

Institution: Keele University
Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Identities Empowered? Creative Writing, Production, Technology
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>For Joe Stretch creative writing, widely conceived, is both the key research output and the practice that generates impact. Through award-winning writing in a range of media, he seeks critically to interrogate new modes of identity and empowerment that new forms of media production and communication technology claim to offer by engaging a range of reading, listening and viewing audiences. Wide-ranging and innovative dissemination has led to local, national and international impacts on the imaginations and sensibilities of those audiences, especially among a younger demographic. Impacts within the creative and cultural sectors have been achieved through influence on the practices of other creative professionals.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>In his novels, and also in his audio-novels, films and songs, Joe Stretch (previously Lecturer, now Senior Lecturer at Keele) depicts people, particularly young people, living in a context of post-industrialism in Manchester. Stretch examines how consumer identities and sexual identities have the potential to merge, how ideology appears to retreat then re-emerge as its opposite, and how people cope with freedom's rule.</p> <p>Stretch's <i>Bildungsroman</i> narratives unfold during the period 1989 to the present. His novel <i>Wildlife</i> (2009) examines the impact of social networking on the way young people perform their identities, looking specifically at body-image, sexuality and our relationship with words. His novel <i>The Adult</i> (2012) examines the role celebrity culture played in social change in England from 1989 to 2009. His film <i>Wizard's Way</i> (2012) explores young people's relationship with video cameras as 'fame-tools' and explores the potential difficulties in transitioning between an immersive 'game' environment and a 'real' life. The songs collected on his album <i>Red Brick Heart</i> (2010) were written in an unconverted Ancoats cotton mill; they depict a life and a romance in a Manchester that is rapidly regenerating.</p> <p>In the creation and distribution of his work, Stretch seeks to explore this post-industrial context further by engaging with the new modes of manufacture and distribution that have arisen in it. New media, new technologies and an alleged dismantling of traditional power hierarchies within the creative industries are tested by Stretch, whose research is practice-based, yet generates perspectives on creative practice in a changing social context, and a balanced assessment of the empowering capacities of 'outsider' broadcasting technologies.</p> <p>It is in the distribution of these outputs that Stretch's additional research practice emerges: by engaging with the whole spectrum of cultural dissemination (from 'actual' to 'virtual') Stretch examines the politics of this process and generates perspectives on the ways people can create and access culture in these times.</p> <p>Stretch examines the cultural and economic possibilities created by the decline of traditional models of cultural dissemination and the rise of new broadcasting technologies such as YouTube and Spotify, as well as the availability of cheaper video cameras, and software such as ProTools and FinalCut. He explores the reality of this new cultural and economic context and assesses the validity of its claims to empowerment.</p> <p>Stretch's creative research interacts with key strains of critical research in English at Keele, notably Professor Scott McCracken's current work on political 'defeat' in Europe from 1870 to 1989. Stretch has initiated a strong culture of literary practice within Keele, consisting of events, publications, workshops and a Summer School to create a literary 'centre' that is accessible to the</p>

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local community. The strength of contribution that Stretch has made to the vitality and health of the wider literary world is evident from the professional recognition his work has received. In 2012 *The Adult* was shortlisted for the Portico Prize, a distinguished literary prize that rewards writing about the North of England. Further, in June 2013, the novel won the Somerset Maugham Prize from the Society of Authors. Reviews of Stretch's writing outputs have come from a broad range of local, national and international newspapers, magazines, blogs and other online sources. These reviews attest to the significance of Stretch's novels to literature and the broader cultural sector as opening up and articulating perceptive and powerful understandings of the contemporary society in highly accessible ways. *Wizard's Way* was an Official Selection for The London Independent Film Festival 2012, where it won the award for Best Comedy Feature. In December 2012, it won The London Comedy Festival Discovery Award, where it was short-listed alongside two BBC funded films. *The Huffington Post* identified *Wizard's Way*, along with Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers*, as founding films in a new and quintessentially British cinematic genre, 'Bedsit Noir'.

3. References to the research

Written publications

STRETCH, J. (2009) *Wildlife* (Vintage) ISBN-13: 978-0099532071

STRETCH, J. (2012) *The Adult* (Vintage). ISBN-13: 978-0224096478 – 2013 winner of the *Somerset Maugham Award*, shortlisted for the *Portico Prize*

Film/Screenplay

STRETCH, J, [screen play] *Wizard's Way* (2012) URL: <http://www.savewizardsway.com/>

Winner of *Best Comedy Feature* in the London Independent Film Festival 2012; Winner of The London Comedy Festival *Discovery Award*.

4. Details of the impact

Stretch's research – through the content, form and dissemination of the outputs - has had significant impact on the cultural sector, including on other creative professionals; as well as on public audiences/participants across the country. These impacts have been 1) to contribute to the economic wellbeing of the creative industries through the commercial value of the research 'products'; 2) to introduce to the creative sector new ways of creating and disseminating ideas, bringing together new media and 'old industry' directly and through influencing other creative professionals; and finally, 3) the impact has enriched lives through challenging existing perspectives, opening up different understandings, imaginations and sensibilities among a variety of audiences.

1) Impacts on the economic wellbeing of the Creative Industries

Most immediately, the very medium of Stretch's research pieces mean that they are available to the creative industries as commercial 'products', contributing to the economic vibrancy of the publishing and film industries.

The novels *Wildlife* (£8.99) and *The Adult* (£12.99, Hardback) have had sales of 750 and 896 copies respectively, as of July 2013. Publisher Vintage (Random House) have stated that they have been 'very satisfied' with the progress of these sales [source 1] and *The Adult* is being marketed in the publisher's latest sales catalogue.

Although film *Wizard's Way* was created on a minimal budget (£400), it has been screened to sell-out audiences in Belfast and London. The success of this type of screening is essential to the economic viability of the arts venues in which they are shown, a success that was in part due to the sympathetic audience research that underpinned the conceptualisation of the film by Stretch and his two co-creators. 220 came to the Belfast Screening at the Queen's Film Theatre on 14th April 2012 (£6 per ticket) and 125 to the screening (£12 per ticket) at the British Film Institute in London on 25th January 2013 as part of the London LOCO Comedy Film Festival [source 2].

2) Impacts on the vibrancy and innovative capacity of the Creative Industries (including the influencing of other professionals)

In addition to adding economic value to the creative sector, the work of Stretch has also made a creative contribution to the literary arena. He has collaborated with other artists and creative professionals, both to create other innovative and successful cultural products, but also to inspire the work of others. Stretch's 'no-budget' film, *Wizard's Way*, was edited (for free) by Oscar-winning editor Chris Dickens (*Slumdog Millionaire* – Best Editor) after he viewed the rushes on Vimeo. The film was subsequently acquired by Hollywood agency William Morris Endeavor who negotiated a deal for the US actor, writer, singer and producer Jack Black to become Executive Producer, and act as a sales consultant on the film (the film is due to have its North American sales premiere in early 2014). Jack Black's ELECTRIC DYNAMITE production company also purchased the remake rights to the film, a production in which Jack Black is already attached to star. Stretch has been commissioned by Film 4 (Anna Higgs – Commissioning Executive Film 4.0) to make his next film.

The 'Wizard's Way project' creates and tests a new way of making film. It is thus generating valuable lessons for other film-makers on how to access and innovate within the established film world, both in Britain and the United States. The film's impact in Hollywood strengthens the British Film industry in the international arena.

Extending research into the narratives of contemporary youth undertaken for *Wildlife* and *The Adult*, Stretch wrote a 'choose your own adventure' audio-novel *Don't Let Go*, which was bought by SONY and recorded by the actress Anna Friel. It was released in 2010 in an entirely new fashion: each chapter was separately uploaded onto Spotify and listeners navigated their way round the story on-line. The audio-novel *Don't Let Go* was 'read' by 150,000 people. It has had extended commercial impact: having been purchased by SONY Music, it was used to promote the debut album of British pop act Hurts directly leading to over 18,000 sales in 2010/11 [source 3]. It also received a Cannes Lion Award for Creative Innovation at The Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, which is considered the world's largest gathering of advertising creatives, designers, digital innovators and marketers. It was also cited as good practice in a speech on Creative Innovation by one of the world's leading new media entrepreneurs, Daniel Ek (named by Forbes in 2012 as 'the most important man in music' [source 4]).

Stretch further explores the narratives of youth and sexuality in a post-modern/post-industrial context through his lyrics. As the *Guardian* wrote in 2012, Stretch's 'lyrics merge the Bowie-esque with the Balladian' [source 5]. Many songs borrow lines directly from Stretch's novels; others build on themes found in *Wildlife* and *The Adult*: the anomic features of social networking, the performance of sexual identity, and the experience of post-industrial Manchester. The impact of Stretch's lyric writing is consolidated through a variety of media and dissemination channels. Stretch's use of MySpace and YouTube as a way of distributing the music of his band, (We are) Performance, led to independent sales of 4000 copies of his albums *(We are) Performance* and *Red Brick Heart*. The songs have 150,000 views on YouTube. Two of Stretch's compositions were used in Alexis Dos Santos' film *Unmade Beds*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. In 2010, *NME* placed *(We are) Performance* at number 2 in their prestigious 'Top 100 Albums You've Never Heard'. In the supporting article, Adam Anderson from Hurts stated, 'Their music made you want to go out to the places they went. Do the things they sang about. Manchester felt exciting. I suppose more importantly than anything else they made me want to make music. So, inspired by them, I did.' Hurts' debut album sold over a million copies worldwide in 2011. Stretch performed his songs across Europe in 2010, playing to a combined audience of 15,000. He also performed his composition 'The Living' on the German television programme *Gute Zeiten Schlechte Zeiten*, which has an average audience of 8 million.

3) Enriching life/lives and developing insights

On the basis of his writing, Stretch was invited to talk at prominent UK arts festival, Camp Bestival, in July 2012 (audience of around 70) and The Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2012 where he read from and discussed his work (audience of around 100). *Wizard's Way* was screened to public audiences at the Belfast Film Festival in 2012 and to a full audience (venue sold out) at London's British Film Institute in January 2013. Stretch's *Wildlife* chimed most with the

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younger generation and this led directly to invitations for Stretch to talk in schools. For instance, Stretch visits a school in South London annually to look over essays and run creative writing workshops. The Learning Resource Centre Manager at another school, The Fallibroome Academy in Macclesfield wrote, '[Stretch] made a terrific impact on both staff and sixth formers with everyone talking about how engaging and inspiring he was during the following days. Several of the tutors actively sought me out to let me know the reaction from their forms and many individual students have subsequently admitted to me how much they enjoyed his talk. In terms of reading we have actually had students seeking out and borrowing books on the strength of his recommendation, as well as requesting others and we now have a waiting list for his book pending the arrival of extra copies. I even have new book group recruits! Can it get any better?' [source 6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Source 1: Random House

Source 2: <http://locofilmfestival.com/2012/11/22/wizards-way-wins-loco-discovery-award-2013/> - London Comedy Film Festival commentary on *Wizard's Way*

Source 3: See media innovation website 'Cream' for evidence of statistics for and review of 'Don't let go': <http://www.creamglobal.com/17798/23095/don't-let-go>.

See also Spotify Blog Post, *Interactive audio novel from Hurts*, (30th August 2010) announcing the release of 'Don't Let Go': <http://news.spotify.com/uk/2010/08/30/hurt/>

Source 4: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2012/01/04/spotify-daniel-ek-the-most-important-man-in-music/>

Source 5: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/aug/24/the-adult-joe-stretch-review> - National review of *The Adult*

Source 6: Fallibroome Academy

Other Sources of corroboration:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9508975/The-Adult-by-Joe-Stretch-review.html> - National review of *The Adult*

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/wildlife-by-joe-stretch-1675069.html> - National review of *Wildlife*

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jonathan-wakeham/from-sightseers-to-wizard_b_2227153.html - Huffington Post article on *Wizard's Way/Bedsit Noir*