

Institution: University of Chichester
Unit of Assessment: English Language and Literature
Title of case study: International impact for short story writers and writing
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Short story writers, their supporters and the wider reading public have benefitted from the Thresholds International Short Story Forum. Thresholds arose out of the practice-as-research work of Alison MacLeod, and has become a leading international source of information and expertise for short fiction writers, readers, students and academics as evidenced by its 1,000+ registered members and other online activity. Feedback from those who use Thresholds indicates that new writing practice, motivation, literary productivity and publishing success have characterised the achievement of the site since its creation in 2010. Thresholds is now a vibrant hub of activity driving innovation in the short fiction form.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Through her practice-based research into the artistic and conceptual possibilities of the short story form, and through her related research outputs and wider literary activity, Professor MacLeod has had a significant impact on the rejuvenation of the short story form in the UK, both as an individual expert and in concert with other key UK cultural-literary organisations.</p> <p>The short story form is characterised by its narrative compression, its intensity of focus, and its rigours, word by word, image by image, line by line. It is a very exacting form – the fiction writer’s equivalent of the tightrope walk. At its best, it is both bold and precise, and the experience for the reader is exhilarating. In the UK, the form of the novel casts a long shadow, and the short story has not always thrived in the way it has in Ireland, Russia or the US. Yet the power of ‘story’ is a strong cultural force, albeit one which has needed support from educators and cultural commentators in recent years in the UK.</p> <p>Building on her profile as an author, achieved in part by the critical reception to <i>Fifteen Modern Tales of Attraction</i> (described as, for example, “<i>as formally inventive as it is original</i>” by the Guardian in 2009), as well as through her award nominations (e.g., The 2013 Man-Booker Prize), numerous public events, prestigious story publications and commissions (by the BBC, The Sunday Times, Prospect, Comma Press, Virago Books, Bloomsbury, Best British Short Stories, etc.), MacLeod has played an important part in the development of the contemporary short fiction form.</p> <p>Her literary expertise, coupled with her cutting-edge awareness of the formal possibilities of short-story writing, has led to innovative new examples of short fiction. In MacLeod’s hands, the short story routinely takes on new form and, with it, fresh power. Her short fiction writing is characterised by strong storytelling elements, sharp psychological insights, as well as surprising combinations of seemingly disparate literary modes: historical material, scientific research (Complexity Theory, cardiovascular physiology, etc.) real-world reportage, biography, a black-box recording transcript, and so on. Her research-as-practice in short fiction is founded on the belief that the short story is an innately mutable form, one that expresses, above all, the force of change and metamorphosis in our lives.</p> <p>Thresholds arises directly from Prof. MacLeod’s writing and research in the area of short fiction. It is distinguished by both a sharp awareness of contemporary developments in the short story and a dynamic sense of the form’s tradition. The site rejects the notion of any one kind of short story writing and instead embraces the heterogeneous work within the form, from, for example, the absurdist stories of Adam Marek to the semi-autobiographical fiction of David Vann. As an international forum, Thresholds encourages exchange and dialogue above all; in so doing, it offers a source of ongoing renewal for both story writers and the short story.</p> <p>Prof. MacLeod has been employed at the University of Chichester since 2/10/1989.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>2013 commissioned essay on the short story art of Katherine Mansfield, ‘Alison MacLeod on Katherine Mansfield’, <i>Morphologies</i>, ed. Ra Page; Comma Press.</p> <p>2012 commissioned short story ‘There Are Precious Things’, producer Liz Allard, BBC Radio 3 ‘Twenty Minutes’ series.</p> <p>2012 commissioned short story ‘Solo, A Cappella’; producer Jeremy Osborne, BBC Radio 4</p> <p>2011-13 commissioned short story :‘The Heart of Denis Noble’ for <i>Litmus: Short Stories from Modern Science</i>, Comma Press, ed. Ra Page; re-published in The Sunday Times</p>

Magazine online edition, Aug. 2011 and ongoing; shortlisted for the prestigious BBC National Short Story Award; re-published in the **2011 BBC National Short Story Award Collection**; broadcast internationally on **BBC Radio 4** and read by actor Tim Pigott-Smith; excerpt featured on BBC Radio 4's 'Pick of the Week' 18/09/11; sold internationally via BBC AUDIOGO audiobooks; retransmission of story in Ireland and Belgium; published in **Best British Short Stories 2012**, ed. Nick Royle (Salt Publishing); selected for Comma Press's 'Tramlines' Europe-wide digital short fiction app

<http://www.commapress.co.uk/?section=books&page=Tramlines> ; reprinted in *THE STORY: 100 Great Short Stories Chosen by Victoria Hislop*; Head of Zeus Publishing – for UK and British Commonwealth distribution in hbk and pbk., Sept. 2013.

2009-12 commissioned short story 'The Thaw' for *Waving at the Gardener: The Asham Prize Collection*, ed. Kate Pullinger; **Bloomsbury Publishing** (UK). Subsequently recorded for downloading at **Spoken Ink**; re-printed in *Bridges to Modernity and Beyond*, international anthology of leading short fiction writers to coincide with 2012 International Conference of the Short Story in English (U.S.A.); re-printed in *The Mechanics' Institute Review* (Birkbeck, University of London Press).

2007 short story collection, *Fifteen Modern Tales of Attraction*, Hamish Hamilton.

4. Details of the impact

In 2004, BookTrust painted a bleak picture of the short fiction form in the UK, stressing the predominance of the novel and the declining share of mainstream publications of short story collections. Yet the report also recognised a tentative new trend: the form's re-emergence in the independent publishing sector. In October 2010 MacLeod established the website Thresholds International Short Story Forum, with its name evoking 'brinks of discovery', as well as the 'thresholds poetics' that are often considered key to the short story form. The site's primary aim was – and is still – to create an open platform where short story writers, editors, publishers, students and academics can 'meet' for an exchange of ideas and mutual support. The site has become a valuable resource for writers with information about prizes, calls for submissions, as well as tips and guidance on writing from esteemed writers. Thus Thresholds has created a vibrant community of those interested in the short story form, from Literature and Creative Writing students to editors, teachers, academics, writers and readers of short fiction. Since its launch Thresholds has attracted over 154,000 visits (to 31/7/2013) and 1,113 registered members worldwide; growth in visit numbers from 2011/12 to 2012/13 was 74% and 13/14 figures indicate that this is set to continue). It has a Facebook discussion group with 750 members, a membership that grows weekly, and nearly 1,800 'followers' on Twitter (as well as a lively twitter feed). Thresholds distinctively combines an awareness of contemporary developments in the short story, a real sense (and evidence) of day-to-day engagement with its members and followers, and the new, commissioned content which reflects MacLeod's particular approach to the form.

The beneficiaries are:

- Short story writers;
- Those involved in supporting the short story literary form (literary organisations, columnists and commentators);
- The wider interested public.

The impacts, as described and evidenced below, are:

1. Individuals who become inspired and act on the basis of engagement with Thresholds e.g. start writing, renew writing efforts, take a different approach to with their writing;
2. Individuals whose success is influenced by their engagement with Thresholds;
3. Individuals who experience the satisfaction of new skills, new literary knowledge, and/or new connections because of their engagement with Thresholds;
4. Enhanced activities of those who support the short story form e.g. Charleston/Small Wonder; Asham Award, Arvon Foundation, national news media.

The site features a range of material commissioned by MacLeod: stories, talks, masterclass interviews, and articles by acclaimed writers, academics and editors. It also features blogs, reviews and author profiles submitted by members. An up-to-date list of writing competitions, submission opportunities, conferences, festivals, and funding applications is available on the site, as well as other short-story-related resources. Thresholds' 'Friend and Partner organisations'

include The Charleston Trust, *The Sunday Times*, The Royal Society of Literature, *The London Magazine* and the Arvon Foundation. Original and new content on the site includes (but is not limited to) 24 author profiles, 11 interviews (including Joanna Trollope and Hanif Kureishi), 13 writing exercises, 94 'we recommend' entries, 97 entries in the discussion section (48 on the short form, 40 on writing stories, 17 on submitting), of which ~90% has been contributed by people outside of the Thresholds team.

According to a recent Thresholds members' survey (June 2013) (Number of respondents =61), 62% of the respondents currently describe themselves as a 'writer', 15% as student, 5% as literary professional and 3% as academic. 66% of respondents visit the site at least once or twice a week (24% more than 3 times a week), with 97% of respondents visiting at least once a month. The survey revealed that the three most popular areas of the site are the stories, features and submission deadlines. Nearly 60% of respondents have submitted 'a story, essay or article' after reading of a call for submissions at Thresholds; over a third state (35%) that they have had 'a publication or writing success' as a result. Successes reported by respondents include broadcast on Radio 4, PhD funding awards, a variety of competition long-listings and short-listings, a performance of a member's story by the renowned WordTheatre, and assorted publications, including publication at Thresholds (39%). Furthermore, many respondents confirmed that various sections of the site had helped them to develop their own short-story writing i.e. Features (51%), Interviews (44%), Masterclass podcasts (16%).

In terms of stimulating other types of activity 45% of respondents said that the info on Thresholds, Thresholds Facebook or Thresholds at Twitter encouraged them to attend a short story event, literary festival or literary conference. 10% of respondents applied for a job, a bursary or a fellowship after seeing it advertised on Thresholds or Thresholds Facebook. Thresholds has introduced its members to new short story fiction and expanded the range of short story writers read by its members as confirmed by over 80% of respondents. Respondents took the opportunity to provide a range of qualitative feedback (around 200 individual comments) which was overwhelmingly positive and constructive. Quotations support the claims made (see 1,2,3 and 4 above):

- 1). Individuals who become inspired and act on the basis of engagement with Thresholds.
 - 'Thresholds is a wonderful and unique forum for short story writing, theory and practice.'
 - 'It's the only place with a clear focus on all aspects of the short story.'
 - 'I love getting to know new short story writers as well as revisiting the old masters and finding new ways of appreciating them. Since I'm not in Academia, Thresholds helps me feel as [if] I'm still part of that world. [The] articles on craft are also good. ...[T]here are so many enjoyable "nooks and crannies" on Thresholds that when I stop by I hate to leave it.'
 - '...[my Thresholds article] made me think longer and harder about that writer and her stories and I think this has had a knock-on effect on my own writing.'
 - 'Frequently...the points raised make me think about that [technical] aspect of my own work and whether it's an area I could develop.'
- 2). Individuals whose success is influenced by their engagement with Thresholds;
 - 'BIG thanks [to the Thresholds team]... 2012 has been my best writing year largely due to checking out calls here and deadlines on the main site.' (from Facebook)
 - 'Several stories have either been short-listed in competitions or found online homes'
 - 'Word Theatre (2 events), Edge Hill Story Prize (longlist)'
 - 'Short listed for Cinnamon Press & published in the 2012-2013 anthology'
 - 'A short piece was published in Olentangy Review (USA).'
- 3). Individuals who feel more confident or positive about their writing because of Thresholds;
 - 'Having something published on the site [Thresholds] was a very empowering experience...'
 - 'I enjoy seeing what is published... and learning (with joy) that there are so many people writing short stories.'
 - 'It re-enthused me about a particular author – making me revisit that author – Helen Simpson – and then go back to my own writing with vigour.'
 - 'the existence of Thresholds in itself gives me inspiration!'

- 'I took part in an online chat with David Vann...and that was helpful as David was very encouraging.'

4). Enhanced activities of those who support the short story form

- Dr. Jose Varghese, editor, Lakeview Literature Journal, India: 'We started getting international submissions because our creative writing contests were publicised in Thresholds - and that was one reason why we thought of bringing out such a good international journal.'
- Comma Press to Thresholds: '[T]hank you so much for coming all the way to London and conducting such a thoughtful and in-depth interview [with author Hassan Blasim]. We really appreciate your time, and all the help and support Thresholds has given us in the past.'
- Author Cyril Dabydeen: 'I look forward to all the new exciting things happening with THRESHOLDS. I think it does great things for the short story genre.'

Further quoted material that illustrates other key aspects of Thresholds' impact and its uniqueness:

- Sense of community: 'There's a nice sense of community on the FB pages...and it's good to see when someone has a publishing success.'; 'I love that it's international.'
- Vibrancy and interaction: 'I love Thresholds. So many websites become dormant or start "recycling" things, but Thresholds always feels fresh.'; 'I particularly like the fact that it's so regularly maintained; it's the place to go for current [] short story news.'
- Contribution to the form: 'a wonderful forum for what is often a poorly publicised art form, so it's important in spreading the word about writers and texts'; 'The essays/features are brilliant - it is very well put together with v. informative features on writers and collections.'

In addition, by way of evidence of Prof. MacLeod's impact on the short story form in wider terms, she has promoted the short story and Thresholds at a range of public events during the REF period. For example, her invited talk and panel discussion at the Sunday Times Literary Awards (March 2013) which was described as a highlight by one VIP and globally renowned writer, "... a real highlight for me. As is seeing the short story rise in the public consciousness the way it has the last few years ..". Similarly, an award-winning literary journalist described MacLeod's talk as 'THE BEST overview of short story writing I've ever heard'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Thresholds International Short Story Forum: <http://blogs.chi.ac.uk/shortstoryforum/>

Thresholds Members Online Survey; conducted anonymously through Bristol Online Surveys; data collated by University of Chichester Research Office; survey results available upon request.

Thresholds Facebook Forum: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/119408184764495/>

Thresholds at Twitter: @shortstoryforum. A substantial record of 'Twitter correspondence' to @shortstoryforum is available upon request.

International Small Wonder Short Story Festival and Thresholds collaboration (please scroll down):

<http://smallwondershorts.wordpress.com/tag/small-wonder/>

Thresholds at The Society of Authors (UK): <http://www.societyofauthors.net/what-are-best-markets-short-stories>

Thresholds is promoted at *The Telegraph's* 'Short Story Club':

<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/theshortstoryclub/louiseatmyt/619/thresholds-short-story-forum/>

Thresholds at Writers Afrika <http://www.writersafrika.org/2013/03/worldwide-entries-open-2013-thresholds.html>

Thresholds and *Sunday Times* collaborative Oxford Literary Festival event:

<http://oxfordliteraryfestival.org/literature-events-2013/Friday-22/how-to-write-a-successful-short-story>

MacLeod, A. 'No Excess Baggage', *The Sunday Times*, 3 March 2013, ed. Andrew Holgate;

<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/fiction/article1221621.ece>

MacLeod, A. 'Beautiful Blasts', Thresholds International Short Story Forum;

<http://blogs.chi.ac.uk/shortstoryforum/atoms-and-stories/>

Thresholds link featured at BBC Radio 3 site: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01p9jcz>

Brown, J., Forsyth, M., and Johnston, P. 2004: 'The Short Story in the UK: an overview of the current state and exploration of opportunities for new initiatives.' Jenny Brown Associates Book Marketing Ltd.