

REPORT ON READER ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS



NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa

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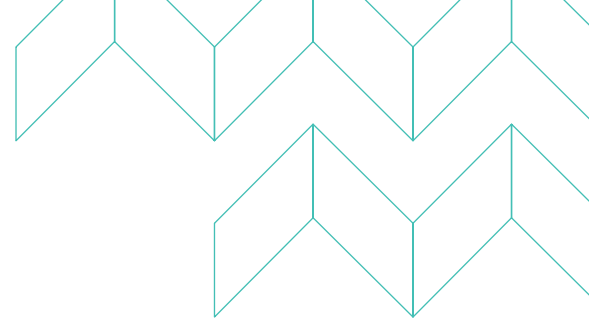
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OVERVIEW AND AIM OF RESEARCH



The New Zealand Book Council's role is to advocate for the proven lifelong social and personal benefits of reading, and to increase the number of New Zealanders of all ages who read for pleasure. We particularly promote and encourage the reading of New Zealand books.

To develop a strong reading culture, we need to know what encourages and what discourages or limits reading. There has been very little qualitative New Zealand research into this subject, so we designed our research to uncover attitudes and behaviours towards reading – positive and negative. We focused the research on adult readers.

We wanted to learn what barriers exist; what prevents people from reading regularly and widely? For example, do they hold limiting beliefs around the various genres of fiction?

We were especially interested in exploring why New Zealanders seem to prefer international fiction to their own. A 2012 survey of readers conducted by Victoria University Masters student, Pia White¹, found that 67% thought it was important to read books by New Zealand authors, but 72% said they read such books "rarely" or only "sometimes". Only 23% said they read them often.

Sales data supports this. While New Zealand non-fiction sells very well compared with international non-fiction (Nielsen BookScan data regularly places it at around a third of the total non-fiction sold), our fiction does not fare as well. According to Nielsen BookScan, in 2014, New Zealand fiction comprised only 3% of all fiction bought in this country. Based on available sales data², estimates suggest that New Zealand fiction comprises more like 5-6% of all fiction bought here. Our research aimed to discover the reasons for the comparatively low consumption. (NB: Stage 2 of this research project will be gathering data to create an industry-wide picture of sales and readership in New Zealand.)

It is also important for us to know what encourages people to read. How do they find out about books? What persuades them to try a book and to broaden their reading? What opportunities exist to more widely promote books and reading for pleasure? Resulting benchmarking information and data will be useful to the entire New Zealand book industry.

First phase of a larger project

This is the first phase of a research project the Book Council is undertaking in order to support the sales and readership of New Zealand books. Further research will be developed with the aim of uncovering additional information in specific areas.

For the second part, we are gathering sales and readership data from numerous sources, from which we aim to create a picture of the position of New Zealand books within New Zealand (including self-published books), and establish ongoing trends in New Zealanders' reading and borrowing of New Zealand authors and illustrators. We foresee that this data will provide useful benchmarking information for publishers, booksellers and authors, and arts funding bodies.

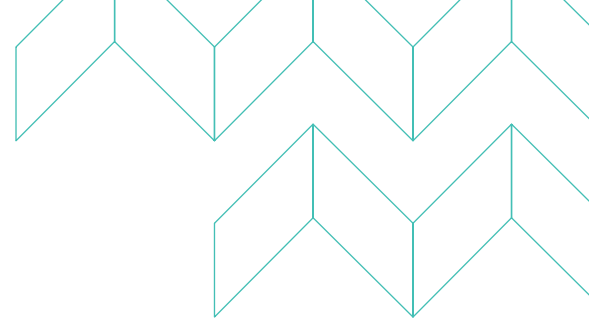
How will this research be used?

The New Zealand Book Council will use the insights from this research to enhance our existing strategies for increasing the number of lifelong readers for pleasure, and for encouraging greater consumption of New Zealand fiction. We will also share our findings with the wider industry – publishers, booksellers, etc. – for use in their own strategies.

1 Read the **survey**.

2 Nielsen data: volume of NZ fiction sold in 2014 and 2015 as a percentage of total sales volume. NB: data not yet finalised.

THE PROCESS



We conducted 11 focus groups around the country. The participants were drawn from existing book groups that are either run privately or organised through libraries in the following locations:

- Whangarei
- Auckland Central x 2
- Ōtāhuhu
- Tauranga
- Wellington Central x 2
(including a young readers group)
- Hutt Valley
- Nelson
- Christchurch
- Dunedin

Participants

The participants were all keen readers and from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. As existing book groups tend to attract an older demographic (our participants were aged mid-40s to early 80s), we ran a younger readers group (ages 18 to 21) in Wellington, and there was one other teen in the Nelson group.

We could not avoid the fact that book groups are also mainly female. However, five of the groups, including the younger readers one, were mixed-gender. Our groups were also predominantly Pākehā, with two Māori (one male, one female) and no Pacific Island participants overall. We see an opportunity to do further research into the attitudes and behaviours of Māori and Pasifika readers.

Our primary aim was to target participants who were regular readers for pleasure, and we believe the make-up of our groups is in keeping with national and international evidence about who reads the most:

- A 2012 study found 23% of New Zealand men read no books in the past year compared with only 8% of women, and that those who read the most were aged over 65³.

- United States National Endowment for the Arts data for 2012 showed 64% of women read fiction vs 45% of men, and those who read the most were aged 65-75⁴.

Survey questions

The questions were designed to reveal attitudes and behaviours towards both reading and different genres/types of books. Because our emotions drive our actions and decisions, we probed beneath the surface to uncover the emotions at the root of certain attitudes and opinions, particularly negative or ingrained ones. We wanted to uncover the 'why' – what had led to these opinions being formed.

We conducted a 'genre ranking' exercise, which was designed to a) provide us with data about genre preferences; b) encourage the participants to question how they defined each genre; and c) see New Zealand fiction presented as a similar range of subjects and styles rather than a homogenous whole.

We ended with a series of questions about New Zealand fiction, designed to uncover the reasons why consumption of our fiction is comparatively low. White's 2012 study concluded with a hypothesis that New Zealand fiction "did not cater for a particularly wide range of reading interests" and was "largely disconnected from the more reflexive motives of pleasure, personal interest or entertainment". We wanted to test these and other perceptions as we felt, particularly, the first statement does not reflect an accurate portrayal of the range of contemporary New Zealand fiction, which includes romance, historical drama, 'chick-lit', fantasy series and crime.

Anecdotally, everyone in the book industry has an opinion on why New Zealanders are not high consumers of our own fiction. We wished to test all those possibilities, and get to the root of why we hold the attitudes we do.

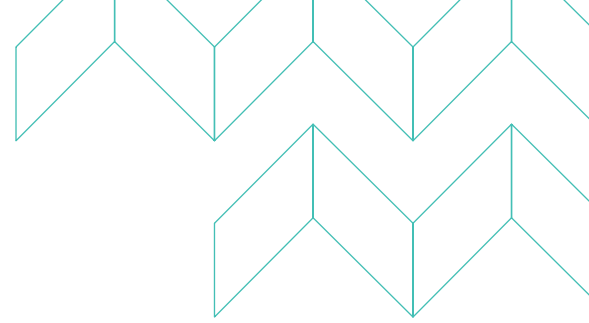
3 View the [NZ Herald article](#).

4 View the [United States National Endowment for the Arts article](#).

"...reading for pleasure is primarily about leaving the world and entering another, being immersed and forgetting about your cares and obligations..."



KEY FINDINGS



General:

1. Reasons for reading in order of most cited: escapism; relaxation/time out; learning/exposure to other times/cultures/experiences; enjoyment of the writing.

- Universal across the groups, including the younger readers, was that reading for pleasure is primarily about leaving the world and entering another, being immersed and forgetting about your cares and obligations, as well as having 'me time' – *"A chance to become 'other'."*
- Learning was also a very strong motivation for reading; people wanted to finish a book feeling better informed about cultures, places, times or people's experiences (which could be new to them or another perspective on one they'd had). They wanted to be startled by new knowledge and use it as a springboard for more reading – either more books or following the Google trail. This applied to both non-fiction and fiction (particularly historical fiction and that written by foreign authors about their own country).
- The quality of the writing was important but cited less often than the reason above – a reasonably common comment was that they'd rather enjoy a book than admire it.

- Participants often categorised their books into those that were purely for escapism (usually lighter, easier reads) and those that were more challenging, which could be because of their content (an academic historical study) or writing style (an experimental literary work). Some participants had several books on the go, and read different types of books at different times of day, e.g. lighter works at night when they wanted to relax.
- ### 2. Sharing – discussing and recommending books – can enhance the enjoyment of reading.
- Apart from reading aloud to children, reading is a solitary pastime, but many keen readers also love to discuss books: their feelings and opinions on the story and characters; quality of the writing; and themes, ideas and issues. Most people said they preferred when the group disagreed about a book, so that they could have a debate. Book groups would often make selections based on which books would stimulate the most discussion.
 - The younger readers shared and gained recommendations online, through social media and content aggregate sites like Reddit. They did not belong to physical book groups, but did follow online book groups – two noted were those of US basketball player, Ekpe Udoh, and British music star, Florence Welch (which is run by a fan with the singer's support). One also followed book recommendation site The Reading Room on Facebook.

- Many people said they enjoyed recommending or lending books to others, and obtaining recommendations in return. Most people recommended books they felt certain the other person would enjoy, but occasionally they liked to recommend books that might expose the other to a completely new type of book or story (one woman recommended a memoir written by a transgender author to the men in her book group and was pleased they all enjoyed it).
- 3. Readers are unlikely to broaden their reading unless encouraged (e.g. through book group choice or personal recommendation).**
- Everyone said their reading had broadened as a result of being part of a group. It was extremely common for people to say they would never have read a certain book if it had not been either selected by the book group or recommended by a trusted person. They would not have read it

either because they didn't usually read that kind of book or because they had never heard of it. People branched out in all directions – into literary fiction from commercial/genre (e.g. chick lit); into genre from literary; into non-fiction from fiction; and into forms never before read, such as graphic novels.

- The implication is that we read what we know or feel confident we are going to enjoy; we read for pleasure so we will only branch out into unfamiliar territory if we are given encouragement, information and opportunity.
- 4. Among the older readers, literary, historical, contemporary family dramas, crime and thrillers are the most-read genres; science fiction, fantasy, romance and chick lit are least read. However, sci-fi and fantasy were the most popular among the younger readers.**
- Among the older readers, there were biases against what most consider genre fiction – sci-fi, fantasy, romance – but they generally came from those who had never tried the genres. Those who read those genres and were knowledgeable about them rated them more highly.
 - When the older groups were completing the 'genre ranking' exercise, there was often comment that they had not considered a certain book to be in that genre (e.g. they hadn't seen *A Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood as sci-fi) – which suggests there is low knowledge among most in this group of how each genre can be defined, as well as the spectrum of books that can exist within it.
 - The younger readers, by contrast, were highly aware of the range of styles and quality in genres such as sci-fi and fantasy – and read widely within those genres, while distinguishing quite clearly between the quick, easy reads ("*shitty sci-fi*"), and the more demanding works (one cited a series based on metaphysics that he, as a third-year physics student, particularly enjoyed).
 - The choice of book is primarily dictated by preference and habit – we read what we believe we will enjoy. Preference tends to dictate awareness – we filter out books that do not fit our criteria, the mental checklist we use to assess whether or not a book is a good fit for us. As with (3) above, if people had not tried a genre before, they were unlikely to experiment unless encouraged.



5. People discover new books in numerous ways – but younger readers look globally rather than locally. All readers use personal preference as a filter.

- Readers cited numerous ways that they found out about new books, including: book groups; friends; reviews in print, online and on radio; literary prize lists; bestseller lists; and displays and 'staff picks' in libraries and bookshops. However, book selection is still primarily a matter of personal preference – people look for the type of fiction they know unless, as in (3), they are personally encouraged to try something new.
- Older readers cited mostly local sources for book news and reviews – the most commonly named were the *Listener* and RNZ, followed by the weekend newspapers and women's magazines. The most cited overseas sources were *The Guardian* online and overseas literary journals such as *The London Review of Books* and *The New York Review of Books*. They also used 'Amazon recommends' and occasionally (but rarely, citing it as too cumbersome and unreliable to be useful) Goodreads. There were a couple of niche sources, including a Buddhist fiction blog. Librarians have access to other professional international resources. There was no mention at all of local online sources of book news and reviews, such as The Spinoff, Booknotes Unbound or Pantograph Punch (though we chose not to prompt too much, being more interested in top of mind awareness), and only a few cited New Zealand book bloggers like Graham Beattie. Very few readers in our groups mentioned *New Zealand Books* (a periodical dedicated to reviewing New Zealand books).
- Younger readers sourced book news and reviews only online and only on global sites such as Reddit, Facebook and Twitter. They occasionally used Goodreads, but did not rate it highly. One followed global book recommendation site The Reading Room on Facebook. They did not read papers or magazines (local or international) or listen to the radio. They did take note of book recommendations from friends, but those usually came via online means, such as Twitter and Facebook. Again, book selection was one of personal preference – one young reader said he only clicked on reviews about books in genres he enjoyed, and ignored the rest.

"...book selection is still primarily a matter of personal preference – people look for the type of fiction they know, unless they are personally encouraged to try something new."

- Both younger and older readers cited libraries and bookshops as sources of information about new books: usually on the 'new books' tables or displays, but also from 'staff picks' lists and thematic or genre groupings. Again, most people gravitated to familiar types of books – only a few would make random selections of books they knew nothing about but felt looked interesting.
- 6. No one believed they consciously favoured male or female authors, but genre preference may dictate likely gender of author.**
- Two librarians had experienced definite author gender bias (usually against female authors but not always by male readers). However, no one in any of the groups believed they made a conscious choice to favour male or female authors. In fact, most were surprised to mentally review the books they read most and discover that they did read more male or female authors. One young (and politically active) female reader was slightly aghast to realise her top three favourite authors were male.
 - It emerged that if they read one gender of author more than the other, it was generally to do with the type of book/genre they favoured – e.g. science-fiction and thriller authors are more likely to be male, historical fiction and romance authors are more likely to be female. Again, choice of books is dictated by preference and habit, so if a reader enjoys a certain genre or author's style, then that seems to be the primary driver, rather than any bias for or against the gender of the author.



"It was interesting to note that not everyone had been a lifelong reader for pleasure."

7. Reading habits vary, but most people read two to four books a month.

- Note that the reading totals captured were only for books read for pleasure, and not for work or study – so people may read more books per month, as well as magazines and newspapers, in print or online.
- There were some voracious readers, who read 20-plus books a month, but the average was generally between two and four. The type of book, size of print and time available were cited as reasons for faster or slower reading. Not everyone who was retired said they read more, because they still had busy lives, but some were finding they needed less sleep as they got older and read for much longer at night than they had. Younger readers prioritised reading for study over reading for pleasure.

8. Reading for pleasure is distinct from reading for work or study.

- Everyone made a clear distinction between reading for pleasure and reading for study or work. Mostly never the twain met in people's minds – and several who had read for their profession or career now relished being able to read books of their own choice now.
- Younger readers prioritised reading for study – and if they snatched time to read for pleasure, they *"felt guilty"*. One, who was taking an undergraduate creative writing course, was thrilled that she could *"legitimately"* read Young Adult books as they were part of the curriculum. One, however, had branched out into new areas of reading that coincided with his studies; an avid fantasy reader when younger, he now primarily read historical non-fiction.
- It was interesting to note that not everyone had been a lifelong reader for pleasure – some had not enjoyed reading as a child and had only taken it up as adults, others had been avid readers as children but put it on hold for family or professional reasons and took it up again after retirement. In the Christchurch group, one woman who'd put reading on hold while she brought up children had started reading after the earthquakes, *"because there was nothing else to do"*. And the Christchurch librarian said there had been a marked increase in fiction borrowing after the quakes – *"people wanted escapism more than ever"*.



9. The majority will not finish a book they dislike.

- When asked to name the last book they really disliked, many people struggled – and said if they were not enjoying a book, they would give it up. Some said they would occasionally push through *"for some perverse reason"*, and others said they were more likely to persevere if it were a book group choice – but most would not finish. *"Life is too short"* was the common refrain.
- Dislike of a book did not put people off that genre – but it might put them off an author. However, readers were usually prepared to give an author at least one more chance.



10. Even books people enjoy don't always stick in the mind.

- When asked to name the last book they really loved, the groups also struggled a little. The titles most likely to be named were either very recently read or old favourites that were often re-read. Many were quite embarrassed that they could not recall titles more clearly; often they could only remember parts of the plot and the general sense that they had enjoyed reading it.
- The conclusion may be that 'recency and frequency' – the mantras of marketing and advertising – also apply to books. With so many titles available, and with these groups reading an average of between 24 and 48 books a year, it is hard for books to stay top of mind. Those that do, tend to be read very recently, read more than once (because they are favourites) or heard about often (e.g. *The Luminaries*).
- This might explain the international popularity of sites like Goodreads, which help keep track of books you have read. One woman wrote titles in a notebook, and another kept a paper version of Goodreads, where she wrote down every book she'd read and gave it marks out of 10.

11. E-reading is not prevalent.

- International statistics show that sales of e-readers have declined and purchases of e-books has plateaued at around 50% of all books sold, including self-published books. Among the older participants, e-readers were no one's preferred choice – the only time they were, was for travel. Fewer than five people read on their iPad or mobile phone. Reasons cited were: print size and screen brightness; the physical experience being less enjoyable than holding a real book; limited ability to flip back and forth or mark pages; too many books stored but not read; and difficulty scrolling through titles to find books.
- None of the younger readers liked e-readers – all preferred physical books. The main reason was, "we have so much screen time with other things, it's nice to have a break". They liked the feel of a physical book and viewed the book as an object or artefact rather than just words on pages (or screen).
- Audio books were more popular – usually borrowed from the library. At least a quarter of the participants, including the younger readers, had used or currently listened to audio books, e.g. when driving, running or walking dogs. Reasons given included convenience when a physical book isn't an option and increased understanding: "things can sometimes make more sense when you hear them spoken out loud."

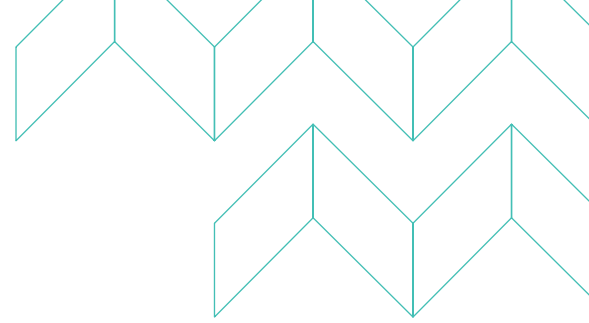
“At least a quarter of the participants... had used or currently listened to audio books, e.g. when driving, running or walking dogs. Reasons given included convenience when a physical book isn't an option and increased understanding...”

12. Libraries are the most popular source of books – and not only because of cost.

- Given the groups contained a lot of retired people, and all the younger readers were students, it may not be surprising that the library was the preferred source for books. It was not always about cost, though – libraries were seen to offer more range and also the chance for curated recommendations, either through displays or via the librarians themselves. Library websites offer convenient ways to order and be alerted to new releases, and are 'one-stop' sources of information about new books and favourite authors, which readers might otherwise have had to gather from several places.
- People often browsed in bookshops for titles they would then order from the library. Some were prepared to wait weeks for books to become available through the library system.
- People did buy books – most either as gifts, or if they were very special books they wanted to own. They bought from local bookshops, online via Amazon and Book Depository, from second-hand bookshops and book fairs. People loved receiving book vouchers as presents.
- Younger readers bought a surprisingly large number of books; the owning of a physical object was attractive to them. They shopped at second-hand shops and online, via Book Depository, Fishpond and Trade Me, looking for bargains and 'job lots' of books (e.g. 20 for \$40).
- Several people used free 'book share' schemes, such as the Lilliput Libraries, where a shelf is placed, usually on someone's fence or gate, and the honesty system requires you to donate a book for every one you take.



"We have so much screen time with other things, it's nice to have a break."



NZ FICTION:

1. People have ingrained negative impressions of NZ fiction.

- When asked for the first word that came into their heads when they heard 'New Zealand fiction', around 75% came up with a negative. Most common first words were 'dark', 'grim', 'depressing', 'gloomy', 'overrated', or 'boring'.
- However, when pressed, participants struggled to give reasons why they felt that way. Some said their view was possibly influenced by what they had read at school (*Man Alone* and *Owls Do Cry* were commonly referenced). Others even suggested that New Zealand films (*Vigil* was named more than once) had helped create an impression of grimness around presenting New Zealand in the arts.
- Younger readers had a unanimous and negative view on what New Zealand fiction was about: "growing up in the back blocks with pohutukawa and jandals"; "everything happening really slowly, no action". Their immediate reaction was that all New Zealand fiction was Kiwiana, a slice of not-very-enjoyable life, plodding and dull. None of them could say why they felt that way – none of them could remember a single New Zealand book they had read at school.

"When asked for the first word that came into their heads when they heard 'New Zealand fiction', around 75% came up with a negative."

- This has important implications: even if they do not appear to be based on solid evidence, these first reactions are significant in that they are visceral emotional responses – gut reactions – and there is considerable scientific evidence to say it is our emotions, particularly our primary ones, that drive our actions and decisions. Our primary emotions determine whether we fight or flee, whether we will be attracted or repelled. Love and joy promote attraction, but if our first emotions are fear, sadness or disgust, we are more likely to be repelled.
- Therefore, if we read only what we believe we will enjoy (unless encouraged) – and people do not, deep down, believe New Zealand fiction is enjoyable, then we may have a key part of our explanation as to why consumption of New Zealand fiction is comparatively low.

2. Awareness of New Zealand fiction – new titles, new writers, genre fiction, etc – is very low.

- When asked to come up with titles and authors of New Zealand fiction they had read or heard of, people often had to stretch right back to the 1980s and beyond. Very few newer, younger authors were mentioned: exceptions were *The Luminaries* and *The Chimes* (though most could not name Anna Smill) – and this was because of the publicity they had received from the Man Booker prize. Most named were long-standing literary authors, such as CK Stead, Janet Frame, Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, Keri Hulme, Elizabeth Knox, Albert Wendt, Fiona Kidman, Shonagh Koea, Fiona Farrell, Maurice Gee and Stephen Eldrid-Grigg. In terms of titles, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* was often mentioned, as was Elizabeth Knox's *The Vintner's Luck*, and this was also likely to be because of the international success both had achieved, and the resulting publicity.
- No one mentioned any books on the 2016 Ockham Book Award shortlist, except for Patricia Grace's *Chappy* – and very few, even the librarians, knew what the name of the new award was. Some participants knew about the fiction winner, Stephen Daisley, and expressed interest in reading his work, though they didn't remember the title.
- Younger readers were connected to global rather than local online book communities – and on those, "*New Zealand fiction doesn't even feature*".
- Awareness of anything outside New Zealand literary fiction was very low. Nicky Pellegrino and Sarah-Kate Lynch were mentioned. Two groups talked about the *Sunday Star-Times* article on New Zealand crime writers and not one participant had heard of any of them. Only one person, a writer himself and fan of the genre, mentioned our science fiction and fantasy writers.
- Even the librarians, bar one or two exceptions – see (5) below – did not have any greater awareness of New Zealand books.

"Awareness of anything outside New Zealand literary fiction was very low."

- This seems to support our conclusion that people filter information about books by personal preference and ignore what does not fit their perceived criteria for enjoyment. Many of the sources people said they trusted for information on new books, such as the Listener and RNZ, do quite heavily promote new New Zealand titles, including commercial fiction. So if awareness is low or non-existent, then they are most likely subconsciously de-selecting: 'not my thing so I'm not interested'.

3. However, they generally enjoy the NZ fiction they read.

- Despite the negative first reaction, when people started to come up with New Zealand titles they'd read in book group or on their own, there were very few they had not enjoyed. Many, in fact, were surprised at how much they'd enjoyed certain books: "*I ask myself – why should I be surprised?*"
- Our conclusion here is that trial and experience generally overcome bias, and change beliefs. Once you have tried and liked something, you are more likely to continue to consume it. However, people need to be encouraged and given opportunities for new experiences – and it can be very difficult to push through their resistance, especially if it is deeply ingrained in the subconscious.

4. People expressed support for NZ fiction, but with caveats.

- The reaction of our groups backed up the White⁵ study, which showed more people supported New Zealand fiction than read it. "*I support it in the sense that I want it to continue*" was one comment.

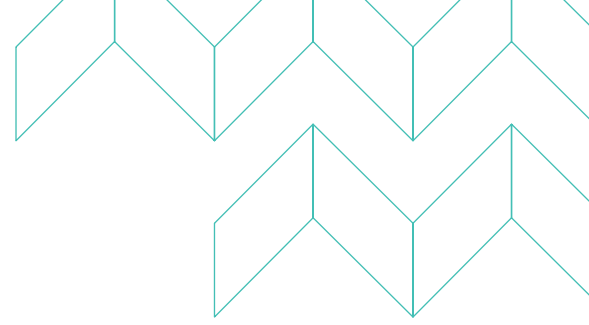
5 Ibid.



"Advocates are vital if we are to overcome bias and change beliefs through trial and experience."

- Others said they did not want to feel a sense of duty – one saw the New Zealand table in bookshops as a reproach: *"I feel like I'm being ordered to read them"*. Other caveats were *"it has to hold its own"*, *"it should have better covers"* and *"it shouldn't be published if it's not up to scratch. There's too much rubbish being overhyped."* Those people also avoided the New Zealand table as they felt the quality wasn't always good across the board.
- A New Zealand setting can be a pro and a con. Those for it enjoyed the familiar, though they warned: *"It has to be done well because you really notice the mistakes."* Those against did not – they did not want to read about places they knew because: *"I want to be transported."* Some supported overseas settings: *"I think it's good that New Zealand authors don't feel obliged to write about home."*
- 5. **Advocates noticeably increase the amount of NZ fiction read.**
 - There were three of the 11 groups that stood out as being more positive about New Zealand fiction: one had a librarian co-ordinator passionate about it, the other two were private book groups that made a conscious effort to include a good percentage of it in their reading list.
 - In these three groups, the participants were markedly more knowledgeable, aware of and positive about New Zealand fiction, and they read more of it.
 - The librarian's advocacy extends to the library itself, where there are regular, prominent displays of new New Zealand fiction, and events held to promote New Zealand authors. Anecdotal evidence outside our research suggests this has affected the borrowing habits of its customers, and increased their uptake of New Zealand fiction.
 - Younger readers were open to learning more about New Zealand fiction – but if they continue to be connected only to global online book communities, and lack opportunities to read local fiction in school, then the opportunities for awareness and advocacy are limited.
 - Advocates are vital if we are to overcome bias and change beliefs through trial and experience – they can help and encourage people to take the first steps towards increasing and widening their consumption of New Zealand fiction.

CONCLUSIONS



This research was carried out to uncover attitudes and behaviours towards reading – positive and negative. We wanted to know what encourages people to read, and what discourages or limits reading.

In terms of what encourages people to read in general:

- Reading for pleasure means exactly that – having an enjoyable experience. Enjoyment may come in different ways – through immersive escapism, exposure to new knowledge and perspectives, mental challenge or relaxation. Readers do not always want the same experience, either, and will select books to give them what they most feel like at that particular time.
- Anticipation of enjoyment is the main driver for selecting a book. Readers will choose based on previous good experience with that author, or with similar kinds or genres of books. Readers do not seem to have conscious biases for or against male or female authors, but if they prefer a particular genre, that may dictate the likely gender of the author. For example, the authors of thrillers are more often men; romance authors are more often women.
- Personal recommendation or advocacy from a trusted source – friends, book group members and co-ordinators, bookshop staff and librarians – is the most influential in encouraging readers to try new books. Readers do actively seek out information about new titles from various sources in print, radio and online, but tend to filter by personal preference and stick to what they know or believe they will enjoy. They tend only to branch out and broaden their reading when encouraged to do so by someone they trust.
- Libraries are popular places to source books and not only for cost reasons. They were seen to offer more range and also the chance for curated recommendations, either through displays or via the librarians themselves. Library websites offer convenient ways to order and be alerted to new releases, and are one-stop sources of information about new books and favourite authors, which readers might otherwise have had to gather from several places.

- Book groups enable the sharing of recommendations and discussion of books (stories, characters, writing, ideas and themes), both of which enhance the enjoyment of reading. Reading may primarily be a solitary pastime, but many readers love talking about books. Book groups also help to broaden people's reading by exposing them to books they would not normally choose for themselves.

In terms of what discourages or limits reading in general:

- Awareness can be an issue. You need to know a book exists before you can assess whether or not you feel it would be a book you would enjoy. There are dozens of new releases every month and keeping up is difficult, if not impossible, even for librarians and bookshop owners, who are in the best position to be informed. Many readers do actively seek out information about new releases, but often it is hard enough trying to keep up with authors and genres that you are familiar with, let alone those you are not. The sales success of books like *The Luminaries* or Lee Child's latest comes down to publicity and to international marketing and publicity campaigns – readers are exposed to multiple messages about the books in advertising and news, so the book sticks in their mind. Advertising lore says a person must be exposed to a product/brand seven times before the name starts to sink in. American 19th-century ad man Thomas Smith believed it was 20 times. Chances are, most readers are exposed to the majority of new books a maximum of three to four times – in reviews, on library and/or bookshop shelves. And that book title will soon be overtaken by the next.
- Habit and biases can limit people's reading. If you do not believe you will enjoy a book, because you have had a negative experience or you hold negative beliefs about that genre or author, you are unlikely to select it. Negative beliefs can be dismissive and disdainful – 'that kind of book is beneath me' – but they are more likely to simply be: 'that's not my thing, I won't enjoy it.' Enjoyment is the main driver for reading, therefore it is the main criteria for selecting a book.
- Habit and bias can affect awareness. People use their preferences to filter out anything they see as not relevant or suitable – they subconsciously de-select – and so new authors or different kinds of books often simply do not register.



“Readers simply don’t know about reliable sources of news and reviews of New Zealand books.”

For New Zealand fiction, there are even more challenges:

- Around 75% of participants had an extremely negative reaction to New Zealand fiction, most calling it dark, depressing and grim. This occurred even in groups that were generally positive about New Zealand fiction. People struggled to give reasons for this reaction, citing a bad experience at school or a general sense of grimness in New Zealand arts, particularly film. However, the root of the reaction is less significant than the fact it is deeply ingrained. Our emotions, particularly our primary ones – our “gut reactions” – drive our actions and decisions, and determine whether we will be attracted or repelled. Love and joy promote attraction, but if our first emotions are fear, sadness or disgust, we are more likely to be repelled. If the primary driver for reading is enjoyment and people’s first reactions to New Zealand fiction are negative – then our low consumption starts to make sense.

- Further comments revealed elements of cultural cringe – for example, several felt New Zealand fiction is often overhyped, and that the New Zealand fiction table in bookshops was a mixed bag of quality as well as a tactic to ‘guilt-trip’ us into buying. In marketing terms, we could think of ‘New Zealand fiction’ as an old brand with legacy issues – the reason why Telecom rebranded as Spark – it lacks an ability to attract and excite.
- Awareness is another huge challenge. Awareness of the breadth of our writing and of new authors and titles was very low. When coming up with titles and authors, most readers were stretching back over 30 years.
- The situation was worse with our younger readers. We had hypothesised they might be more aware of and positive towards New Zealand fiction because they are more connected, and because the amount of New Zealand fiction available – in particular YA fiction – is significantly greater than even 10 years ago. But they had a unanimous and negative view on what New Zealand fiction was about: Kiwiana, a slice of not-very-enjoyable life, plodding and dull. None of them could remember a single New Zealand book they had read at school. All of them were connected to global rather than local online book communities – and on those, “New Zealand fiction doesn’t even feature”.
- Advocates are vital if we are to overcome bias and change beliefs about New Zealand fiction – they can help and encourage people to take the first steps towards increasing and widening their consumption. But opportunities for personal advocacy are limited and the circles of influence don’t extend very far. We also do not seem to be successfully creating advocates in all our librarians, booksellers and school teachers, those who do have the most influence – we are leaving that choice up to them.
- Lack of information: readers simply don’t know about reliable sources of news and reviews of New Zealand books, even though there are many, particularly online: sites such as Booknotes Unbound, The Spinoff, Pantograph Punch, Landfall Online; and bloggers like Nicholas Reid – as well as other journals and *New Zealand Books* in print. Many participants expressed interest in learning more, but had no sense of where to look beyond the *Herald*. Even readers who are adept at navigating overseas review sites knew little about local sources of book reviews and features.

NEXT STEPS

The New Zealand Book Council already plays a central role in promoting the benefits of reading and connecting books, particularly New Zealand books, with readers. We are also taking the lead in connecting the wider book industry and creating a co-ordinated effort. There are plenty of committed people and organisations who can work together and share resources, and plenty of good content that already exists.

The next phase of this research project is to gather data to form a picture of the position of New Zealand books within New Zealand (including self-published books), and establish ongoing trends in New Zealand in reading and borrowing New Zealand authors and illustrators.

Once we have that data picture, we will combine it with the information gathered in this qualitative phase and use those insights to refine and strengthen our existing strategies around the key areas of:

1. Awareness: co-ordinating efforts and resources to ensure better cut-through and retention of information around reading and books in general, and New Zealand fiction in particular.
2. Attraction: overcoming any negative and incorrect perceptions about New Zealand fiction, and promoting the proven lifelong social and personal benefits of reading.
3. Advocacy: building the broadest possible base of advocates for reading in general, and New Zealand fiction in particular.



NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa