

Institution: Durham University
Unit of Assessment: English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Developing Critical Audiences for Literature (CS 4)
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research on the history of literary readership from the late 19th century to the present has proposed that all reading is necessarily ‘critical’, and promoted the value of serious reflection on contemporary writing of many forms, from genre fiction to poetry, and on the historical formation of literary taste. Through work with the Durham Book Festival, school teachers and an exhibition gallery, the research has helped to inform and to engage their audiences, to bring reading communities together, and to encourage wider critical interpretation. It has influenced the strategic development of the Durham Book Festival, contributing to a marked increase in attendance.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research was carried out between 1999 and 2013 by Professor Simon James (appointed to Durham in 1999), Dr Jason Harding (appointed 2006) and Professor Stephen Regan (appointed 2004). Their research has focused on two issues: (1) the stratification of the reading public around the turn of the twentieth century into cultural groups with differing literary tastes and modes of publication; and (2) public debates over the value of reading contemporary literature, whether in popular genres or in small print-run poetry volumes. In addressing the historical formation of different audiences, the research proposes appropriate responses to its contemporary consequences.</p> <p>James’s research has explored the relationship between literary criticism and mass literacy, notably the historical role of literary criticism in shaping the tastes of the wider reading public for fiction. Books on George Gissing (3.1) and H.G. Wells (3.2) have argued that the reading of all fiction, including fiction in popular genres, is intrinsically a critical practice, and that the consumption of popular writing can be, and historically has been, informed, strengthened and made more sophisticated by engagement with academic forms of knowledge. He has shown Gissing’s uneasy negotiations with the commercial realities of a newly literate mass audience for the novel, and the literary modes employed in Wells’s enormously diverse output of popular science, educational theory, history, politics, prophecy, and utopian as well as realist, experimental and science fiction. At his peak, Wells was the most widely read writer in the world, and in the present he continues to command a very substantial audience, especially for his science fiction. Historically, his career is a test-case in the strains and divisions of the literary marketplace. In elucidating and promoting the work of this writer, James shows how Wells straddled, and challenged, conventional generic markers of literary canonicity. James’s research (3.3) has gone on to show how literary criticism can recuperate the work of the historically popular but critically disparaged author, Marie Corelli.</p> <p>Harding’s research on literary magazines in the early twentieth century has demonstrated the importance of the role of periodical networks in mediating between authors and audiences. It has shown how these networks inform the complex and contested processes of canon-formation (3.4). Focusing on Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot and Ford Madox Ford, he has shown a much greater engagement by these writers in the detail of editorial practice, networking and periodical business than was previously recognised (3.5). His research complements that of James by analysing the growth of stratified and overlapping reading publics in the modernist era.</p> <p>Research by Regan reveals how contemporary poets have adapted poetic forms and genres in ways that appeal to new and different audiences. Regan (3.6) shows how the sonnet has developed in terms of its ‘address’ to particular audiences (in twentieth-century America, for instance), and how modern sonnets can be read in terms of their adaptation, subversion and renewal of well-established formal qualities. His research on the elegy (3.8) is similarly concerned with the ways in which literary conventions are propagated in new and changing contexts of reception. It claims that Irish elegy, for instance, not only fulfils the traditional function of consoling in the face of death, but also intervenes in sensitive political debates concerning national identity. Regan and Harding have both sought to show how modernist poets such as Eliot and W.B. Yeats have been re-read within the changing critical climate of the past century. Regan’s work on</p>

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contemporary and post-war poetry (3.7) shows how Eliot has been read and transmitted by later poets, including Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

The related insight is that the supposed fracture between 'mass' and 'literary' readerships is a consequence of a misunderstanding of the history of readership. Since criticism is, in Eliot's words 'as natural as breathing', academic literary criticism can, and does, inform, expand, develop, democratise and make more self-reflexive the wider public's continuing consumption of its chosen forms of reading, which practice is itself a form of criticism. The research of James, Harding and Regan thus emphasises the relevance of earlier debates over genre and literary audience for contemporary writing and its readers.

3. References to the research

1. Simon James, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing*, London: Anthem Press, 2003.
2. Simon James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
3. Simon James, 'Marie Corelli and the Value of Literary Self-Consciousness: *The Sorrows of Satan*, Popular Fiction, and the Fin-de-Siècle Canon', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18:1 (2013): 134-51.
4. Jason Harding, 'Modernist Poetry and the Canon', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Davis, A. & Jenkins, L. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 225-243.
5. Jason Harding, ed. *Ford Madox Ford, Modernist Magazines and Editing*, Rodopi, 2010.
6. Stephen Regan, 'Robert Frost and the American Sonnet', *Robert Frost Review* 14 (2005): 13-35.
7. Stephen Regan, 'Contemporary and Post-war Poetry' in *T.S. Eliot in Context*. Ed. Harding, J. Cambridge University Press, 2011. 359-70.
8. Stephen Regan, 'Irish Elegy After Yeats', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Brearton, F. & Gillis, A. Oxford University Press, 2012. 588-606.

Markers of Quality: Peer-reviewed by leading journals and academic presses.

4. Details of the impact

By promoting reading as an inherently critical practice, the underpinning research into literary value and readership, across genres and reading communities, has benefited: (1) the audiences and organisers of the Durham Book Festival, (2) school teachers and (3) exhibition visitors.

1. Shaping Durham Book Festival

The Durham Book Festival (DBF) is the largest book festival in North East England and, according to an Arts Council assessor, its programme is 'comparable with large festivals of this type e.g. Cheltenham' [5.1]. As members of the steering group, James (from 2007) and Regan (from 2008) have drawn on their research to help the Festival to redefine its literary offering. Regan's instigation of a 'Festival Laureate' scheme in 2009 was an important innovation in its strategy. He devised the scheme and organises it annually. The Laureateship draws on Regan's research on contemporary poetry (and that of colleagues), by attracting to Durham poets of international renown. Each Laureate is commissioned to write and deliver a poem inspired by the people, place or culture of the North East. In public interview they respond to questions of literariness, access and audience.

The success of the scheme is evidenced by the Laureates who have been appointed. The first, Andrew Motion, composed and read 'Holy Island' (30 Oct. 2009). Speaking to the *Northern Echo*, Motion praised DBF in comparison with other festivals and singled out that 'one of the ways it's good is by developing, not staying the same' and the Laureateship exemplifies this 'renewal'. [5.2] In 2010, Simon Armitage wrote 'Fell Ponies'; and Regan gave prefatory public talks on work by Armitage (22 Oct. 2010). The 2011 Laureate, Don Paterson, discussed Shakespeare's sonnets with Fuller (whose recent book was on the sonnets) and Tony Harrison (25 Oct. 2011). The Festival Evaluation Report for that year states: 'With the English Department at Durham University we engaged Don Paterson as Festival Laureate. Don worked with choral composer Chris Totney to write a new Anthem for Evensong for the Durham Cathedral Choir.' Paterson wrote to the festival organisers: 'to have four events in such spectacular settings, with such great & attentive (and large!) audiences ... Well, it's all an author ever dreams of, frankly.' [5.3] On 25-26 October 2012 the Laureate Lorna Goodison delivered a specially composed poem based on Fenwick Lawson's sculpture of St Cuthbert (whose tomb is in Durham Cathedral). The 2013 Laureate will be Paul

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Muldoon. The DBF Chair who worked with Regan in establishing the scheme states that 'The Laureateship was instrumental in creating a stronger and more sustainable relationship between Durham Book Festival and Durham University'. It brought 'clear roles and responsibilities, which had been lacking from previous attempts at collaboration', and 'increased PR and programming opportunities for the Festival.' [5.4] An independent report for the DBF in 2010 praised the laureate scheme and recommended deepening the ties between the Festival and Durham University research. [5.5] Regan and James have been instrumental in achieving these closer links for English Studies, which in 2012 led to a formal partnership agreement with the University. Writing in 2012, a popular poetry blogger linked the success of the Laureateship to that of the Festival: 'the Festival has gone from strength to strength in recent years, with Simon Armitage and Don Paterson filling the role of Festival Laureate in 2010 and 2011'. [5.6]

The laureateship scheme has been carefully established in order to: (i) bring departmental research in contemporary poetry into dialogue with acclaimed poets; (ii) promote critical reflection on poetry to a wide audience of festival-goers; and (iii) initiate, and build on, cultural links between poets and the region. The Laureateship scheme brought new 'opportunities for increased audience engagement with the Festival' and so has directly contributed to the success of DBF [5.4]. Over the period of the scheme, DBF total visitor numbers have increased from 2,350 in 2008 to 6,155 in 2012. DBF 2012 generated nearly £45,000 solely in box-office income against a target income of £25,000. [5.7]. Specifically, the Laureateship generated a focus on Durham as a site for contemporary poetry which was recognised by the decision of Faber to include Durham as one of the main venues for the Faber New Poets Tour (broadcast on BBC2 Culture Show, 12 November 2009), and by a recent partnership with the Poetry Book Society to host an annual reading in Durham for the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry from 2013.

The underpinning research has also generated an innovative reading programme that brought new audiences to contemporary genre fiction and placed it in a literary-historical context. James's challenging of the divisions between literary fiction and genre fiction, and between academic criticism and popular reading, led to the programming of specific events within DBF. He co-hosted a creative writing course on 'vampire / horror fiction' for 25 schoolchildren aged 10-17 at the 2009 festival (29 October), which 'allowed them to see that the modern vampire stories they were reading (*Twilight*) had a long literary tradition' and which assisted them in creating their own stories. His contribution was praised by the Chair of DBF as 'brilliant' and very effective with the age group. [5.8] Most notably, in 2011, James collaborated with New Writing North (an Arts Council-funded body) to devise 'Durham Reads', described by the DBF report as 'the first ever civic reading project across County Durham'. This event promoted critical reading and discussion by distributing 1,000 free copies of Richard T. Kelly's neo-Victorian Gothic novel *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* at libraries and shops and other venues across County Durham. This novel was chosen by James and New Writing North as it reworks Victorian gothic, one of James's specialisms. Library reading groups met to discuss the novel, and representatives from the Council and business communities also distributed it. Inside each copy was a specially produced reading guide for the novel. The finale of 'Durham Reads' was staged in conjunction with DBF (18 October). James led a discussion with Kelly and 149 readers on the relationship between classic gothic fiction, literary canonisation and contemporary writing. This was accompanied by staged readings, by actors, from gothic novels by Stevenson, Wilde and Stoker, placing Kelly's novel in dialogue with a history of the form devised by James. Independent feedback cited in the DBF 2011 report praises the innovative format of this event. [5.9] The Chair of New Writing North and DBF (2009-2012) writes that James's 'research interests have helped to influence and shape a number of events' at DBF. 'The impact of his involvement was both in the shaping and articulation of the book choice, the enriching of our programme offer and in the profiling of [his] interesting research'. She states that James's 'research interests allowed us to create a final celebratory event that allowed readers to respond to the book that they had read whilst being able to understand more about the author's literary influences.' [5.10] The event further gave Kelly a greater comprehension of his readers' motivations and interests, as he attested in his blog report. 'The experience of conversing with such readers is very meaningful and instructive', he added, praising James's 'adept questioning and commentary'. [5.11] This scheme assisted DBF in widening its audiences: the DBF Chair states that 'readers absolutely loved' this event. It 'was a high point for the festival as it brought together such diverse elements of Durham's communities'. [5.10]

2. Influence on School Teachers

James's work with local schoolchildren at DBF 2009 fed into an event for schoolteachers in April 2010. James and Regan co-organised a three-day residential summer school for 60 school teachers to investigate ways in which their research might inform the teaching of English in schools. Sessions by James and Regan on 'What is English Literature For?' and by James on 'Genres in Fiction: Gothic' were mixed with sessions on 'A-Level design and delivery' by a principal examiner for the exam board AQA. The focus was on assisting teachers' to engage young audiences in contemporary writing. Responses immediately after the event were very positive: James showed how ideas can be 'applied or adapted for classroom practice'. His talk scored 4.8 out of 5 for providing 'information that will be useful in my work'. Participants said that it had 'renewed', 'inspired' and 're-energized' their love of the subject, that it 'will help [their] teaching', and that they had gained 'quality professional development'. The 'enormous benefit' of the event was shared by many. Teachers wrote to say that they had incorporated aspects of the sessions into their classroom practice. This influence will continue: these 60 teachers will teach thousands of present and future school students whose interest will help to sustain the discipline. [5.12]

3. Designing an Exhibition of Literary Magazines

James's and Harding's research shaped an exhibition which was the inaugural public display at the Wolfson Gallery, Durham in 2012. This exhibition grew from a previous, smaller three-day public exhibition of a selection of the University Library's rare modernist magazines, held at the University's Cosin's Library in 2009, arranged by Harding to accompany his work on Ford Madox Ford and the editing of literary magazines (Harding, 2010). The event led a collector to donate to the University a complete original set of *transatlantic review*, edited by Ford. This unforeseen effect – the preservation of a rare item for public and scholarly access – led directly to the later, larger exhibition. *Outrageously Modern!: The Avant-Garde Magazines that Shocked Britain 1884-1922* displayed literary periodicals and captions at the Wolfson Gallery from February to October 2012. Curated by James, Harding and a PhD student, the exhibition drew on their research to show the role of literary magazines, and their different publics, in the history of literary audiences from the mid-19th century to modernism. James and Harding selected the exhibits and wrote the captions, seeking to revise received versions of literary audience-formation in favour of a narrative more closely informed by their research. Over 8 months, *Outrageously Modern!* was attended by 7,180 members of the public (plus university staff and students). The visitors' book records many pages of praise, such as 'Very informative and moving. Beautifully presented'. Visitors found the curating educational: 'Fantastic exhibition, learnt a lot'; 'informative displays' were 'very well annotated'; 'thank you for the literary insights'. Several spent lengthy periods engaging with the exhibition: 'a very enjoyable 1.5 hours'. The benefits of this work were also social, opening the university's rare literary holdings to all ('good to know these works are accessible'). The exhibition had direct and indirect economic impacts: entry fees and directly-related sales raised over £25,000. Moreover, the exhibition boosted the local economy through transport and accommodation, contributing to Durham's cultural tourism: several found it 'well worth the trip'; 'ten years since we were last here and what an amazing discovery'. It had a sustainable impact in its encouragement to explore further: respondents said they 'look forward to returning' [5.13]

The overall influence of the research has been to promote critical reflection on literature, and the idea of literary taste, to a variety of audiences. It led to new partnerships that have established the city of Durham as a significant venue for the critical, and public, appreciation of modern writing.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Durham Book Festival final report, 2011, p.9. **5.2** Cited in DBF final report, 2009, p.18. **5.3** DBF final report, 2011, p.6. **5.4** Testimony from Chair of DBF 2008 **5.5** 'Durham Book Festival: Five Year Plan 2011-2016', 24/9/2010, p.15. **5.6** <http://wordsofmercury.wordpress.com/2012/08/09/durham-book-festival-launch/> **5.7** DBF reports 2008, p.15 and 2012, p.2. **5.8** Testimonies from Chair of DBF 2009 and Chair of DBF 2013 (co-organiser 2009-12). **5.9** DBF final report 2011: details of 'Durham Reads', p.5; audience feedback, p.7. **5.10** Testimony from Chair of DBF 2009-12. **5.11** Richard T. Kelly blog report: <http://drforrest.wordpress.com/2011/10/25/70-durham-reads-doctor-forrest-with-diverse-fascinating-opinions/> and testimonial from the author. **5.12** Teachers' Conference evaluation forms and teachers' emails. **5.13** Visitors' Book, Wolfson Gallery, Durham. Figures supplied by the Exhibitions Officer, Wolfson Gallery.