

Kingston University takes a leaf out of Amazon's book with novel approach to Big Read project

Kingston University has scored another first with The Big Read – an original initiative it piloted last year. In 2015, the University was the first UK higher education institution to incorporate a broad-based shared reading scheme in to its Freshers' welcome activities and it has now devised a new method for arriving at the book shortlist for this year's project.

The Big Read involves a copy of a book being sent to each student who receives a firm offer from the University. Kingston University graduate Nick Hornby's novel 'About a Boy' was chosen as the pilot title and more than 10,000 copies were mailed to prospective students. Staff and current students could also pick up copies and everyone was invited to take part in a series of events based around the novel. The goal was to give students arriving at the institution a talking point – something in common to help them form new friendships – and to also encourage all students and staff to feel part of the University community.

Feedback research showed the scheme had been a huge success and it will now be an annual initiative for the London-based university. For the Big Read's second year, it was decided that a new approach was needed to finding the right novel. Dr Alison Baverstock, a publishing expert and director of the Kingston University Big Read, said that choosing a book to be read by the entire community of undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as staff was difficult, as it would be virtually impossible to pick something that would please everyone. "The aim of the scheme is to bring people together so we decided that the book we selected should provoke discussion and be of interest to as many students as possible, not just those who already have an interest in literature," she said.

Staff and students were asked for their suggestions which produced a list of more than 100 books. "It's not practical to ask people to read 100 titles and to choose just one so we decided to come at this from a completely different viewpoint and use a scientific solution to address the problem," Dr Baverstock said. Working with the University's IT department and local data analyst Jackie Steinitz, who has collaborated with Dr Baverstock on previous research projects, a formula was created that would generate a list of suitable titles which could then be presented to a final book selection committee. Amazon is famous for its use of algorithms to create suggestions for future purchases based on customers' previous buys, and this worked in a similar way.

A group of eight students and two staff members worked with Ms Steinitz to draw up a list of criteria against which each book could be considered. These included the length of book, the cover design

and the availability of the author to be involved in specific Big Read activities. To avoid picking a book which had already been studied, novels could also not have been previously set for GCSE or A-level syllabuses.

“Each book was assessed against the criteria drawn up and then, for some of the more critical measures, weightings were added before being fed in to the algorithm,” Dr Baverstock said. “The programme then analysed all the information in the database and gave us the six titles on the shortlist.” The book selection committee, comprised of students and staff members from across the University, will now read each title before agreeing which should be the Big Read novel for 2016. Current staff and students are also being given the opportunity to join in discussions online to help inform the selection committee’s final decision. Copies of the chosen novel will be sent out in August with activities being launched in September and October.

The six shortlisted titles are:

[The Humans](#) by Matt Haig

[The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War](#) by Sumia Sukkar

[Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life](#) by George Monbiot

[Red Dust Road](#) by Jackie Kay

[The Other Hand](#) by Chris Cleave

[Girl Meets Boy](#) by Ali Smith

–ENDS–

- **For further information about the Kingston University Big Read or to interview Dr Alison Baverstock, please contact Julee Sanderson in the Kingston University Communications team on 020 8417 3642 or email press@kingston.ac.uk.**
- **Copies of the book covers, the Kingston University Big Read logo and photographs of Big Read Director Dr Alison Baverstock and Big Read Project Manager Laura Bryars, and the book selection committee are [available to download](#).**

Additional information

Industry quotes about the Kingston University Big Read:

“I am a huge supporter of the Kingston University Big Read. I think it is beneficial to students as it gives them the opportunity to be part of a shared experience of reading a great book. By targeting this generation of readers, who don’t always read for pleasure, Kingston University are helping to encourage literacy amongst a crucial demographic. I think it’s one of the best and most innovative ways of promoting reading that I’ve seen.” – David Shelley, CEO, Hachette Publishing Group Ltd.

“A really clever, up-to-the-minute way of engaging a large, diverse community with books. A sure-fire method of provoking debate and discussion and encouraging word of mouth.” – John Bond, CEO www.whitefox.com.

“What a fantastic - and positive - story this is on how a book can change a campus and help create a community.” – Gabriel Huntley, Head of Communications and External Affairs, The University Alliance.