



Sunset over Portland, Oregon.

Aug 15, 2022 15:11 BST

Academic's 'coming of age' memoir explores how art shapes identity

A lecturer in Creative Writing at Northumbria University has been awarded a British Academy Small Research Grant to explore how art – and music in particular – has a profound impact on our lives and makes us who we are.

Dr Richard O'Brien, from the Department of Humanities, is writing his own memoir *Now Here We Are Thirty Years Later*, a book about growing up and feeling out of place in the world, and the way that his favourite band helped him make sense of his own experiences.

The British Academy funding will enable Dr O'Brien to explore how an eventful year spent in Portland, Oregon, shaped the creative thinking of and ultimately inspired musician and novelist John Darnielle, the founding member of American indie band the Mountain Goats.

The idea behind Dr O'Brien's book is to tell two intertwined stories – one about his favourite band who started making music in 1990 and have been releasing it ever since – and one about himself, exploring every year in his life from 1990 to 2020 through the lens of the Mountain Goats' songs.

The memoir can be compared to the movie 'Boyhood' by Richard Linklater, in the way it takes the reader, year by year, image by image, through a single life, and how a person grows and changes in response to the things that capture their attention.

“The British Academy Small Research Grant will allow me to physically travel to Portland, a formative location for John Darnielle's song writing, so I can explore the meaning behind his work,” explains Dr O'Brien.

“I am writing about an American indie band, but I think for a lot of people the art we love can work in this way, as a guiding star or a checkpoint in our lives. Every time an artist we care about releases new material, we tend to remember where we were and what we were doing at the time.

“It is also about a time and place. For me personally, South Lincolnshire in the 1990s and early 2000s was so quiet and it sometimes felt disconnected to be a young person in the countryside. The book explores all the things that felt so frustrating about that, looking for connection, culture and belonging. It is about making sense of our own pasts, and how we become the people we are now through the steady accumulation of all the people we have ever been.”

The book is being published by Unbound - the world's first crowdfunding publisher, which aims to connect authors writing on non-mainstream subjects with fans who share those interests. Readers who want to support Dr O'Brien's campaign to get the project fully funded can pledge at [this link](#).

For those based in Portland, Dr O'Brien will be reading work-in-progress as part of an event in support of the book at the music venue Turn! Turn! Turn!

on September 5th.

Northumbria's Department of Humanities is underpinned by a strong research culture, in which English and History both rank in the top 30 in the UK, with outstanding successes reflecting the University's outward-facing work with communities and cultural partners. This research culture is embedded in teaching, where research-active academic staff teach students from day one.

Northumbria is a research-intensive modern university with a global reputation for academic excellence. Find out more about us at www.northumbria.ac.uk --- Please contact our Media and Communications team at media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk with any media enquiries or interview requests ---

Contacts



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

Head of Corporate Communications (interim)

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Ruth Lognonne

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk