



the northern line

the magazine of north london U3A issue 92 September 2026

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- The Northern Line, published three times a year, is edited by Leni Green and designed by Barry Davies.
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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

When I joined the U3A 15 or so years ago, its leader was referred to as a chairman. No matter if the leader was not a man; chairman it was, and I remember writing many letters to the national magazine strongly objecting to this designation. Now, of course, we just say 'chair' and ignore those who say: 'I am not a piece of furniture!'

But what pronouns do we use? Political correctness used to legislate for the cumbersome 'she/he' or 's/he' or the longer 'she or he' (or the other way round). Some people put 'she/her' or 'he/him' in their email signatures.

Others, specifically those who identify as non-binary (neither

male nor female), choose 'they/them'. For example: Peter was elected president. They said they were delighted and would do their best to represent everyone. (Read *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo.)

This also brings objections. It's not grammatical. It's not English. What does it matter, anyway? Life would be so much simpler if we spoke a language like Spanish, in which personal pronouns can almost always be avoided.

In this issue our reading groups recommend books to get us through the forthcoming winter months. We introduce a new series, Art by Members, to accompany the ongoing Books by Members. And I report on a



dastardly scam that almost cleaned out my bank account.

Happy reading! ☺

Leni Green
editor@nlu3a.org.uk



Front cover: *Daffodils*
back cover: *Laguna Winter*, paintings by Micky Mankin. For more of her work and details of her conversation with Diana Toeman see page 6.



The first R

Poetry or prose – everything goes! Our reading groups recommend literature that has pleased them

Contemporary Novelists

We meet every third Monday in the month for about an hour and a half. Members suggest books, and we pick a selection to read over the coming months.

It's rare that there is a total consensus on a book, but one we all agreed on is *Shy Creatures* (Mariner Books, 2024) by Clare Chambers.

It's set in the 1960s and follows Helen, an art therapist recently appointed to work in a Croydon psychiatric hospital. She is called to the house of a mute man, William Tapping, age 37, who has slipped through the social services net and who has been isolated in his home since he was a child.

Gradually, and with warmth and hope, the story of William's sad and restricted life is revealed, slowly

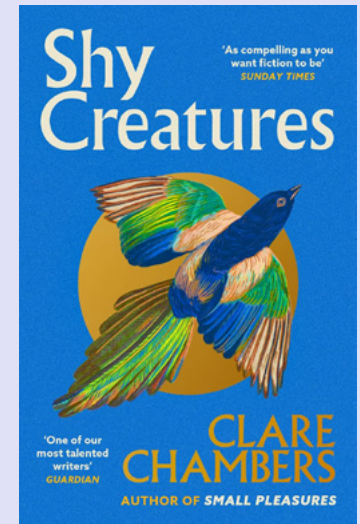
in reverse chronological order – 1960s–1930s – and spliced between the ongoing story of Helen's love life and other 'goings on' at the hospital.

It is an excellent read, with characters carefully observed throughout the book. The slow revelation of how William became mute and isolated gradually comes to light, and how he becomes, eventually, integrated back into society. Helen is pivotal to this and her story develops along with his.

We all enjoyed this well-written book with its good story line and its promising and happy ending. A brief explanation at the beginning says that the story of William Tapping is based on a true happening.

A page turner of a story, we recommend it highly.

On the other hand, another

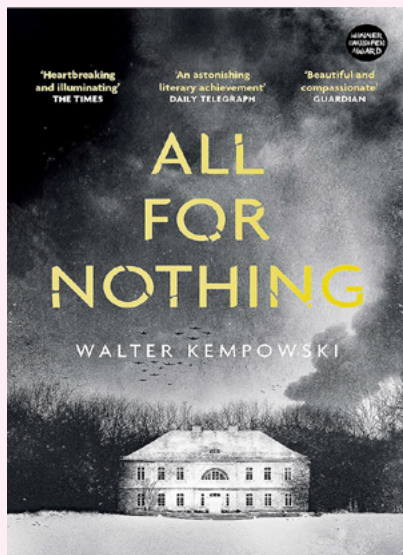


book that we all agreed on, and that none of us enjoyed, was *Murder at Mount Fuji* (St Martin's Press, 1982) by Shizuko Natsuki. A definite thumbs down! ☹️

VIV PRESTON

WITH HELP FROM THE GROUP

Reading in translation



The group, hosted by Miriam Mazower, reads novels translated from other languages, and they selected *All for Nothing* (Granta, 2016) by Walter Kempowski.

In January 1945, during a bitter winter, a family hunker down in their manor house in East Prussia. They hear rumours of the advancing Russians, but they are in denial. Tension rises in the family and among local

people. Eyes are averted from cruelty in their midst. Reality finally arrives via a flood of refugees and wounded soldiers, whereupon the family take to the roads. But have they left it too late?

The novel has occasional longueurs (e.g. the writer has an annoying habit of telling us repeatedly about one character's favourite fish meal), but overall the story gripped our imagination. ☹️

TERRY TASTARD

Reading Classic Novels

We meet once a month in members' homes, when we decide what to read in the forthcoming month. We concentrate on classic English novels.

One of our favourite writers is Anthony Trollope; over the years we have read several of his books. At the moment we're re-reading *The Barchester Chronicles*, which is a series of six novels set in the fictional county of Barsetshire. We had read them years ago and knew we'd enjoyed them.

Although they can be read separately, it's more interesting

to read them in the right order as characters weave in and out of the books. Trollope presents a living community where old friends come and go.

His writing makes the characters realistic and easy to relate to; the women are strong and independent and bring their energy to the stories.

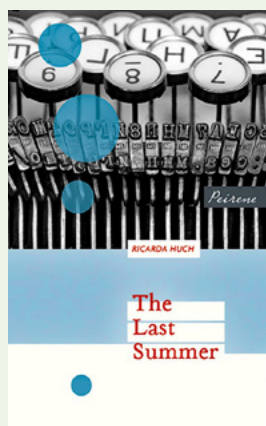
Trollope's sense of optimism and wit, while exploring social and political issues, brings thoughtful enjoyment to the reader. It celebrates everyday life with all its ups and downs. ☺

LIGIA HOLLY



Mrs. Proudie and Archdeacon Grantly in *Barchester Towers*. Wikimedia Commons

Reading the World



Ricarda Huch Wikimedia Commons

reads. *The Last Summer* by Ricarda Huch, a pioneering German intellectual writing in the early 20th century, spins a compelling web of intrigue entirely from letters. It is set in turn-of-century St Petersburg, where revolutionary fervour is gathering

We meet every other week for about two hours. We suggest books and agree a programme which allows the group to plan their reading. We usually look for books which have been written in another language and translated into English. This allows us insights into another world different to our own and makes our reading very rewarding. We look for books which are not too long, typically no more than 200 pages.

Two books selected recently stand out as particularly good

momentum, and the governor is facing threats after closing the local university. His wife calls in someone to protect him at his summer house, but this new secretary/guard has other ideas. The letters between the characters over the summer leap off the page and transport you into their world, where events threaten to spin out of control. It was written in 1910 but translated into English less than a decade ago for Peirene Press, a small independent publisher. Its writing style and the characters' struggles feel very contemporary.

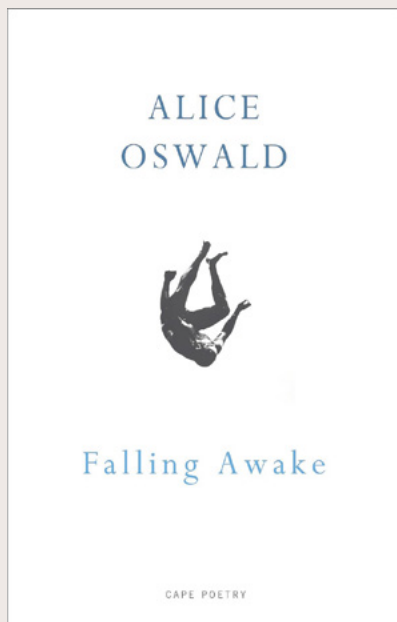
Another book worthy of a mention is *The Ice Palace* by well-known Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas. Written in 1963 but translated only about a decade ago, it tells the tale of Siss and Unn, two friends who have been together just one evening in each other's company. But so profound is this time spent together that when Unn disappears without a trace, Siss's world is destroyed.

A member of our reading group describes this novel like this: '*The Ice Palace* is an unusual, chilling story of two young girls, one an outsider, which may or may not reveal what happens to one of them. It is intriguing, with wonderful descriptions of scenery, ice and isolated villagers. Perhaps an allegory?' ☺

TAPAN DATTA

TAPAN HAS TAKEN OVER AS COORDINATOR FROM VICKY OLLIVER, WHO, SADLY, DIED IN THE SPRING.

Modern and Contemporary Literature



We have been a study group since the launch of NLU3A in 1994.

Currently our focus is on poetry. We are eclectic in the choice of poets we read and study – from Shakespeare's sonnets to poets of the 21st century, two of whom we want to recommend to members of NLU3A.

Alice Oswald was the first acting female Oxford Professor of Poetry, from 2019 to 2023. Her 2016 collection, *Falling Awake* (which was shortlisted for both the TS Eliot and Costa Poetry Prize), deals with the natural world and our mortality. A review

in the *Guardian* calls it 'a dazzling celebration of nature'. A lot of Oswald's poetry is online on the Poetry Foundation website (poetryfoundation.org).

Sarah Wardle's 2003 collection, *Fields Away* (Bloodaxe Books 2003), is extremely readable. Our members thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the accessibility, variety and emotional depths of her poetry. Unfortunately her poems are not available online.

Both Oswald and Wardle read Classics at Oxford. Sarah also has an MA and DPhil in English from Sussex University. ☺

ANN BRACKEN

As I see it

Joining a new U3A group is an ideal way to get through the winter, says **Patricia Isaacs**

Sitting by an open window in July, with blue sky and warm sunshine, I am thinking ahead to September, when you will be reading this. Autumn is often a delightful season, but it means that winter is about to take over, with the days already significantly shorter, the evenings longer.

Darkness when you wake up and when you get home in the afternoon can be depressing.

Time to think about U3A groups during the coming months; some of you will continue with groups you have enjoyed, some of you will look for new ideas, new inspiration, new people to meet. One of the many good

benefits of being a member of a U3A is that anything can happen, routines can change, friendships can develop.

Look through the list of groups on the website and read the information on new ones about to begin. Any group meeting can be inspiring, and you can be a part of that inspiration by participating in discussion, or by suggesting topics for future sessions. And remember to make any newcomers feel

welcome; it isn't always easy to walk into a roomful of people as the only stranger; introducing yourself with a welcome smile will mean a lot to someone who feels a little shy.

'It isn't always easy to walk into a roomful of people as the only stranger; introducing yourself with a welcome smile will mean a lot to someone who feels a little shy.'



I have made many good friends through my involvement with U3A, and that, along with the opportunity to learn something new and to keep my brain alert, is worth every penny of my annual subscription. I hope you will make the most of everything on offer during the winter. ☺

PATRICIA ISAACS IS A PAST CHAIR OF NLU3A.

Art by members

Painters, sculptors, jewellers – they're all represented in NLU3A. In a new series on members' art, **Micky Mankin** tells **Diana Toeman** why she paints

What inspired you to paint?

I've painted all my life! As a child, I never painted like ordinary four- or five-year olds. I always thought that I was rubbish because I didn't do that blue strip at the top and that green strip at the bottom and a house with three figures bigger than the house. I used to fill in the sky in the background and I had everything in proportion. I thought that was terrible: I thought I should be drawing like all the other children.

Would you say you had a sense of perspective?

I never had to learn perspective. I could always do it automatically.

Life drawing is the basis of art. If you can draw the body, you can draw anything.

And you started painting with what? Crayons, watercolours?

At school we used poster paints. At my prep school we didn't really do art: it was a very academic and religious school and they didn't bother with things like art and games. It was only when I went to grammar school that I learned art officially. We did a lot of charcoal and life drawing. My art teacher, a well-known artist who went to the Slade School of Art, taught me painting for seven years.

Tell me about the life class. Was it in your teenage years?

From ages 11 to 18, I learned life drawing at school. It was part of the A-level syllabus and I continued it afterwards. Life drawing is the basis of art. If you can draw the

body, you can draw anything. You have to get the body exactly right. So all artists who do figurative or representational work go to life classes, all through their lives.

So if you're a landscape painter, this doesn't apply to you?

I think anybody who's a landscape artist has probably learnt some life drawing. I'm not sure because nowadays they don't teach you anything in most art schools. In my five years at art school I didn't have one lesson in technique. People like the late David Hockney used to go mad because he said nobody can draw nowadays. All we did was paint large abstracts that looked like nothing on earth. And in fact, the head of the sculpture classes said to me: 'The trouble with you, Micky, is you draw too well.'

What are you painting now?

I'm basically a landscape artist. I love a landscape: I was brought up in the country.

What are your favourite media for creating a landscape?

© Micky Mankin



Great Dixter – a wonderful medieval house and fabulous gardens in East Sussex. The famous gardens are amazing and really fired my imagination. This is one of a series of paintings in acrylic.

I use everything. For example, 'Great Dixter' is acrylic on canvas. It's a wonderful medieval house in East Sussex with fabulous gardens, which really fired my imagination. (See greatdixter.co.uk)

How much do your surroundings or daily life influence your art?

A lot! I was on holiday in California last December. We went to Laguna Bay and red-hot poker were everywhere. The colour, shape and size were magnificent and so



Cornish Summer - Mixed media. Cotton dyed with tea and bleach, then embroidered with flowers. Other additions in acrylic and gold leaf paint. The whole then stitched onto a canvas. Finally a border is painted.

inspired me. The result, 'Laguna Winter', is acrylic on canvas. (See back cover)

Would you describe your work as a collage?

No, in collage you stick things on. 'Cornish Summer' is mixed media – embroidery and acrylic on canvas. I start with a canvas. Then I take some fabric and I dye it with tea and bleach. This gives me slightly smudgy brown and beige colours. Then I do the embroidery and the painting and I sew the whole thing onto the canvas. And then I paint the border.

'Daffodils' (see front cover) is

also acrylic on canvas. They're my favourite flower and always make me smile. My home is filled with them from January to April.

Is there a message or feeling that you hope people get when they're looking at your art?

Joy! I don't paint political stuff. I don't paint my emotions. I paint what I like to see. And I like beautiful things. I love the landscape, flowers, trees and that's what I want to represent. I do a lot of sitting and drawing outside.

And you hope that the people who are viewing them feel the

same way?

Yes I do.

On average how often do you paint?

As I've got the space, several times a week. In some I use a fresh canvas. Others I just recycle. If I don't like the painting underneath, which is maybe very old or I wasn't very happy with, I just slap some white paint over it and start again. ☺

• Do you do artwork? Or do you know another member who does? If so, we would like to feature you! Please email editor@nlu3a.org.uk

Black and blue

If you were born in the UK, your birth was probably registered using Stephens' Ink. Invented by Dr Henry 'Inky' Stephens and patented in 1836, it was renowned for its indelibility and was one of the official inks that the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages was required to use throughout the UK until it went out of production in the late 1980s. **Leni Green** reports



Henry Stephens was a medical doctor, chemist, entrepreneur, writer and poet. One of his endeavours was to improve writing fluids and wood stains, and this led to the creation of his world-famous blue-black ink.

A letter about ink and ink stands published in *Mechanics' Magazine, Register, Museum, Journal and Gazette* in 1836 contained the following paragraph:

'Mr Stephens' writing fluid is remarkable for the ease with which it flows from and follows every stroke of the pen, for its bright and distinct blue colour when first

The history of the ink company is on display in a small museum – The Stephens Collection – in Stephens House in Finchley. A Grade II Listed

Building, it features the history of the Stephens family and the eponymous ink company, with a section on the development of writing materials.

The house and grounds, now known as Stephens House and Gardens, are run by the Avenue House Estate Trust, a local charity, for public benefit and as a memorial to Stephens and his son Henry Charles. One of its frequent visitors was

the comedian Spike Milligan, a Finchley resident whose memorial statue sits on a bench at the top of



Spike Milligan © Leni Green

the hill and overlooks the gardens.

You need to arrange to visit the museum. Email Melanie Wynard, vsm@stephenshouseandgardens.com

The good news is that the museum is free. And if you live in Finchley, it's yours! So why not go? And while you're there, have a walk round the gardens, have lunch in the Stables café, sit with Spike on his bench and enjoy the view. You don't have to book for these! ☺

- Stephens House, 17 East End Road, Finchley, London N3 3QE. Tube: Finchley Central. Buses 13, 125, 143, 460 and 326.



© Stephens House

written with, and for the superior blackness which it afterwards invariably acquires.'

Stephens' son, Henry Charles, took on the company on his father's death in 1864. A member of the Chemistry Society and an MP for Hornsey, he bought the estate in 1874 and constructed Avenue House. He left the estate to the Urban District Council 'for the enjoyment of the people'.



© Stephens House

Planning the monthly meetings

U3A chair **Edmond Cohen** recollects

It started in the Egg and Bake café in East Finchley High Road. I was the outgoing chair of the NLU3A committee and, thinking about what to do next. And John Hadju, the soon-to-retire monthly meetings organiser, was looking for a successor.

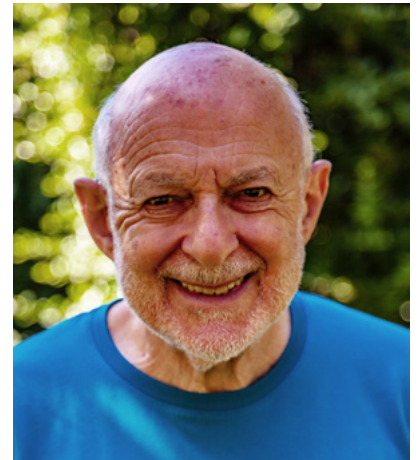
John suggested we met at the café as he highly recommended their pastries. I was interested in filling the role, but I wanted to know what was involved. He handed me a thick sheaf of paperwork with past speakers and those booked for the next two months and told me that you need to book ahead by at least six months.

Having absorbed the information, I decided to take on the role – with a few changes. St Paul's in Long Lane had been hosting the meetings for many years, but it wasn't satisfactory: our members had to set out the chairs themselves, and the audio equipment regularly broke down.

I had attended a meeting in St Margaret's recently refurbished church, and I thought it ideal. As it had excellent facilities, we moved the monthly meetings there.

I also felt that as monthly meetings organiser I needed new ideas, so my committee colleague, Susan Watt, came on board to join me in the planning group. We were both keen to give the programme a refresh, and we started exploring subjects and speakers and getting more variety into the programme. A while later another member, Edward Halsted, joined our planning group.

We meet every few months to monitor progress, and we continue to use many different sources to choose speakers from. The range of talks has covered everything from the London Air Ambulance Service to reforming the House of Lords, and from Harrods to the history of Kentish Town. Attendances have grown



and we have had to institute a booking system. We have excellent help from Mary O'Toole, who manages registration at the door with her team, and Marion Fitzpatrick, who oversees the catering team.

After many months and years I decided to hand over the role of introducing the speakers to Edward Halsted, but am continuing to be a part the group providing interesting speakers and subjects for our members. ☺

Crimes of the times

I've been hacked! I warn you about these crimes in every issue but it seems I need to pay more attention myself, says **Leni Green**

One morning I got a call from 'Visa Fraud' (inverted commas tell you that it's not genuine) saying that there was suspicious activity on my accounts and advising me to call my bank's fraud department NOW. 'Jack', the person I got through to in the 'bank' sounded sympathetic and gave me complex procedures to follow because, he

said, the fraudsters were in the bank itself and not Visa at all. He invented a story for the bank in which £10,000 would be sent from my account as a loan to a fictitious cousin who needed to borrow money to fund the purchase of a conservatory. He named this cousin and gave him a bank account and a street address. This money would come back to me

in three days' time. It seemed, he said, that there was a major fraud operating in my branch, targeting people over 75. I was to go to the branch and have them transfer the funds to this non-existent account. I'd be on CCTV; all would be recorded; the thieves would be nabbed and put behind bars. And I wasn't to worry because the money

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

would come back to my account – in three days' time, he stressed. The thing was: I wasn't to mention anything about the fraud because I could well be talking to one of the criminals.

And reader, I fell for it!

I did ask the caller how I was to know he wasn't also a fraudster, along with the bank thief and the Visa concoction; he brushed this aside. When I got home, I received a phone call from my bank saying that they were declining the transaction. But, remembering what 'Jack' had said about in-branch thieves, I told the caller I didn't trust her. She told me I could check her identity by calling the number on the back of my bank card. (You can also call 159, which will connect you with your real live bank.) Meantime, 'Jack' kept ringing. 'You did everything I told you not to,' he moaned. 'This person who just called you is probably a fraudster. Here's what to do...'

Luckily I ignored him and

called the number on the card. They spent over an hour on the phone with me explaining how the latest frauds (mine is phishing, I think) operate and not hanging up until they were sure I was OK. No money had left my account; they'd be replacing my debit card; they were there if I needed them. And 'Jack'? He stopped calling, and in any case, I'd blocked his number.

The moral of the story? Fraudsters are incredibly convincing. After all, they're after our money. So we need to be incredible too. Incredibly vigilant.

- If you suspect fraud, either phone the number on the back of your bank card, or call 159, but wait at least 15 minutes before doing this in case the scammer is



still on the line. You can also email reportfraud.police.uk

Postscript: It happened again as we were nearing publication! A call saying that there was unrecognised activity on my credit card. (I'd already deleted this one in email.) So I told the caller where to go and phoned 159, who immediately put me through to my bank, who sorted it out.

Remember: 159 every time! ☺

The age of consent

Francis Beckett on the tribulations of trying to buy a property once you've retired

You've heard of people being under the age of consent. But I've only just found out that I am OVER the age of consent. So, I fear, are most of the readers of The Northern Line.

My wife and I sold our house, and wanted to rent a flat while we looked for somewhere else to buy. But house hunting and renting are, apparently, the sort of thing you're only allowed to do

before you retire. Estate agents gave our grey hairs some very old-fashioned looks, and asked us what we did for a living. When we said we were retired, their worst suspicions were confirmed. We'd have done better to claim to be 19-year-old professional drug dealers.

We did manage to find a flat in Finchley that would do, so we agreed the asking price and handed over £600 deposit. But

the landlord, Mr Dilip Puri, who rents out several properties in the area, noticed that we were retired, and demanded a guarantor for the rent.

You've heard of parents standing as guarantor for their sons and daughters. But we had to ask our daughter to stand as guarantor for us. She is a solid citizen: she is in her thirties. All three of us had to upload all our recent bank statements

for a referencing agency called Goodlords.

It was suggested that we could save trouble by giving Goodlords authority to roam free in all our bank accounts, but we said No, thank you.

Goodlords agreed that, with our daughter standing guarantor, we might be trusted with the flat, despite the irresponsible attitude to money that goes with being old.

All was well. Except that it wasn't. Two days before we were due to move in, Mr Puri decided he needed more assurance. He demanded to see all the papers showing how we had invested the proceeds of our house. This time we rebelled, in the irresponsible way that people do rebel at our age. The deal was off.

That was two years ago. Our renting days are over and we have bought a flat. The other day we

sallied forth to buy a dining table for it. The nice people at Fishpools said we could have 0 per cent finance, and could we just fill in this online form.

But they didn't reckon with the fact that we were, well, old, and neither of us has a job. Now that we have been forced to disclose these shameful facts, we have been 'referred for further checks'.

Solid citizens we're not. ☹️



"For Rent, \$5000 per Year and Up" New York Leader. October 18, 1923. By Edmund Duffy. Harvard College Library, Public Domain

Monthly meetings

Date	Event	Details
7 September	NLU3A Open morning	10.00–11.30 at St Margaret's United Reformed Church, N3
14 September	Monthly meeting	Speaker: Alan Silman on famous people and their illnesses: Beethoven
12 October	Monthly meeting and AGM	Speaker: Roger Filer on Irving Berlin
9 November	Monthly meeting	Speaker: Peter Popham on disaster at the end of the Raj: Gandhi vs Churchill
7 December	Festive lunch	Venue TBC <i>Note: This replaces the December monthly meeting.</i>

- Full details of monthly meetings are available from nlu3a.org.uk/monthly-meetings
- The autumn term starts on 7 September and ends on 18 December.



Michael