

Peer recommended reads for 2026: historical and contemporary stories



Not sure what book to read next? Members of LiveUp's Ageing Well Advisory Group (AWAG) have provided their top picks for 2026. This list brings together two themes: stories from history, and modern Australian writing that reflects life today.

About AWAG

The **Ageing Well Advisory Group (AWAG)** played an important role in helping LiveUp stay centred around its primary audience – you.

AWAG advised LiveUp by representing the voices of older people in Australia. The group included 14 members aged between 45 and 85, with people from every state in Australia. They helped improve LiveUp resources by sharing their feedback.

LiveUp's mission is to be an evidence-based resource for older adults. A key part of this is working with people in the community. We want to be led by your lived experience. This helps us share resources that are useful, practical, and relevant.

How does LiveUp continue this work today? We now gather feedback through surveys that reach many more older people across Australia. This approach builds on the strong foundations AWAG created and allows even more voices to be heard.

About AWAG's recommended books

These recommendations come from older readers who know the joy of a good book.

The overall list covers a broad range of genres and themes. This article focuses on two of those themes, so you can:



1. Explore the past with books about people who've changed the world
2. Discover fresh perspectives on the present with books by modern Australian authors

Extraordinary women in science and world history

Learn about some impactful women in science and history. These books show how their achievements still shape the world today:

1. **Her Space, Her Time: How Trailblazing Women Scientists Decoded the Hidden Universe**, by Shohini Ghose
If you liked *Hidden Figures*, you'll probably enjoy this, too. *Her Space, Her Time* is about remarkable but overlooked women in physics and astronomy. Their discoveries changed what we know about the universe.
2. **The Elements of Marie Curie: How the Glow of Radium Lit a Path for Women in Science**, by Davia Sobel
The Elements of Marie Curie is a biography of the life and work of the most famous woman in the history of science. It also tells the stories of the many successful young women trained in her laboratory.

Australian voices on our history and society

These Australian authors challenge and question accepted stories about our history and society:

1. **Kosciuszko** by Anthony Sharwood
Sharwood is an Australian journalist. This book investigates how a historical topic matters in Australia today.
Kosciuszko is Australia's tallest mountain. Anthony Sharwood traces the life of the hero it's named after, Tadeusz Kosciuszko. The journey takes him across continents.
In Australia, he speaks with Traditional Owners to learn about the mountain's ancient history. Is the man's legacy reason enough to keep his name on the mountain?
2. **On Freedom** by Tory Shepherd
Shepherd is another Australian journalist. This book challenges a pervasive stigma in Australian society.

On Freedom is one of the *Little Books on Big Ideas* series. In it, Shepherd looks at how women's freedom to choose motherhood is reshaping their own lives as well as society.

– *'Covering women's freedom to choose motherhood or not, and the way Australian society makes them feel guilty either way. Brilliant. Has stopped me making any comments at all to women because it's none of my business!'*

3. **A Room Made of Leaves** by Kate Grenville

This book is a historical fiction. Like Grenville's other works, it interrogates Australian colonial history.

Elizabeth Macarthur was the wife of Sydney's notorious John Macarthur. What if she wrote a secret, shocking memoir? This is the premise of *A Room Made of Leaves*.

You can listen to the [ABC Radio audiobook](#) for free.

– *'A very entertaining listen of historical realities and connections to the individual past.'*

Contemporary Australian fiction

Modern Australian writers give insight into the ideas and issues shaping life in the country right now. Here are a couple of AWAG's favourite literary fiction books by Australian authors of today:

1. **The Name of the Sister** by Gail Jones

This thrilling novel is set in Sydney and the Mars-red landscapes around Broken Hill. A young woman is found in a state of distress. She's lost the ability to speak. No one knows who she is, but the media speculates.

The Name of the Sister explores the lines between the truth and the stories people tell each other.

– *'The topic is relevant to so many of us, and the character development is so good. I love this book and have already read it 3 times, loving it more with each read. One of Australia's best contemporary writers.'*

2. **Cold Enough for Snow** by Jessica Au

This book was the inaugural winner of the Nobel Prize in 2022. In it, an unnamed mother and daughter live in different cities in an unnamed Western country. They meet in Tokyo and travel together on holiday in Japan. The book follows the intense yet tender interactions that happen between them.

– *'I love this book so much, having found it on the new-book stand in Morley public library. Contemporary Australian writer. watch this space for more of her work.'*

Reading matters for healthy ageing

Reading is a dynamic process, handled by multiple brain areas. It's a hobby that helps you keep your brain active and healthy as you age.

Choose topics you find interesting and enjoyable. This makes it easier to read often and stay engaged.

Looking for ideas? AWAG's top picks include [ageing science and self-help books](#) to challenge your thinking.

Prefer something fun and fictional? [AWAG has a list for that, too.](#)

Did you know?

Reading fiction is just as much a workout for your brain as non-fiction. It has some unique social benefits, too. Research published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2024) shows that reading fiction can boost your:

- Empathy (understanding others)
- Theory of mind (thinking about other people's thoughts)
- Language skills

[Learn more about how and why to keep reading as you age](#)

Getting started

Join your local library for free, to start borrowing books today.

You can also use LiveUp's [social activities finder](#) to discover book clubs near you.

If you need more information about healthy ageing, get in touch with one of our helpful site navigators on **1800 951 971**.

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