Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

Fall 9-23-2017

How to Rate a Book: Goodreads, Taste, and Reading in the 21st Century

Dylan Burns
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/lib_present

Part of the Digital Humanities Commons, Library and Information Science Commons, and the Reading and Language Commons

HOW TO RATE A BOOK: GOODREADS, TASTE, AND READING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dylan Burns
Digital Scholarship Librarian
Utah State University
@ForgetTheMaine

What is goodreads?

- Goodreads is a social media platform for books launched in January 2007 by Otis Chandler.

- It allows the open reviewing of books with star-ratings (1-5) as well as advanced written reviews and community features

- All reviews weigh the same; no "expert reviewers"

- In 2013, it was purchased by Amazon.

Source: Quantcast, https://www.quantcast.com/goodreads.com#/demographicsCard
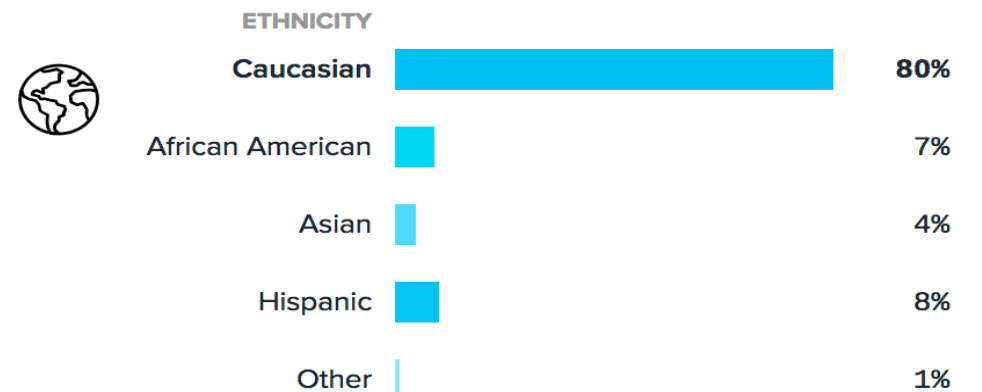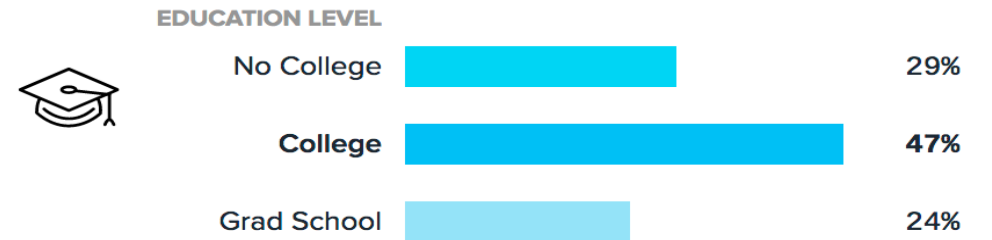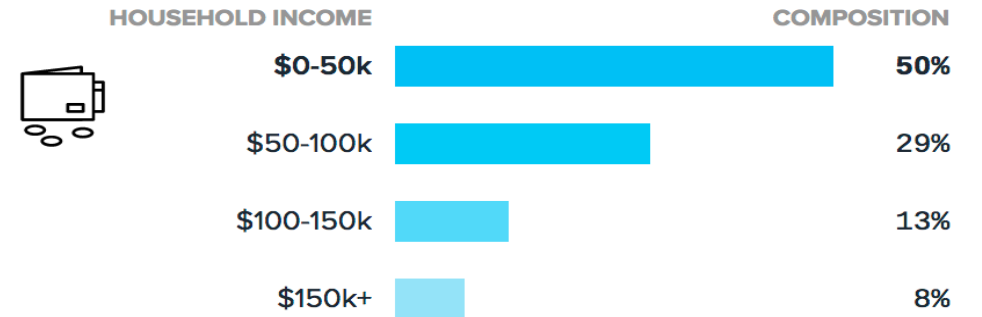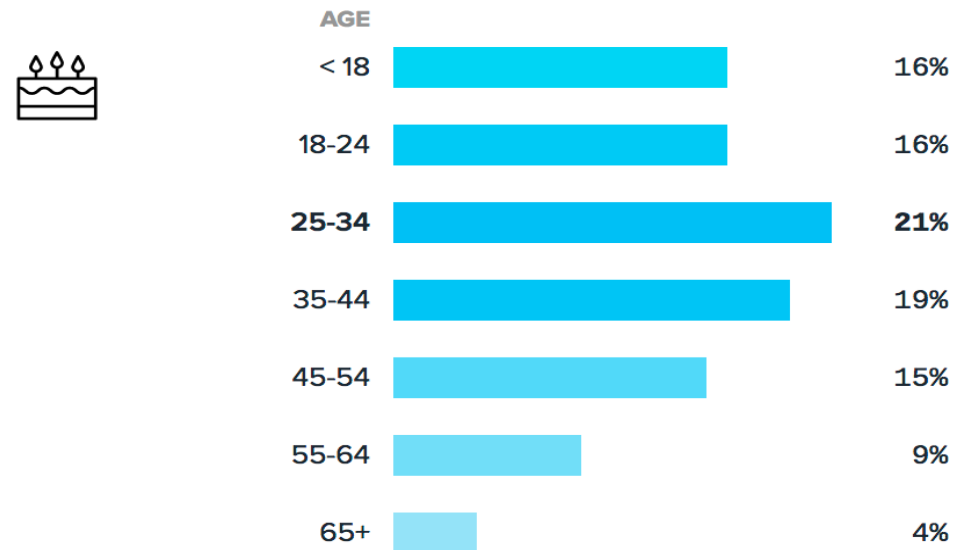
Taste and Deliberation

Antoine Hennion writes:

- "Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity"

- And that Taste is a **deliberation**, that "in spite of a conception which has become hegemonic, is not a gratuitous social game, overdetermined and ignorant of its own existence"

- Instead "taste is a pragmatic activity involving amateurs turned towards their object in a perplexed mode"

[1]Hennion, Antoine. 2007. "Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology." *Cultural Sociology* 1 (1): 97–114, 98

Presentation of the S(h)elf

- Users build bookshelves that show what they've read and what they intend to read.

- According to Lisa Nakamura, this act is both "bibliocentric" and "egocentric" where the "reading self" serves as a self-curated digital image.

- This is an image that is presented to the public as a stylized, well-read, and very anti-critic.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2013. "'Words with Friends': Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads." PMLA 128 (1): 238–43., 240

Under Whose Authority?

- Nowhere is this more present than in the Goodreads' 2016 best fiction book.

- What did the New York Times say…

BEST FICTION

LIANE MORIARTY
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author of Big Little Lies
Truly Madly Guilty

WINNER 30,154 votes

Truly Madly Guilty
by *Liane Moriarty (Goodreads Author)*

Six responsible adults. Three cute kids. One small dog. It's just a normal weekend. What could possibly go wrong?

Sam and Clementine have a wonderful, albeit, busy life: they have two little girls, Sam has just started a new dream job, and Clementine, a cellist, is busy preparing for the audition of a lifetime. If there's anything they can count on, it's each other.

Review: In Liane Moriarty's 'Truly Madly Guilty,' a Very Unfortunate Barbecue Indeed

Books of The Times

By JANET MASLIN   JULY 21, 2016

Since Ms. Moriarty is now a brand-name writer, there's a good chance that "Truly Madly Guilty" will be widely read, no matter what. It has all the requisite trademarks of one of her hits ("The Husband's Secret," "What Alice Forgot"), a three-word title included. It probes some of the things she writes about best: fraught friendships, covert backbiting, stale marriages. And its format has become standard for her, with brief, maddening flashes of Whatever-It-Is that don't gel until she's ready to let them. All of it is formulaic by now.

Goodreads, Taste, and Reading

- What impact does "taste" or "good taste" play in how Goodreads users choose books?

- Are users influenced by "best of" lists and highly rated works?

- Do they feel social pressure to read and rate great works?

DATA AND METHODS

How to Rate a Book: Goodreads, Taste, and Reading in the 21st Century

Data and Methods

- 4 best of 2016 lists from the Washington Post, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times, and Harper's Bazaar.

- 2 end of the century lists Paste Magazine's "Best of the 2000s" and New York Times Best of 1985-2010.

- 2 lists of user-generated "best books" lists from Goodreads, one of All-Time and One of 2016.

- Harold Bloom's 20th Century Canon from *The Western Canon (1994)* and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction list.

- **Total of 382 Books from 1874-2016.**

Data and Methods

- Number of Ratings = Number of reads

- Average Rating = 1-5 average of the star rating

- Number of Reviews = Number of written reviews

- Reviews per Rate = Engagement with materials

Data and Methods

- Average rating across the site is 3.86.[1]

- There is a strong correlation between the newness of the book and debates over their rating.

1 Dimitrov, Stefan, Faiyaz Zamal, Andrew Piper, and Derek Ruths. 2015. "Goodreads versus Amazon: The Effect of Decoupling Book Reviewing and Book Selling." In Proceedings of the Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. Oxford, England, 604

| List	Average Rating	Number of Ratings	Number of Reviews	Ratings Vs Reviews
Bloom's "20th Century Chaotic Canon"	3.79	72,922.5	2,190	17.405
Goodreads top 50	4.59	225,635	8,308	28.62
New York Times Best of 2016	4.033	19,114	2,653	6.676
Washington Post Best of 2016	4.133	27,140	3,498	7.083
Harper's Bazaar Best of 2016	3.85	38,354	4,603	7.077
Los Angeles Times Best of 2016	4.1	21,989	3,213	6.226
Goodreads Best Fiction 2016	3.731	65,376	8,093	7.47
Paste Best Books of the 2000s	3.979	329,932	14,266	21.25
New York Times Best of the Last 25 Years	3.907	50,459	3,197	15.09
Pulitzer Prize for Fiction	3.903	140,693	6,829	20.1442

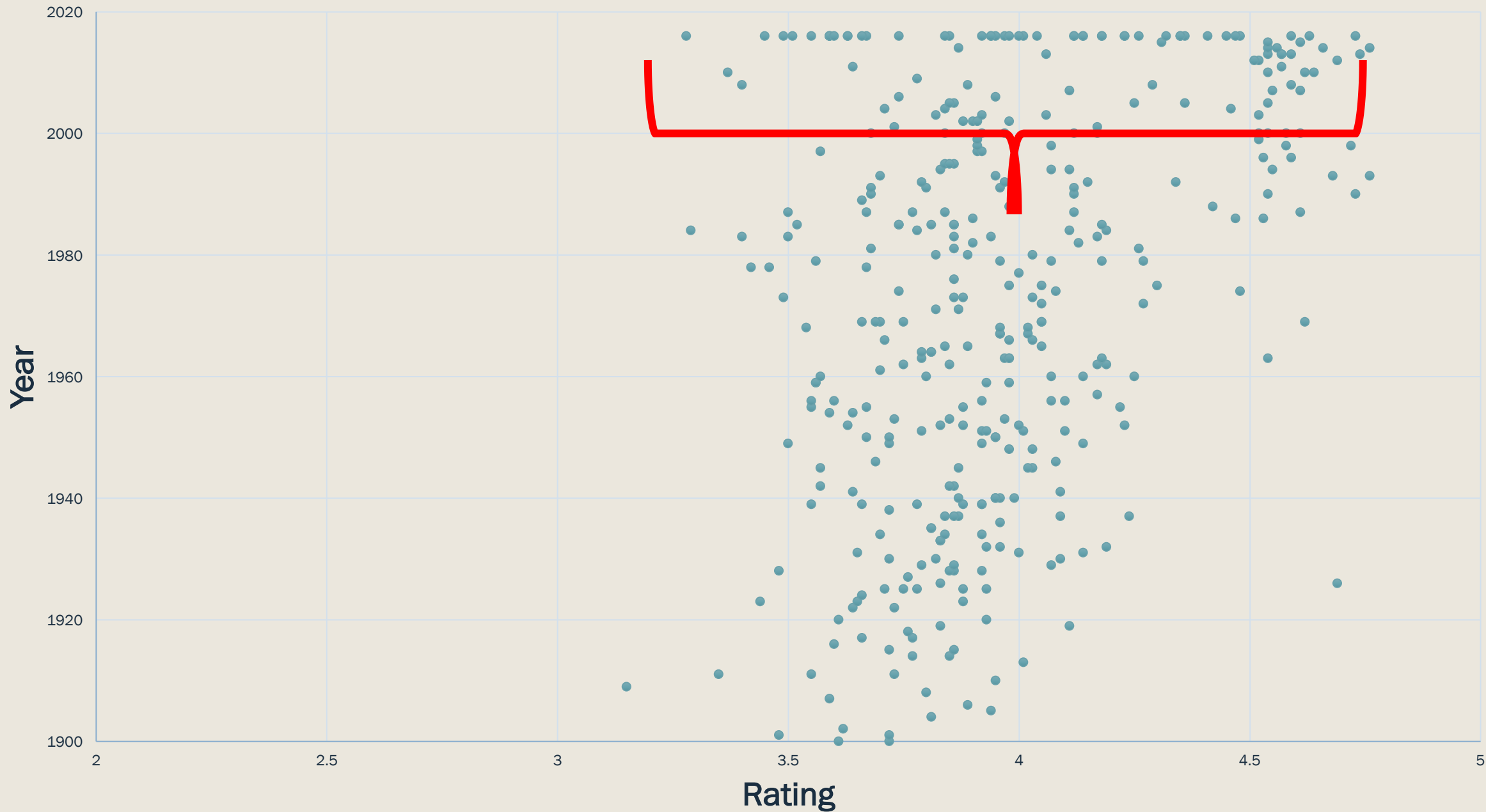Average Rating by Year Goodreads
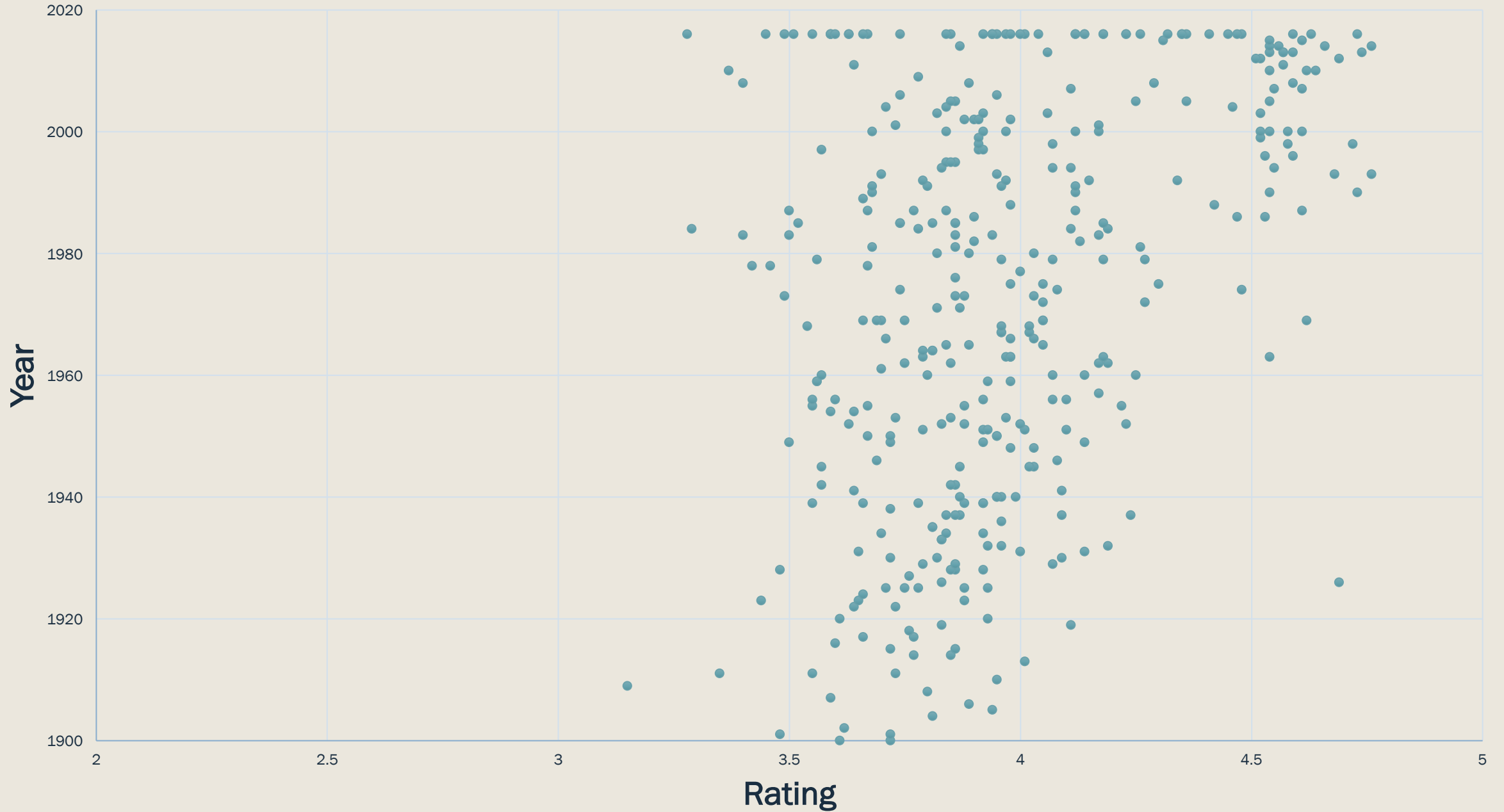
Average Rating by Year Goodreads
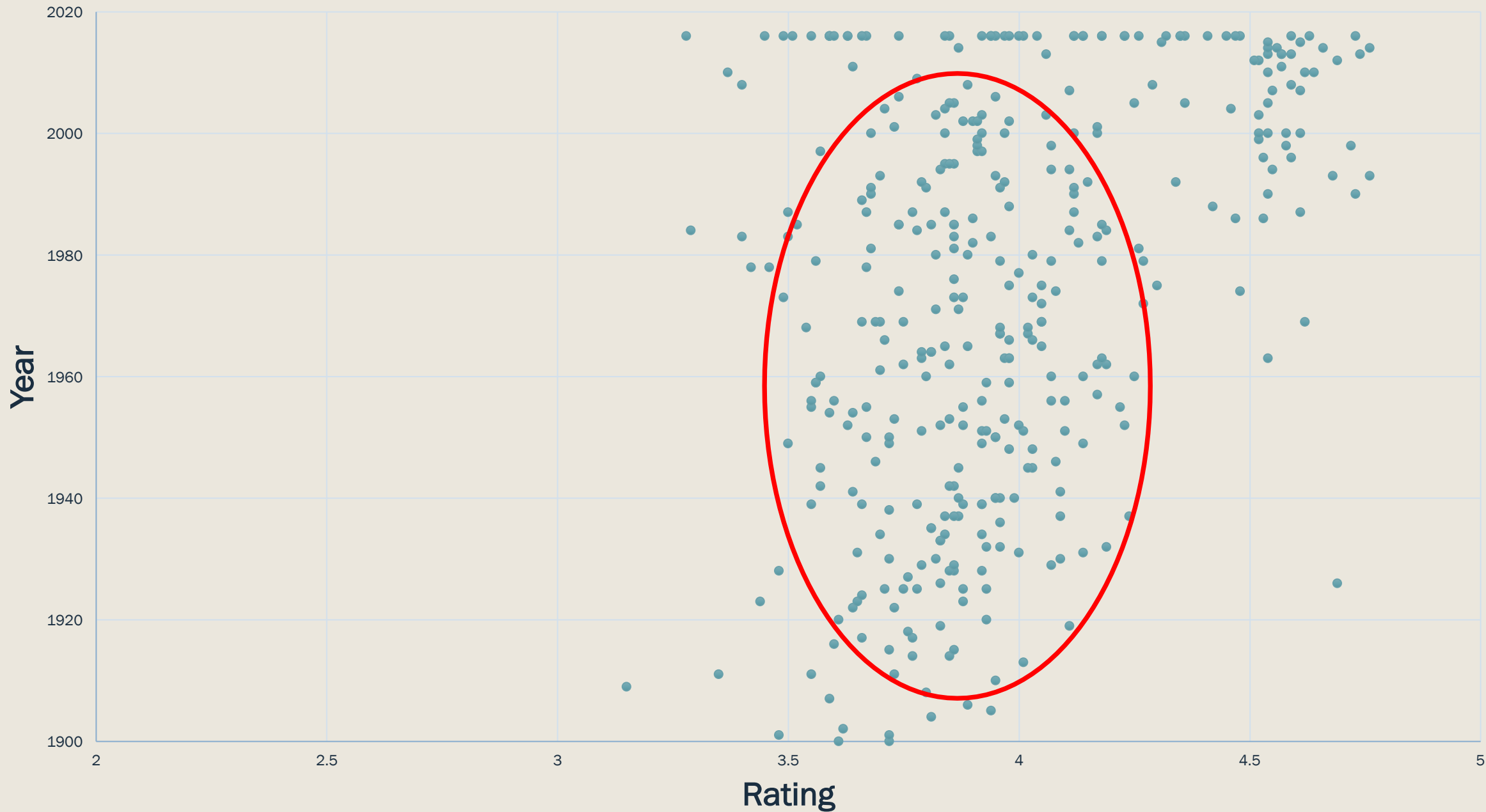
Average Rating by Year Goodreads
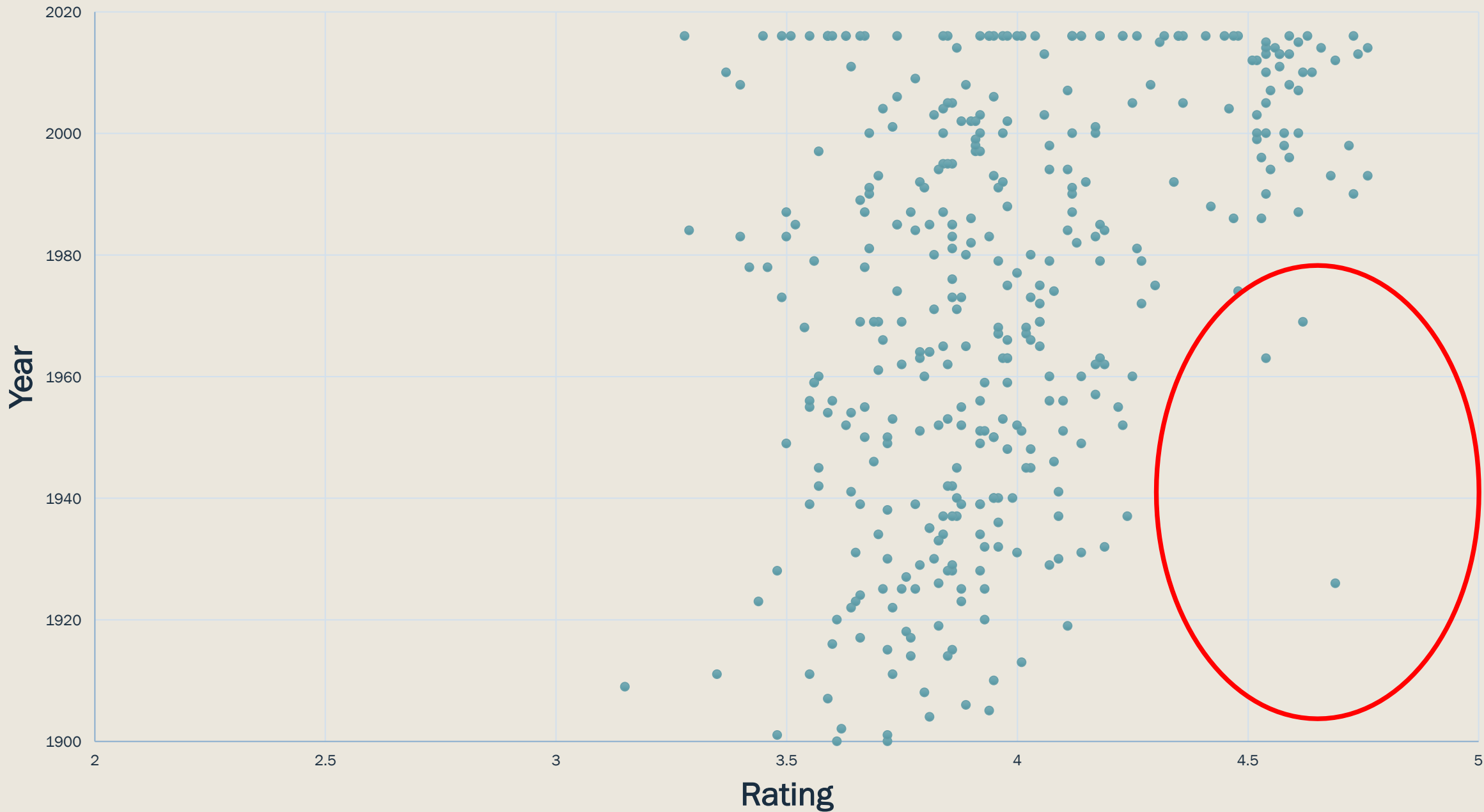
Average Rating by Year Goodreads

"Best of" and Readership

- While there is consistency in the rating of books between critic and users, there isn't consistency in terms of readership

- Sorensen and Rasmussen (2004) found a 25% increase in readership for books simply reviewed (good or bad) in the New York Times.

- This doesn't seem to hold true on Goodreads.

List	Average Rating	Number of Ratings	Number of Reviews	Ratings Vs Reviews
New York Times Best of 2016	4.033	19,114	2,653	6.676
Washington Post Best of 2016	4.133	27,140	3,498	7.083
Harper's Bazaar Best of 2016	3.85	38,354	4,603	7.077
Los Angeles Times Best of 2016	4.1	21,989	3,213	6.226
Goodreads Best Fiction 2016	3.731	65,376	8,093	7.47

Sorensen, Alan T., and Scott J. Rasmussen. "Is any publicity good publicity? A note on the impact of book reviews." *NBER Working paper, Stanford University* (2004).

Against the Canon

- Bloom's works have lower average ratings but not, on average, lower numbers of rates.

- Readers *read* these works and rate them lower than the newer ones.

List	Average Rating	Number of Ratings	Number of Reviews	Ratings Vs Reviews
Bloom's "20th Century Chaotic Canon"	3.79	72,922.5	2,190	17.405
New York Times Best of 2016	4.033	19,114	2,653	6.676
Washington Post Best of 2016	4.133	27,140	3,498	7.083
Harper's Bazaar Best of 2016	3.85	38,354	4,603	7.077
Los Angeles Times Best of 2016	4.1	21,989	3,213	6.226
New York Times Best of the Last 25 Years	3.907	50,459	3,197	15.09

CONSIDER *THE GREAT GATSBY*

How to Rate a Book: Goodreads, Taste, and Reading in the 21st Century

Consider *The Great Gatsby*
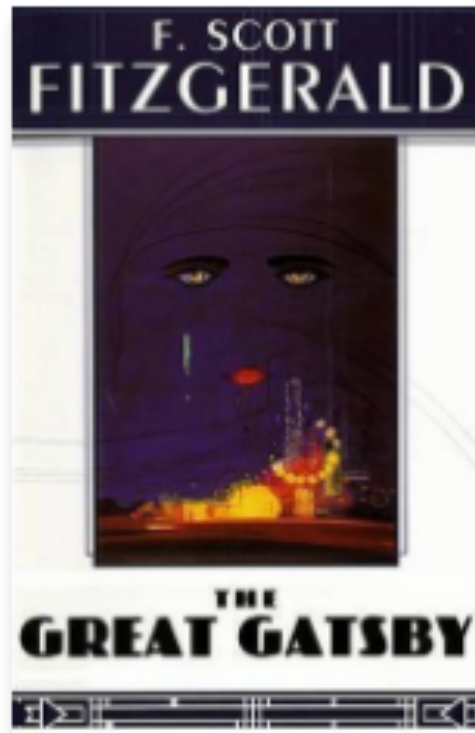
The Great Gatsby
by F. Scott Fitzgerald

★★★☆ 3.89 · Rating details · 2,800,773 Ratings · 52,311 Reviews

THE GREAT GATSBY, F. Scott Fitzgerald's third book, stands as the supreme achievement of his career. This exemplary novel of the Jazz Age has been acclaimed by generations of readers. The story of the fabulously wealthy Jay Gatsby and his love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan, of lavish parties on Long Island at a time when The New York Times noted "gin was the national dr ...more

Want to Read ▼

GET A COPY

Like many people, I first read *The Great Gatsby* when I was too young to understand it. I appreciated the beauty of Fitzgerald's prose and his gift for describing scenes, but disliked quite a few of his characters and couldn't fathom why they inspired in each other the degree of devotion and obsession that they seemed to do. I also found the narrator a bit dull and the ending a huge let-down. In short, I was convinced Fitzgerald was a good writer (I actually went on to check out some of his short stories immediately afterwards), but couldn't see what all the *Gatsby* fuss was about.

I think I can see it now, having reread the book a couple of times since then. Yes, it's a novel about the American Dream -- a rags-to-riches story about a poor man who re-invents himself as a mysterious millionaire in hopes of winning the heart of the beautiful rich girl he has fancied ever since they were young. But it's also about the shallowness of that dream, and about the corruption inherent in it -- about the lengths to which people will go for success and acceptance, not necessarily in an admirable way. It's about the gap between dreams and reality, between reality and perception, and about how modern, status-obsessed America is increasingly on the perception side of the gap. It's an indictment of materialism, of the thin veneer of wealth which hides the moral decay underneath. And last but not least, it's a story about what makes us who we are. About how we are shaped by our pasts and backgrounds, and how, no matter how far we run and how hard we try to re-invent ourselves, we are what we are, what we always were. It's a depressing message for the would-be self-improvers among us, but a true one, I think.

Consider *The Great Gatsby*
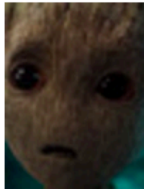
rated it ★★☆☆☆   Jun 10, 2014

Can someone explain to me why is this a classic? Because I've seen NOTHING even remotely revolutionizing, life-changing or heart wrenching. It's boring, superficial, plotless and the narrator is so unreliable that you never know what's really going on. And even if you have a glimpse on the story that's behind the curtains, Nick ruins everything with his pretentious comments. The Fault In Our Stars is better book than this one.

Consider *The Great Gatsby*
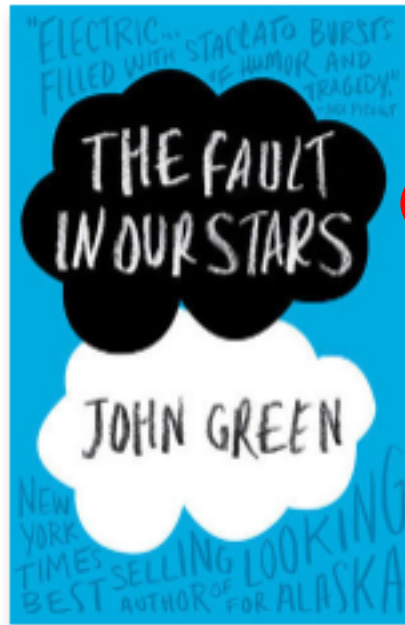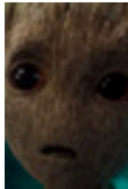
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? OR HOW WE "KILLED" LITERATURE

How to Rate a Book: Goodreads, Taste, and Reading in the 21st Century

The Noble Amateur and the Death of Literature.

- Andrew Keen opines about "the death of literature" growth of what he calls the "noble amateur" on the internet will usher in "a dictatorship of idiots" that replaces the "dictatorship of experts."[1]

- He continues that "Today's editors, technicians, and cultural gatekeepers—the experts across an array of fields—are necessary to help us to sift through what's important and what's not."[1]

- Amongst these experts are the Scholar, the New York Times, and the Tower Records Employee...all ruthlessly snuffed out by the internet.

Keen, Andrew. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube and the Rest of Today's User Generated Media are Killing Our Culture*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011. 45

The Death of Literature and the love of Genre.

- We have seen a larger explosion in the popularity of reading in the past 20 years; ranging not just from Goodreads but things like Oprah's Bookclub and the rapid growth of YA fiction.

- Reading has grown to be an activity of "reading just to read" according to Book History scholar Armando Pettrucci, especially in terms of genre.[1]

- Genre readers in particular feel the "need to distinguish themselves as serious readers"[2] which is evident on Goodreads.

1 Petrucci, Armando. 1999. "Reading to Read:A Future for Reading." In *A History of Reading in the West*. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 345

2 Fuller, Danielle, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. 2013. *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York: Routledge.

21st Century Reading Convergence Culture

- Despite Goodreads central focus upon consumption and purchasing of books, it has fostered a transgressive reading culture against the power of canonization

- Reading culture is collective and literary opinion is democratized.

- Readers are encouraged to make their own taste, in a deliberate self-directed way.

Pressure to Enjoy?

- Goodreads users feel pressure to justify their opinions, with explanatory reviews, which shows a consciousness of the hegemonic opinions about "great books."

- Yet, these readers curate self-images that thrive on opposition.

- In the end, reader feel pressure to read these books but not to enjoy them.

Works Cited

- Nakamura, Lisa. 2013. "'Words with Friends': Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads." PMLA 128 (1): 238–43., 240

- Keen, Andrew. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube and the Rest of Today's User Generated Media are Killing Our Culture*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011. 45

- Dimitrov, Stefan, Faiyaz Zamal, Andrew Piper, and Derek Ruths. 2015. "Goodreads versus Amazon: The Effect of Decoupling Book Reviewing and Book Selling." In Proceedings of the Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. Oxford, England, 604

- Petrucci, Armando. 1999. "Reading to Read:A Future for Reading." In *A History of Reading in the West*. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 345

- 2 Fuller, Danielle, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. 2013. *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York: Routledge.