

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Wolverhampton</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature</p>
<p>Title of case study: Humour, Culture, and Identity</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Paul McDonald is an award-winning writer whose comic novels, short stories, and poetry have established him as a leading figure in the literature of the Black Country. His creative output is informed by scholarly research into humour and humour-writing that has national and international reach, and has contributed to the public knowledge of the history and cultural significance of humour. Specifically, he has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benefited economic prosperity through media commissions in the creative sector (e.g. via promotion, sales, and web traffic); • contributed to creating, inspiring, and supporting the cultural life of the West Midlands.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>McDonald explores Jewish-American, and American humour more generally, in a number of articles published between 2004-2010 in journals such as the <i>Journal of Popular Culture</i> and the <i>Journal of Ecocriticism</i>, and in edited collections from Amsterdam University Press, and Königshausen u. Neumann. This work develops his concern for how humour functions in its cultural context and culminates in two books, <i>Laughing at the Darkness: Optimism and Postmodernism in American Humour</i> (2011) and <i>The Philosophy of Humour</i> (2012). The former draws on over 200 primary and secondary sources, and demonstrates how humour becomes a corrective to the negative implications of philosophical postmodernism. The latter shows how creative writing exercises can explicate and interrogate classic humour theories and involved researching philosophies of humour from antiquity to the present.</p> <p>McDonald's comic novels explore aspects of popular music, literature, and social relations in the Black Country/West Midlands of the mid to late twentieth century. The research for McDonald's first novel, <i>Surviving Sting</i> (2001), involved interviewing leather trade workers, as well as reading material on 1970s British culture. For his second, <i>Kiss Me Softly, Amy Turtle</i> (2004), he shadowed a <i>Birmingham Evening Mail</i> journalist and interviewed sex workers and NHS representatives. <i>Do I Love You?</i> (2008) is presented against the backdrop of the Midlands Northern Soul music scene, and research included interviewing people involved with this subculture, as well as reading the large corpus of primary and secondary sources that document its history. It also involved interviewing Health Visitors, together with West Midlands Council employees and teachers. One critic calls the novel 'an unflinching depiction of life in the Midlands, a historical and sociological view of the Northern Soul scene' (<i>Transition-Tradition</i>). With his collections of poetry, <i>Catch a Falling Tortoise</i> (2007) and <i>An Artist Goes Bananas</i> (2012), McDonald extends this regional focus to include transnational and universal reflections on nature, art, social responsibility, and personal failure in comic, tragi-comic, and more serious registers.</p> <p>McDonald is also concerned to preserve and promote Black Country writing. He is the author of a study of neglected Black Country writers, <i>Fiction from the Furnace: A Hundred Years of Black Country Writing</i> (Sheffield University Press, 2002). The research for this involved studying all available novel-length works written by regional writers, and all available secondary sources. He also edited a collection of short stories by contemporary writers from or connected to the West Midlands, <i>Loffing Matters</i> (2006), in order to promote and inspire unpublished writers. This links McDonald's humour research and his own status as a creative writer and involved McDonald evaluating the large amount of writing submitted, and editing his selections. His scholarly work on regional writing, which includes numerous articles for <i>The Blackcountryman</i>, was undertaken partly with a view to finding ways of positioning himself creatively within the existing canon, and his close</p>

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readings of this writing have influenced his own imaginative work, both in terms of theme and style.

3. References to the research

Surviving Sting. Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2001. (Novel). (Quality Indicators: Reviewed in *The Times*, 6 October 2001; *Time Out*, 17-24 October 2001).

Kiss Me Softly, Amy Turtle. Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2004. (Novel). (Quality Indicators: Reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 21 May 2004; *The Telegraph*, 12 July 2007).

Catch a Falling Tortoise. Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2007. (Poetry). (Quality Indicators: Reviewed in *New Hope International Review*, September 2007; *Ink, Sweat and Tears: The Poetry and Prose Webzine*, November 2007; Welsh Book Council, www.gwales.com, 2012; includes poems published previously in *Iota* [ISSN 0266-2922], *The Journal* [1466-5220], *Other Poetry* [0144-5847], and *Staple* [0266-4410]).

Do I Love You? Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2008. (Novel) (Quality Indicators: Reviewed in *The Times*, *TLS* (cover quotes), *The Telegraph*, September 2008, *Irish Central*, 7 March 2010; *Transition/Tradition*, 7 December 2008; submitted in REF2 – output PM1).

Laughing at the Darkness: Optimism and Postmodernism in American Humour. Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011. (Criticism). (Quality Indicator: Submitted in REF2 – output PM2).

The Philosophy of Humour. Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2012. (Criticism). (Quality Indicator: Submitted in REF2 – output PM4).

4. Details of the impact

Benefiting Economic Prosperity through Media Commissions

Through media commissions, McDonald's research has benefited commercial clients, and contributed to public knowledge of the history and cultural significance of humour. In 2008, publicist Taylor Herring and their client UKTV commissioned McDonald to research the world's oldest joke in order to publicise Dave TV, drive traffic to the Dave TV website, and promote a stand-up comedy event, 'Live at the Apollo'. McDonald's discovery of a Sumerian flatulence joke (c. 1900 BC) was broadcast in interviews for *BBC Breakfast* (TV), *BBC Midlands Today* (TV), *BBC World Service*, *Sky News*, and 31 local radio stations. The story was covered by every major UK newspaper and worldwide (via Reuters) in such media as *China Daily.com*, *ABC Australia*, *The Economic Times-India*, and *International Business Times-New York*, with an estimated audience of 196 million (Taylor Herring, 2008). The coverage exceeded expectations ('We also surpassed our original target by getting 90% of online coverage to credit the Dave website or provide a link directly to it') and the client responded enthusiastically: 'Fantastic Dave coverage . . . super impressed with the amount of interviews' (TH, 2008).

Additional responses included a chapter on McDonald's findings in Jim Dawson's *Did Somebody Step on a Duck?: A Natural History of the Fart* (2010), where the 'recent discovery of the oldest joke' is the lead selling feature on Amazon Books. McDonald was subsequently commissioned to research, help script, and contribute on screen to *Ye Olde Stand Up* (Icon Films), directed by Dominic Weston, and presented by Barry Cryer on BBC's *The One Show* (12 August 2010; estimated audience 4.5 million [BBC Publicity, online]). More recently, McDonald contributed research and an on-screen interview for the BBC documentary, *Michael Grade and the World's Oldest Joke* (BBC4, 6 and 7 March 2013), previewed in *The Radio Times* and widely reviewed in the national press including *The Independent* and *Daily Mail*.

McDonald extends the reach of this research in accessible articles, published in both regional and national newspapers (e.g. 'How to Write a Funny Short Story', *Birmingham Post*, 1 December 2008 [circulation 11,000]; 'Heard the One About The Oldest Joke in the World?', *Independent on Sunday* 19 December 2010 [circulation 124,000]). Internationally, the research continues to reverberate.

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The 19-E Emmy Award winning US-based documentary filmmaker and television producer Troy Hale read of McDonald's work in the Dawson book and invited McDonald to join a new project, 'Fart, a documentary film: the history and comedy of farting'; McDonald was filmed and interviewed in June 2013 and the documentary will be released in 2014.

Creating, Inspiring, and Supporting West Midlands Cultural Life

McDonald's comic novels, all published with award-winning Birmingham publisher Tindal Street Press, have promoted public engagement with regional issues through humour. *Do I Love You?* (2008) has sold 2000 copies and has been widely reviewed regionally and nationally, including *The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Telegraph*, and *Time Out*, eliciting comments on the novel's accessibility and local colouring ('as Black Country as Balti and Banks's Bitter' [*Time Out*]).

McDonald has also benefited publics by giving readings and workshops at numerous arts events including, The Birmingham Book Festival (October 2008, audience 60), The Lichfield Literary Festival (October 2012, 40), The Wellington Literary Festival (October 2012, 30), and The Peterborough We Love Words Festival (September 2012, 40). He distributed free books at Lichfield City Railway Station for World Book Day (3 March 2011), an event organised by Staffordshire County Council and the train operator London Midland to 'bring people back to reading and encourage them to enjoy ... their local library' (GlobalRailNews, online); and has given talks and workshops for numerous institutions, including Winson Green Prison (June 2009), Swinfen Prison (August 2011), and 18 regional libraries, schools, and colleges within the census period (e.g. Birmingham Library, Bloxwich Library, Hereford Library, and Sandwell Academy).

McDonald's interest in the relationship between humour and creativity has also been disseminated via 7 public lectures and workshops since 2008, including, 'Philosophy, Humour, Writing,' part of the Arts Council funded Hooky Street Press series 'bring[ing] together artists, writers, academics and comedians in developing a model of art-writing that draws upon ... comical writing genres outside of art', Eastside Projects, Birmingham, July 2012, recorded for online broadcast.

The **reach** of McDonald's research is indicated by the cumulative audiences of his outreach activities and the local, national, and international media circulation of his contributions to radio, television, and print journalism (figures cited above).

Its **significance** is indicated by favourable reviews and public notices, his many invitations to give public lectures and workshops regionally and nationally, and prizes – McDonald is a four times prize winner in the Ottakar/Faber & Faber Poetry Competition, and won first prize in both the John Clare Poetry Competition, 2012, judged by Sir Andrew Motion, and the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Prize, 2013.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Corroboration of responses to media commissions:

- 'The World's Oldest Joke for TV Channel Dave', Taylor Herring Report, 2008 (corroborating statement provided [1])
- 'Reuters Article Featuring the Oldest Joke.' <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/07/31/uk-britain-joke-life-idUKL129052420080731>
- Dawson, Jim. *Did Somebody Step on a Duck?: A Natural History of the Fart*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press [Random House], 2010; esp. 33-35.
- *Michael Grade and the World's Oldest Joke* (BBC4, 6 and 7 March 2013); details at: http://www.comedy.co.uk/guide/tv/michael_grade_oldest_joke/

Corroboration of responses to regional support activities:

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- 'From Saddles to Chuckles', interview with BBC local radio, January 2007; article updated 25 January 2008
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blackcountry/content/articles/2007/01/15/paul_mcdonald_feature.shtml
- 'Philosophy, Humour, Writing', public lecture given at the Eastside Projects Birmingham, 4 July 2012.
<http://extraspecialpeople.org/events/hooky-st-press-writing-talk-1-dr-paul-mcdonald>;
<http://www.chrispoolman.com/talks>
- Diane Perry, 'The Recipe for Laughter', *Working to Write*, Blog, 21 October 2012. On McDonald's workshop at Wellington Literary Festival ('a wonderful workshop ... a real insight into how to write humour').
<http://working2write.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/the-recipe-for-laughter.html>
- 'Spend the Evening with Local Writer Paul McDonald, April 18 [2013], The Drop Forge', Jewellery Quarter Bookwormers Group, online announcement and responses from attendees ('great fun, entertaining and informative', 'Hearing Paul read ... really brought the humour to life'. 'Paul made the evening a lot of fun ... A great turn out attendee wise too for this event')
http://www.meetup.com/JQBookwormers/events/82194572/?_af_eid=82194572&a=uc1_te&_af=event