My Life in Books by Richard Brown

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, that was a brilliant first session. And it's great to see so many of you chatting and engaging with the material that we've got.

I know a lot of you are doing the Watch Only button. So if you do want to come in and see what all this chatter is about, because this is a live and interactive event, you can go out and come back in with the Watch and Engage button. And there, you can see all of the chat and the interactive widgets.

You do need an Open University computer username for that. That's just basically your name and email address. It's really quick and easy to do, but it does make watching this quite a different experience. So if you would like to see that chat and participate in it yourself, then you can do that. And choose the Live and Interactive button, even.

OK. So our next section is "My Life in Books" with Richard Brown. Welcome.

But before we do that, we've been getting lots of mail and chats...

[DING]

Ooh.

HJ: Fantastic. You know what that means? We've got stuff in our inbox. All right. Let's have a quick look here. I hope it's all those selfies that people have been talking about. We've got... oh, nice red envelope. We'll start with that one, I think. Yeah. Let's have a little look then.

But remember, use the #studenthublive15 and studenthub@open.ac.uk. We absolutely love your selfies coming in. Let's have a look. Ah, Laura from Burton-on-Trent. She popped by last week as well. So it's good to see you again. We're loving people coming back and all the new people as well. And we've also got Joseph's dog, Ralph. He looks very lovely there. But sometimes pets, they know the wrong times to do things, don't they, when you're studying?

I always have a cat on a keyboard when I'm trying to do a TMA. So that's always a bit awkward. But we've got a few more as well.

HELEN: We do. We also have Naomi here who sent a lovely smiley selfie into us wearing her headset. And also, gone but not forgotten, Rachel from Colchester, who some of you may recognise because she used to be sitting in this seat. We both have curly hair, but yeah, I am different. I am Helen. I'm not Rachel. So yes. So thank you for that, Rachel.

HJ: Yeah. But keep them coming in. We do love them. Remember, #studenthublive15, studenthub@open.ac.uk. We want to see your selfies. You can take a picture of where you are. We've had lots of different views. Your study buddy pets, we all love it.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And we'll try and get those printed out as soon as we can and get those to the social media desk. So do keep those coming.

We also have the Vice Chancellor coming along for a question time this evening at 5:40. So do let us know your questions that we'll be putting to him then.

OK, Richard.

RICHARD BROWN: Hi.

KAREN FOLEY: Hi. So you're Interim Executive Dean. What's that all about then?

RICHARD BROWN: Well, that's a very good question. Last year, I became Dean of Arts and Humanities. We've had a reorganisation, which is fusing faculties together. So now I'm Exec Dean of Arts and Social Sciences. So it's a huge responsibility. The idea is that it gives greater voice to the academics within the institution. And obviously, arts and social sciences are very close areas in terms of lots of the kinds of things we're interested in.

Kevin was talking about research earlier on. There are lots of similarities that we have in research and teaching across a broad range of subject areas.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, I know the audience are talking about their recently read books and their favourite books as we talk... your challenge. And I don't know many universities that would let the Pro Vice Chancellors come in with challenges, meteorites, all these sorts of things. And your challenge was, tell us about your life in books. So you've brought some amazing things here. What are we going to talk about?

RICHARD BROWN: Well, I thought we'd start with a book that was actually an O level set text for me when I was a teenager. And I guess I was a kind of surly, uninterested teenager. I was much more interested in punk rock than I was in poetry. But there was a poem in here that kind of turned me on to poetry in ways I hadn't expected. So the set texts were called Landscapes and Seascapes.

And to be honest, I couldn't think of much more boring than landscapes or seascapes. But one particular poem, I read it and I thought wow, that really is something.

KAREN FOLEY: So how old were you when this happened?

RICHARD BROWN: I was 14. And as I say, quite surly, quite disengaged. But this poem hit me like a train.

KAREN FOLEY: Can you tell us about it?

RICHARD BROWN: Yeah. It's a poem. It's got a weird title. That was one of the first things I thought, what's that about? So the title is "Thalassa," which is actually the Greek word for the sea. And the poet, this is Louis MacNeice, a 20th century Irish poet. Basically, he got this from a Greek narrative. So it means the sea. And in a particular narrative, this army sees the sea and they all go 'thalassa, thalassa.'

And so what I thought I'd do is read you the final stanza of it. And it's a weird poem. There are lots of weird things about it. It was found in his papers in his death. He died in... after his death... in 1963. So when it was first published, about a year or two after that, people thought that it was something he had just written. But it may well have been something he wrote during the Second World War. So it's a poem about the challenges of struggle through a sea journey and it may also have other resonances. So I'll just read you the end. And this is why it thrilled me, I guess.

"Put out to sea, ignoble comrades, whose record shall be noble yet. Butting through scarps of moving marble, the narwhal dares us to be free. By a high star, our course is set. Our end is life put out to sea." There for you.

KAREN FOLEY: Just thinking there's something about reading poetry, isn't it? It's just amazing. And irrespective of what it is, it really... the way you read that was very evocative. What in particular about that sort of stood out to you. That's a very... for a 14-year-old boy, I can't imagine... so what in particular was so meaningful?

RICHARD BROWN: I would say... this is me as a grownup... it's a poem of wounded heroism. It's heroism in the teeth of adversity, real adversity. And one of the things I really loved about it when I first read it was that line "butting through scarps of moving marble." Because it's so surreal.

A ship butts through a sea. And I suppose at the North Pole, if you think about the polar exploration, they do go through ice flows and things like that. But the idea of moving marble, it's an image that's very hard to construe. And I suppose one of the things that I really liked about poetry at that stage... and I still do... is the kind of mental images that it gives you.

The other thing, I didn't know what a narwhal is. So you think, what the hell is a narwhal? Of course, it's one of those whales with a long, pointy... I hope it is. Anyway...

KAREN FOLEY: Our audience will know. They'll be Googling that.

RICHARD BROWN: It was that combination of really striking imagery with something that sounded like a challenge. So "our end is life put out to sea." I suppose I took that as a challenge to me at some level. And the best poetry, it seems to me... the best literature, it hits you somewhere. So what MacNeice, it seemed to me, was saying was that you have to get on with things, even if you live in adverse conditions. Even if your life is hard, challenging. As the final line says, "our end is life put out to sea." You have to go there. You have to make the journey. Of course, that might make you think I should have turned into a polar explorer rather than academic. However...

KAREN FOLEY: It could have gone either which way, couldn't it?

I guess, partly it's the language, partly the surrealism. And perhaps, maybe resonating with where you were at in that sort of adolescent time. Where to then? What's the next book that you wanted to...

RICHARD BROWN: I suppose the thing that I... well, there are two books. One is this enormous one. I thought we'd go from O level to A level. This is the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. You were showing selfies earlier on. Now this isn't a selfie, but this is the 16th

century picture of Chaucer, which I can hold up for you here. So there he is. He's got his little tabard on. And I studied Chaucer for A level. And of course, Chaucer is in Middle English, so it's all kind of olde worlde. And to be honest, it was another thing I was thinking, this really isn't going to be a lot of fun. But you know what? I really loved it because it was about deeds of high heroism. Again, perhaps I've got a thing about heroes and knights in shining armour. So the text that I studied was actually this one, The Knight's Tale. And again, there's a nice picture in this edition. There he is. There's the knight. So this is from The Canterbury Tales, which everyone knows it starts off "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote," which means roughly when April with his sweet showers. So you get into the language quite easily.

But The Knight's Tale is a classic story about two boys being in love with one girl. So what happens there? And it's a tragic narrative because by the end of it, one of the boys is dead because only one of the boys can marry the girl. And I just thought it was terrific and terribly moving and exciting. And very strange. I mean, again, one of the things I suppose, for me as a reader, I'm always attracted to things that are different. That are both, I suppose work with things I know, but yet take me somewhere completely different. So The Knight's Tale takes you to mediaeval England. It's also a story that's set in ancient Greece. So you're kind of being transported by these poets to all kinds of different places.

KAREN FOLEY: A magical land.

RICHARD BROWN: Yeah, that fascination of what's going on.

KAREN FOLEY: And of course, how it's written as well. The language is very different. Let's go to the social media desk and see what people are reading at home. Because I think Pride & Prejudice is a hot option, isn't it? HJ and Helen.

HJ: Yeah. Well, there's lots of different books people are reading at the moment. We got things like Animal Farm, which any politics student will love George Orwell, any of his stuff. Some Stephen King, Tale of Two Cities. So we're going to some more classic stuff. Andrea's reading Othello for her arts course. And I always find that in a lot of the module materials, you can always find these good books to pick up about subjects or lots of different things that you wouldn't normally think to look at. And it introduces you to a lot of nice books as well, doesn't it?

HELEN: Yes, it does. There was a question from Georgina actually, about how do you pick up fiction. When you're so involved with OU study, you're reading lots for your modules. How do you actually pick up that book of poetry or that book of fiction?

KAREN FOLEY: Really good question.

RICHARD BROWN: How do you find the time for reading? It's a really tricky question. I mean, I find in my own work that I've got so much to read that often novels just get left behind. So I've got to read numerous university papers. Obviously, you've got to keep up with the press. I've also got to read a lot of academic books.

But I suppose I would say reading, to me, is a kind of an addiction. So I'm addicted to various kinds of reading. And after a while, I find when I've read lots of scholarly books, I just have to read something that's fun, something that's exciting. So often, a thriller or something like

that, will be just the thing to take me somewhere else, take my mind off what I'm worrying about.

I think often, reading can be therapeutic for the reasons I was saying earlier on, because it takes you somewhere else. And in that being taken to somewhere else, you're actually being given... I would say, metaphors for understanding other aspects of your life. That sounds a bit worthy.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And of course, it's not just fiction. I mean, Jack is reading the history of cassettes. So it's good to see that everyone's been taking Belinda's advice here. So we'll email her and let her know.

Social media desk then, what else are people reading and talking about?

HJ: Well, we've got Andy's reading The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, which anyone into sci-fi will absolutely love that. And Stephanie's just read To Kill a Mockingbird, which is an absolutely fantastic book. I recommend it to everyone.

HELEN: And Marcus is re-reading The Discworld series for the third time. So he's obviously found something that he enjoys and he's going through it again.

HJ: Some people have asked about Richard's books. And they want to know for later what you've been reading, so they can look into it more, like a Knight's Tale. So we'll make sure to pop that on the Resources page on the website.

And I've also heard we've got lots of your videos coming in. So if you want to tell us your OU story, where you are, interesting facts, like about cassettes, let us know. But Anthony has apparently sent in a lovely video, but he forgot to send the link with it. So if you send us the link as well, then we'll be able to see it. And I'm sure we'll really enjoy watching that.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, that's absolutely brilliant. We'll look forward to seeing those. And some great books out there as well.

I also wanted to ask you, because I wanted to talk about The Faerie Queene. We've only got about six minutes left and there's some amazing books. And one thing is that there's such a range of stuff that people are reading at home. And of course, middle England, that sort of era of literature is an entirely different thing. We were talking the other week about how nice it can be to have a reward, maybe like a book to read. And of course, poetry and some of these things are quite short.

These, on the other hand, are quite hefty holiday reading one might say. I want you to talk about this. But also, I wondered if you could say something about how... you were talking about how this can give people a mental break, these images and things. Can you say something about the language and house this sort of era, I guess, can offer something quite different from maybe the more traditional reads?

RICHARD BROWN: The thing to start off with is something a bit about The Faerie Queene, who was Edmund Spenser? He's a lot later than Chaucer. He's actually a contemporary of Shakespeare's. So he dies in 1599 when he was in his late 40's. So The Faerie Queene is a massive, massive book. This is actually only half of it. This is the second instalment, the

second part of The Faerie Queene. So it was published in two editions in his lifetime. And it is absolutely vast and unfinished. So why on earth did I get obsessed with this? It was partly my parents telling me it was unreadable, I'm afraid to say.

KAREN FOLEY: Your rebellious streak.

RICHARD BROWN: They told me a whole lot of books were unreadable. So the other one that I absolutely love is James Joyce's Ulysses, one of the most famous unreadable books in English. But The Faerie Queene is very long. And I was told it was a very dry poem in which nothing much happens and it's all about morals. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is a very long poem, but I think it is utterly beguiling and exciting. And in some senses, the things that were coming through from the media desk are really relevant here, like Discworld. Faerie Queene is a fantasy poem. It's a symbolic poem set in a place called Faerieland. Those of you who know the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis, as well as being an imaginative writer, was a Spenser scholar. He was a scholar of Middle English and Renaissance literature. And he was obsessed with this. And he actually used images from The Faerie Queene in the Narnia books. So Aslan, the lion, there is a lion in The Faerie Queene. In some senses, he plagiarised Spenser for some of those images. And that kind of gives you a sense of how absorbing the fictional worlds that Spenser creates are.

So to me, when you go to Faerieland, you're going to somewhere that's both like and unlike the real world. So of course, the real world for Spenser was 16th century England and Ireland. One of the really important contexts for Spenser is he is a colonist in Ireland. And a lot of his work is about how the English state seeks to subdue the Irish. It's one of the really edgy and difficult things in Spenser.

But more broadly, what's going on here is it's an image of reality that's very distanced from it. So again, to me you're always on a journey somewhere exciting, somewhere different.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, I now our audience are really obsessed with Narnia, especially Naomi and Rachel. So yeah. And I certainly remember reading those as a child. And obviously, seeing the videos. And so many different levels there.

What's interesting I think about you in particular is that you write, you read obviously, and you're obviously also working at the Open University in terms of how to teach these things to people. And also, you're writing about these, I guess, in a historical and contextual sense. What do you like doing best? I mean, you can't do all of those things. But what's your best moment? Is it when you're reading or writing or academically writing because they're so different?

RICHARD BROWN: It's a very hard question to answer. To me, I can't write poems all day long. I think they come in phases. So when you're writing something that you're really excited by, you're finding something out always. And that's really a connection I would say with academic writing. Whether it's module writing or research, I'm trying to find something out.

What I would say as a teacher, and there is no greater privilege than writing OU course material. It is so exciting. It always has been to me. What you're trying to do as a teacher is dramatise for the student what you find interesting about a text, or a writer, or something like that. You're not trying to persuade them it's the best thing ever, but you're trying to, as it

were, say to them why it might have a claim on their attention. So that's really thrilling to me to do.

KAREN FOLEY: Arts is one of those things that everyone has a subjective response to. And I guess, like you say, there is a contextual... there's a slightly right way of looking at things as well as a slightly wrong way. So it's balancing that subjectivity with that context. Can you say a little bit about how students, maybe starting with the arts, might experience that? Maybe if they're reading something, this whole idea of thinking, wow, that's incredible. Why do I then have to look at all of this context? What are these other things about that sort of constrain how one can view these things?

RICHARD BROWN: Well, I think things don't mean in isolation, do they? There's no such thing as, let's say, a song that has a meaning only in terms of itself as a song. So if you study the Beatles, you need to know quite a lot about '60s culture. The things that were happening at that time. So something like "All You Need is Love." Why are they singing about that at that moment in time? There are all kinds of reasons that are to do with changes in politics, changes in culture, that do have a direct implication for how you hear the song.

It's the same with literature. And writers like Spenser, Chaucer, and MacNeice, I think you best understand them starting with "Thalassa." That's why I talked about when was it written. It makes a huge difference whether it's a '60s poem or a '40s poem. And it's the same kind of thing with most imaginative arts, I think. They don't mean in isolation. They are social constructs. So the societies which produce them and which they bear witness to are really crucial things for... as students of them, we make sense of them.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, Richard Brown, thank you so much for coming. That's been really, really illuminating. And thank you, everybody, for all of your contributions. We're now going to show three short videos about books. And then we have our first student video that we're going to air. Thank you very much, Debbie, for sending that in. I'm looking forward to seeing it.

And don't forget that if you'd like to make us a student video, we'd love to hear from you. Maybe about your favourite book. Maybe about your OU student journey. And you can send those to us a variety of ways by looking at the Videos tab on the website. But we'll be back in about five minutes after all of that media. See you soon.

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