF NLU3A

I was suffering from post-operative pain following a pacemaker insertion. After four weeks’ absence I dragged myself to my Singing for Pleasure group and warned everyone not to touch my left shoulder. At the

it the power of singing? I’ll never know, but it was so good to join others in song again.

I’ve been a member of SFP since I joined NLU3A 17 years ago. Then we met in a church hall in Highgate, where we were

and even gave some of us solos. Martin had been involved with a West End production of *The Music Man*, and he never let us forget that we were not up to the standard of the professional performers!



Photo by Leni Green

end of the 90-minute session I was amazed to find that the pain had largely gone. Was this part of the natural healing process or was

led by the brilliant Max de Boo, accompanied by former West End pianist Martin Goldstein. Max taught us to sing in parts

Max and Martin are, sadly, no longer with us and the group has been through several permutations. We moved to

North London Synagogue in Finchley because of rising costs in Highgate and gained a new accompanist. It was a lovely venue, but the acoustic was terrible – the sopranos couldn't hear the altos and vice versa, and nobody could hear the tenors. So we found alternative premises in St Mary's Church Hall, Hendon Lane, where we remain today, accompanied by pianist Serena Kurash, who patiently teaches us a thing or two.

We have a varied repertoire: classical, folk, oldies, international, popular, show tunes, rounds, spiritual, country... anything goes! And that's one of our songs.

We have sung in languages including French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Maori, Russian, ... someone who knows how to pronounce the language teaches everyone else. And of course English.

Members have introduced the songs over the years; they've come from people's collections and the

internet. At the moment we have some 250 songs to choose from, stored on and printable from a Dropbox file.

You don't have to read music, but it helps. People who can't read music are taught the notes for their part, and we encourage them to sit next to someone who can.

There are no auditions – this is U3A, not a formal choir. It's singing for pleasure, and anyone can join.

People who think they can't sing were usually told so in early childhood by insensitive adults and, forced to keep silent, were never given a chance. But research has shown that anyone with vocal folds can be taught to sing: it's a matter of learning to match pitch with a physical activity. You may not become an opera singer, but who's judging?

Group members volunteer to choose the programmes, each of which lasts for three weeks. The person choosing selects from a variety of genres – so not too

ballady, not too pop-py, not sung too recently. Each programme consists of eight songs, which we learn and practise.

We have a committee: one person helps with song selection; one emails the new song lists to members; one looks after practical matters such as heating; one person takes on the role of treasurer. Our accompanist is professional, so we pay her a small fee.

Why not come along to see if it suits you? We meet at 10.30 on Tuesday mornings, at St Mary's church hall, Hendon Lane, N3 1TR. It's accessible by several buses and the Northern Line tube. And there's a car park but it's best to get there early as it fills up.

If you'd like to give us a try, contact Maureen O'Mahony, [maureenomah@btinternet.com](mailto:maureenomah@btinternet.com) 📧

LENI GREEN IS THE EDITOR OF  
THE NORTHERN LINE

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# Test tube

## Francis Beckett on the trials of modern shopping

I have in my bathroom a tube with the words 'fresh mint' on it, in large letters, alongside a picture of a leaf of mint, presumably in case I am unable to read.

The reason I have not sprayed the contents on a joint of lamb, or poured hot water over them to make a drink, is that I happen to know the tube contains toothpaste. But the word 'toothpaste' appears nowhere on the tube, or the cardboard box it comes in.

You, too, would know it contained toothpaste if you came across it in a supermarket, because like me, you have been conditioned by the big corporations that rule our lives to accept the clues we are given and be grateful for them.

We long ago gave up hoping for the courtesy of being told anything straightforwardly. Packaging shouts out, not the information we want, but what someone else wants us to know.

Yesterday in my local Tesco I

found a box of Light and Free, which I think contained yogurt; another of Mild and Nutty, inside which was something that looked like cheese; and rolls of something called Luxury Soft.

Try to talk to a big corporation and you will find that they are also geared up only to hear what they want to hear, not what you want to say. Technology enables them to do this very efficiently. They just get rid of all their staff, and train their robots only to understand certain things.

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Many corporations then give their robots regional accents and make them use elaborately ordinary language, so as to give you the warm, comforting feeling of talking to a real person. You end up having conversations like this:

ROBOT: 'Allo. We at Megabank like to 'ave a friendly, informal relationship with our customers, or pals as we like to call yer. Now, tell me in a few

words 'ow I can 'elp yer, Duck.

YOU: Oh dear, that's another robot. I really wanted to talk to a human being. Can you put me through to one?

ROBOT: Sorry, Duck, I didn't quite catch that. Could ye just say what you want in a few words, like 'I want to put more money into my account' or 'I want to open a new account.' Summat like that, Duck.

YOU: I'm sick of this. I want

to close my account.

ROBOT: Sorry, wee man, ye'll have t'run that past me again, hoots mon the noo. Could ye no maybe say 'I want to put more money into my account' or 'I want to open a new account.'

YOU: Why have you got a Scottish accent now? You were Yorkshire a minute ago.

ROBOT: Aye. 'Appen. ☺

## Slow Revelation

The garden unfurls like a fern in early Spring  
though far far more slowly, with  
winter and summer revealing scents and touchable  
textures, colours morphing with light,  
a delicious platter to be consumed through time,  
the small woodland, a lovely sitting tenant with Lime and  
Horse-Chestnut, now shades a growing pet cemetery.

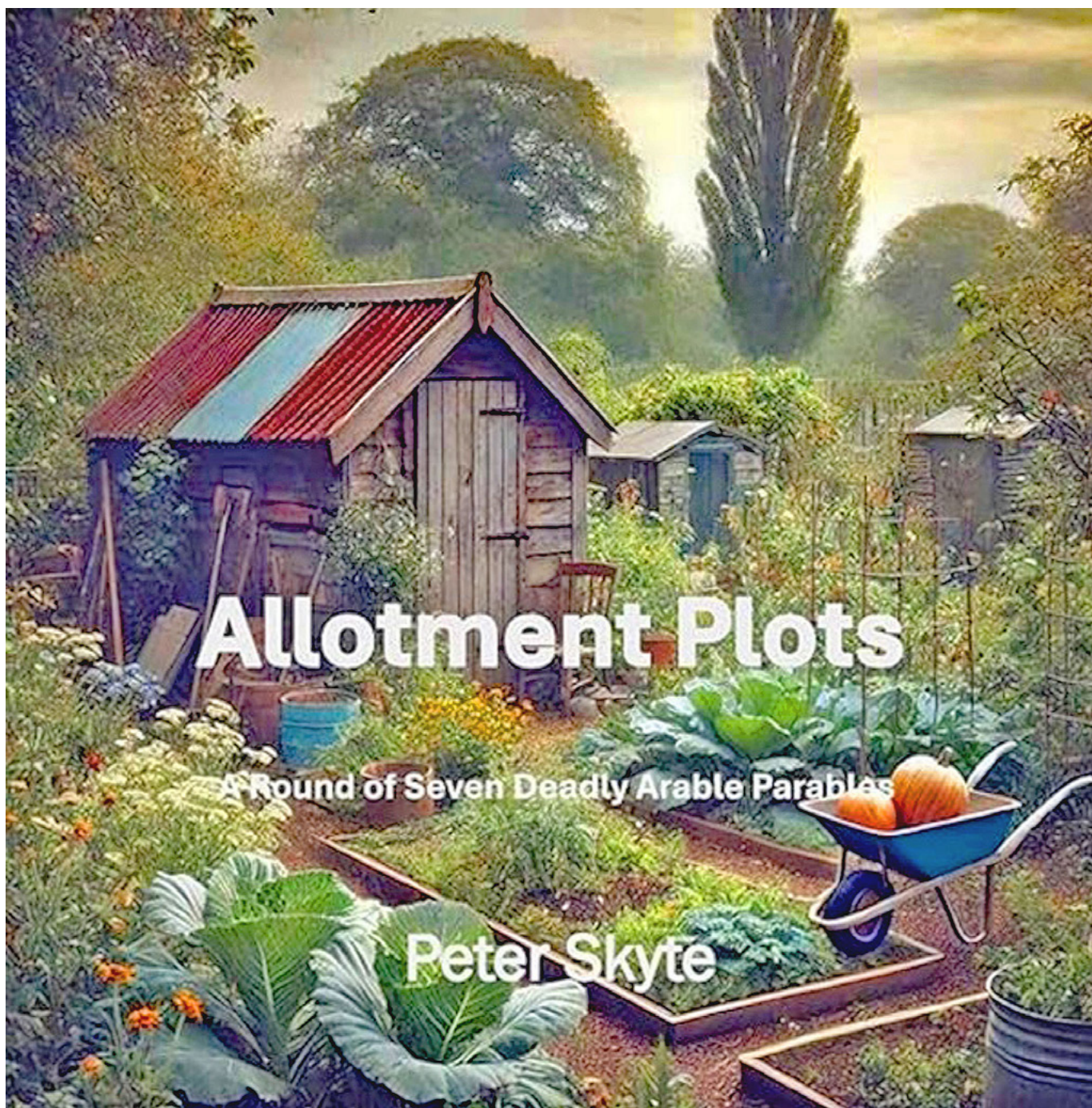
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for company I'd plant a golden willow,  
two apple trees, mint and mallow,  
old Lilac, Laburnum beg for reprieve,  
purple wisteria gives scent to breathe,  
A field of wheat becomes a lawn,  
a garden swing for children yet unborn.  
Daisies dance, dandelions glow, hyacinths, violets,  
sunflowers thrive; raspberries, autumn roses deep,  
poplars that will grow and grow.  
In winter all will fall asleep, frozen, some will  
slumber on. Goldfish in the pond have gone.  
Then April lazy Spring arrives, calls out, yawning,  
"All Rise!" Nature's heart takes a leap,  
blackbirds, robins sing in choir; a riot of colour  
will not be quelled, in earth's embrace all will be held! ☺

Lis VanDyk

# Books by members

Francis Beckett reviews *Allotment Plots* by Peter Skyte. Image by Peter Skyte



The novelist's most precious skill lies, not in writing great action scenes with a high death toll in exotic locations, but in making us really interested in small events on a small and obscure stage.

Think of Jane Austen. She is gripping; her work is full of what today we call page-turners; but the

stage is generally a small village, and the action little more than the occasional pairing and unpairing of its inhabitants.

That, too, is Peter Skyte territory. *Allotment Plots*, the new novel from North London U3A member Peter, is set in the unpromising world of allotments – there are a lot of those in Finchley,

and it's safe to suppose Peter knows that of which he writes.

Peter, a former chemist and trade union official, is now working towards a new career: he describes himself as 'a budding author and playwright, awaiting the buds to blossom.' Born in Leeds, he now lives in north London and

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*Continued from page 7*

contributes regularly to Substack with 'Letter to America'.

*Allotment Plots* shows how small and apparently inconsequential politics grip the participants and the reader. Each of his characters is a real, rounded human being whose fate the reader cares about.

It's written with the professional skill of someone who has been writing fiction all his life. Like all the best novelists, Peter has worked hard to get the opening paragraph right, knowing that this is where you either grip or lose your reader. 'It was a cucumber that had been her nemesis, she would later think' is

his opening gambit, and the rest of the first paragraph leaves you intrigued and looking for more.

The story is told from the standpoints of seven of the allotment holders, and Peter cleverly recounts the same events through different eyes, with different parts of it remembered. So, for example, the moment when the husband of one character finds his wife in bed with the man who has the neighbouring allotment is recounted differently by all three participants.

Again like the best novelists, Peter uses his own experience to sustain the plot. There is talk of the toxicity of certain chemicals for which he has clearly drawn on

his first career. His second career, as a trade union official, enables him to create the character of a former shop stewards' convenor.

If I had a complaint, it's that from time to time the innuendo is a little too blunt to be realistic. The most flirtatious woman, approaching a man at the drinks counter, is, I feel, unlikely to say "I see you have a large one." Or perhaps I have mixed in really inhibited circles.

But this is a trivial complaint about a delightful, and very short, novel, which I recommend. It's available in both paperback (£7.99) and Kindle (£3.99) versions from Amazon at [tinyurl.com/2h38asbv](https://tinyurl.com/2h38asbv) ↻

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## Scamwatch: voice-cloning

**Leni Green** on a dastardly scam which clones your voice from a brief phone call

'Hello? Am I talking to (Your Name)? I hope you're having a great day! I'm Susie and I'm calling from Lifestyle Surveys Ltd. Great news! You've been chosen to answer a few questions about your TV-viewing preferences, in return for which we'll enter you into a competition to win one of five all-expenses-paid trips around the world. Sound good? Would you like to take part?'

What should you do?

- a. Say 'Wow! Yes!' and go ahead
- b. Say 'Can you tell me more?'
- c. Hang up the phone and put the caller on a blocked list.

The correct answer, of course, is c. (You knew that, didn't you?) Because as soon as the AI technology (which is what 'Susie' is) hears your voice, they can clone it and use the replica, to get into your bank

account, set up new direct debits, pay fictitious bills and more. And you're none the wiser until you see that £££ have been taken from your account.

Louise Baxter of the National Trading Centre scams team says: 'Criminals are using AI not just to deceive victims, but to trick legitimate systems into processing fraudulent payments.'

'This is no longer just a nuisance – it's a coordinated, sophisticated operation targeting some of the most ... vulnerable consumers in society.'

What can you do? A few tips that may ease your mind

- Treat any unexpected call with caution. If you're asked to provide sensitive information or make a payment, always verify whether the call is genuine. End the call and, using a different phone, or waiting at least 15 minutes to use the same phone, contact the organisation they claim to be from. Use a number from the organisation's website or from a recent official letter.



Humbugging. Or Raising the Devil, 1800, Thomas Rowlandson. Rowlandson's Humbugging depicts the public as a credulous simpleton being distracted by a display of 'the miraculous', the better to have his pockets picked.

- Never disclose financial information over the phone.
  - Register your landline and mobile with the **Telephone Preference Service** ([tpsonline.org.uk](http://tpsonline.org.uk)). This will stop companies from making unsolicited sales and marketing calls to your phone number. So when you do receive a call, you'll know a scammer is on the other end.
  - Install a **call blocker** to filter out nuisance calls. You'll get caller display, which shows you the number of the person calling; incoming call blocking, which prevents selected numbers from getting through; and caller identification – or 1471.
  - **Call 159 – the anti-fraud line** – if you receive a call claiming to be from your bank. This will put you through to your bank's genuine customer services line. (You can see a full list of the members, including any new companies that become members on the scheme's website, [stopscams.uk.org.uk](http://stopscams.uk.org.uk))
  - **Enter numbers into the call-checking website Who Called Me?** ([who-called.co.uk](http://who-called.co.uk)) to find the caller's identity.
- And if you don't know the caller, just hang up. It's easy! ☺

# The post-graduate: learning for life

Still appreciating learning after so many years **Barry Davies** has come upon some thoughts of past thinkers on the subject

**T**wo quotations from the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*:

‘Learning teacheth more in one year than experience in twenty.’ **Roger Ascham** (1515–1568). English scholar, writer and courtier.

‘Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practise from time to time what has been learned?’ **Confucius** (551–479 BC). Chinese philosopher.

From **Goethe’s** (1749–1832) *Faust* Part 2, lines 6754–6759, translated by David Luke (some meaning changed for the sake of rhyme and the original metre), where Mephistopheles and The Graduate are exchanging words:

MEPHISTOPHELES:

Well, there is a time for learning. You, I see,  
Are yourself qualified to teach. Presumably,  
After these many years, or months at least,  
Your store of experience will have increased.

THE GRADUATE:

Experience! Insubstantial stuff!  
Unworthy of the intellectual.  
What’s long been known quite well enough,  
Why bother knowing it at all?

From *Silent Catastrophes* by **W G Sebald** (1944–2001), translated by Jo Catling, in his chapter on Elias Canetti:

His ideal is not the prophet, but the teacher, whose great good fortune ... is that learning never ends. Whereas the ruler always remains in one place, the learner is always on a journey. ‘Learning has to be an adventure, otherwise it’s stillborn. What you learn at a given moment ought to depend on chance meetings, and it ought to continue in that way, from encounter to encounter, a learning in transformations, a learning for fun.’ (Canetti, *Aufzeichnungen*). The central activity of the learner, however, is not writing but reading ‘*Lesen bis die Wimpern vor Müdigkeit leise klingen*’ [‘To read until one’s eyelashes gently chime in weariness’] ...

For Canetti learning appears identical with life itself, as it should be.

Whether or not one agrees with the Mephistopheles view on the relative value of experience, learning, and learning at any age, has for ever been seen as a necessary part of life. That and founder member Keith Richards’ enthusiasm is why I got involved with and acquired my affection for NLU3A. It’s why the U3A movement was conceived and born. Is it still as important as it used to be? Haven’t other ideas nationally taken precedence? Why are we frightened of the word ‘university’? ☞



Portrait of Goethe in the Compagna Romana painted in 1787 by Johann Heinrich Tischbein, who appears to have given his subject two left feet. Held by Städfel Museum, Frankfurt, public domain.

Photo of the painting taken by Barry Davies

# Forthcoming monthly meetings

NLU3A monthly meetings usually take place on the second Monday of the month and are held at St Margaret's United Reformed Church, Victoria Avenue, London N3 1BD. Doors open at 10am, when refreshments are served. Meetings start at

10.45. The venue is a short walk from Finchley Central tube station, or it can be reached by buses 13, 125, 143, 326 and 460 from Hendon Lane or Regent's Park Road. Booking is required to manage numbers – email [meetings@nlu3a.org.uk](mailto:meetings@nlu3a.org.uk)

**11 May**

## America and Britain: What happened – and is there a way back?

**W**hat has happened to the 'special relationship' between the US and the UK? In this lively and lightly provocative talk, **Steven Fogel**, a US/UK lawfirm manager, will examine the reach of American cultural power — what it has given us, what it may have cost us, and whether some measure of recalibration on this side of the Atlantic is still possible.



Nicolas Raymond/flickr.com

**8 June**

## The unsung heroes of the Oxford English Dictionary



**W**hat do three murderers, Karl Marx's daughter, a kleptomaniac and a vegetarian vicar have in common? They all helped create the Oxford English Dictionary! Professor **Sarah Ogilvie** will dive deep into previously untapped archives to tell a people's history of one of the most famous books in the world.

Sarah is Professor of Language and Lexicography at the University of Oxford and a former OED editor.

**13 July**

## Growing up in London 1930–1960

**C**onvinced that people born between the wars were a forgotten generation, NLU3A member **Peter Cox** decided to interview members of London U3As who were born in this period, focusing on their childhoods and adolescence. In this talk he will read from the resulting book, which was published in 2025.



Imperial War Museum/Wikimedia Commons

**The summer term, which began on 7 April, runs until 31 July. The autumn term will be announced on the website and in the monthly newsletter.**

