UL Age Friendly University
in co-operation with the Centre for European Studies, UL
to mark the Irish EU Presidency 2026

AFU Reading Club 2026/27 "Reading European Classics"

Participants

Any interested student enrolled in the AFU Learning Initiative programme.

Hours

2hrs per month on selected Thursday evenings, 6-8pm

Venue

Schumann Building; room: TBC

Facilitators

Nuria Borrull, Martin Chappell, Joachim Fischer, Marieke Krajenbrink, Patricia Lynch, Eddie Moxon-Browne, Micheál Ó hAodha, Patrick J. Ryan

Background and purpose

The Reading Club is an additional offering for students participating in the Age Friendly University Teaching Programme 2026/27. As such it also provides a monthly opportunity for participants to meet in a relaxed environment.

Following the model of book-clubs it offers an opportunity to talk about books and reading experiences. Running against the ever-intensifying trend of reading texts in electronic format, it sticks to the traditional, slower and arguably more thorough reading and digesting of texts with a hard copy in hand that tends to be most appreciated by the older generation.

In its first iteration, particularly appropriate in the year that Ireland holds the EU Presidency, the Club aims to provide an opportunity to discuss famous, 'classic' texts, both literary and non-literary, which have had an impact on European literary culture as a whole or respond to European experiences; the sessions thus broaden the participants' understanding of our common European culture. The chosen books may include texts some may feel they should have read at some stage, others, though classics in their respective national or language culture, may not be widely known by Irish readers. Starting with an Ancient Classic text and the Reading Club will include texts from a variety of European literary traditions such as Dutch, English, French, German, Irish, Italian, Spanish literature. All texts will be read in English translations.

Structure

The sessions fall into two distinct parts: a half-hour preparatory session with a facilitator giving some background to the text in question and a few pointers to aspects worth focussing on as well as a 45-minute discussion session one month later with the facilitator where participants are encouraged to feed in their own reading experiences. They will have thus one full month to read the texts. As we would like groups to remain relatively small, we will most likely run two parallel groups for which participants register in advance.

The Reading Club is not following a traditional teaching and learning format. The facilitators are not to be seen as lecturers who teach the 'proper way' of reading the texts in question but rather as readers very familiar with the texts, eager to encourage active participation and keen to hear about other informed individual reading experiences. Participation in the preparatory sessions is entirely voluntary; some may prefer an entirely independent, unaided and uninfluenced reading of the texts. Participants are free to pick and choose any sessions they like to attend, or all of them. The facilitators have provided a short synopsis of the texts below.

Schedule

	Session 1, 6.00-7.30 pm *Discussion* *Group A: 6.00-6.45pm;* *Group B: 6.45-7.30pm*	*Session 2, 7.30 – 8.00 pm* *Introduction to next month's session*
10 September	Welcome	Terence, *Adelphoe*/*The Brothers*, 160 BC (PR)
8 October	Terence, *Adelphoe*/*The Brothers*, 160 BC (PR)	Nicolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532 (EMB)
12 November	Nicolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532 (EMB)	Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774 (JF)
10 December	Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774 (JF)	Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818 (MÓ)
28 January	Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818 (MÓ)	Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker), *Max Havelaar*, 1860 (MK)
25 February	Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker) *Max Havelaar*, 1860 (MK)	Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 1936 (PL)
25 March	Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 1936 (PL)	Carmen Laforet, *Nada*, 1945 (NB)
22 April	Carmen Laforet, *Nada*, 1945 (NB)	Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, 1942 (MC)
20 May	Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, 1942 (MC)	concluding coffee/tea

Texts

Since most selected texts are freely available on the internet participants do not necessarily have to have a hard copy in front of them, though it is often easier to move around the text if everyone uses the same edition. The editions we will be using are:

Terence, *The Comedies*, Penguin Classics, ISBN: 9780140443240
Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Penguin Classics, 978-0141442259
Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Penguin Classics, 978-0140445039
Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, Penguin Classics, 978-0140445169
Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, Virago, 978-1844083152
Camus, *The Outsider*, Penguin, 978-0141198064
Laforet*, Nada*, Vintage Classics, 978-1784876210.

The Glucksman Library will supply a number of copies of each text which can be borrowed. Some participants may prefer to have their own copy for personal annotation. O'Mahony's University Bookshop has been approached and they will have sufficient copies available for purchase.

Fees / Prerequisites

There are no fees. The only prerequisites are an interest in reading and discussing texts and a commitment to reading the text (or selected excerpts) before the discussion. There will be no certificate of participation.

Summaries supplied by facilitators

***The Brothers*/*Adelphoe* (160BC) by Terence**

The European Classics Reading Club begins with a reading and discussion of *Adelphoe* or *The Brothers* by Publius Terentius Afer (usually known in English as Terence). The play dates from 160BC and was composed for the Funeral Games of the general Aemilius Paullus, the conqueror of Macedonia and twice Consul. We will look briefly at the life and works of Terence, from his first appearance as a slave-boy from North Africa to his unexplained disappearance at around thirty years of age within the year after the staging of this, his last play.

Terence uses the Prologue to explain something of the drama's history, and its descent from a Greek original, *Synapothnescontes*, 'those who die at the same time', as well as answering the critics of his previous plays and appealing to the audience to give this one their impartial attention.

The play follows the fortunes of two sets of brothers, Micio and Demea, as well as Demea's sons Ctesipho and Aeschinus. The contrast is in the differing philosophies of the senior brothers about the proper way to raise a son. Micio is the older brother and, having adopted Aeschinus, has reared him in a liberal fashion, allowing him to do almost anything free from threat of punishment.

Julius Caesar wrote of Terence: *Tu quoque, tu in summis, o dimidiate Menander, Poneris, et merito, puri sermonis amator*. 'You too, you especially, are placed among the

highest, and justly so, for you are half-Menander, and a lover of pure language.' (quoted by Suetonius in his *Vita Terenti*).

The Prince (1532) by Nicolò Machiavelli

Machiavelli's *The Prince* remains highly relevant in today's world, because it strips away political idealism to expose the raw mechanics of power. A modern reader will recognise his concept of realpolitik – the focus on how the world actually operates rather than how it should operate – in contemporary political campaigns, corporate boardrooms, and international diplomacy. Machiavelli' core argument is that leaders must adapt to changing circumstances to maintain stability. In our fast moving digital era this translates directly to crisis management and strategic flexibility. His insights on public perceptions are equally predictive. Long before social media he understood that appearing virtuous is often more politically useful than actually being virtuous, a lesson evident in modern political public relations and image branding. His exploration of the conflict between ethics and efficacy forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about leadership. By reading *The Prince* citizens gain a sharper framework to analyse political rhetoric, detect manipulation, and evaluate strategies deployed by our political leaders.

The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Johann Wolfgang Goethe is a towering figure in German literary history. His importance can be gauged by the fact that the German cultural institutes abroad (incl. in Dublin), the *Goethe Institut*s, are named after him. In his later period Goethe defined German classicism but before this he was an 'angry young man' within the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Pressure') literary movement of the late 18th century. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is his key work from this period. It has been called the first European bestseller, as it was quickly translated into many languages and became a huge international success. That it was based on a true story added to its appeal. The 'Werther outfit' of blue tailcoat, yellow waistcoat and trousers became a European fashion, its tragic ending even inspired copycat suicides. The relatively short novel not only created instant fame for its author, it put Germany on the literary map of Europe.

The story describes a – one-sided – unhappy love affair told in letters by the I-narrator Werther to his friend Wilhelm. There are operas, films and many literary adaptations of the Werther story, including a famous text from the former East Germany with a similar tragic ending of the main character who, like Werther, is unable to live a life based purely on self-fulfilment and intense emotion that unavoidably clashes with the restrictions of societal norms, including marriage: the woman he loves never contemplates leaving her fiancé and later husband. But does she love Werther?

Frankenstein (1818) by Mary Shelley

Written in 1816–17 and published in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was remarkably ahead of its time in exploring otherness, identity, exclusion and belonging. Through the Creature's rejection on the basis of his appearance and difference, Shelley questions how societies construct the "Other," how prejudice shapes identity, and how exclusion can itself produce alienation and conflict. Although not a novel about multiculturalism in the modern sense, its concerns resonate strongly with contemporary debates in Western Europe – and particularly in

modern Ireland – about immigration, ethnicity, cultural difference, integration and who is permitted to belong. Reading *Frankenstein* today offers an opportunity to explore how we understand difference, challenge assumptions about the "Other," and consider how greater empathy, dialogue and inclusion might help create a society in which diverse identities can coexist and belong.

Max Havelaar (1860) by Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker)

Max Havelaar – a Dutch civil servant in Java – burns with an insatiable desire to end the ill treatment and oppression inflicted on the native peoples by the colonial administration. Max is an inspirational figure, but he is also a flawed idealist whose vow to protect the Javanese from cruelty ends in his own downfall. In *Max Havelaar*, Multatuli (the pseudonym for Eduard Douwes Dekker) vividly recreated his own experiences in Java and tellingly depicts the hypocrisy of those who gained from the corrupt coffee trade. Sending shockwaves through the Dutch nation when it was published in 1860, this damning exposé of the terrible conditions in the colonies led to welfare reforms in Java and continues to inspire the fairtrade movement today. Regarded as the most significant novel in the canon of Dutch literature, *Max Havelaar* is still shockingly topical in terms of content and analysis, and at the same time staggeringly modern in its form. It mixes many moods and genres and practices all those genres with the same ease. Among them is, in the seventeenth chapter, the heartbreaking love story of Saidjah and Adinda, set against the harsh realities of Dutch colonial rule in Java. Roy Edwards's vibrant translation conveys the satirical and innovative style of Multatuli's autobiographical polemic.

Mary Lavelle (1936) by Kate O'Brien

This novel, written in the 1930s, was very forward-thinking in so many ways. It can be considered a *bildungsroman*, or novel about a young person growing up, in Ireland shortly after gaining its independence in the early twentieth century. But it is also a European novel, in that it is the story of an Irish girl going to live in Spain, and is all the more authentic in being partly autobiographical, as the author spent some time similarly as a governess in Spain. The heroine is not just Irish but a native of Limerick, as was Kate herself. It can also be considered a diaspora novel, as while the heroine lived and worked with a Spanish family, she spent considerable time associating with other Irish 'misses' or governesses, who cling to each other for comfort in enduring impecunious and lonely lives far from home.

Mary Lavelle is a member of a large middle-class family, financially comfortable but not rich, and in Spain her young charges are members of a wealthy, cultured and prestigious family. However in both countries there are forces at work by which some young idealistic people are working towards a more socially equal society. Education is a means of enabling these youngsters to achieve both personal and social goals, but in both countries women are constrained into being traditional, and educated to be wives and mothers only. Mary's father will not allow her small inheritance to be used to send her to university or be trained for employment, a measure which he would not contemplate unless a girl was 'downright plain'. In spite of this, she manages to make her own choices in life, to live an independent life as a woman.

The novel is also strong on family relationships, in both Ireland and Spain. In both families, the members relate to each other in different ways, both positive and negative, but always with a sense of the family's unique identity. The love story between a member of the

Irish and Spanish family will not have a happy ending, as both societies and families will forbid it.

Nada (1945) by Carmen Laforet

The novel *Nada* by Carmen Laforet (1921 - 2004) has become a classic of Spanish literature. It is widely considered as one of the best novels of early post Spanish Civil War. In 1944 the manuscript of *Nada* won Laforet the first Nadal Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Spain, which led to its publication in 1945, when Laforet was only 23. *Nada* describes the influence of the post war years on the young spirit of its protagonist Andrea. The novel is a highly evocative portrayal of the chilling, claustrophobic atmosphere of a 'wounded city', Barcelona, in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (1936 - 1939)

The Outsider (1942) by Albert Camus

L'Etranger was first published in 1942. It is now considered to be one of the great novels of modern literature. Its hero Meursault, can be seen as an archetype of the modern man unable to engage with the values and expectations of society. The novel has been associated with the post war interest in existentialism and with the notion of the absurd which is found in philosophy, theatre and the novel. It has been translated in English as *The Stranger* and as *The Outsider*. *Etranger* can also mean 'foreigner'. Three films have been made of the novel – by Visconti in 1967, Demirkubuz in 2001 and by Ozon in 2025.