



Reading *for/and* Escape: an online conference

17-18 March 2022



Organised by The History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) Research Collaboration, English & Creative Writing, The Open University and supported by SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing)

The ability of books to mentally transport their readers away from the problems and challenges of everyday life is well established. And yet, reading for escape (rather than self-improvement) has often attracted moral censure for being self-indulgent and wasteful. Despite the plethora of influencers on social media with their lists of '[10 escapist books to take your mind off the madness](#)', in academia, reading for escape (and escapist fiction) has often been derided for being beneath serious intellectual enquiry: the main questions around how, why, where, and when people read *for* escape and *to* escape remain critically underexamined. Does reading for escape allow for temporary mental respite and therefore offer a safety valve, a way or normalising profoundly abnormal or traumatic circumstances? Or is reading for escape actually a way of re-engaging with the world around us? This conference will encourage participants to interrogate both **reading *for* escape** as an instrumental practice, as well as **reading *and* escape** as a series of cultural or personal associations. Topics for discussion will include:



- reading as mental escape during physical confinement (imprisonment, house-arrest, quarantine, sickness or mental or physical rehabilitation).
- reading for escape during armed conflict, natural disasters, or personal trauma.
- reading as mental escape from the banality or tedium of everyday life.
- reading as means to acquire knowledge in order to escape violence, detention or capture;
- the interrogation of long-established critical prejudices against escapist reading.
- reading for escape as a psychological displacement activity.
- reading for escape during the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- exploring the genres of escapist fiction: romance fiction, pulp fiction, science fiction, fantasy, gothic, detective fiction, spy fiction, speculative fiction.
- reading for escape as a means to re-engage with reality.
- books on the run – readers who have made great escapes with their books.
- examining beach reading and holiday reading: is it escapist or immersive reading?
- reading as a means to escape socioeconomic, gender, class, race or other forms of discrimination or disadvantage.
- fictional, visual or cinematic representations of reading and/or escape ('the book that got me out')
- reading for escape as an intertextual, multimodal or transmedia activity.

The lobby will open 15 minutes before each session, i.e. 09.45am for morning sessions, and 16.45pm for evening sessions, to cover introductions, check for any technical issues etc All papers should be no more than 20 minutes in length, with maximum 10 minutes allowed for questions afterword. It is essential that all speakers stick to their allotted time slot.

Thursday 17 March Session 1 (09.45-13.00 GMT/ 10.45-14.00 CET/ 05.45-09.00 EST)*Lobby opens at 9.30 GMT/ 10.30 CET/ 05.30 EST*

09.45-10.00	Welcome to the conference from Shafquat Towheed & Sally Blackburn-Daniels
Session 1, Panel 1	'Beyond confinement: war, imprisonment, and reading to escape' Panel chair: Edmund G.C. King (The Open University, UK)
10.00-10.30	1. Christina Spittel (University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia): "Escape with a master storyteller!" The Centenary War Books Boom and Australian Romance Fiction
10.30-11.00	2. George Simmers (Sheffield Hallam University, UK): 'Escaping the prison camp: escapers' memoirs in the decades after the two world wars.'
11.00-11.30	3. Sarah Bower (The Open University, UK): 'Escape Inside: reading between the bars'
11.30-12.00	Tea/coffee break
Session 1, Panel 2	'Nineteenth-Century readers escape' Panel chair: Francesca Benatti (The Open University, UK)
12.00-12.30	4. Helen McKenzie (The Open University, UK): 'My books were my only friends [...] They took me out of my life': Mary Elizabeth Braddon's escapist readers and writers
12.30-13.00	5. Adam Baldwin (The Open University, UK): 'Locating the reader of the late-nineteenth century penny paper <i>Pearson's Weekly</i> .'

*Lobby opens at 16.45pm***Thursday 17 March Session 2 (17.00-19.30 GMT/18.00-20.30 CET/13.00-16.30 EST)**

Session 2, Panel 1	'Escaping reality: from the Victorians to the present' Panel chair: Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK)
17.00-17.30	6. Cam Khaski Graglia (Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain): 'Victorian Reading Communities: A Collective Escape from Reality'
17.30-18.00	7. Natasha Anderson (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany): 'Stories as Sanctuaries: Bibliophiles from the Victorian Novel to Young Adult Fiction'
18.00-18.30	Tea/coffee break
Session 2, Panel 2	'Escaping the domestic: summer reading and beyond' Panel chair: Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK)
18.30-19.00	8. Amanda Watson (New York University, USA): 'A bright book of poems for summer reading'
19.00-19.30	9. Kelsey Squire (Ohio Dominican University, USA): '1930s Escapism and Idealized Domesticity in Willa Cather's <i>Shadows on the Rock</i> '

Friday 18 March Session 3 (10.00-13.00 GMT/11.00-14.00 CET/06.00-09.00 EST)

Lobby opens at 9.45am

Session 3, Panel 1	Re-examining escapist reading: gender, politics and aesthetics Panel Chair: Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK)
10.00-10.30	10. Swati Moitra (Gurudas College, University of Calcutta, India): 'Flight: Escapist Reading for Virtuous Bengali Wives'
10.30-11.00	11. Sally Blackburn-Daniels (Liverpool University/The Open University, UK) "Hell is the vision of a soul on fire": Eugene Lee-Hamilton's Reading to Escape'
11.00-11.30	12. Sara Wingate Gray (University College London, UK): 'So the poets helped me escape': Re-reading "escapist reading" of Imaginative Literature as Emancipatory, Political Act'
11.30-12.00	Tea/coffee break
Session 3, Panel 2	Marginalised communities: reading for escape Panel Chair: Corinna Norrick-Rühl (University of Münster, Germany)
12.00-12.30	13. Suchismita Ghosh (Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India): 'Who reads? Re-engaging with realities of community reading habits'
12.30-13.00	14. Avril Gray (Edinburgh Napier University, UK): 'Street Readers' Habits and Habitats: reading as escapism for the homeless and vulnerable'

Friday 18 March Session 4 (17.00-19.45 GMT/18.00-20.45 CET/13.00-16.45 EST)

Lobby opens at 16.45pm

Session 4, Panel 1	Reading for escape in the digital sphere Panel chair: Francesca Benatti (The Open University, UK)
17.00-17.30	15. Olajide Salawu (University of Alberta, Canada): 'Escaping the Self: The Tweeting Literary Public in the Times of Pandemic'
17.30-18.00	16. Chandni Ananth (University of Münster, Germany) & Ellen Barth (University of Münster, Germany): 'Lust in the Time of Coronavirus: Reader Reviews of Amazon's Viral Erotica'
18.00-18.30	Tea/coffee break – please bring a drink with you for the last session
Session 4, Panel 2	Women travel writers: reading and escape Panel chair: Nicola J Watson (The Open University, UK)
18.30-19.00	17. Helen Chambers (The Open University, UK): 'Life-long escapes on land and sea: the plurilingual reading of Gertrude Bell'
19.00-19.30	18. Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK): 'A "thoroughly enjoyed siege?": Freya Stark's reading in Baghdad during the Iraq uprising (1941)
19.30-19.45	Open discussion and conference closing comments from Shafquat Towheed & Sally Blackburn-Daniels

Abstracts of papers and speaker biographies (organised by panel sessions)

Thursday 17 March Session 1 (10.00-13.00 GMT/11.00-14.00 CET/06.00-09.00 EST)

Session 1, Panel 1: Beyond confinement: war, imprisonment, and reading to escape

Christina Spittel (University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia): "Escape with a master storyteller!" The Centenary War Books Boom and Australian Romance Fiction

"Escape with a master storyteller!" beckons the website of South Australian novelist Fiona McIntosh, a powerhouse of historical romance fiction, whose female protagonists face daring adventures against dramatic historical backdrops, often escaping restrictive marriages and gender norms along the way. In Australian bookshops, McIntosh's sensuous, unapologetically escapist books (*The Chocolate Tin*, *The Perfumer's Daughter*, *The Champagne War*) sit alongside similar titles, by Karly Lane, Pamela Hart, Mary-Rose MacColl and Kim Kelly, making up a significant strand in the war books boom that occurred in Australia (and elsewhere) during the Great War Centenary.

These are period dramas, with lush, enticing covers, and yet they offer more than just a love affair with the nation's most sacred narrative, the Anzac legend. Even as they transport their readers to exotic overseas locales, or to the Australian bush, they raise questions about the nature of historical recollection, recast the war's history along gender lines, and shed light on the war's long and difficult aftermath. In doing so, they also invite us to reconsider some of the scholarly assumptions often made about Australian readers of war literature: that they are naïve, narrow-minded, nationalist. For all their often-formulaic plots, these novels imagine readers capable of re-engaging with the memory of the Great War in different ways and at a number of levels: personal, local, regional, global.

Christina Spittel teaches and researches at UNSW Canberra. She is the co-editor of *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain* (2016) and her first book, *The First World War in the Australian Novel* is forthcoming with Sydney University Press.

George Simmers (Sheffield Hallam University, UK): Escaping the prison camp: escapers' memoirs in the decades after the two world wars.

Throughout the twentieth century, and especially in the decades immediately following each of the World Wars, prisoner-of-war escape memoirs were remarkably popular. In the 1950s, books by Paul Brickhill, Eric Williams and Pat Reid were among the great publishing (and cinematic) successes of the decade. This paper argues that they were comforting because they reduced the immense impersonal horrors of the wars down to a human scale, in which individual effort and character are crucial, and where British ingenuity, grit and doggedness can triumph against a powerful enemy. It is also notable that at a time when the Holocaust was a troubling memory that was rarely mentioned, these books offered a comforting picture of British soldiers refusing to be passive victims.

The genre of the prisoner-of-war memoir had developed in the 1920s, and established generic stereotypes such as the uncomprehending commandant, the bribable guard and the British officer skilled at improvisation. These memoirs sometimes use the tropes and vocabulary of the school story, representing escape as a 'game' (and inveterate escapers will often proudly label themselves 'bad boys' who refuse to accept authority). Most memoirs of this time reproduce these tropes, though at least one (*The Road to End-Or* by E.H. Jones) goes beyond them to produce something more than an

adventure story. The Great War memoirs of escape set the pattern for the Second World War, presenting an example both to the escapers and to their chroniclers.

After a career in teaching, **George Simmers** researched a Ph.D. on the fiction of the Great War. He has published papers and book chapters on Kipling, Arnold Bennett, 'Sapper', T.S. Eliot and on the popular fiction of the 1920s, and a monograph on Rose Allatini. He runs the blog *Great War Fiction* and is an Honorary Research Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University.

Sarah Bower (The Open University, UK): 'Escape Inside: reading between the bars'

A close relative of mine was recently arrested and imprisoned. The abruptness with which this process removes an individual from their family, their work and their social networks feels to me to be akin to the sudden loss of a loved one in an accident. Ties are cut, ends left loose, the next conversation, whether about the meaning of life or the Saturday supermarket run, cannot be had. In our current circumstances this sense of severance is exacerbated by the fact that prisoner communications with the outside world have been adversely affected by Covid staff shortages. The cycle of email and reply takes several days. Visits and video calls are cancelled at short notice, phone conversations cut off after a few minutes.

One form of communication which is open to us, however, is the sending of books to 'our' prisoner. While we cannot send clothes or food or toiletries, we can send books. This paper will explore the connections books have forged between myself and my imprisoned relative. Through an analysis of my book choices for him and his reading notes, sent to me via email, I will consider, not just how reading is an escape for him from the tedium and indignities of prison life into the world of the intellect and the imagination, but also how the act of choosing and sending him books is an escape for me from the brutal reality of our separation.

Sarah Bower is a PhD candidate in creative writing at the Open University where she is also an Associate Lecturer. She is the author of three novels and her short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies. She lives in Norwich, though her heart is currently in HMP Wandsworth.

Session 1, Panel 2: Nineteenth-Century readers escape

Helen McKenzie (The Open University, UK): 'My books were my only friends [...] They took me out of my life': Mary Elizabeth Braddon's escapist readers and writers

Braddon's depictions of reading are intimately tied to her depictions of writing. In Braddon's novels, reading and authorship are interwoven. Fictional readers and writers populate over ten novels across Braddon's remarkable career, from the most famous in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) to the little-known *The Infidel* (1900). In the nineteenth-century, criticism aimed at Braddon persistently conflated popularity, infection, sensationalism, and being a women writer. As both author and the editor of *Belgravia*, Braddon's determined defence of escapism, particularly for female readers, is combined with strategically countering criticism of popularity and sensationalism.

This paper will centre around a lesser-known novel, *One Thing Needful* (1886), focusing on Stella Boldwood, whose 'pen was her friend and confidant' for years, and Polly Chapman, who expresses the joy of reading as a 'delicious dream'. These women are surrounded by fictional literary characters, including the editor Lord Mallow and the comedic character Lady Sophia, or 'Spur-Box' of the 'Sunday Swash-Buckler'. Braddon's novel deliberately confronts and undermines the language of food, immorality, and infection which pervaded Victorian discourses around reading. *One Thing Needful*

stood at a crux in Braddon's career amid shifts in genre and business negotiations on serialisation; these fictional readers and writers can be seen as Braddon's voice amid the demands imposed by the literary marketplace. Importantly, the most intimate connection is created between Polly, 'a devourer of periodical literature', and Stella, who wrote the 'book of the season'; *One Thing Needful* reflects Braddon's conscious campaigning for escapist reading and writing.

Helen McKenzie is an Associate Lecturer at the Open University. She has recently passed her PhD from Cardiff University, entitled 'Miniature Literary Marketplaces: Constructions of Authorship in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Fiction'. Her research focuses on women writers at the *fin de siècle*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and the Victorian periodical press.

Adam Baldwin (The Open University, UK): 'Locating the reader of the late-nineteenth century penny paper *Pearson's Weekly*.'

Popular in his heyday, subsequently neglected, though now receiving renewed attention from historians of science fiction science fiction writer George Griffith's earliest, and most successful, novels were published in the penny papers *Pearson's Weekly* and its stablemate *Short Stories* in 1893 to 1894. In 1957 Robert Altick comments that the role of the late-Victorian penny press was to provide escapist literature of low quality: 'reading matter whose chief function was to keep their [the readers] eyes busy while their brains took a rest.' This perception of the weekly press has led to its contents being mostly overlooked most scholarship of late nineteenth-century fiction.

This paper explores the problem of identifying Griffith's, and *Pearson's Weekly's* readers in the 1890s. That they read as escapism, for leisure not for learning is clear from the nature of the articles found in penny papers of the time. Locating this reader has proved difficult, and a portrait has had to be formed from comments by others about the readers, both contemporaneously and in later scholarship. This paper will critically the examine the image of the penny weekly reader. Drawing on a variety of sources (letters to the editor, journal advertising, press commentary, comments by authors, including Wilkie Collins, H.G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle), it will identify the kinds of readers (clerks and shopworkers) who consumed *Pearson's Weekly*—and escapist science fiction generally—and the sites and conditions in which these kinds of texts were originally read.

Adam Baldwin is a PhD candidate with the Open University, now in his third year of exploring the impact of George Griffith's writing on the formation and early history of the continuing tradition of science fiction that emerged in the late nineteenth-century.

Thursday 17 March Session 2 (17.00-19.30 GMT/18.00-20.30 CET/13.00-16.30 EST)

Session 2, Panel 1: Escaping reality: from the Victorians to the present

Cam Khaski Graglia (Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain): 'Victorian Reading Communities: A Collective Escape from Reality'

Reading communities were common during the 19th-century when leisure was limited, literacy began to rise and books became accessible and more affordable than ever before to the low class reader. Whereas today we experience an evolved sense of community from the one established by Victorians, through the use of social platforms which bring together readers from anywhere in the world, driven by mutual or shared literary tastes, the roots of these groups go back to the 19th-century. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the reading habits of the 19th-century reading communities, specially those

collectives that gathered around a fire or downstairs after a long shift, to escape their reality and delved into the lives of Oliver Twists for empathy, Mrs. Audley for intrigue or Dr. Jekyll's to get closer to the uncertain limits among life, science and the supernatural, etc.

The scope of this study aims at analysing the collective response to escapist literature or fiction that contrasts the reading experience with the group's own social background. For emphasis and a broader sample, the examination will rely mostly on serialised fiction and the literary comment it generated between instalments among the readers, critics, publishers, editors and authors. After the success of Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836), a serial that was set to revolution English literature, which so far understood as class determined and the privilege of a few, it changed literary consumption. By portraying a social class that had not been articulated, it can be seen how for the first time in the history of reading, the common reader was finally able to consume fiction that was representative of the world it lived on.

Cam Khaski Graglia has recently deposited her PhD Thesis *The Victorian Reading Marketplace: Dickens's Serials and The Common Reader* and is pending on the viva voce stage of this process. She also has a MA in Literary Studies by the Complutense University of Madrid and a Degree in English Studies, specialised in British Fiction. Her research interests are 19th-century British Literature, Reading History, Serialised Fiction and Folklore.

Natasha Anderson (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany): 'Stories as Sanctuaries: Bibliophiles from the Victorian Novel to Young Adult Fiction'

From the nineteenth century to today, books offer both escape and intimacy to readers. Bibliophilic characters hereby form a keystone of fictional immersion by mirroring the audience's interests and deepening emotional investment in the narrative. A trio of book-loving heroines illuminate continuities in depictions of reading, which unite the Victorian era and the present. All three protagonists engage with interwoven escapist and interactive elements of perusing literature: curious Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's 1817 fiction *Northanger Abbey*, the intrepid, eponymous protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, and quiet Elizabeth Rew in Polly Shulman's 2010 YA fantasy *The Grimm Legacy*. While these three heroines engage with genres of escapist fiction by daydreaming about Gothic adventures, dabbling in fantasy stories, or appreciating fairy tales, their reading habits also facilitate interpersonal relationships. Although Austen's protagonist Catherine faces disappointment upon applying Gothic reading experiences to her life, she regularly knits bonds to new acquaintances via shared literary interests. In Brontë's novel, Jane's relationships with family, friends, and foes are reflected in her peers' use and abuse of books, ranging from her tyrannical cousin's employment of heavy volumes as weapons to her first bibliophilic friend. Finally, Elizabeth in Shulman's YA fiction discovers unexpected strengths despite her shyness when she joins a community dedicated to preserving artifacts of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. In all three narratives, books function as barriers shielding readers from the stress and struggles of the wider world and as bridges between bibliophiles to create communities of collaborative literary appreciation.

Natasha Anderson is a Doctoral Research Fellow examining Victorian visceral novel readers in a project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany. She co-organized two virtual workshops and presented at international conferences in Germany, Greece, Ireland, and virtually in Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA.

Session 2, Panel 2: Escaping the domestic: summer reading and beyond

Amanda Watson (New York University, USA): 'A bright book of poems for summer reading'

Studies of the phenomenon of 19th-century "railway reading" or "summer books" — inexpensive books

aimed at travelers and vacationers, meant to be read while en route or at summer resorts — have primarily focused on the novel and nonfiction prose. In this paper, I expand the category of summer books by discussing a quirky and short-lived genre: the summer vacation poetry anthology. During the second half of the 19th century, American literary publishers (particularly Ticknor & Fields and its successors) took advantage of the burgeoning market for “summer books” by repackaging the work of past and contemporary poets in portable, sometimes travel-themed collections. These volumes included *Thalatta: A Book for the Sea-Side* (1853); *Roadside Poems for Summer Travellers* (1876) and its sequel *Hillside and Seaside in Poetry* (1877); and many volumes of poetry in James R. Osgood & Company’s “Vest Pocket Series” of small, inexpensive literary classics. Publishers in both the United States and Great Britain continued to include occasional travel-themed poetry anthologies in their summer series into the 20th century. In this paper, I examine the work that poetry is asked to do in these collections. How were these poetry collections received in the press and understood by their readers? How did these anthologies, together with similar works like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s multivolume collection *Poems of Places* (1876-1879), respond to and adapt the format of the travel guide, a genre that sometimes included poetry in its own right? What was poetry understood to do for tourists and travelers that prose fiction did not?

Amanda Watson is the Librarian for English and Comparative Literature at New York University. Her recent publications have appeared in *Book History*, *The Routledge Shakespeare: Shakespeare and Memory*, and *Nineteenth-Century Studies*. She is working on a book provisionally entitled *Original and Selected: Commonplace Books, Readers, and Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*.

Kelsey Squire (Ohio Dominican University, USA): ‘1930s Escapism and Idealized Domesticity in Willa Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock*

Willa Cather’s novel *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) had a decidedly mixed critical reception. Several critics, such as Fanny Butcher of the Chicago *Tribune*, praised Cather for the quality of her writing, which in Butcher’s words, brings “mental joy” to “sensitive readers.” Yet other critics, including Newton Arvin and Granville Hicks, criticized the content of Cather’s novel as a plotless idyll that was disconnected from the contemporary issues facing the United States. These reviewers were especially critical of Cather’s decision to focus on Cecile Auclair, a 13-year-old girl, as the primary protagonist. Horace Gregory, writing in the *Symposium*, argued that “The danger of Miss Cather’s position lies not so much in her taking ‘a happy vacation from life’ but in her refusal to express a moral issue in terms of adult experience,” and that Ceile’s life is depicted like that of Cinderella – but “less terrifying [and] far more reassuring.”

In this paper, I examine the escapist qualities of *Shadows on the Rock* in light of the Great Depression. I focus on how Cather’s use of the “long ago and far away” setting of seventeenth-century Quebec affords her the opportunity to imagine a community where an idealized practice of domesticity allows individuals to navigate poverty with dignity and quiet acts of charity. As part of my analysis, I include a discussion of Cather’s response to criticism of her approach in her 1936 *Commonweal* essay “Escapism” and more broadly, a discussion of women’s domestic novels of the 1930s in the United States.

Kelsey Squire is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Core Program at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus, Ohio. Her book *Willa Cather: The Critical Conversation* (Camden House, 2020) traces the critical reception of Willa Cather throughout the 20th century and into the first decade of the 2000s.

Friday 18 March Session 3 (10.00-13.00 GMT/11.00-14.00 CET/06.00-09.00 EST)

Session 3, Panel 1: Re-examining escapist reading: gender, politics and aesthetics

Swati Moitra (Gurudas College, University of Calcutta, India): 'Flight: Escapist Reading for Virtuous Bengali Wives'

In an advice manual titled, *Kumari Shiksha (The Education of Young Women; 1883, n.p.)*, the author, Nabinkali Dasi, tells her readers, "...the pleasure of your studies will remain with you your whole life. There will be no stage in your life when that pleasure will be inappropriate. There is no one with whom it must be shared." 'You' represents the intended audience – young Bengali women (*bhadramahila*) of Hindu, dominant caste origins, learning to read and write at a time when women's education had increasingly become part of the agenda of social reform in British India. *Kumari Shiksha's* proposition of 'pleasure' as an incentive for cultivating a reading habit is unusual as it proposes an 'appropriate' escape from domestic duties. It hints at dangerous flights of fantasy, in a manner akin to the better-known flights of fantasy of the iconic male protagonist of the 1929 novel *Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road)*, Apu.

In this paper, I propose to consider this unusual proposition for reading for pleasure and escape in this 19th century Bengali manual for women. I will take into account the gendered nature of this escape, exploring the historical woman readers' complex navigation of reformist concerns about social chaos and sexual deviance. I will ask how the 'escapist' genres patronized by historical women readers at the time featured in this promised flight and what that might suggest about the culture of reading-hearing about Bengali women at the time.

Swati Moitra (M.Phil, Ph.D) is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, at Gurudas College, University of Calcutta. Her areas of interest include book history and histories of readership.

Sally Blackburn-Daniels (Liverpool University/The Open University, UK) "'Hell is the vision of a soul on fire": Eugene Lee-Hamilton's Reading to Escape'

Eugene Lee-Hamilton (1845-1907) was born in London, studied at Oriel College Oxford, and had an early career in the diplomatic service. In 1873, after a stint in the legation to Tours, Bordeaux and Versailles during the Franco-Prussian war, Lee-Hamilton was selected to take a position in Buenos Ayres. On hearing of his appointment to what he called 'one of the worst posts in the world' Lee-Hamilton became sick. His illness led to a twenty-year period of semi-paralysis; the poet was bed-bound and cared for by his sister, mother, and a retinue of secretaries and amanuenses. During this period, he became well-known as a poet and sonneteer, and he was visited at his home in Florence by authors such as Henry James and Oscar Wilde.

In a letter to his sister 'Bags' (Vernon Lee) on the 27 January 1890, Lee-Hamilton writes that his secretary is 'reading me some magnificent bits of Omar Khaijam [sic]' resulting in his dictation of 'sixty-five lines' of verse, more that he had ever written in his life 'in one sitting'. He signs off the letter with the quote 'Hell is the vision of a soul on fire' a paraphrase of verse LXVII of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. This paper will discuss Lee-Hamilton's bed-bound reading as a means to escape the confinement of his bed, and as a way to experience the wider world.

Sally Blackburn-Daniels is a Visiting Fellow at The Open University and a Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Liverpool. Their research focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly on the work of Vernon Lee and her brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton. They are the Communications Officer for the International Vernon Lee Society, and Ordinary Officer for the British Association of Decadence Studies.

Sara Wingate Gray (University College London, UK): ‘So the poets helped me escape’: Re-reading “escapist reading” of Imaginative Literature as Emancipatory, Political Act’

As Usherwood and Toyne note in their 2002 reading study, the notion of “escapism” remains ‘a complex idea with many connotations, often contradictory and not always positive’, with the concept frequently having taken on ‘derogatory’ overtones. This paper, using historical working class autobiography extracts and oral narratives centred on encounters with books – drawing on the work of Rose (2002) and Burnett (1974), amongst others – proposes to expose the personal acts of political freedom these reading experiences can represent, in particular when occurring in the context of imaginative literature specifically. Integrating the work of scholars interrogating concepts of publics and public discourse (Arendt, Warner, Fraser) – framing readers accessing a book as a continuous space of encountering forms of publics and discourse – with work in the fields of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, theory of mind and the wider domain of cognitive literature studies (Dodell-Feder, Oatley, Mar, Miall et al) this interdisciplinary investigative approach argues for the role these explicit reading experiences may play in engaging motivational responses and altering real-world beliefs and attitudes in a reader, and in facilitating types of discourses and engagements in the public sphere which can represent and become individual political acts of freedom: re-presenting ‘reading for/and escape’ as lifeforms of personal emancipation.

Sara Wingate Gray is a Lecturer in the Department of Arts and Sciences, University College London; founder of an international poetry library; and co-founder of a digi-tech agency working with the GLAM sector. Her research interests collide at the intersection of conceptions of information and power. She tweets at @sarawingategray and @librarian.

Session 3, Panel 2: Marginalised communities: reading for escape

Suchismita Ghosh (Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India): ‘Who reads? Re-engaging with realities of community reading habits’

In the forests of Idukki district, Kerala, 73-year-old P.V. Chinnathambi runs an extraordinary library. There are only 25 families in this small village, surrounded by dense wilderness. The people who borrow books from him walk through the forest and in his immaculately arranged register, one would find names, dates and the books borrowed by the people from the community. The collection of books is mostly works of literature, like the Malayalam translation of the Tamil epic poem *Silappathikaram*, along with works of Kamala Das, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. Chinnathambi attests that the villagers are devoted readers and the register most definitely supports that claim.

Rampyari Kawachi from Chhattisgarh sells books in a *haat* (local weekly market) in the Dhamtari district at the Ghotgaon village. Rampyari cannot read or write but his mission is to promote reading and learning in Adivasi communities in his area. Unlike a regular book-vendor, his objective is to create awareness, to make books available to the marginalised community so that they learn and read about their rights, and understand the issues. This paper will attempt to discuss reading as a way to engage with the world as well as re-examine the definitions of reading. The focus here is to acknowledge the representation of reading outside an urban understanding. The examples mentioned here are a gateway to re-define what reading means to different communities, where reading serves as a bridge towards awareness, knowledge and of course quality literature.

Suchismita Ghosh is a PhD scholar at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University. She also works as a project fellow for the Two Centuries of Indian Print Project. Her area of research is the history of scientific textbooks published in the vernacular in colonial Calcutta.

Avril Gray (Edinburgh Napier University, UK): 'Street Readers' Habits and Habitats: reading as escapism for the homeless and vulnerable'

We delight in 'rags-to-riches' stories: feel-good 'Cinderella' endings fuel a voracious demand for misery memoirs; newspapers sell columns recounting heart-warming revelations of escape from the gutter; and beggars have emerged as bestselling authors. For these individuals, the book is the instrument of their literal escape from life on the streets. Likewise, for the thousands who remain homeless, reading offers release from the harshest of realities and, conversely, a rare connection with the real world. By mirroring societal values attributed to reading, the excluded can elude stereotypical and prejudicial perceptions.

Now in its third year, my research explores the reading habits of the homeless. Working with 28 organisations supporting homeless individuals, including charitable trusts, community initiatives, government bodies and industry, it probes the importance of reading as a tool for inclusion and a means of understanding this marginalised community, while investigating the extent to which book advocacy is reader-directed.

This paper focuses on homeless readers' consumption of content during the 2020 Lockdown. What did 'street readers' read during the months when our towns and cities changed so radically, and access to basic human needs, let alone books, deteriorated? Focussing on readers living on the streets of Edinburgh, a UNESCO City of Literature, centre of Scottish publishing, and birthplace of the world's most revered writers, the paper explores access to the book as cultural capital and considers why – and how –when people sought sanctuary in their homes during a global pandemic, books provided a haven for individuals without the most basic shelter.

Avril Gray is Associate Professor in Publishing, Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and Head of Publishing at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to academia, she was a Publisher and Managing Director, and founded the first children's publisher in Scotland. Her work forms part of the prestigious Publishers' Collections, National Library of Scotland. Follow: @EdNapierPublish.

Friday 18 March Session 4 (17.00-19.30 GMT/18.00-20.30 CET/13.00-16.30 EST)

Session 4, Panel 1: Reading for escape in the digital sphere

Olajide Salawu (University of Alberta, Canada): 'Escaping the Self: The Tweeting Literary Public in the Times of Pandemic'

This paper critically reflects on how the pandemic moments facilitated and contributed to the formation of sociality on Twitter. It seeks to explore how tagging practice became a form of digital escapism from the self and pandemic detention. It explains retweeting as rebounding, and the tagging practice of International Poetry Circle as a mechanism of allyship to renegotiate a way out of the social fog of the pandemic. The International Poetry Circle is a Twitter handle founded by Tara Skurtu, a Romanian-American poet, in 2020. The paper positions tagging practice as a way of generating imagined community of the digital literary public for the authors who are also the readers. How do the readers/poets pose poetry as a potential tool that can alleviate the social and mental fogs enabled by the pandemic? Often the reading on the International Poetry Circle takes place asynchronously in which individual poet tweets their reading on their own handle and hashtags International Poetry Circle on the posts, which are subsequently retweeted by the handle as a form of affiliative gesture. Other times, tweets of readings are showcased on the platform while tagging the author. The paper attempts to think this tagging method, which includes retweeting within digital ethnography, as a way of conceptualizing belonging to depersonalize the pain and pressure that came with the global lockdown. As a passive

follower of the handle, I have selected purposively up to ten retweeted poetry readings to pivot the argument of this paper.

Olajide Salawu is a PhD student at the Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. His works have appeared in *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, *African Identities*, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, and so on. He was a British Academy mentee. His research interests include: rurality, urbanity, mobility, folk music, Nigerian literary and cultural cyber articulations, African films and postcolonial studies.

Chandni Ananth (University of Münster, Germany) & Ellen Barth (University of Münster, Germany): 'Lust in the Time of Coronavirus: Reader Reviews of Amazon's Viral Erotica'

This paper will analyze Amazon reviews of M.J. Edwards' self-published parody erotica *Kissing the Coronavirus* series, to attend to reading and reviewing practices during the global pandemic. Whereas other studies of Amazon reviews have primarily focused on the literary, we examine a non-literary genre, with initial results suggesting that the books provide a humorous and distracting relief from anxieties about the pandemic—a kind of “junk food for the brain” (Harman and Jones, 2013), or, adapting Orwell's term, a digital-age good bad book (1945). However, reading “trashy literature”, as Mark McGurl notes, does not equate to a wholesale escape from the realities of life (2021). This can be seen in the reviews, which reflect an interest in and sympathy for the author's unemployed status during the pandemic as well as digitally-enabled social reading practices. Additionally, these pieces of escapist literature are published, distributed and reviewed on the seemingly inescapable Amazon ecommerce store. Like many books of the genre, which began in 2014 with the appearance of Chuck Tingle's gay parody novelettes, the *Kissing the Coronavirus* books were published through Amazon's Kindle Store, sport an attention-grabbing cover, are short in length and have an affordable price tag. The viral success of works so intimately tied to Amazon raises questions about digital-age purchasing trends, the online performance of authorship (Murray, 2018), the accessibility of niche and taboo genres, and the emergence of the amateur critic (Staub, 2021). The Amazon reviews will be used to reflect on these contemporary issues.

Chandni Ananth is an M.A. student specializing in Book Studies in the National and Transnational Studies program at the University of Münster. She is a student assistant in the DFG-funded collaborative research center SFB 1385 Law and Literature.

Ellen Barth is a Research Associate in the Chair of Book Studies at the University of Münster and Executive Assistant for The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP). She is currently writing her dissertation on women's production of American community cookbooks from the 1950s to 1990s.

Session 4, Panel 2: Women travel writers: reading and escape

Helen Chambers (The Open University, UK): 'Life-long escapes on land and sea: the plurilingual reading of Gertrude Bell'

Celebrated in popular biography and film as the 'Queen of the Desert', and co-founder of modern Iraq, Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) was a lifelong traveller, writer, photographer, cartographer, explorer, mountaineer, and most famously, a respected archaeologist, a wartime intelligence officer and a political advisor to kings and prime ministers. Born into a privileged and supportive late Victorian family of wealthy industrialists and with a first-class degree in Modern History from Oxford, she was never at ease within the social expectations of her class, and throughout her life she was an immersive elite

reader across a wide range of genres, and in at least six foreign languages including Persian, Arabic and Turkish.

Biographers have focused on Bell's role in Middle Eastern politics, while her private intellectual life has so far been largely overlooked, despite the very rich archival evidence of her reading. This paper draws on almost 200 recorded reading experiences, mostly within *UKRED* and sourced from Bell's letters and diaries (<http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/>) and locates these within her geophysical, biographical and, as far as possible, psychological landscape. My main focus here, within this wide-ranging topic, is on Bell's shipboard reading, including comparisons with other shipboard readers of the period. I will show how Bell used her reading not only to escape the tedium of these voyages, but also to acquire the background knowledge which enabled her unprecedented entry (itself an escape), into the exclusively male world of desert tribal leaders and later, of Middle Eastern diplomacy, and to escape the personally traumatic consequences of ill-judged and tragic love affairs.

Helen Chambers is a Visiting Fellow in English at The Open University and a member of HOBAR. Her publications include *Conrad's Reading: Space, Time; Networks* (Palgrave 2018), journal articles and book chapters on Conrad, Ford, and recently on shipboard reading (Palgrave 2021). She is currently co-editing volume 1 of *The Collected Letters of Ford Madox Ford*.

Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK): 'A "thoroughly enjoyed siege?": Freya Stark's reading in Baghdad during the Iraq uprising (1941)'

Travel writer, journalist and propagandist, Freya Stark (1893-1993) was already well-established as a journalist in Baghdad by 1941. She had published *Baghdad Sketches* (1937) and had worked as a sub-editor on the *Baghdad Times*. Returning to Iraq in 1941, Stark found herself centre stage in a dramatic but often overlooked conflict: the failed Iraqi uprising and subsequent British military reoccupation of Iraq.

This paper examines Stark's reading during the failed Iraq Uprising of 1941 (1 April to 31 May). Following a coup d'état by Iraq's Arab nationalist Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani against Prince Abdullah (the Regent monarch of Iraq) on 1 April 1941, the British military and civilian presence came under threat. Fearing spreading Axis influence, the British decided to take concerted diplomatic (and eventually) military action in order to achieve regime change. Additional British military forces invaded Iraq on 2 May 1941 and the military campaign ended on 31 May, with Rashid Ali's administration overthrown and the British again formally reoccupying Iraq. During much of this period, Stark like many other British residents who faced increasing hostility from Iraqi nationalists, was besieged in the British Embassy in Baghdad. During this time, she continued clandestine propaganda work, kept a diary, and commented on her own reading, as well as the information economy around her.

Drawing upon Stark's manuscript Baghdad journal (16.03.1941-8.07.1941), her published correspondence, and unpublished material from the Freya Stark archive in the Harry Ransom Center, this paper examines Stark's reading during the period when she was under siege in Baghdad, as well as her observations on the reading practices and habits of the people (both British and Iraqi) around her. Trained as a journalist and already employed by the British government to support Arabic language propaganda for the Allied cause, Stark was a keen ethnographic observer of reading. In this paper, I draw upon some of those accounts of reading, from Dante to *Alice in Wonderland* and from the Book of Psalms to *The Decameron*, to tease out the ways in which reading can facilitate a form of mental and psychological escape during periods of physical incarceration. While Stark's claim of having 'thoroughly enjoyed' being under siege might be taken with a pinch of salt, what is evident from her accounts of those months of the spring and early summer in Baghdad is that reading fiction and poetry played a central role in making life under siege bearable by affording a form of mental escape, while at the same time, reading for information about the conflict had a direct impact on the fate of the British besieged in the embassy compound.

Shafquat Towheed is Senior Lecturer in English in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), The Open University, where he directs the History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) Research Collaboration. He has written extensively on the history of reading practices. With Professor Jonathan Rose, he is co-editor of the Palgrave series, *New Directions in Book History*. His most recent publication (co-edited with Corinna Norrick-Rühl) is *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (forthcoming, 2022).

List of speakers

Chandni Ananth (University of Münster, Germany)
Natasha Anderson (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany)
Adam Baldwin (The Open University, UK)
Ellen Barth (University of Münster, Germany)
Sally Blackburn-Daniels (Liverpool University/The Open University, UK)
Sarah Bower (The Open University, UK)
Helen Chambers (The Open University, UK)
Suchismita Ghosh (Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India)
Avril Gray (Edinburgh Napier University, UK)
Cam Khaski Graglia (Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain)
Helen McKenzie (The Open University, UK)
Swati Moitra (Gurudas College, University of Calcutta, India)
Olajide Salawu (University of Alberta, Canada)
George Simmers (Sheffield Hallam University, UK)
Christina Spittel (University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia)
Kelsey Squire (Ohio Dominican University, USA)
Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK)
Amanda Watson (New York University, USA)
Sara Wingate Gray (University College London, UK)

List of panel chairs

Francesca Benatti (The Open University, UK)
Edmund G.C. King (The Open University, UK)
Corinna Norrick-Rühl (University of Münster, Germany)
Shafquat Towheed (The Open University, UK)
Nicola J. Watson (The Open University, UK)

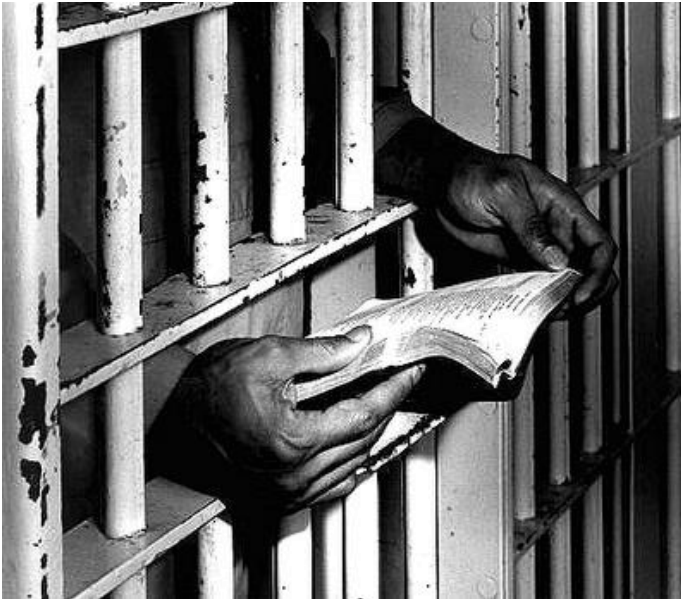


Reading *for/and* Escape: an online conference

17-18 March 2022



Organised by The History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) Research Collaboration, English & Creative Writing, The Open University and supported by SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing)



Contact:

Dr Shafquat Towheed (organiser),
Shafquat.Towheed@open.ac.uk

Dr Sally Blackburn-Daniels (co-organiser),
Sally.Blackburn-Daniels@open.ac.uk

This free online conference is organised by the History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) research collaboration in the Department of English & Creative Writing, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), The Open University, and supported by SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing). The conference will be on Microsoft Teams; attendees must register in advance to receive their meeting links.