

Reading experiences across the world

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Clip transcript:

Shafquat Towheed:

Hello. I'm Dr Shafquat Towheed, and I'm a lecturer in the English Department at The Open University, where I direct an innovative research project called the Reading Experience Database, or RED for short. RED helps to unlock the experiences of thousands of British readers across five centuries.

With British authors, libraries and publishing firms famous throughout the world, we've always prided ourselves on being a nation of readers and book lovers. But what do we really know about what people in the past actually read, and what they said about their reading? How might their reading practices and tastes be different from our own? This is the library of the prestigious Travellers Club in Pall Mall in London. The club was founded over 250 years ago to serve as a place for gentleman travellers to meet and read. It has much the same function today, but for a wider membership. If we want to know whether reading habits have changed over time, whether reading habits were affected by the outbreak of the First World War, or whether men or women read the same book differently, for example, we need to interpret some of the information that's stored in the Reading Experience Database.

One way in which we can systematically gather together information about readers from the past is by constructing an open-access searchable database to which people could contribute the evidence of the responses of actual historical readers, both famous and ordinary. Drawing upon material from memoirs, correspondence, private papers, marginalia in books, surveillance records and many other sources, we've been able to put together the world's largest single resource dedicated to investigating the experience of reading. You can search, browse and download records of readers in the database, and you can also contribute to it, adding to the ever-increasing wealth of information about readers and reading.

Working together, team members have amassed over 30,000 entries of the evidence of British readers, both at home and abroad between 1450 and 1945. Over 100 volunteers have gathered together nearly a fifth of entries in the database, some 6,000 items. RED is not just a research project in the history of reading, team members have recovered the experiences of British readers both famous and ordinary from the past, and made this available to a global audience.

Research emerging from RED has significantly deepened our understanding of reading practices over five centuries – but this isn't relevant just to the past, it's of relevance to us today at a time when our own reading practices – shaped by the rise of new technologies – are changing rapidly.

So the next time you snuggle up with your favourite book, whether a detective story on an e-reader, or perhaps your favourite book that you've had since childhood, you might want to think about how readers in the past have read and responded to their reading. Perhaps to the very book that you're reading now. Perhaps there are valuable records of reading: diaries, letters, commonplace books, books with notes in the margin in your own family archives. If there are, the RED team would like to know about it. We welcome volunteers. For more information, follow the link on the screen.