E-Reading Lists

The Potential Impact of New Publishing Technology on the Study of English Literature at University

Who Are We?
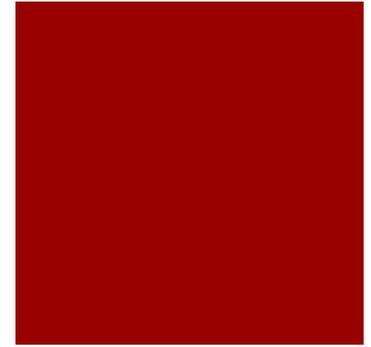
- The English Department at the University of Surrey is the newest in the country – launched in 2008

- Professor Marion Wynne-Davies leads a young team of research lecturers in developing innovative approaches to research and teaching

- We are home to the internationally-acclaimed Surrey Morphology Group

- We pioneered the undergraduate placement-year schemes now being implemented by other universities across the UK

- We have forged a series of international links with universities from around the world

Focus on Contemporary Literature
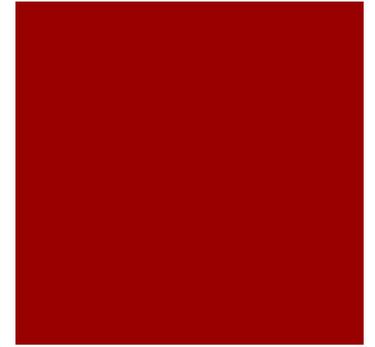
- "Genres and Contemporary Literature"

- "Contemporary Literature in a Global Context"

- "Contemporary Storytelling"

- "Contemporary British and American Poetry"

- "The 21st Century British Novel"

The Impact of E-Readers
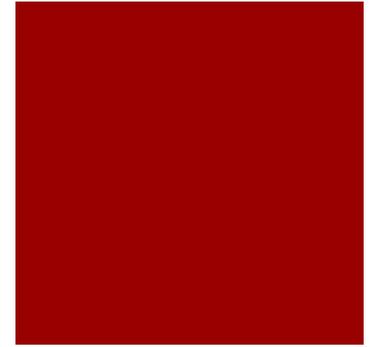
- Once the e-reader has been purchased students at many universities need never again buy a primary text

- Most of the classics are available for free at Project Gutenberg in high-quality HTML

- More texts are available at commercial websites that university libraries subscribe to: LION, Project Muse, etc.

- The e-reader must prove to be beneficial to students at a time when their finances are set to come under intense pressure

- But contemporary literature is not freely available . . .

Problems with Teaching Contemporary Fiction
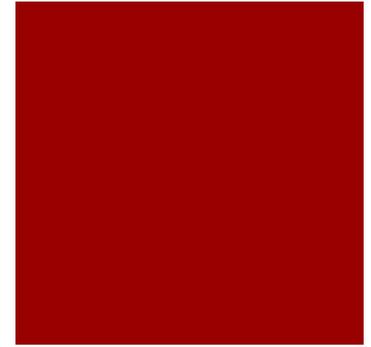
- Desirability of maintaining a focus on contemporary must come under pressure with the rise of the e-reader

- If every book ever written in English outside the 75-year period required for copyright is free why insist on the contemporary?

- Quite apart from cost the form of the contemporary novel renders it extremely difficult to teach

- Publishers often insist on 90,000 words plus

- English students usually study one text each week for each module!

- The fact is that form has been determined by cost – large books can be sold for more than a short book, while the cost of production is equivalent over a sufficiently large print run

Alternative Solutions
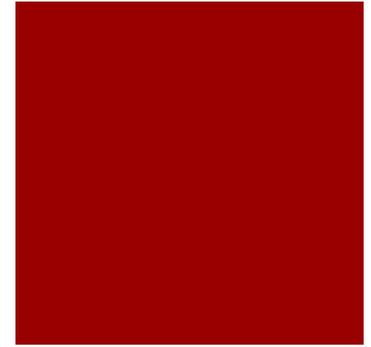
① In response to student concerns English Departments will turn away from the contemporary . . .

② As part of a long-term investment mainstream publishers will start to make plans with universities in mind, as they have in the past in relation to schools:

This might involve arrangements with libraries or package deals for students through bodies such as the NUS or with specific English Departments . . .

③ Rather than trying to maintain a form of literature that has become unsustainable with the advent of the e-reader, mainstream publishers might try embracing the possibilities offered by the technology . . .

New Medium: New Content
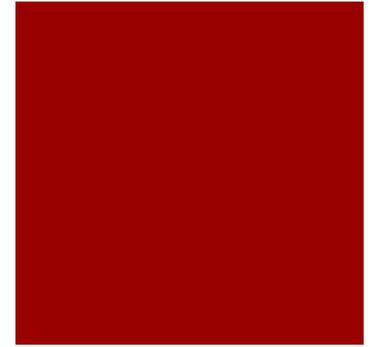
- The form of the contemporary novel has been determined by means of production & distribution soon to be obsolete

- This has stifled creativity: novels tend to conform to a strict pattern; those 90,000 words plus are an obstacle to young talent, & the final product is clearly not aimed at a young demographic (no other creative industry in the world would have market strategies that revolved round Richard & Judy!)

- The scene needs to freshen up anyway – and the e-reader necessitates this: it no longer makes financial sense to be risk averse.

- Short novels or even novellas are best suited for new readers

- Long novels should be written with serial publication in mind

- Fiction needs to become again – short, fast, smart and hard
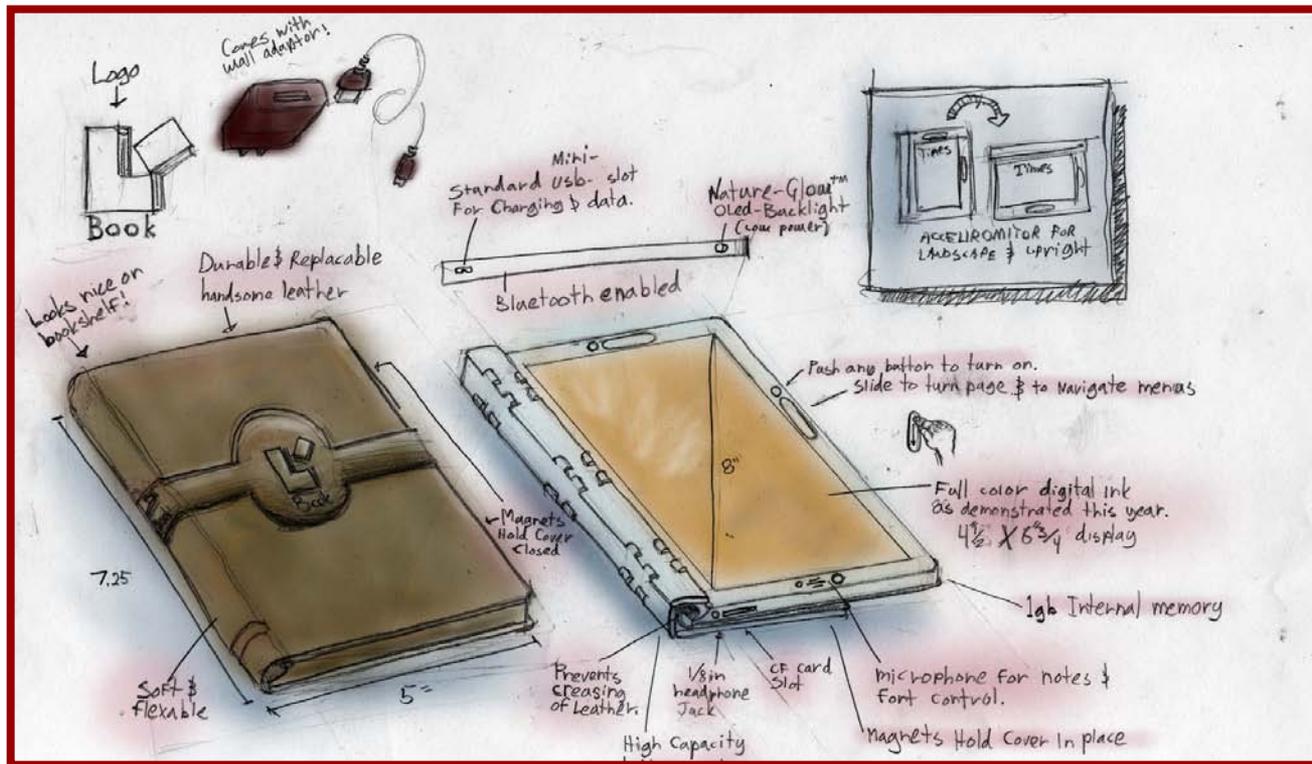
Thank you for listening!

If you have any comments please do get in touch . . .

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