Read around the world with Birmingham at Hay

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From the world's oldest Bible, via the meaning of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, to the burgeoning popularity of mass reading events; the past, present and future of literature come together in the University of Birmingham's exciting line-up of lectures at this year's Hay Festival.

Top academics from the University's College of Arts and Law will lead talks highlighting some of the most interesting and topical research areas in the humanities at the festival, now in its 26th year.

In doing so, they will showcase the work of some of the University's most cherished cultural gems, including the historic Shakespeare Institute in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon and the major interdisciplinary Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, in Shropshire.

The world-renowned Hay Festival of Literature and Arts runs from 23 May to 2 June 2012 with a packed programme of debates and conversations featuring poets and scientists, novelists and historians, artists and gardeners, comedians and musicians, film makers and politicians.

Professor Ewan Fernie, of the University's prestigious Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, will suggest that the way to 'get' and to enjoy the Bard is to read his works with imagination and intensity. Given the chance, many students are good at this, he says.

Encompassing The Tempest and Measure for Measure as well as Hamlet, Professor Fernie's lecture *Teaching Shakespeare and the Big Stuff,* includes excerpts from his own latest book The Demonic: Literature and Experience, highlighting that in reading Shakespeare we are - or should be – equally journeying into the perils and promises of our own lives.

In *As Readers We Tour the World*, Professor Mike Robinson, director of the Ironbridge Institute, will discuss the critical but underplayed role that fictional narratives play in shaping tourism and our understanding of people, places and pasts. Drawing on a variety of literary genres, Professor Robinson will explore how the world of fiction shapes our agenda as tourists, to the point where not only can we consider notions of genuine desire for imagined worlds but it becomes almost impossible to be wholly 'innocent' of places. 'As tourists we read the world. As readers we tour the world – a world we have already visited.'

Professor David Parker's talk '*The World's Oldest Bible: How technology shapes belief*' uncovers more information about the oldest surviving Christian Bible, the Codex Sinaiticus. Handwritten more than 1,600 years ago and the oldest substantial book to survive antiquity, the manuscript contains the Christian Bible in Greek, including the oldest complete copy of the New Testament.

Meanwhile, city-wide reading events such as Liverpool Reads and TV book clubs like Richard & Judy's Book Club remain hugely popular in the new age of digital literature. Danielle Fuller's talk *Citizen Reader* examines how and why contemporary readers come together to share reading, and the lure of belonging to such a community, however briefly.

Professor Michael Whitby, Head of the College of Arts and Law, comments: 'It is a pleasure to be returning to this prestigious cultural event.

'We are delighted to be offering a diverse, entertaining and highly informative lecture programme that highlights the range of research and pedagogic interests at the University of Birmingham and validates the place occupied by culture and literature in people's everyday lives.'

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Notes to editors
• For more details on the above talks and others featuring the Birmingham Speakers at Hay, plus a full programme of events and to book tickets please visit www.hayfestival.co.uk

• Professor Ewan Fernie will be speaking at the Hay Festival at 10am on Tuesday May 28. As well as teaching on the undergraduate Shakespeare course at Birmingham, and on various postgraduate programmes at the University's Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, Professor Fernie has devised and co-convenes the brand new MA in Shakespeare and Creativity. To find out more or to arrange an interview, please contact the press office. www.birmingham.ac.uk/shakespearecreativity

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