

Meeting 2 - May 2 2015 Corsham Court: Empathy in the brain, in literature and in the history of ideas

Neuropsychologist Alison Lee gave us a brief, brilliant historical tour of the way 20th and 21st-century neuroscience has tried to map the areas of the brain that are responsible for registering sensations and emotions, illustrating her talk with a series of slides that taught us the names of areas of the brain unfamiliar to non-psychologists – the precuneus, now thought of as possibly linked to empathy, for one. She also outlined some of the controversies in the field, inspiring lively questions about both facts and concepts.

Writer Richard Kerridge (founder and leader of the MA in Creative Writing) gave a scholarly talk which took us back through the history of imaginative literature and the historical evolution of the idea of empathy. He discussed empathy and the limits of empathy in, among others, George Eliot, Octavia Butler and his own recent book on reptiles, *Cold Blood*, from which he read a passage about the dangers of anthropomorphism, ie what he saw as an inappropriate or inaccurate kind of empathy, the temptation to impose an observer's human emotions on the animal observed.