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CASE STUDY

Engaging Newcomers with the Global Great Unread: Working Together to Expand the Canon

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Abstract

Literary scholars' expertise is founded on knowledge of a small collection of texts, below which lies the vast realm of archived but long-forgotten literature that Margaret Cohen has called the "Great Unread." Cohen's account frames the Great Unread as the exclusive domain of highly trained specialists, while students are, for pragmatic reasons, taught to close-read the established canonical texts. This article argues that there is great value in facilitating the engagement of newcomers with the Great Unread, and in particular, the Global Great Unread. Within a course I created and taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I guided undergraduates through exploring the Great Unread of nineteenth-century global periodicals, selecting a short story of interest and creating a digital edition to reintroduce the story to a present-day audience. In crafting editorial materials of various kinds, students independently studied and wrote about global contexts ranging from the linguistic to the cultural to the geopolitical. After the course was complete, students could choose to have their edition published on a website and thus actually become available to a public readership beyond the classroom. Through such initiatives, we can expand our understanding of the ways in which literary scholars and literary study can be valuable to publics on a global scale.

Keywords: newcomer; pedagogy; republication; short story; specialist

Across a lifetime, a literary scholar can read only a tiny fraction of all the literature ever written. Our expertise, both individually and collectively, is founded on knowledge of a small collection of texts we have actually read, below which lies the vast realm of archived but long-forgotten literature of the past that Margaret Cohen has called the "Great Unread." Indeed, as Cohen notes, whereas our discipline's signature method of close reading presupposes the "intensive reading of canonical texts," "as soon as scholars start to work on the archive of forgotten literature, techniques of close reading come up short"—if only because of the "lack of time … to read closely all the texts that make up the great unread." Instead, scholars exploring the Great Unread must "improvis[e] alternative kinds of reading."[1]

[1] Cohen 2009, 58–59. Besides Cohen's own work, studies that mobilise the Great Unread to expand our understanding of literary history include Lamond (2014), Wiemann (2017), Henzel (2020), and Martynenko (2023).

The payoff of this improvisation, in Cohen's account, is a more nuanced, expansive understanding of literary history beyond the canonical texts.

While the contrast Cohen emphasises is between different kinds of *reading*—close reading and its improvised others—she also implies a contrast between different kinds of *readers*—the specialist scholar and the newcomer student. She notes that close reading "continues to dominate the teaching of literature" as a method "ideally suited to the seminar." If only for "strategic" reasons, students begin with close reading of canonical texts (even when taught by "scholars uncomfortable with the canon and the canonical values of the critics who first developed it").[2] Only those who attain the level of a specialist can lose the training wheels and set out intrepidly into the Great Unread.

In this article, I argue that specialist training is not a prerequisite for exploring the Great Unread, and that there is great value in opening up the Great Unread to exploration by newcomers.[3] Exploration by newcomers is valuable in at least two ways. First, it positions each newcomer, simply by virtue of reading, as the best-informed person on the texts they find. Unlike with canonical literary works, where newcomers may experience a lack of specialised training in close reading or lack of familiarity with the history of prior interpretations as obstacles to their understanding, with texts in the Great Unread, there are no pre-existing specialists to defer to. Indeed, Cohen's account of needing to "improvise" reading methods might be taken to imply that specialist training is actually an obstacle to making sense of the Great Unread. Newcomers, at least, have less training to unlearn. Second, exploring the Great Unread is valuable in giving newcomers first-hand experience of the substantial and challenging labour involved in making forgotten texts available to the world again. Newcomers thus understand the work involved in expanding the canon, and in particular, in creating a canon whose scope is expansively global.

Scholars of literature have by now produced and absorbed decades of debates about expanding and diversifying the canon. In the field of Victorian or nineteenth-century literature, with which both Cohen and I have an affiliation, recent publications from Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong on "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" and from Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie on "Widening the Nineteenth Century" have urged scholars to simultaneously unlearn conventional wisdom about the limits of their Victorianist purview while also expanding the range of texts they read and topics they address.[4] Both position Victorian Britain, in particular through its imperial and colonial expansion, as globally interconnected in ways that scholars have tended to neglect.[5] While these interventions certainly have pedagogical implications, their audience is scholars rather than students.[6] And while students may bring Anglocentric and Eurocentric biases into the classroom, they have not yet absorbed field-specific norms of what texts and topics are most appropriate or important. They are still "wide" and "undisciplined" in their approach. They do not yet have a comfort zone from which exploring the Great Unread would feel like a departure.

[2] Cohen 2009, 58–59.

[3] Throughout this article, I'll refer to these two communities as "specialists" (those pursuing careers in literary scholarship and teaching) and "newcomers" (those without extensive training in literary history and archival research).

[4] Banerjee, Fong, and Michie 2021; Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong 2020.

[5] For a study that investigates the nineteenth-century Great Unread in order to gain a more expansive understanding of Victorian imperialism, see Reid 2019.

[6] For pedagogical ramifications, see Fong et al. 2021–2024.

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In this article, I begin by outlining a course I created to facilitate students engaging with the Global Great Unread, then discuss some exemplary student projects, and finally consider a second community of newcomers—the intended public audiences of the students' projects. After a brief reflection on my own role in digitally publishing the students' projects, I conclude by arguing that facilitating public engagement with the Global Great Unread challenges the received wisdom about the value that literary scholars, and in particular, students in our courses, can bring to the wider world.

The role of the specialist, as I conceive it in this article, runs counter to what I take to be the standard conception of public engagement among literary scholars—namely, public criticism. Thus, Jonathan Kramnick, at the end of his book analysing close reading as the defining practice internal to the discipline of literary scholars, concludes with a turn to "public criticism" as

> an unqualified good. Every time a critic is heard, someone learns something new about the corner of the world the critic finds of compelling interest. More of the world comes into view and is altered in the viewing. … Let us have more of it.[7]

To rephrase this conception in the terms I'm using, public good arises when a *newcomer* "learns something" from a *specialist* about some little-known "corner of the world." The specialist has already had their view of the world enriched through the close reading they have done themselves, and now they are passing this on to a public that would not otherwise arrive at the experience. I suspect many literary scholars—myself included—can recall formative experiences of the enriching power of reading great literary criticism.

But this need not be the only good we can do in the world. In particular, whereas public criticism involves the specialist choosing both what to read and how to read it—and locates value in the way *this* critic reads *this* book in *this* unique new way—facilitating newcomers' exploration of the Global Great Unread places the questions of what and how to read squarely with the newcomers.

1. About the course

My case study is a course I developed and taught twice at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): *The Birth of the Global Short Story*.[8] Aimed at first-year undergraduates, this course needed to be oriented to newcomers on multiple levels. As first-years, the students were all newcomers to university. Additionally, whether or not they enjoyed reading or studying literature, most students were intending to major in STEM disciplines. Because the course fulfilled a writing-intensive requirement, substantial amounts of writing would be required despite many students having little or no prior experience in writing essays of any kind, let alone the interpretive essays typical of an undergraduate literature course. Given these factors, I conceived a course that guided students through producing not an essay but a digital edition of a short story from the Great Unread.[9]

[7] Kramnick 2023, 105.

[8] The course syllabus and assignment guidelines are available in Terlunen 2025.

[9] My direct inspiration was the digital republication assignment in Plotz's 2008–2010 course *The Birth of the Short Story*, taught at Brandeis University. Student projects from that course can be found at https://birthoftheshortstory.blogspot.com/. For extensive resources on digital edition-making, including in the classroom, see eLaboratories n.d. I thank one of this article's reviewers for alerting me to other initiatives to facilitate student editing of texts by (generally more canonical) nineteenth-century writers: *The Walt Whitman Archive* (Cohen, Folsom, and Price

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The course syllabus did not eschew canonical literature, however. Instead, the readings on the syllabus represented a *global* canon of short stories from the long nineteenth century, encompassing not only canonical U.S.-American and European writers but also writers from Latin America, Africa, and Asia who were (and often still are) well known in their own countries. All stories were assigned in English translation, and I explained that the availability of translations largely determined the selection of stories not originally in English. Students thus understood that the assigned reading depended on the collective work of translators, editors, and publishers to make stories from the past accessible in the present.

Complementary to the assigned reading, within a few weeks, students began browsing archives of digitised nineteenth-century periodicals and books, with the goal of finding a short story to republish. Some students took one of the assigned stories as a starting point, figured out which database (e.g., Google Books, Archive.Org, Hathi Trust, and ProQuest) held the periodical in which the story was first published, tracked down the relevant issue, and began browsing what else appeared alongside it. Other students began with an interest in a specific topic or genre, and used keyword searches in the aforementioned databases to find relevant writings. While a global dimension was not a requirement, I provided additional support for students who speak and/or read languages other than English, helping locate digital archives of nineteenth-century periodicals in languages such as Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, French, Georgian, Spanish, and Tagalog. Regardless of their point of entry, all students browsed nineteenth-century periodicals, skimmed various stories that looked interesting, and finally read a few stories in full before choosing one story for which create a digital edition. By thus scaffolding the choice of a story, I aimed to give students an accelerated experience of browsing and discovery within the Great Unread, which Cohen describes as necessary for specialists, exposing these newcomers to enough new material that their choice of story felt meaningful and satisfying. If possible, I'd make this phase longer: while most students found a story they were genuinely excited about, a few students later admitted they'd chosen the very first story they encountered, did not care about the story, and thus now found the entire assignment a chore. To be effective advocates for their story, students need to feel invested in their choice.

Having selected a story, students began to choose the components their edition would include. The one required component for every edition was an editorial apparatus comprising one or more of the following:

- introductory blurb,
- note on the publication context,
- explanatory notes on unfamiliar language, historical, or cultural references,
- glossary.

In addition, students chose several of the following elements:

- translator's note (required for all translated stories),
- interpretive essay,
- historical/biographical essay,
- creative/multimedia response,
- custom-made digital environment.

n.d.), *The Charles W. Chesnutt Archive* (Browner and Price n.d.), and *Teaching Transatlanticism*'s "Digital Anthology" n.d. In addition, for a less student-oriented digital republication project recovering "racialized creators in British imperial and colonial archives," see "One More Voice" 2022–2023.

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I conceived these options, which go beyond the typical elements included in a conventional published edition, to enable students to bring a broader range of skills—including linguistic, creative, and digital skills—than just essay-writing.[10] Indeed, I structured the options so as to make essay-writing entirely optional, while requiring every edition to include the same amount of writing (3,000 words, excluding the text of the story). My goal was to decouple writing skills from the genre of the essay. While some students already had the experience and motivation to write the sustained argument-driven prose of an essay, others instead cultivated writing skills through producing modular notes or more descriptive accounts of their translation or creative process. For STEM students in particular, I intended for these non-essay genres to connect more closely to the kinds of writing typical of science courses. Pragmatically, given the unfamiliarity of the texts, I wanted students to have the option of writing in genres familiar to them.

The question of the audience was also central throughout the process. My grading rubric specified that "Creat[ing] materials adapted to the knowledge, interests and language use of your target audience" was one of the aspects on which each edition would be evaluated.[11] Consequently, I repeatedly reminded students that they should not write for me, or for an audience of specialists, but for newcomers like themselves. As we read the assigned canonical short stories throughout the semester, one fruitful activity was to observe the strategies that made the paratexts of some editions speak primarily to newcomers and others to specialists (e.g., how much scholarly jargon or historical context was explained *vs.* assumed). The question of which audience each student wanted to reach was not merely hypothetical. I announced—and eventually launched—a website, *Lit@MIT Student Projects Showcase*, where student editions could actually be published.[12] While students had free choice of whether to publish or not, I encouraged them all to work on their editions with digital publication in mind, to have a more palpable sense of a public audience beyond the classroom. Through these student-produced digital publications, the course thus aimed to connect two distinct groups of newcomers with the Global Great Unread: the students themselves and the target audience each student identified. I now turn to some specific editions that exemplified this goal.

2. Exemplary global editions

I encourage readers of this article to browse the showcase, which includes many fascinating stories as well as many intellectually and artistically rich materials that students created to introduce those stories to new publics. Given the global focus of this issue of *Public Humanities*, I'll here focus on stories that have a particularly strong global dimension.[13] For my purposes, in the context of teaching students in the United States, I take "global" to

[10] The ethos and many specific components of the assignment also took inspiration from fan-fiction communities. Fan-fiction websites, such as *Archive of Our Own* n.d., provide a space for users to create, curate, read, and discuss non-canonical narrative texts, as well as to create and view visual art inspired by existing canonical and non-canonical narratives.

[11] Terlunen 2025, 32.

[12] Terlunen and Yung 2025.

[13] While all students engaged productively with the Great Unread, the majority of students did not engage with the *Global* Great Unread. Overall, most students, even some of those who spoke and read languages other than English, chose to republish English-language stories from the United States or the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, numerous students—particularly those who spoke a language other than English natively—embraced the prospect of finding a nineteenth-century story in another language, translating it into English and introducing it to new audiences. In future iterations of this course, I also aim to better support monolingual students in exploring global Anglophone texts.

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mean the expansion of the literary canon beyond the English language and beyond the North American and European authors who have traditionally been predominant.

Some students selected non-Anglophone stories that spoke to global concerns and created editions that further highlighted the global contexts in and around the story. "When We Were Children" (1913) is a story of thwarted love between two young people, written by the Filipina author Pura L. Medrano and originally published in Tagalog "as a stand-alone short story" in a book series by "the group *Lupon ng mga Paraluman* (Board of Muses)." In her editor's note, Gwyneth Margaux Gutierrez Tangog presents the story as "preserv[ing]" the pre-colonial "language and culture in the Philippines," as well as depicting "the social stratification brought about by colonisation." Gwyneth brings these colonial contexts more fully into view in her interpretive essay, where she takes the lovers' desire for freedom to be an allegory for the experience of the Philippines under Spanish and U.S. colonialism. The topic of colonialism carries through to her translator's note, which explains how she handled vocabulary related to pre-colonial Philippine culture, such as children's games and grammatical honorific markers. Gwyneth's intended audience of the non-Tagalog-speaking Filipinx diaspora gave her a powerful ethos as an editor, positioning her as a mediator whose identity overlapped partially but not totally with her audience.

Given the preponderance of STEM students, many editions experimented with digital technologies, and some connected their technological explorations with global concerns. For example, an edition of the story "Gmiriseuli's Daughter," written by Georgian author Soprom Mgaloblishvili (published in the periodical *Iveria* in 1886) and edited by a student who chose to publish anonymously, documents the student's technologically assisted translation practice. Explaining that English is not her native language, she used Google Translate to "create the initial draft," then "carefully read through the text, correcting errors and making sense of some sentences," and finally used ChatGPT "to correct the grammar and make the text sound more natural in English." In addition, for some challenging passages, the student "first created a Russian version of the sentence and then translated that into English, since online translators from Russian to English are much more reliable than those from Georgian to English." As a speaker of Russian as well as Georgian, this was an ingenious way for the student to supplement direct Georgian-English resources, and also points to the geopolitical inequalities baked into machine translation. Russian hegemony in relation to its neighbouring countries in the nineteenth century is also a crucial context for the story, as the student details in her edition's historical notes. (This history in turn explains why Georgians, including the student herself, still know Russian today.) Other elements of the edition also made strategic use of freely available internet resources relevant to the story's geographic and cultural contexts, such as Google Maps to depict real locations mentioned in the story and YouTube videos of performances of traditional Georgian music and dances, which are repeatedly evoked in the story. These online resources may not have the highest scholarly integrity: indeed, some may worry that Google and OpenAI are complicit in U.S. and Anglophone hegemony rather than agents of global liberation. While in other courses focused on digital methods, I have foregrounded open-source and non-commercial tools, for this course, it felt both pragmatic and appropriate to meet students where they were at in terms of (digital) knowledge and abilities. Tools and resources from Google and OpenAI were convenient starting points for students, who were then prompted to reflect on their value and limitations, such as the lack of support for "smaller" global languages.

Even Anglo-American stories could have a substantial global dimension, which students further emphasised through their editorial work. An exemplary project of this kind is Tigest

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Aboye's edition of "The Golden Tiger" by F. Norreys Connell (pen name of Conal Holmes O'Connell O'Riordan).[14] As Tigest outlines, O'Riordan's life was profoundly international: born in Ireland, he pursued military studies in Germany with the intention of joining the British army, but ended up working as an actor, playwright, and fiction writer in London. Reworking and extending the author's international connections, the story "The Golden Tiger" centres on a British military officer in India in the period when India was under direct rule from Britain. Tigest reflects on the parallels between British imperialism in India and in Ireland, suggesting that O'Riordan may have been drawn to the theme of British imperialism due to his personal experiences in his home country. She concludes her note on these international imperial contexts by reflecting on "the uniqueness of [her] very own country of heritage, Ethiopia," which "was not subjected to imperialist pressure from Italy in the twentieth century and became the only African nation apart from Liberia to have never been colonised" and invites her readers "to make similar connections—either in their own lives or to current events of global significance." The edition highlights the story's global connections both actual and potential.

The story itself is far from a critique of imperialism, however. "The Golden Tiger" presents the narrative of Quirke, a British officer captured by the "Rajah of Rhatameh." The Rajah flaunts his astonishing power to verbally command a majestic tiger. Quirke eventually realises the tiger is not living but mechanical, knocks out the Rajah, and rides off into the sunset on the back of the tiger, whose mechanical controls he has learned to use. Having escaped to freedom, Quirke encounters a "taciturn Scots major" who, in a final international flourish, tells Quirke the tiger was "Made in Germany, of course. Everything's made in Germany nowadays." The story is plainly chauvinistic, revelling in British—and, more broadly, European—superiority over India. Tigest's interpretive essay examines the characterisation of Quirke and the Rajah to conclude that their relationship is "representative of the larger power dynamic between India and Britain during the British Raj: India attempts to assert its dominance, but Britain does not take it seriously, and, ultimately, the British remain in control." Such editions thus mobilised a reading technique honed in classroom discussions of the assigned readings—namely, to identify the diegetic depiction of global connections within a given story and to ask how this fictional depiction relates to real-world nineteenth-century global contexts.

While the three editions mentioned so far foregrounded contexts of nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism, these were not the only contexts explored. Jocelyn Zheng's edition of "The Heart's Memory" by French writer Catulle Mendès, for example, uncovered international contexts to the story's theme of painting.[15] First, a brief synopsis. In this tale, a king spends his days crying in front of a portrait of his deceased wife, which he himself once painted. Eventually, the king meets a beautiful shepherdess but feels it would be disloyal to remarry anyone who was not a perfect match for his first wife. Over time, the king begins to repaint elements of the portrait (e.g., lightening the original brown hair to blonde) until eventually the portrait perfectly represents the shepherdess. The king marries the shepherdess, and the kingdom rejoices. It's a provocatively perverse fairy tale.

Jocelyn amplified the disturbing role the portrait plays in the story by using AI to generate illustrations of key scenes, as well as multiple (increasingly uncanny) versions of the metamorphosing portrait. For all the illustrations, Jocelyn applied filters to produce images

[14] Connell 1899.
[15] Zheng 1899.

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in the styles of Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh, painters emblematic of impressionism and post-impressionism, respectively, which she identified as "predominantly French art movements." Since the French language "posed a language barrier" for Jocelyn, she in fact republished a translation from a British periodical, and her approach to the illustrations thus serve to reconnect the story with aspects of French and more broadly European culture. It's not merely that impressionism and post-impressionism coincided historically with the story, however. Jocelyn also lays out a thematic connection to the story's themes of reality, perception, and distortion: "where Impressionism attempts to stay true to the natural orientations of light and colour, Post-Impressionism seeks to utilise abstraction, distortions, and unnatural colours to emphasise expressiveness." Since each student was responsible for researching the historical contexts that seemed most relevant or enriching for their story, stories set in non-realistic worlds (e.g., fairy tales, fantasy, and horror) often prompted students to pursue global connections that were not geopolitical but rather, in the broadest sense, cultural.

Each of these editions attests to the value of facilitating students' engagement with the Global Great Unread. They point to the existing language skills and interests that led each student to their chosen story and that they then mobilised in producing their edition. Because these stories came without a pre-existing editorial or interpretive history, each student decided for themselves which global contexts were most important for their edition and then independently researched these contexts as much as they felt necessary—or as much as they had time for. By the end of the process, the students remained newcomers to the study of literature, but had gained hands-on experience of the improvisational research practices Cohen presents as essential to the exploration of the Great Unread.

I should acknowledge that not all instances of students' cross-cultural contact were so happy. Indeed, a few projects pointed to a risk in my approach, where positioning students as "newcomers" invited to "explore" global cultural production can take on a colonial-imperial cast. A student who did not identify as Indigenous selected a story by a white American author depicting the deaths in battle of "three Brulé Sioux warriors." Despite the student's sincere intention to use the edition to educate themselves, and in turn their readers, about Indigenous American history, and despite the guidance I offered to this end, the edition largely ended up replicating the white coloniser's perspective from which the story was narrated. This student chose not to have their edition published in the showcase, so I was spared the dilemma of whether it would be irresponsible or harmful to publish such material. Perhaps, too, this research, imperfect as it was, will be a starting point for the student's continued learning beyond the course. Nonetheless, this situation has alerted me to the need for cultivating what Stuart Firestein calls "high-quality ignorance" when placing newcomers in situations of cross-cultural encounter.[16] In teaching this course on the Global Great Unread, I encouraged students to value and centre their own initial experiences of unknowing. I should also have emphasised each student's responsibility to inform themselves about the histories of places and people in the story they choose.

3. Speaking to specific audiences

The course reflects my own emergent philosophy of public humanities, which is that the best initiatives are conceived not for the so-called general public but for small, specific

[16] Firestein 2012, 58.

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communities.[17] This entailed an unconventional approach to edition-making. After all, professionally published literary works typically have an editorial apparatus and paratexts that address either a broad general public or a scholarly audience. Indeed, most of the short stories on my syllabus were published by academic or trade publishers and have a corresponding scholarly or generalist orientation. For this reason, I assigned several stories republished on websites created by and for specific communities, such as *Literary Ladies Guide*, *The Digital Colored American Magazine*, and *The Anarchist Library*, and presented these as models for tailoring an edition to a specific audience.[18] Through both the assignment guidelines and grading policies, I made it an explicit policy that students needed to craft their editions for a small, specific community. These ended up including communities as varied as New England-based birdwatchers and readers/writers of self-insert fanfiction.

Philosophy aside, however, this policy had pragmatic benefits in encouraging each student to write in a voice and for an audience that already felt familiar to them. I encouraged students to think about real-world and online communities they were already part of, and consciously draw on the communicative styles and vocabularies of their chosen community. While some students were reluctant to specify a readership for their edition, preferring to frame its appeal in universal terms, the students who conceived their editions for a specific community not only produced better writing ("better" in the sense of more closely attuned to their audience) but also had an easier and more enjoyable writing experience. A particularly rewarding example came from Kaylee Barrera and Skipper Lynch, who decided their target audience would be feminist gamers (a community to which they also belong), and so decided to begin their edition not with a written blurb but with an adaptation of the story into the medium of a text-based video game (see "The Voices of the Night"). Overall, the policy made it tangible for all students that the style and content of their writing should always be adapted to an audience, and that there's no single linguistic standard. For newcomers to university in particular, who might feel pressure to write in a new scholarly voice, I consider it important to alert them to how valuable the writing skills and linguistic knowledge derived from their existing community ties can be.

A site of particularly explicit contact between the student editors and their specific audiences was the introductory blurb. Some students from the first iteration of the course began their editions with a blurb of one or several paragraphs, making a pitch to potential readers. Seeing its effectiveness as an instantiation of writing for specific audiences, I made the blurb a requirement in the second iteration to reinforce the students' awareness of writing for an audience beyond their instructor. While individual published short stories rarely have a blurb, we spent time in class examining the blurbs for short story collections as well as novels, and assessed their strategies for appealing to potential readers. As we considered existing blurbs and students drafted their own, I encouraged them to imagine what their intended readers would already know and care about (which students could explicitly evoke) as well as what intended readers might not yet know, or not know they care about (which might then require extra explanation or persuasion).

One topic of classroom discussion reflected in many blurbs was the question of plot spoilers. By definition, any story from the Great Unread will have a plot unknown to audiences. Through classroom activities, I asked students to reflect on what information about their story's plot would be helpful or appealing to give readers beforehand, and what to

[17] My thanks to María González Pendás for her mentorship, which helped me clarify this distinction as it relates to my own public humanities project, the *In Sacred Spaces* podcast (Terlunen et al. 2024).

[18] Dahn and Sweeney n.d.; "Literary Ladies Guide." n.d.; "The Anarchist Library" n.d.

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withhold.[19] In particular, we discussed the relationship between plot and a variety of genres, with students generally concluding that genres driven by suspense or mystery, such as adventure and detective stories, demanded a careful withholding of spoilers, while plot spoilers were less harmful for other genres such as the fairytale, where the reading experience is more focused on character, theme, and world-building than on plot.

Thus, the blurb for "The Golden Tiger," for example, withholds the details of the plot but does quietly hint at the revelation that the apparently living tiger is in fact mechanical:

> To what extent do political climates manifest themselves in the media? How can one distinguish between reality and illusion? What enables one person or group to gain power over another? Readers who are keen to see these questions answered can benefit from reading the short story, "The Golden Tiger."

Tigest is strategically vague in this opening, evoking sociological abstractions ("political climates" and "power") and thematic keywords ("reality" and "illusion") but not giving away the plot or her own critical reading of the British imperial domination in India.

Similarly, an edition of "The Penelope Robbery" opens with just enough detail about the plot to tantalise without spoiling the ending:

> On a ship called "The Penelope," a set of brilliant diamonds are stolen en route to a jeweler. One passenger draws suspicion, but when he is arrested, the police cannot find a single shred of evidence against him. Nine years later, the lead detective on the case, Inspector Herrick, details his investigation and its dramatic conclusion as repayment to the doctor who saves his daughter's life. "The Penelope Robbery" details an unforgettable clash between criminals and police, spanning years, spanning continents—and it ends with a grand confrontation that readers of crime fiction won't want to miss.[20]

This student gives more information than the previous example, summarising broad outlines of the plot up to the "grand confrontation" at the end. Nonetheless, there's still strategic vagueness: as a whodunit, the identity of the "criminals" is not specified, and the location is no more specific than "spanning continents." The student ends with an explicit appeal to the community of crime fiction fans, promising them a story they'll enjoy.

While the appeal of short stories does not rest on plot alone (and the syllabus introduced students to a number of plotless short stories from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), deciding how much plot information to include in the edition *before* readers encounter the story itself is a question that professional (and in particular scholarly) editors of canonical literary works often fail to consider, assuming an audience who, whether scholars or a general public, must already know the narrative in question.

A second writing strategy for effectively addressing a specific audience, which emerged unprompted among some students and which I only became aware of in writing this article, is the crafting of an editorial persona. The blurb, once again, was often the place where students established their persona and expressed it most overtly. Thus, Jake Ross's

[19] In other words, I asked students to craft what I've elsewhere called a "pre-reading environment" for their chosen story. Terlunen 2024.

[20] "The Penelope Robbery" 1884.

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introduction to Lily Spender's "A Legend of Another World" establishes shared concerns and tastes with a reader addressed as "you"[21]:

> Do you ever despair?
>
> Do you ever find yourself wandering desolate streets of a world far past salvation, a world ravaged by impurity, hatred, where sons raise weapons against their fathers? Do you ever think we should try to be better, then throw that thought away: with the state of humanity, how could we begin to try? Do you ever wish you could—think you *should*—burn it all down?
>
> Or do you hope? Do you believe, despite all evidence otherwise, of the goodness inherent in people? Do you think that, no matter how awful the circumstances, how few survivors of a calamity, there will always be a way to rebuild, and that maybe, just maybe, *this* time we can make it work?
>
> Like the *Barbenheimer* sensation, *A Legend of Another World* is a two-minded tragedy of emotion and science that appeals to an eclectic audience. If you are a teenager or adult darkly wondering about how close society is to collapse, if you enjoyed one or both of the movies that defined summer 2023, or even if you were a fan of H.G. Wells, E.A. Abbott, or other 19th-century science-fiction writers, this story is for you.

Jake's persona, and by extension the implied reader, is someone deeply concerned about the fate of the world while also being immersed in current pop culture (*Barbenheimer* referring to the simultaneous release of the movies *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* in 2023). While the blurb speaks of societal collapse, Jake's persona (his questions, his italics, and his mention of "hope") invites a feeling of closeness between writer and addressee.

A gentler but equally effective persona emerges in Zoe Xi's edition of Olivia Howard Dunbar's "The Fork of the Road."[22] In her blurb, Zoe announces the elements of her edition, which include "a list of discussion questions meant to provide a starting point for further inquiry into the themes and history of the story," as well as a historical essay on "the women's suffrage movement and the feminist Heterodoxy Club that Dunbar was part of," since "It is helpful (though not necessary) to go into reading the story knowing the surrounding historical context." The phrasing here is inviting, promising readers context that is "helpful" but optional, and signalling that the discussion questions are "starting points" for readers' own thinking. Reinforcing the welcoming tone is Zoe's sign off—"I hope you enjoy reading!"—to which she appends her own name. All these choices contribute to a persona that newcomers with an interest (but perhaps no specific expertise) in nineteenth-century feminist history can trust as an approachable guide.

While professional editors may not think of themselves as crafting a persona on the page, this is only because the narrow spectrum of acceptable editor personas encompasses little more than the blandly competent, the obsessively well-informed and the self-effacingly invisible. The taboo on editorial personality, while embodying a certain scholarly ideal of objectivity, is a missed opportunity when it comes to public-oriented humanities. When it comes to the writings of the past, and especially forgotten writings of the past, newcomers

[21] Spender 1886.
[22] Dunbar 1903.

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benefit from sensing the tastes and interests of the person who's made this text available and is making a pitch for the reader's attention.

In this section, I've had less to say about the global dimension of exploring the Great Unread. A global audience is nonetheless implicit in the very process of online publication. The editions needed to be in English to fulfil MIT's requirements for writing-intensive courses, and the status of English as a global lingua franca—as well as a lingua franca of the internet—meant that all students could anticipate a potentially global audience for their work. As and when I teach this course again, I plan to require all students—monolingual Anglophone students included—to write for an audience in a different country from the story's country of publication. Some students might thus become ambassadors for a story from their home country to a foreign country, researching what an audience in that other country might already know and care about, and what kind of persona might help the student make their pitch. Other students might bring a foreign story (whether originally in English or translated) back to an audience in their home country, explaining what they needed to learn to make sense of the story. Some students might even create an edition of a story from a country that's not their own and intended for a community in another country not their own. In short, all students would become mediators between multiple global contexts.

While there is certainly value in specialists republishing forgotten texts for a public audience, I believe that there is a distinctive value in having a newcomer craft an edition for a community of other newcomers. We specialists may struggle to suspend our disciplinary training when the Great Unread requires us to improvise and revise our received wisdom, whereas newcomers are necessarily improvisers and have less disciplinary training and received wisdom to resist. Even when they deviate from scholarly editorial standards, they may in fact do a better job than we specialists at making unknown literary works feel relevant and appealing to publics beyond the university.

4. From submitted assignments to digital publications

Actual publication was not a requirement of the course: to complete the course and receive a grade, students only needed to submit their digital edition to me. Nonetheless, I repeatedly encouraged students to create their editions with online publication, and thus an audience beyond myself and their fellow students, in mind. Making actual publication the promised endpoint of the students' projects brought into sharper focus the question of engaging a second community of newcomers with texts the students discovered in the Great Unread. Due to time constraints, I was not able to create and launch the *Lit@MIT Student Projects Showcase* until after the second iteration of the course, but students from both courses knew this was coming, and most gave consent for their editions to be published here. The consent form asked students whether they wanted to further revise their edition or publish it as is. All preferred to publish as is.

I will not dwell here on the technicalities of developing the website, for which I benefited greatly from the collaboration of Belinda Yung, an IT specialist at MIT. Instead, I wish to discuss my own position as a specialist facilitating contact between student newcomers and their anticipated audiences of other newcomers, which became especially palpable to me in transferring the student projects from the university's Learning Management System to the new website. While I had not given line edits on inconsistencies in spelling, syntax, and formatting as part of my feedback—and indeed had explicitly stated such inconsistencies would not affect students' grades—in publishing the projects, I had to decide how much editorial intervention of my own to introduce.

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In making my decisions, I aimed to balance the respective needs of two distinct communities of newcomers. On the one hand, each student was a newcomer to independent literary-archival research, and the editions bore many traces of this status. In both style and content, the students generally expressed themselves in ways far removed from the editor of a scholarly or commercial edition of literary work. As noted above, I encouraged this and did not want to change it. Even factual errors or incomplete citations were, I felt, important to leave as written to honour the work students were able to do with only introductory training and limited time. In addition, noticeable errors in spelling and syntax might, I thought, help make these editions more approachable to some audiences, who could recognise the editor not as an all-knowing professional but as a fallible but hard-working human being.[23] In terms of the editions' content, then, I intervened very minimally.

On the other hand, I intervened more actively when it came to formatting, on the grounds that this would help make the editions more accessible to audiences encountering the story and the overall website for the first time. While students had submitted editions in a range of typefaces and font sizes, I standardised these for consistency and online readability (e.g., making the headings and subheadings visibly distinct from each other and from the body text).[24] This standardisation is especially crucial for blind and visually impaired visitors, since assistive technologies rely on consistent formatting in the underlying HTML that is not necessarily visible to sighted users. To further aid visitor navigation and discovery, I added a hyperlinked table of contents at the top of each edition (which some students had already included in their submissions). A more difficult question was how to treat notes, since some students had formatted these as footnotes or as endnotes at the end of a section, while standard HTML places endnotes at the bottom of the entire webpage. In the end, to give visitors a consistent experience from story to story, and also to avoid extra labour for Belinda and me, we decided to follow the standard and format all notes as webpage-final endnotes. While plugins exist to display notes in custom formats and layouts, adopting the HTML standard also supports the long-term preservation of these editions, since plugins change or break faster than HTML does. For the few editions where students had designed custom websites (e.g., "The Kinetoscope of Time"), Belinda manually recreated these as distinct pages within the website. Here, the potential risk to preservation was counterbalanced by the design being an integral part of the edition. Across the varied content and structure of each edition, then, I standardised formatting where I believed it would enhance accessibility for newcomers without compromising the intentions of the student editors.

In future iterations of this course, I plan to have students create their editions directly in WordPress, thus sidestepping much of the work I've outlined in this section. Nonetheless, my experiences point to the somewhat unusual, but still valuable, role that specialists can play in engaging newcomers with the Global Great Unread. In short, we should resist the self-flattering role of an expert who evaluates and supplements the limitations in the work of newcomer editors. The kinds of engagement with the Global Great Unread that are possible for newcomers will be different from specialists' engagement, but they are not lesser. Editions by and for newcomers do not replace specialist research and scholarly

[23] I also had in mind students in future iterations of the course. Showing them editions that contained such minor errors but that I nonetheless consider excellent would help me persuade them to prioritise aspects such as audience and voice over aspects such as spelling and formatting.

[24] I retained typefaces that students discussed as a creative feature of their editions. See, for example, Sydney Smith's edition of L. E. L.'s "The Head" (*The Keepsake*, 1834), which includes a hand-written typeface for the title and text colour that gradually shifts to match the story's darkening tone.

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editions, but rather expand the limits of who can be a producer or consumer of knowledge about the Great Unread.

5. Conclusion: our public value

I offer my experience of engaging newcomers with the Global Great Unread as an experiment but not an exemplar. I'm curious about other ways we specialists might facilitate such engagement. In particular, how might we facilitate such engagement in contexts other than an undergraduate course and in countries where English is not a primary language? What other kinds of engagement might we facilitate that do not involve the making of digital editions? How might engagement look different for periods other than the nineteenth century and for text types other than short stories?

I take this issue's title of "Global Public Literary Humanities" to imply that literary scholarship is by default neither global nor public in orientation. I agree. Disciplinary and institutional norms push each of us to research topics and teach courses that are public, if at all, only as an afterthought, and that, even if they have an international or multilingual dimension, cannot claim to be comprehensively global in scope. But overcoming these limitations is too much to ask of any of us individually. Instead of blaming ourselves for failing our students and the world, we can make allies of our students—and other newcomer communities—in the goal of exploring a mass of texts so vast that no one can read more than the tiniest fraction of it.

At the start of this article, I noted Cohen's distinction between our disciplinary norm of close reading and the reading practices that explorers of the Great Unread must improvise. Yet to borrow John Guillory's helpful distinction, while only some of my students' editions demonstrated "close reading" (the distinctive reading/writing practice of literary scholars), all demonstrated "reading closely" (the full spectrum of "careful or methodical reading, whatever the aim or context of that reading").[25] The requirement to transcribe and write explanatory notes on their chosen story meant that every student had a remarkably detailed knowledge of their text. Furthermore, many of the statements of intent that students wrote about websites, illustrations, and interactive media they produced quoted specific passages from the story as inspiration, or invited readers to reinterpret aspects of the story in light of their editorial choices. Nor was close reading irrelevant to the course or the editions: every class session involved detailed passage analysis of the canonical nineteenth-century short stories assigned as reading. While students were not required to write a close-reading-heavy interpretive essay as part of their edition, many chose to do so. Compared to literature courses focused primarily on close reading, then, this course thus facilitated a broader spectrum of practices of "reading closely," certainly for the students and in principle also for their audiences.

I do not have a single alternative reading practice to advocate for in opposition to close reading. Certainly, this is not a call for "distant reading," the large-scale data-driven approach to the Great Unread.[26] The improvisatory quality of students' reading practices meant that they went in many different directions (from creating hand-drawn fan art to attempting to construct a working guillotine!). What characterises these varied reading practices is their social, interpersonal quality: because students were crafting an edition for

[25] Guillory 2025, 5.

[26] The term is credited to Moretti 2013, although a longer pre-history has been traced by Underwood 2017.

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an audience of future readers, the ways they themselves read necessarily anticipated a wider future readership. While claims have sometimes been made for the ethical value of close reading, I take the acts of care and curation for an anticipated future reader to have its own distinctive ethical value.[27] In particular, care to mediate across linguistic and national differences has ethical value, especially in our time of rising xenophobic and anti-immigrant politics.

In the introduction, I evoked public criticism as the standard conception of literary scholars' public value. Compared to the role of the public critic, literary scholars might perceive the facilitator role I adopted in my course as a loss of status—and it is. The role of the public critic, however humbly worn and generously employed, is a privileged one. In particular, it assumes the privilege of choosing for a public what to read and how to read it. Yet, as Guillory has noted, it's unclear whether the high status attributed to public critics from the nineteenth century to the present is still tenable, if it ever was, or if it only reflected "just how extremely the effects of criticism have been overestimated in literary study."[28] How large is the public, really, that values our judgement about what to read and how to read it? How much larger might the publics be that value us as guides rather than authorities? In an age averse to gatekeeping, might people appreciate us as gate-openers?[29]

I'm not arguing that we should cease to value public criticism, but rather that it's salutary to recognise that our public value can be much broader. That we can inspire in others acts of reading, community engagement, and literary-historical discovery that lie beyond our own capacities. That in the vastness of the Global Great Unread there is ample space for newcomers to do what Kramnick says public critics do: find their own "corner," "learn something new" about it, and bring that corner "into view," transforming it in the process, for new communities of readers. Let us have more of this.

Who benefits from the work students do in our courses? It should benefit the student, certainly. Nonetheless, in practice, when assignments are written to be read only by specialists and assessed in accordance with the specialist standards of literary scholars, students are also doing their work *for us.* I do not want this anymore. I want students to write —and draw, design, code, etc.—for more than an audience of one. This needn't be a large audience, preferably it's a small community connected by shared identities, interests, or tastes. Imagine it—a readership whose attention is held and whose thinking is stimulated by something they never knew they cared about: an obscure, forgotten nineteenth-century story, perhaps from a part of the world they know little about. Who is such work for? Not for us specialists but for global publics we would not know how to reach.

We can do more than train people to be good close readers; we can bring into being an expansive new category of Great Unreaders.

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[27] Gallop 2024.

[28] Guillory 2022, 87.

[29] Thanks to John Plotz for this formulation.

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