

Calling All Book Worms: Birmingham's Readers Needed for Study

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In the run up to Birmingham's Book Festival, researchers from the University of Birmingham are turning to the readers in the city and the West Midlands to determine whether reading can create social change.

Modern versions of shared reading, such as the Birmingham Book Festival, focus on events, employ the mass media and promote community and city pride. But the researchers from the University's Department of American and Canadian Studies want to find out whether these mass reading events actually encourage new reading practices, attract marginalized groups and enable social change.

'Mass reading events started in America, when Seattle hosted the first 'One Book, One Community' program in 1998,' says Dr Danielle Fuller, Director of the Beyond the Book Research Team at the University of Birmingham's Department of American and Canadian Studies. 'Instigated by the likes of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, Richard & Judy's Book Club and others, more than 200 cities in the USA alone host community-wide reading programmes. Cities in Canada, Singapore, Australia and the UK are also adopting the idea.'

She continues: 'Next year, five cities in the UK will host community or region-wide reading events. Whilst the Birmingham Book Festival is a little different in style from the 'One Book, One Community' model, we are looking forward to discovering who participates in the various reading events on offer. We want to find out what motivates people to share their interest in books with others.'

The researchers are keen to hear from all readers and would like them to fill in an online questionnaire which is available at www.beyondthebookproject.org under the 'questionnaire' link. Participants completing the survey have a chance of winning a £50 book voucher.

'The 'Beyond the Book' team are trying to determine whether these types of events are effecting social change in any way,' Dr Fuller says. 'We also want to know why this cultural phenomenon is taking place now, what the organisers hope to achieve from them, how individual events use mass media and digital technology and what kind of people are excluded or included.'

Ends

Notes to Editors

Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading is a trans-national analysis of contemporary shared reading practices, the formation of reading communities and the popular function of literary fiction in the UK, USA and Canada. It is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

For further information

Kate Chapple, Press Officer, University of Birmingham, tel 0121 414 2772 or 07789 921164.

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