

Prison Reading Groups

Prison Reading Groups What Books Can Do Behind Bars

Report on the work of PRG 1999–2013



“ *Today we have not been in a prison, just a library*

For one hour a month I feel that my opinion is valid, that I am listened to, and that others care what I say. In the Book Group, everyone is given a voice, all have an equal say

Reading can change your life. Reading together can add even more to the experience. Especially if you are in prison.

”

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
SUPPORT FOR PRG WORK.....	6
Chapter One: PRG 1999–2012.....	8
Chapter Two: Growth, Success, Diversity	12
Chapter Three: Benefits	16
Chapter Four: Reading and Rehabilitation	30
Chapter Five: Empathy and the Reader	34
Chapter Six: Becoming a Reader.....	40
Chapter Seven: The Way Forward	44
Bibliography	49
Appendix One: Books read recently by PRG groups, together with comments by facilitators and a list of online resources	50
Appendix Two: Words on Wednesday material.....	57
Appendix Three: Poetry Group hand-out, Holloway Resettlement Centre	60
Appendix Four: How to Set Up Your Own Book Club in Prison.....	67
Appendix Five: World Book Night in prison	69

SUMMARY

Chapter One: PRG 1999–2012

- The genesis of our first prison reading groups. The format of the early groups, the involvement of inside facilitators and volunteers
- Expansion through partnership with the Prisoners Education Trust and funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council
- Evaluation of the AHRC project: report by Dr Steven Howlett

Chapter Two: Growth, success, diversity

- Forty-four groups in twenty-eight prisons over thirteen years
- The variety of our groups and the ways they have adapted to meet different target memberships and different prison conditions
- Choice, the watchword of the PRG project: choice for librarians, volunteers and group members

Chapter Three: Benefits

- Benefits for prisoners: building family bonds; volunteering; connection with the wider culture
- Informal learning for both basic skills and higher level learners; the bonus of purposeful activity
- Benefits for prison librarians and volunteers: feedback from our evaluation and workshops evidence the variety of benefits perceived by those involved

Chapter Four: Reading and rehabilitation

- The contribution of prison reading groups to the rehabilitation agenda
- Employability and soft skills
- Choice and self-development
- Imaginative capital

Chapter Five: Empathy and the reader

- Empathy and the imagination: the links between reading, imaginative engagement and empathy
- Fiction as the highway to empathy, taking us inside the heads and lives of others
- Reader uncertainty and the moral dividend: catching us 'off-guard', reading can yield unlooked for moral dividends

Chapter Six: Becoming a reader

- Reading groups as communities
- From the edge to the middle
- Desistance and pro-social identity

Chapter Seven: The way forward

- New funding
- Spreading the word
- Supporting the groups
- Prison / university partnerships
- Networks
- Advocacy and collective action

Chapter Eight: Recommendations

- Sustain and expand our network of prisons and volunteers
- Build on and source new funding streams
- Conduct and publish an audit of current university and higher level learning initiatives in prisons
- Model and pilot new partnerships between selected universities and their local prisons

Appendix One: Books read recently by PRG groups, together with comments by facilitators and a list of online resources

Appendix Two: Words on Wednesday material

Appendix Three: Poetry Group hand-out, Holloway Resettlement Centre

Appendix Four: How to Set Up Your Own Book Club in Prison

Appendix Five: World Book Night in prison

INTRODUCTION

In 2000 we started running reading groups in prisons in the UK: at HMPs Coldingley, Bullingdon, Wandsworth and Send. This was the beginning of Prison Reading Groups (PRG).

In 2010 we were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council Knowledge Transfer Fellowship grant to expand our work. The goal was to start ten new reading groups. The project succeeded beyond all expectations.

During the thirty months of AHRC funding we supported thirty-two groups in twenty-one different prisons, from Yorkshire to Bristol and the Isle of Wight. We have also supported groups in cognate settings, such as community centres for those with substance abuse issues and/or at risk of offending.

Twenty-eight of these groups are still going strong. Since the end of the AHRC funding in September 2012 we have supported ten further groups in six new prisons.

The AHRC project was evaluated in a small-scale, qualitative study which focussed on the benefits for both prisoners and volunteers. The results are presented throughout this report.

The growth of reading groups has been one of the cultural success stories of recent times. Their ability to boost reading and bring people together is widely applauded. Our work in prisons over the past fourteen years has confirmed the particular benefits that reading groups offer prisoners. These include:

- empathy with the lives of others through reading
- critical self-reflection
- mutual respect fostered in group discussion
- connectedness with a wider culture beyond prison
- development of soft skills vital for employability

The success of Prison Reading Groups is due in large part to the dedication and commitment of all those involved. Prison group members have responded with enthusiasm, and risen to the challenge of a rich and varied mix of books and discussions. Prison librarians and volunteers have contributed time, energy, and a host of ideas and suggestions, in sometimes difficult circumstances. To everyone in the project, we are delighted to be able to present such a positive report, and to record our acknowledgements and thanks. We would also like to thank the Prisoners Education Trust, Give A Book, Kate Gunning at Random House, Irene Garrow at PEN, and Claire Bastable and Alison Sidebottom at Roehampton University, for all their wisdom, expertise and support.

Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey

Department of English and Creative Writing

University of Roehampton

July 2013

SUPPORT FOR PRG

“ As for the Reading Group, I'm delighted that it's taking place here. As a prison, we want to focus our effort on reducing reoffending by those who pass through here. Now, it would be a stretch to say that a reading group will reduce reoffending, but it does play an important role in getting prisoners to engage with the awful experience of imprisonment in a positive way. At its simplest, we can't motivate people to change their lives if they're stuck in a cell 'keeping their head down' and waiting for time to pass.

Peter Dawson, Governor HMP High Down, October 2011

The book club at HMP Send is a well established forum for the women to come together to discuss a common theme, the selected book. It generates positive interaction between a diverse mix of cultures, back grounds and experiences, united in the enjoyment of reading. The discussions generated from the chosen book lead to women learning about differences, exploring new ideas on varying subjects, educating women to be accepting of differences in opinion and explore new worlds through the medium of literature. The book club is of a huge benefit for the establishment. Enabling women to learn, share experiences and unite in their enjoyment of books.

Kelly Nethercoat, Deputy Governor, HMP Send, July 2011

This is a valuable donation and enhances prisoners' lives by the encouragement it gives them to read widely and to talk about what they have read with their peers.

Andy Lattimore, Governor, HMP Bullingdon, November 2012

I was particularly pleased to see that the Prison Reading Groups enjoy . . . volunteer support. ”

John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, January 2012

“ Prison reading groups really are an invaluable contribution and I was lucky to be able to attend one such group at HMP Wandsworth. I saw just how the reading group can make a difference to those inside prison...I got the real sense that upon returning to their wings, the prisoners were spreading the message about the work of the group, and sharing around the books amongst other inmates.

Sadiq Khan, Shadow Justice Secretary, May 2012

I learnt a great deal from the experience and got a real glimpse into the importance of work in this area.

Philip Pothen, Head of Communications, Arts and Humanities Research Council, January 2011

I was most impressed by the reading group at Wandsworth prison. The contributions from members varied enormously and demonstrated different levels of reading ability and response but it was clear that all valued and benefitted from the experience that the group offered. We had a spirited discussion, illuminating and provocative, discovering reading preferences and aversions.

Dame Penelope Lively

I really enjoyed meeting the men and I felt a real sense of connection with them as I do with most readers. But here there was something else as well.

Philip Pullman

A lifeline ”

Prison Reading Group member



CHAPTER ONE: PRG 1999–2012

Beginnings

Prison Reading Groups originated in the late 1990s, with our research into reading groups in the UK, which led to *The Reading Groups Book* (OUP, 2001). The research questions focussed on who joins groups and why; what they read together, and what they enjoy about it. What our research highlighted was the significance of belonging to a reading community. The range of benefits included the commitment to exploring the power of books through discussion and debate, a safe space for sharing personal responses, and a sense of connectedness to a wider culture.

As we drew our research findings together, we started to think about the possible benefits for those in prison. We were fortunate to have contact with a prison chaplain, and he helped set up our first prison reading group at HMP Coldingley. Soon after this a group was set up at HMP Bullingdon, followed by groups at HMP Send (a women's prison) and HMP Wandsworth.

Format of the first groups

Our original idea was to run these groups on a monthly basis, much like many groups in the general community: everyone reads the same book in advance and meets for an hour or so to discuss it. This remains the format for a number of the groups. The facilitator is not there to lead the discussion, but rather to 'hold the ring'. Sometimes all we have to say is 'Who wants to start?' We suggest very few ground rules, but the group sometimes need reminding of them, such as: no interrupting, no side conversations. We usually go round for first responses so that everyone's voice gets heard. We then open up for general discussion. The last quarter of an hour is devoted to choosing the next book we are all going to read.

Reading and choosing

From the outset we were keen that prison groups would choose their books for themselves. Our survey of reading groups in the UK showed us how important – and often how fraught – the issue of choice is. In prison, it is even more important. Prisoners do not get to choose much, or get involved in democratic decision-making. As we all know, how to choose what to read next can be difficult; and prison reading group members sometimes tell us they are not really comfortable in bookshops or libraries. So one of the things they learn in the group is how you might choose a book. To help in the process, we bring in single copies of books, book reviews and prize short lists, magazines, publishers' catalogues and descriptions from Amazon. Group members also like to make suggestions: books they have enjoyed in the past and would like others to read, books they have heard about from friends or family.

Getting started

Where possible we wanted to involve volunteers as facilitators, and the evaluation confirmed positive prisoner response:

“ to have someone take time out of their lives and come with us means a lot ”

It was clear from the start that the facilitator always needs someone 'on the inside' as it were – someone who works in the prison, usually the librarian, or someone in education – to organise the logistics, such as finding a room for the group, unlocking group members, and arranging access for the volunteer facilitator at the gate. This support from often hard-pressed prison staff has been crucial to the running and well-being of the groups, and we are very appreciative of the work they put in. The groups sometimes have another prop, with one of the members acting as secretary. He or she will find new members and send out reminders. This can be a satisfying role, as well as useful for the smooth running of the group.



Funding

For the first ten years we were funded by a variety of sources: Surrey Local Education Authority, Millennium Lottery Funding, charities such as Joseph Rowntree and Paul Hamlyn, and individual donations. The University of Roehampton supported us from their Enterprise and Community Projects Funds. We did not need much money, just for the books. It was and is very important to us that each prisoner gets to keep his or her own copy of the book each month (one of our few rules is that the book should be in paperback).

The next phase: AHRC funding

In 2010 we were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant of £120,000. This was a Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, an award designed to spread research work and findings beyond the academic community. For this scheme the university needed a partner to work with, and we were fortunate to find the Prisoners Education Trust (PET). This is the body that provides access to funding for distance learning in prisons, including higher level courses such as the Open University Openings courses. Our work is informal learning, and thus complements the work of the PET well. PET expertise in prison settings and their contacts throughout the sector have been invaluable. They helped us to identify prisons which they thought would be propitious for our scheme; they gave us contact points, and they brought us into the community of organisations working with prisoners. We were also contacted by prison librarians who had read our articles in the *Prison Libraries Journal*.

As well as finding the prisons and the staff to help us, we needed to find the volunteers to facilitate the groups. We did this through word of mouth, leaflets, and a page on the University website. We also made use of contacts provided or suggested by PET.

Once we had made the necessary contacts, we arranged a series of visits, to take potential volunteers to the prison to meet staff and possible members. We also asked potential volunteers to sit in on a session we were running ourselves at Bullingdon, Wandsworth or Send, to give them first-hand observation of how these groups work.

The volunteers were all given a full pack of information and support material, and the librarians or facilitators inside the prison were given checklists. The pack included material such as notes for volunteers explaining how to get the group started; lists of titles read by prison groups recently and a copy of *Waterstone's Books Quarterly* to help the new group choose its first books. We also provided examples of leaflets to help advertise the group inside the prison; an agreement explaining fully what was involved in running the group, and a few short poems and stories to help get initial meetings off the ground. Each volunteer was also given a logbook, as we wanted to plot the progress of our new groups.

Evaluation

We conducted a survey of prison reading groups in 2007. The AHRC project was evaluated by Dr Steven Howlett, of Roehampton University's Business School. Steven Howlett was formerly Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Volunteering Research. He conducted a small-scale qualitative evaluation of the project, comprising a survey and some case-studies. The results and evidence from his evaluation and our earlier survey underpin this report. A longitudinal study of groups is on-going.



Reading group round-up

Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

The report this month comes from Lesley Graham and the group at HMP Send, where a reading group has been meeting once a month since 2001.



The shorter the story the hotter the debate. Raymond Carver's 1981 collection of very short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, provoked lots of discussion in our group of fourteen members. 'These are just middles aren't they, no beginnings and no ends': this was the criticism from one member, but the reason why another was so drawn in. 'He gets you guessing, working. Like when you hear something when you're walking past on the street.' Someone else remembered being on a bus when a man stood in front of it for ten minutes on a busy street, stopping the bus from moving. 'Well, was that all about, what was going on, what was the story behind that, I've never forgotten it. That's what reading Carver is like.'

Carver's pared down style, his minimalism, has become famous. We talked about less being more:

- I loved the style of writing, it left me wanting more from every story.

- It was like being a fly on the wall.

For some of the group, Carver's style rang particularly true:

- It made me think of walking down the wing at night and hearing snippets of totally different conversations as you pass each room.

How much was Carver, and how much his characters' attitudes? That wasn't always clear, and could be disturbing.

- His attitude towards women was quite warped. This came out particularly in the story about the two men living 'ordinary' lives who had been friends for years. They go out and

pick up two girls and end up murdering them matter-of-factly with no qualms, no guilt.

We talked about Carver's own alcoholism and the hard-drinking habits of many of his characters.

- It sounds like a drunk writing it. The stories are disjointed – and yet so real. They made you think.

- I felt uncomfortable reading a few of the stories. His alcoholism and 'off-key' attitude to women was reflected in many of the stories. But it was good for me to read something different.

- I did get into the style after a while. I saw the stories as looking at the world through the eyes of an alcoholic. The thinking is skewed, not quite right.

How to read short stories also came up:

- Over the years I have come to admire his stories. But you can't read too many at once. Reading all these altogether in an afternoon is like eating too many sweets; you overload.

'In this matter, the issue was decided.' Someone quoted from memory the last sentence of 'Popular Mechanics'. What an ending! This story is really short, only a page or so, so we read it aloud. A man is packing to leave his partner. He wants to take the baby and the story ends with both of them grabbing and pulling the baby. So how was the issue decided? That got us going; thinking about King Solomon, about custody battles, and the whole question that making us work is what these stories are all about. Which some like and some don't.

- All the stories leave you hanging. I hated that. I wanted to know how they ended.

This last comment caused a lot of debate and the general agreement was that the intention was to make the reader imagine how the stories may have ended, to use their imagination and think.



CHAPTER TWO: Growth, Success, Diversity

“ It’s genre-breaking

I only ever read sports biographies and sci fi before

There’s variety here. If I was in the library I would only look at one book ”

The target for our new funding was to start ten new groups. We thought this was realistic, given our experience of the time needed for any new prison initiative. But we turned out to have under-estimated the appetite and enthusiasm in all the participants: the prison librarians, the volunteers, and the prisoners themselves. The project succeeded beyond all our expectations.

During the thirty months of AHRC funding we supported thirty-two groups in twenty-one different prisons, from Yorkshire to Bristol and the Isle of Wight. We have also supported groups in cognate settings, such as community centres for those with substance abuse issues and/or at risk of offending.

New Models

With the expansion of our groups has come variety. The model we started with, of a monthly group reading a book in advance, will not suit all. Librarians and volunteers have risen to the challenges facing them: they identify areas of need and develop new groups to meet them. An example is HMP Holloway where there are now four different groups: a monthly group on the lifers’ wing; a read-aloud group in the library; a weekly group in the mental-health wing, and an ad hoc poetry group in the Resettlement Centre. Each one works differently. The lifer group meets monthly to discuss a book they have chosen themselves and read in advance. The library group chooses a theme and the librarian puts together a range of short stories, poems, essays and extracts for the group to read in the session. Topics have included: the 60s; family; banned books; horror; and food (see Appendix Two for Words on Wednesday material). The volunteer on the health wing responds to whatever the women want on the day: reading aloud to the group; short spells of one-to-one reading; listening to the women read their own work. The Resettlement Centre group was formed in response to the librarian’s determination to take reading beyond the library. Resettlement appointments often only last fifteen minutes or so but women can spend two hours waiting for free flow. The answer: an ad hoc poetry group. The volunteer recruits on the spot and the group reads and discusses the poems and images she has prepared as an attractive and stimulating hand-out (see Appendix Three).

Choice

Our watchword throughout the project has been choice: as much choice for members, librarians and volunteers as possible. This means choice in both how the group should run, and what it should read. Throughout the PRG project, prison librarians and volunteers have enjoyed the freedom of trying out and developing many different models, as they tailor-make their groups to fit their circumstances. There have been weekly groups, read-aloud groups, groups for older prisoners (including the gloriously named Rubies at Eastwood Park), an audio group for the visually impaired, a group for foreign nationals, and a Family Day reading group for prisoners and their children.

Choice of reading

The lists of some of the books read recently (see Appendix One) show the same variety as books in reading groups on the outside. And they are much more varied than overall borrowings from prison libraries. Chosen titles range from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Great Expectations* to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Hans Fallada’s *Alone in Berlin*.

There have been many surprise hits. *Wuthering Heights* was a runaway success with one men’s group, and a male member of another group found himself gripped by Roseanne’s story in *The Secret Scripture*: ‘I thought it wouldn’t be for me, more something my mother would like. But I was gripped, I loved it.’

“ Reader, I am smitten. We all loved, loved, loved it! We loved both these independent, intelligent women – the character of Jane and her creator. (Facilitator on *Jane Eyre*) ”

“We loved *The Shock Doctrine*. It's very popular in prison; politics, economics, I made so many notes on the pages, we had a really good discussion. (Group member)”

As we found in our survey of reading groups across the UK, prison groups also tend to go for a combination of wanting to be part of the conversation and wanting to create their own reading identities. An example of a choice reflecting the books everyone is talking about would be *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, a best-seller adapted into a successful film. This book was chosen and enjoyed by groups in men's and women's prisons. Groups also choose 'around' the books of the moment. For example, a group at Holloway chose Pauline Reage's 1976 *The Story of O*. They knew that this had been an erotic best-seller in the past, and thought they would do better with it than with the currently best-selling *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Their choice was influenced partly by their sense of boundaries and appropriateness, and partly by their sense of independence and their wish to assert their individuality as a group making its own choices. Groups evolve their own methods for choosing; the key point is that they should be democratic and group-driven.

48



Reading and Radio

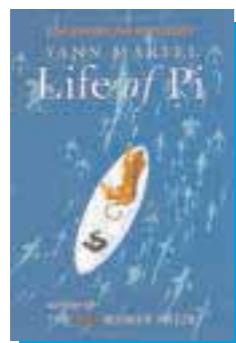
Inside Time



Reading group round-up

Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

The report this month comes from HMP Bullingdon where the reading group has been going strong since 2001



Like most groups on the out, the men at Bullingdon are keen to read the books people are talking about. So it was no surprise that we recently chose Yann Martell's *Life of Pi*, the Man Booker winner and now a blockbuster film.

The story recounts the terrifying adventures of an Indian teenager who is trapped on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a 450lb Bengal tiger.

Our discussion was lively, alert and full of surprises. The first member who spoke put us all on our mettle:

'I thought it was pretty absurd – 227 days on a 26-ft lifeboat: pah! But then I got to the final section and realised what the 'real story' was and what the tiger actually meant. Suddenly it all made sense and now I think it's brilliant'.

him the book was a real help:

'When I was reading it, I was in India, on the Pacific Ocean, in Canada – and not in here'.

At the same time, he also commented on points of contact: 'Of course they're different, but I found analogies - between Pi's fear of the tiger and what it feels like when you first come into prison'.

We finished up the session by reading William Blake's 'The Tyger', first published in 1794. The verdict: 'Blake's tiger is lousy-looking, but the poem - what a scorcher!'



The Tyger - by William Blake

LIST OF PRISONS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

Prison or Centre	Start date / PRG involvement	Type of Group
Men's prisons		
Albany (3 groups)	2010 2010 2010	senior citizens monthly audio group for sight-impaired
Bristol (2 groups)	2010 2010	monthly, vulnerable prisoners monthly
Brixton – (3 groups)	2012 2012 2013	monthly, read aloud monthly, vulnerable prisoners fortnightly, read aloud on Drug Recovery Wing*
Bullingdon	2001	monthly
Bullwood Hall	2011	fortnightly
Bure (3 groups)	2013 2013 2013	monthly, advanced readers monthly, general population monthly, read aloud*
Coldingley	2000	monthly
Downview	2010	monthly
Everthorpe	2012	monthly
Feltham (YOI)	2013	weekly*
Full Sutton	2010	fortnightly
Grendon (2 groups)	2013 2012	fortnightly, read aloud monthly
High Down	2010	fortnightly
Huntercombe (YOI)	2005	weekly
Leicester	2013	monthly*
Lewes	2011	weekly, read aloud
The Mount	2012	monthly
Northallerton	2013	monthly
Pentonville	2011	monthly
Rye Hill (2 groups)	2010 2011	monthly monthly, vulnerable prisoners
Spring Hill	2013	monthly
Wandsworth (3 groups)	2002 2004 2006	monthly, vulnerable prisoners monthly, staff monthly
Wolds	2010	monthly
Wormwood Scrubs	2013	monthly
* in preparation		
Women's prisons		
Bronzefield	2010	monthly
Eastwood Park	2011	fortnightly, over 50s
Holloway (women, 5 groups)	2010 2010 2011 2012 2012	monthly, lifer wing monthly, read aloud fortnightly, poetry read aloud weekly, healthcare fortnightly, mother and baby
Send	2001	monthly
Send Family Day	2012	quarterly
Community groups		
Crawley Foyer YMCA	2012	fortnightly, read aloud
Nelson's Gate CRI	2011	weekly, read aloud
Oasis Open Door	2011	weekly, read aloud



CHAPTER THREE: Benefits

“ *I never knew you could get so much fun from books*

I enjoy the way the book club is run without any lock and key stuff. I feel confident enough to express my opinions without the fear of repercussions

Books allow you to escape these walls for hours at a time; but it's also great to be involved in an active discussion

The book group is a monthly opportunity to have proper conversations about something that everyone in the group has considered

It's good to talk with people you might not otherwise get to know and hear their opinions about a book ”

From the outset, prisoners have been positive, vocal, and specific about the benefits of belonging to a reading group in prison. Their responses to our survey of 2007, and continuing evidence both oral and written, make the case forcefully for all that reading groups can do for the prisoner.

And prisoners are not the only ones to gain: Steven Howlett's evaluative survey and case studies enumerate the many benefits reported by librarians and volunteers involved in the groups.

Benefits for prisoners

The next chapters of this report describe the various benefits and uses of the reading group for the prisoner. They range from improvements in literacy to the offering of comfort, the provision of purposeful activity, and the development of critical engagement and empathy. We firmly believe that reading in groups has a role to play in rehabilitation.

Our view is supported by many others, inside prison and out: governors, politicians, funders, librarians, volunteers.

“ *The book club at HMP Send is a well-established forum for the women to come together to discuss a common theme, the selected book. It generates positive interaction between a diverse mix of cultures, back grounds and experiences, united in the enjoyment of reading. The discussions generated from the chosen book lead to women learning about differences, exploring new ideas on varying subjects, educating women to be accepting of differences in opinion and explore new worlds through the medium of literature.*

The book club is of a huge benefit for the establishment. Enabling women to learn, share experiences and unite in their enjoyment of books.

Kelly Nethercoat, Deputy Governor, Send, July 2011

This is a valuable donation and enhances prisoners' lives by the encouragement it gives them to read widely and to talk about what they have read with their peers.

Andy Lattimore, Governor, Bullingdon, November 2012

The project does add to my workload and is time-consuming but I think it's absolutely excellent and I'm very glad we're involved.

Librarian, Holloway ”

Bookclub

04/11/2020

COMMENTS

I have, and continue to find our bookclub, an amazing opportunity to escape into a ~~Belonging~~ ^{Apheare} that brings me direction, motivation, education and a true sense of belonging. Unlike anything to be found behind bars.

“ I see how [the women] open up and can articulate their views and listen to each other... When the officers pick me up they say the women have been talking about the group.

Volunteer, Holloway

We need projects like PRG to give some respite to the sheer slog of prison life and offer a chance to look at different opinions, perspectives and possibilities... I know [Governors] are burdened with numbers and costs and cuts, but there needs to be a reminder that we are not dealing with widgets!

Volunteer, Bristol

The group has been especially beneficial to one member, a man who has been in prison for 22 years and who was very withdrawn and institutionalised — he has become far more outgoing and confident and both prisoners and staff have commented to me about the change in him. He is like a different person.

Librarian, High Down ”

Dear Sarah,
With regards to HMP Bullingdon's book club.

As discussed at bookclub my daughter "Shadow reads" whatever book is being reviewed and then we contemplate the book before discussing it. In a way she is very much part of our little book club.

Literature has a beauty all of its own, evoking ones imagination in ways that film fails miserably.

I have found that by having this connection via books with my family ^{it} has kept us all strong and dedicated to one another. The Prison Service is forever looking at ways to maintain and strengthen family ties while we all endure the incarceration period and I would suggest that this avenue has not been exploited to its full potential, if at all.

Building family bonds

Reading groups can help strengthen family ties, one of the pathways to rehabilitation recognised by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Books can be ice-breakers on visits or in phone calls, and members often pass on their copies to partners or children:

“ *Before coming to prison I never read much. My partner does and she suggested I join [the group]. Now I even pass the books on to her.*

.....
My daughter is doing English and I have been able to discuss things with her, it gives me pointers for how to discuss books.

.....
Another connection I have received due to the book club was Call the Midwife by Jennifer Worth, which is the only book I have ever discussed with my mother, an avid reader. It gave me yet another feeling of joy that we shared a common interest. ”

Prisoner volunteering

There is increasing attention to the importance for rehabilitation of being able to ‘give back’. Steve Barlow and Shadd Maruna suggest that a key element in the process is the empowering effect of feeling you have ‘something to offer the world’. Prisoners, they argue, ‘need opportunities to be useful to others, to discover their own hidden uses, and recognise the rewards of this sort of generative activity’. Volunteering does this.

Our evaluation confirmed that reading group members are more likely to volunteer: as Shannon Trust literacy mentors, as Samaritan listeners, as resettlement workers. Causality is hard to determine: do readers get involved as volunteers or are volunteers more likely to be readers? In either case, as Steven Howlett puts it, ‘the reading group offers a way of expressing certain values – putting emphasis on exchanging views, communication, being involved in constructive time use – that supports other activities like volunteering’ (PRG Evaluation).

Connecting with the wider culture

Like other readers, members often make links between books and contemporary events, and this can lead to thoughtful reflection and a sense of connection with society.

“ *Bookclub takes us to places we can’t go, it’s an invaluable link to the world we’ve left behind* ”

Reading groups also foster a sense of connectedness with readers outside. By definition prisoners are cut off from society. An important first step towards rehabilitation and renewed citizenship is the recognition of ‘community with strangers’, of having shared interests with people you will never meet.

This was well demonstrated by the reaction of a men’s group who were reading Marina Lewycka’s *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. They were intrigued by the author’s account in *The Guardian* of her visit to an all-women group outside. What the prison group really wanted to know was how these unknown women had responded to the book and its characters. They wrote to the women’s group and an exchange of views followed for several months.

More generally, the chance to read and discuss books being talked about in the media connects prisoners to the wider culture and its debates, whether around *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Emma Donoghue’s *Room*.

The project sponsors author visits which also confirm members’ sense of themselves as readers. Authors have included Man Booker winners Penelope Lively and Howard Jacobson, Philip Pullman, Tony Parsons and Deborah Moggach.

When Boris Johnson came to a group to discuss *The Dream of Rome*, the men quizzed him about everything from his campaign for Mayor of London to Turkey’s possible entry to the European Union.

Informal learning and purposeful activity

Our reading groups are not classes. There is no syllabus; there are no set texts, no points which have to be covered. We have no targets, and award no qualifications or certificates. There is no secret agenda. Many group members have had problems or issues with educational achievement in the past, and may have been put off reading as a consequence. So our groups are to do first of all with pleasure: the pleasures of reading and of talking about books. We all – prison group members, librarians, volunteers – do of course learn much, but in an informal way.

“ *The group is led by a visiting university lecturer, but is extremely informal not at all ‘stuffy’.* ”

Letter to Boris Johnson,

I would first like to say ~~to you~~ thank you for opening a door that I slammed and kept wedged shut, since my boring history lessons at school! I found myself thinking 'I don't want to read this it's history' then after 30-40 pages feeling guilty for enjoying what was my worst subject matter at school!

If you are anything like me you would probably benefit from any constructive criticism:

1) I realise that a lot of upperclass people are familiar with Latin but I am not and would have appreciated translations for every word or phrase used. Maybe this was your ulterior motive because now I not only am looking for more books written by you and on Roman history but I have also been looking for a Latin dictionary!

“A prison reading group is unlike any other. All those involved report that the diversity of views, backgrounds, experience and knowledge are fascinating and absorbing. The volunteers are passionate and committed to their groups. Some read aloud to members and encourage them to read aloud too. For many, it's the first time anyone has ever read to them.”

Laura Marcus, AHRC website

“I welcome the intellectual challenge of reading a book, knowing I shall be sharing my opinion of it with the group – it concentrates the mind.”

Prisoner members are sometimes keen to return to books read at school and they are often surprised at the distance they have travelled as readers.

“When I read *Of Mice and Men* at school I couldn't understand why George killed Lennie. When I re-read it for the group I knew he had to.

At school, I identified with Billy when I read *Kes*. But when I read it in prison I realised I was more like his brother Jud, the bully.”

The goal of purposeful activity is important in prisons. The annual report by the Chief Inspector for Prisons, Nick Hardwick, for 2010-11, states that 'Prisoners are able and expected to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them.' Recently a report by the Independent Monitoring Board at Brixton deplored the lack of purposeful activity at Brixton; Nick Hardwick has spoken of the depressing sight of 'prisoners sleeping through their sentence'. Our reading groups aim not only to keep prisoners awake but to stimulate and challenge them.

“Life is going great for me. . . . I'm now doing couriering, which I really enjoy. . . . Both the reading group and my writing helped to make being inside less of a waste of time.”

Ex-member, now released

Basic skills

Reading groups can play a big part in supporting the basic skills work of Education departments and the Shannon Trust Reading Plan (the peer literacy scheme formerly called Toe by Toe). The solitariness of reading can be a formidable challenge and new readers sometimes speak of becoming discouraged alone in their cells. The sociability of a read-aloud group can make things much easier. A member of the weekly group at HMP Lewes reported that he came to improve his reading: 'I couldn't read at all' he said, 'but I'm getting there slowly.' Sometimes he takes a turn and reads aloud, sometimes he listens and follows the reading in his copy. 'It's easier to digest out loud' he said. This was at a meeting where members volunteered to take turns to read the opening chapters of *The Hunger Games*. Reading is a long journey for this group. It can take many weeks to finish a book.

A dramatic example of the reading group boost to literacy was the member taught to read by his cellmate and then brought along to a meeting. He became a regular member and an enthusiastic reader:

I never knew you could get so much fun from books. Sometimes, now I can read, I even turn the TV off because I can't concentrate with all the noise. I would like to add my voice to ~~the~~ the Librarian's to ask for another year's funding for Wandsworth Book Group. If I can get so much out of it, just think how many other people can be helped. I'm also putting the word about the landing about the book club, trying to get more people to come. Some people don't realise what they are missing. I used to be one of them. Not any more. Please help to make sure we can carry on.

(Letter from an emergent reader, dictated to his cell-mate teacher)

Groups may combine reading aloud with the chance for members to report on a book they are reading on their own. The Holloway librarian connects her library group with the Six Book Challenge and uses books as prizes for successful completers.

Joining a reading group can help develop reading stamina. A surprising number of our group members are dyslexic, and were put off reading as children. The simplest and most straightforward benefit is the bounce to literacy. Our groups are voluntary and self-selecting, and most of the people who come along are reasonably fluent readers, but not always, and not always very confident ones. 'I'm not a reader' was the comment from a woman who amazed herself with her response to Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*: 'I was gobsmacked', she said, 'I couldn't put it down' – as she mimed putting it down and picking it up. This was someone not used to that relationship with a book, and certainly not that kind of book, by a president of the United States. She was enjoying not just the book but the pleasure of joining a reading community.

Reading groups can also build concentration and stamina, important skills for further learning and employability. As one member wrote of his group: 'It concentrates the mind'.

Reaching readers

The flexibility of the project has enabled us to engage with a range of target groups, from emergent to very experienced readers. In 2012 the Prisoners Education Trust report *Brain Cells* found that 80% of survey respondents had a qualification before entering prison, and that 45% had GCSEs.

The challenge that many prison librarians and teachers often identify is less basic literacy than motivating reluctant readers. This is what a reading group can do so well. A single group often contains a wide spread of reading experience. As trust develops members support each other and reading confidence builds.

Higher Level Learners

Basic skills is the understandable priority for prison Education departments. But it can leave higher level learners with fewer opportunities. Reading groups help plug this gap with challenging books and stimulating discussion that can encourage post-release ambitions.

“ I was encouraged by a fellow member of the Creative Writing class to join the Book Group...

The benefits were immediate. I found myself reading a far wider variety than before, encouraged to read classics and genres of which I was previously ignorant or not attracted to, widening my education and reading experience. The lively and informative discussions reinforced the old cliché that 'you can please some of the people some of the time, but you can never please all of the people all of the time', with others' opinions, often polar opposites, pitted intelligently against one another. This learning informed my writing, encouraging me to go further and study Creative Writing through the Open University and funded by the Prisoners Education Trust. ”

“ [Our monthly meetings] have caused me to start reading outside of my normal literary comfort zone and introduced me to the joys of group debates which shed unexpected insights. When I am released I . . . am considering the pursuit of a university degree, probably in philosophy

I got an offer to read English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths... The reading group was a fantastic first step towards a new passion and without overstating it, a new future... It was a non-judgemental space to enjoy reading ”

Day 1

Not really looking forward to reading this book but I'm gonna read it for the book club. Loads of mountaineering jargon - finding it hard going. Like trudging up a mountain itself.

Day 2

Joe and Simon reach the summit - bit of an anticlimax cos my interest was starting to build up as they neared the top.

Day 3

On their way down when suddenly accident happens. Now we're getting somewhere. Human emotions + nature - same whether you're in the suburbs or up a mountain in Peru!

I got the impression Simon was pissed off with Joe for breaking his leg.

Day 4

Simon cuts rope. It's good how author uses italics for Simon's thoughts. At first I thought Simon ~~was~~ cut the rope 1st chance he got - to save his own skin but reading his thoughts are swaying me a little. However, I still suspect him a little because I think you'd have to be quite a selfish person

to want to ~~do~~ go on such dangerous expeditions - without thinking about family etc... Joe was too proud I think not ~~wanting~~ wanting to ask Simon for too much help.

Day 5

Really into the book now - just want to get to the bit where Joe finally makes it back to the camp even though I know he must have somehow.

Day 5

Joe's made it! I agree it is a story worth writing home about! No one apart from the two climbers know exactly what happened up there but the fact remains Simon cut the rope holding his mate who had a broken leg + Joe made it back to camp with that broken leg. (The moraines look hard enough just to walk through) The pictures show the true beauty of the sights you see from the summit. There is no ~~the~~ way a helicopter could land you down there so I suppose the only way to see them is by climbing up there. ~~But my ~~the~~ views~~ But mountaineers go for the challenge - don't really go for the scenery. P. 117 - My views exactly!

(Reading diary kept by a reluctant reader at the suggestion of the group facilitator)

Benefits for facilitators

The project evaluation confirmed rewards for facilitators as well as prisoners. Many volunteers highlighted the insight gained into the prison system and the need for a wider public debate about it. Facilitators also spoke of the pleasure and satisfaction the groups provided for them.

- Volunteers said they benefitted from hearing the views of prisoners and that they were gaining new knowledge and insights about the prison system and the lives of prisoners.
- Volunteers said that they got to meet and discuss books with people they would not normally meet.
- Volunteers felt they were acquiring new skills from running the groups.

PRG Evaluation

A husband and wife team wrote with regret about the closure of the prison where they volunteered:

“ We have met some great characters, learned a lot about other cultures...and our lives will be the poorer for not being able to continue with the group. Like us, some read books that they would not necessarily have chosen and actually enjoyed them...We felt privileged to be there to listen and support.

I have a real passion for literature and reading, and sharing this with people who have very different opinions is really exciting.

Volunteer at a women's prison

We had a small group before the project but it could take a while for inter-loan library books to arrive. This funding liberated us and meant prisoners could be offered a genuine choice, same as for other reading groups.

It's also great for me as I've read books I wouldn't have dreamt of reading for example, Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks. I had one member in my group who would only ever read fantasy novels and science fiction. Then one day he suggested The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold. These groups always surprise and challenge you. I think that's why people love being part of them.

Librarian at a men's prison

”

“ Facilitating the group is a privilege, both for the opportunity to meet these lively and interesting women, and for the pleasures of sharing the act of reading

What have you got out of it, as librarian or volunteer?

- Helping prisoners to engage
- The group has been a good forum for discussion and retreat
- Giving an individual a tool to help to something positive with their sentence
- Reading books I wouldn't necessarily read – and enjoyed!
- It has been a pleasure to help men into the habit of reading
- Knowing the prisoners get a lot out of being a member of the group
- Satisfaction to see new readers – amazing feedback
- Observing confidence being built
- New perspectives and books to experience
- Access to network of reading groups, hearing about what works in prisons – and what doesn't

Feedback from a workshop with librarians and volunteers

I've been in reading groups before but they felt a bit limiting as I was with people just like me so tended to have similar views. The prison reading groups here are far more diverse and I get a lot from them. I'm not there to be top down to tell them what to think or just give my views. Crucially I am there to receive views too.

Volunteer at a women's prison

”



CHAPTER FOUR: Reading and Rehabilitation

Employability is a key element of current rehabilitation strategy, and policy documents recognise the increasing interest of employers in so-called 'soft skills'.

The Funding Rules and Guidance 2012/13 for the Offenders' Learning and Skills Service includes employability skills as one of three 'priority learning aims' and includes under the heading 'a wide range of team working, personal, social and other skills'. There is also acknowledgement of the challenge these skills pose for many prisoners:

“This component [employability skills] recognises the importance of the personal and social skills which employers rate highly in employees and must take account of the distance many offenders will have to travel in developing these softer employability skills in order to be considered 'job ready'.”

Reading groups and soft skills

Our emphasis on choice is a great strength when it comes to the development of soft skills. Prison reading groups provide informal learning which can aid self-development in many ways. In our groups members are improving and refining soft skills such as communication, articulacy and decision making. They learn how to persuade and argue a point of view and get it across, how to debate and discuss, how to listen and communicate, how to negotiate what to read next. All these skills are vital for employability.

Imaginative capital

Writing about 'Crime and Lifelong Learning', the educationalist Tom Schuller argues that prisoners need to grow three sorts of capital: human capital (skills); social capital (networks, family learning), and identity capital (a sense of worth and future). In the development of all of these, reading groups have much to offer.

In addition to these three sorts of capital, many prisoners also need to develop what we see as a fourth sort of capital: imaginative capital. This is what a reading group can foster so well. Why is imaginative capital important? It matters because it concerns the growth of the self: reflection and thinking, crucially about other situations and other people. This is often what prisoners need to do. An invitation to invest in imaginative capital proposes that I might be able to understand my own situation better by reading about someone else's. Also, that I may be able to care about someone else; after all, how can I care about you if I never think about you?

The gift of the unpredictable

Official prison strategy in this country also wants to get prisoners thinking about the situations of others, and about the consequences of actions. Prisoners take part in Offending Behaviour Programmes, which are compulsory for IPP prisoners (indeterminate sentence for public protection). The problem with some of these Enhanced Thinking Skills courses is that they do not always engage the imagination. 'I know what I'm supposed to think', is how one IPP prisoner put it. He and many others are wary of programmes like this. And they are backed by criminologists such as Fergus McNeill who refers to the 'overly-scripted, manualised, homogenised approaches' of cognitive behavioural interventions like these. The virtue of the reading group – as extolled by many groups in our surveys – is that you *don't* always know what you are supposed to think, and you cannot always guess what others are thinking. Unpredictability is the big feature, the big gift to and from the imagination. It is when you do not know what you are supposed to think, that the work starts happening, with the critical engagement with the text.

Bringing books alive

It is not enough, though, just to give a prisoner a book. The imagination is a delicate plant. Our great novelist of the prison, Charles Dickens, shows this towards the end of *Little Dorrit*, when Arthur Clennam is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea. Clennam finds prison an uncongenial environment for reading. 'One day when he might have been some ten or twelve weeks in jail . . . he had been trying to read, and had not been able to release even the imaginary people of the book from the Marshalsea'; the imagination needs space, it would seem. The confinement of the prison is hostile to the powers of the imagination. So one thing we want to do is bring books alive, and we are delighted to report success on this front.

And as members discover the power and pleasure of words in books, their own comments take on vivid force.

“ A man who had to search out death to understand what life is for (Tsotsi)

It was like that coat could get up and walk across the room at YOU (on gripping description in *The Potato Factory*)

Pretty much like prison food – all in there but none of it very nice (on *The Slap*)

Books are alive in this project. Prison can be tedium and tiresome. Something which arrives, lights a flame and then is sustained, is rare. Six months in, we are seeing so many positive things. ”

PRG facilitator

“ Who'd have thought we could spend all this time just talking and arguing about a book?

Oh, so it's OK to disagree about a book is it, not like school?

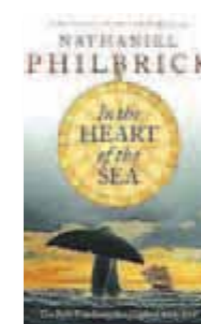
It's a real joy to be able to disagree and remain friends afterwards ”



Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

Reading group round-up

News and views from prison reading groups around the country. This month Chris and Conrad report from HMP Wandsworth on *In the Heart of the Sea* by Nathaniel Philbrick



In *In the Heart of the Sea* starts on Nantucket, a small island off the coast of Massachusetts. In the nineteenth century it was the world's largest supplier of whale oil, a product used by millions and in great demand. The book reveals many contradictions, including the fact that the fiercely competitive and bloody business of whaling was controlled by Quakers, a religious sect renowned for their peace-loving and simple lifestyles.

The book provides a detailed and vivid picture of the bravery and resourcefulness required by the whaling industry. Imagine throwing a harpoon from the bow of a 28 feet whaleboat, and from a distance of perhaps 15 feet, into the head of an animal 70 feet long and weighing up to 60 tons. The boat was then dragged along by the whale until it tired and could be finally killed with all manner of cutting instruments. Not for wimps!

The author, Nathaniel Philbrick, tells the true story of the whaleship Essex. In 1820 it left Nantucket and sailed all the way around the tip of South America and into the Pacific Ocean before being rammed and sunk by a sperm whale 2000 miles off the coast of Chile. (The story of the Essex inspired Herman Melville to write *Moby-Dick*.)

Before the ship finally capsized, the survivors managed to salvage food and water and create makeshift sails for the three whaleboats in which they hoped to reach the South American coast. One of the boats disappeared and was never found; the other two became separated from each other and were not spotted and rescued until after more than 90 days at sea.

The survivors were in a shocking condition – starved, dehydrated and disoriented. They had also resorted to cannibalism and the men in one of the boats were found clutching the bones of their dead companions.

Philbrick gives good insight into the probable thought processes of the men and how the authority of the officers on the boats was accepted or questioned. He also creates a powerful sense of the sailors' experience of powerless and aimless drifting. It became easy to appreciate how loss of control leads to blurred feelings – like those experienced by many prisoners.

The author includes many detailed 'science book' facts, such as what happens to the body during dehydration, and he makes comparisons with other famous cannibalism events, such as the 1972 Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes. He also speculates about the fact that the 7 men who were eaten included all 6 of the black members of the crew.

Like many other non-Americans, we had little knowledge of American history except for obligatory episodes like the Boston Tea Party. *In the Heart of the Sea* introduces a new and fascinating part of America's past.

However, there was sometimes a feeling of fanatically explored facts (did you know that the Pacific Ocean is larger than all the land masses of the earth put together?), or of having David Attenborough as your mind's narrator.

We also found ourselves rebelling against some of the too pro-USA claims: that American whalers were the greatest sailors, explorers, fishermen and survivalists ever. For instance, if the Essex crewmen were so superlative, why did they choose to eat each other when they could have used the dead bodies as shark bait? It's what the English sailors used to do...

The Wandsworth group is part of the Prison Reading Groups project (PRG), supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

We are also grateful for generous support from Random House Publishing Group.

If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.roehampton.ac.uk/Prison-Reading-Groups

PRG has also worked with National Prison Radio to start a radio book club. If you have access to NPR, listen out for details and ways to take part.



CHAPTER FIVE: Empathy and the Reader

Empathy and the imagination

Empathy could be seen as the daughter of the imagination. In the eighteenth century Adam Smith saw them as necessarily linked:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.

Adam Smith, quoted by Coplan, *Empathy*, 2011.

More recently, the psychologist Simon Baron Cohen describes empathy as 'our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion.'

While the relationship between reading and empathy is currently a matter for debate, there seem to be two apparent underlying beliefs: one, that you get empathy from reading novels, and secondly that empathy is and must be a good thing. As the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott put it in 1970, 'A sign of health in the mind is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person'. Two years before that, in Philip K Dick's 1968 dystopia, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* it is vital to be able to tell humans from non-human androids; the definition of being human is the power to feel empathy for others.

For our purposes, empathy is to do with thinking or feeling yourself into the position of the other, and also having some kind of appropriate response. 'Appropriate' can be tricky here. Empathy is not sufficient for morality: you might enjoy contemplating the sufferings of others. So we need a moral framework, to supply the appropriate, and this is where literature comes in. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it: 'It is impossible to care about the characters and their well-being in the way the text invites, without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself'.

Group members notice this aspect themselves:

“ A willingness to see another's point of view. An understanding of why we read for pleasure and not just to educate or find information for another purpose. ”

So do the librarians:

“ More openness from some to others and interest / empathy. One of the prisoners has now started an additional book club for the Over 50's. ”

The fiction dividend

Our experience with prison reading groups aligns us with Nussbaum, Winnicott and Dick. And what we observe is that fiction is the highway to empathy. Men prisoners in particular can be hostile to fiction – the point of resistance being that this is not real. This is how one prisoner put it, at a session attended by Penelope Lively to discuss her book *Making it Up*. Before, said this man, he wouldn't read fiction and wouldn't listen to recommendations; he thought there wouldn't be anything in fiction for him, because of the lack of reality. However, he has had to go along with the group's choices of fiction, and now he says, 'fiction has made me realise that there's someone else in the room, and what's going on in their head you have no idea, and fiction makes you think what's going on in that other head.' To which Penelope Lively responded: 'I couldn't have put it better myself.'

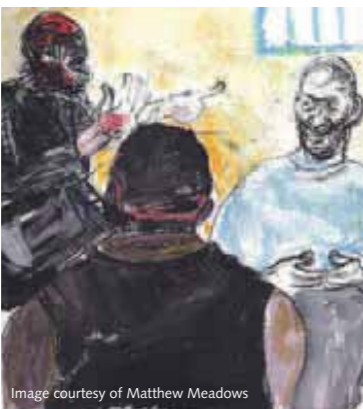


Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

Reading group round-up

News and views from prison reading groups across the country. Russ Litten is Writer in Residence at HMP Wolds.



Lee Child's Killing Floor at HMP Wolds

After a prolonged period of inactivity, our group reunited in July. We received a gift from HMP Everthorpe of half a dozen copies of Lee Child's "Killing Floor", the first in the Jack Reacher series. I took a walk around the units and spoke to a few men I did one-to-one work with, as well as the attendees of the morning Creative Writing Groups. In all, we recruited five people to the group. We agreed to read the first three chapters for our next meeting.

At our first gathering one of the group confessed that he had found the book so engrossing that he had finished it in a couple of sittings. This meant that he had to keep his counsel as the rest of us tried to analyse the opening strands of the plot. "Killing Floor" opens with the book's hero, Jack Reacher, drifting into a small American town and immediately being arrested for a murder he didn't commit. The book is told in the first person, so the reader is forced to consider the predicament from Reacher's point of view. The group members who had stuck to the original reading plan derived a lot of pleasure from trying to unravel the initial action. It was obvious that there was some kind of conspiracy afoot, and Child seemed to have presented us with several clues, but the first three chapters only offered tantalising snippets.

We discussed the book's style. The sentences were short and clipped in a Hemingway-esque minimalist style. Some of the group appreciated this technique, as it allowed them to propel themselves quickly through the story, and the lack of lyrical description allowed them to paint their own pictures of what was happening to Reacher. Some of the group felt that Reacher was a bit far-fetched as a protagonist - he was firmly in the Bruce Willis/Sylvester Stallone all-action hero mould, his military police background making him both physically strong and mentally brilliant. The short biography at the beginning of the book confirmed his pedigree as a thoroughbred fighting machine with the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes. However, such a two dimensional character was accepted by the group as being all in the name of good silly fun, and not to be taken too seriously.

The group enjoyed the swift twists and turns of the plot and the conspiratorial nature of the story's central theme. There were several spin off discussions concerning America and its economic and political system, its power in the world and the way it conducts its affairs both at home and overseas. The police procedure and jail scenes also provoked healthy discussions.

As we read on, it became clear that several aspects of the plot were becoming increasingly farfetched. Some of the group accepted this as part of the "blockbuster" feel of the novel, whilst others found this to be pushing the boundaries of believability somewhat. Ultimately, we all enjoyed "Killing Floor", not least for the shared sense of discovery it provided. One of our members has provided the following review:

"Reading this author for the first time I have to say that I was not in my comfort zone as I have been a reader of sci-fi and fantasy most of my prison life, but reading this book has made me see there is more out there to feed the imagination than space and knights.

From the first chapter I was into this book because the writer had used a style that was easy for me to put my imagination into the story as I have always been a visual kind of reader, where I would like to feel that I am part of the story and the author made that possible.

Before the story starts there is a bio on Jack Reacher, the main character in this book, and it told you what he had done before - a good idea as it did not make it a long winded thing to find out about the man to make you understand what he is about.

The way that the story was told made you not want to put this book down because most of it could be believed and understood. I have to say that I will be reading more from this author and I hope the standard of writing stays the same.

The parts that I found a bit unreal was when Reacher would go into a monologue about calculating firing angles and speed of reactions, as it seemed to me that at times this man must be a machine, but as I have said before, it never stopped me from enjoying this book."

Russ Litten is Writer in Residence at HMP Wolds. The Wolds group is part of the Prison Reading Group (PRG) project, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prg PRG is also currently working with National Prison Radio to support their radio book club.

Questions of empathy fuelled the discussion of Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. At the heart of the book is fifteen-year-old Christopher, an autistic maths genius unable to connect emotionally. Several members commented on their sense of kinship with him and one made the point very explicitly:

"It's a great book and I recognised so much of it since I have mental health issues of my own, especially OCD. I had to stop and work out all the maths and spent more time on that than reading the rest. But I think that's what Christopher would have done too."

The same man went on to talk in detail about how difficult the situation must have been for Christopher's parents, how they clearly loved him but were driven close to breaking point by the strain of looking after him. The book had clearly made this reader feel the empathy he thought he lacked.

Another member vividly described the pleasure of recognition:

"I didn't want to start it; I flicked through and thought what the bloody hell is this all about? But as soon as I started it, I loved it. I think Christopher is my kind of character, he's like me. After I finished it I just kept re-reading it; at one point I was re-reading bits at 11.30 pm and laughing out loud. My cellmate thought I was mad but the book just kept making me see all these brilliant pictures."

Reader uncertainty and the moral dividend

The other gift of fiction is its unpredictability: its ability to wrong-foot the reader, to keep us guessing, keep us thinking. This was illustrated by the women's group reading Colm Toibin's novel *Brooklyn*. As one member commented: 'I usually know what I think about a character; it's straightforward, black and white. But with Ellis I'm thinking, yes you should, no you shouldn't.' This 'what should she do' dilemma (should Ellis go back to Ireland or stay in New York) - is what novel-reading is all about, and the 'should' shows up well that these are often moral questions, and always framed for the reader in the context of the moral framework of the novel. What should he or she do, what would you do?

The group discussing Anita Shreve's novel *Testimony* were also drawn to 'should' questions. The novel asks who is to blame for a drunken incident at a private school, and the group debated what someone in the headmaster's position should do. This was empathy in the sense of thinking yourself into the position of someone very unlike yourself.

Blame is, of course, something prisoners know a lot about; in offering no cut-and-dried answers the novel gave the group a forum for exploring issues of guilt and responsibility:

- I got fearful for Mike (the headmaster)
- I blamed Mike
- I didn't blame Mike
- I don't blame Mike. He could have buried it under the carpet
- How can someone (Mike) run with a situation and get it all wrong, blow it out of all proportion?
- Mike judged the boys yet he was doing the same himself - having sex with someone else's wife and cheating on his own
- The police and the media played a big part in blowing it up
- Would any of this have happened without alcohol? No, people do things they normally wouldn't do
- Surely the teachers at the party saw what was going on and should have done something before the drinking got out of control

T₁₁

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In replying to this letter, please write on the envelope:

Number **Name**

Wing

I found this book gripping and felt the issues raised in the book topical but very disturbing. I tried to put myself in the position of beauty as any other person in this position can intolerable situation. Its easy for most of us to say to person in this position. Leave home - get away. But how can you leave with no-where to go - no one to support you - no money. Where would you sleep what would you eat, and the mental torture the gut wrenching fear that some one was out there looking for you ready to pounce and take you back to probable worse situation than before.

Beauty made all that effort for 10 days to fight the physical & mental difficulties but found she couldn't fight her cultural instincts that had been instilled in her from birth and dominated her as much as the family around her. It made me wonder how many Beautys there are out there, all around us and we are oblivious to them.

It is empathy which can put you in the shoes of the other, and then move on to judge yourself looking at that other: no mean feat. A sixty-year-old white woman responded to the twenty-year-old Bangladeshi woman in an arranged marriage in Raphael Selbourne's novel *Beauty*: 'I found the book gripping and felt the issues raised in the book topical but very disturbing. I tried to put myself in the position of Beauty or any other person in this position, an intolerable situation. It's easy for most of us to say to person in this position. Leave home - get away. But how can you leave with nowhere to go - no one to support you - no money...

Empathy can take the reader to surprising places. A young man who read *Schindler's Ark* wondered why Schindler would do this 'good thing' as he called it, when there was nothing in it for him. 'Why would you do a good thing when you don't have to, and when you're putting yourself at risk?' He was drawn to consider the nature of altruism, an important moral question elicited by reading and discussing this novel.

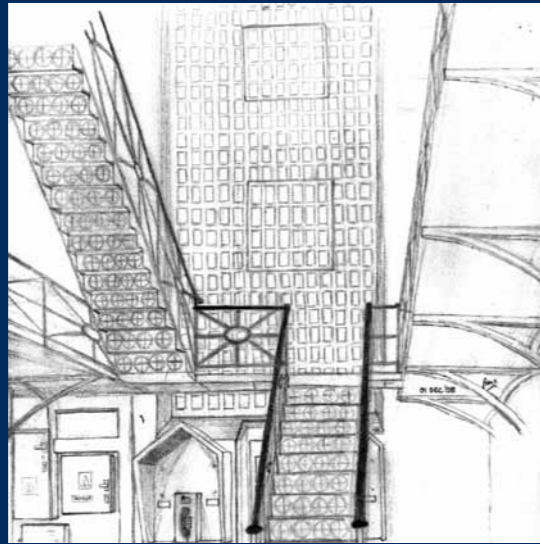
Non-fiction too, can breed unexpected reflectiveness, and yield unlooked for moral dividends. Eric Lomax's prisoner-of-war memoir, *The Railway Man*, ends with the author returning to the Far East and meeting up with one of his wartime torturers. For one group member this book was 'both painful and helpful'. It had forced him to think through and rethink his attitudes about victims and his previous impatience. His line had always been, 'why can't people move on; the past is the past'. This book had made him see and then feel the experience of something very much otherwise.

Closeness and distance

The most powerful books are sometimes those that encourage empathy but also ask the reader to step back from it, even to resist it, in favour of critical distance and judgement. For prisoners especially this can be challenging.

Alexander Masters' *Stuart: A Life Backwards* tells a true story of childhood abuse, disability, drug addiction and eventual death. One member summed up his experience of the book very directly: 'Good but close to home'. Despite this, what the group went on to explore were the limits of identification and the need for individuals to take responsibility, whatever the disadvantages of background or upbringing.

The tension between closeness and distance was even more evident in a discussion of Jonathan Trigell's *Boy A*. It is a novel about a young man's attempt to create a life for himself after many years in prison for his part in the killing of another child. The details of the murder are held back for most of the book while sympathy is built up for 'Boy A' and his effort to start again after release. The final revelation that he was as much responsible as 'Boy B' is shocking. It led the group to a very searching discussion of what it means to experience sympathy and revulsion at the same time. The Governor was at the meeting and commented afterwards on the impressive level of engagement he had witnessed.



CHAPTER SIX: Becoming a Reader

“ I couldn't be seen with a book outside

.....
Book Club is a Godsend to the members since it gives us a chance to escape from the monotony of prison life and get to know each other as people. We have a lot of laughs and there is great respect shown to each other – our thoughts, feelings, beliefs and passions. Long may it last ”

Reading groups as communities

Reading groups are an example of what the critic Stanley Fish calls 'interpretive communities'. These are groups of readers with shared ways of reading and understanding books. When prison groups first get started, members often concentrate on the authenticity or otherwise of the way books deal with crime, prison and punishment. This can be details about court procedures, prison regimes or even the food on offer. But discussion may move on to more fundamental understandings about what prison experience brings. The discussion of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* was a case in point. What fascinated the group was the secretive and unpredictable behaviour of one of the characters. They had all recognised her illiteracy long before the novel reveals it: 'Anyone in prison knows that people who can't read find it almost impossible to trust others'.

Alongside this shared knowledge, there is also great variety of background and experience in our groups. In the best discussions, members discover solidarity amid diversity. This was clear with Adrian Tinniswood's *Pirates of Barbary*. The facilitator wrote that the group included 'Muslims (Sufi and otherwise), Catholics and Protestants'. Members were fascinated by the book's presentation of relations among these same groups in the seventeenth century. Mutual respect alternated with murderous hatred 'on what seemed to us as whims'. She went on to report:

“ A couple of our group knew Algiers, Tangier and Tripoli very well so we were treated to first hand travel and language discussions... One member of the group thanked another very eloquently for sharing his knowledge of the Middle East and its history and many languages. ”

Trust and openness grow as the reading group community develops, and meetings become places where both vulnerability and strength can be safely displayed. During a discussion of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* one man became distressed as he talked about the book's exploration of the Holocaust. Another member quickly took up the thread while the man was quietly comforted by those on either side of him.

From the edge to the middle

Getting in to a reading group can take some time: not just in the sense of having to be on a waiting list to get into the group, though that can be the case, but more in the sense of getting in to how a group like this operates, what it is all about. New members will often start off at the edge; perhaps they have been along brought by a cell-mate or friend, and they are a bit suspicious of the whole thing; perhaps they do not think of themselves as readers or as people who operate well in groups.

But gradually the pattern of moving from the edge to the middle may emerge. Members will identify themselves as fully paid up, part of a group which has an identity, and over time has read and critiqued a variety of texts together. Being part of a group like this is relatively new to some members, and you can see their initial surprise as well as their growing confidence in the role.

Once the ground is prepared, the turning point is often a particular book that just clicks. For one member it was Tim Gautreaux's *The Missing*. After months of hesitancy, he took the floor and spoke at length about how he had loved it. He apologised for 'going on' but the rest of the group were delighted and from then on he clearly felt involved and at home among them.

Desistance and pro-social identity

Much recent thinking about 'going straight' sees it not as a single event but as an ongoing process of *not offending*, of desisting from criminal activity. Desistance theorists stress the importance of offenders being able to create new 'pro-social' identities for themselves to replace that of 'criminal'. As part of the process they need to be able to act out these new identities and create new social networks. As Shadd Maruna (1999) puts it: 'Identity is very much shaped within the constraints and opportunity structure of the social world in which people live.' Reading groups are rare spaces in a prison where a pro-social identity can be asserted and tried out.

One young man's story illustrates this clearly. When he first joined the group he seemed uneasy and reluctant to contribute. But he stuck with it and was eventually persuaded to submit a review to *Inside Time*, the national prisoners' newspaper. The review was printed and he reported to the next meeting that it had been read and commented on by people throughout the prison, 'even the nurse in healthcare!' Better yet, his mother had been able to read it online and had told him how pleased and proud she was. For our member, the reading group and his review advertised and cemented a new pro-social identity as a reader: someone who reads, discusses, thinks and writes about books.

Reading groups can also act as one of the 'hooks for change' that help prisoners identify and consolidate the process of desistance.

Before coming to prison it wouldn't have crossed my mind to seek out membership of a local Reading Group. Neither would I have realised the riches to be gained from seeing books through the minds of others and challenging my own pre-conceptions.

But now I have resolved to set aside at least an hour each day to reading and freeing my mind, I shall also, upon release, be seeking membership of a local reading group. It will be interesting to see how it compares



Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

Reading group round-up

Steve Howard reports from High Down on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*



An occupational hazard that other Prison Reading Groups might be familiar with: the prison was locked down when I arrived, so we were delayed starting the session and not all of the group were able to attend. This didn't dampen the enthusiasm of those who made it.

- it's amazing that he sustains this level of anger!

Cathy did not escape the group's censure and was roundly criticised for her selfishness: Richard felt 'she rides roughshod over other people and expects everyone to wait on her'. The depiction of Cathy's original friendship with Heathcliff was liked, though, and more generally the group appreciated the way that characters verbalised their emotions.

The High Down group has read a fantastic range of books – contemporary novels to non-fiction to war memoirs – but *Wuthering Heights*, an 1848 'classic', was still a slightly unusual choice for us. What was also unusual was the group's unanimous approval for the book. Matt went as far as to commend it as 'one of the best books I've ever read'.

Views on Brontë's style differed – Richard found Joseph's incomprehensible dialect offputting – but there was a general feeling that it complemented the dark complexity of the tale. Roger liked how characters verbalised their emotions and thought Brontë's style 'gives a greater depth of meaning to each sentence, with words you don't come across in everyday life.'

Wuthering Heights was the first and only novel by Emily Brontë, published when she was 29. She died the following year. It was originally published under the pseudonym 'Ellis Bell'. Emily, like her sisters Charlotte and Anne, initially adopted a male pen name to sidestep the prejudice of the publishing industry of their day. *Wuthering Heights* was written in the family's parsonage in Haworth, high up in the (arguably) bleak West Yorkshire moors.

The discussion of *Wuthering Heights* continued into the following fortnight's meeting, and only partly due to the lockdown in the first one. The novel might not be for everyone, as the style is certainly difficult at first and the structure of the book is complicated – an edition with a family tree at the front is useful! But stick with it and you may find it stimulates as much debate and enjoyment as it did for the High Down group.

The novel is narrated by a newcomer to the moors, a southerner, who finds himself renting his house from a very disagreeable landlord named Heathcliff. After a night of bad dreams and worse attacks from Heathcliff's family (and dog), the narrator asks his maid to relate to him the dark history of Heathcliff and the area's two families. 'Wuthering', a Yorkshire word for turbulent weather, is very apt for this story of storms, both of the Yorkshire elements and of the characters' unbridled emotions.

The High Down group is part of the Prison Reading Groups project (PRG), supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

If your prison doesn't already have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prg

The group discussed the characters and their motivations in great depth: part of Brontë's success seemed to be that we felt like we knew the characters as real people. Poor Nelly, the novel's much put-upon maid, received some strong criticism, dubbed 'spineless' for passively observing key events and for her numerous bad decisions! The group were unconvinced by my attempts to defend her, while acknowledging she does stay impressively calm when Hindley tries to make her 'swallow the carving knife'...

The big questions were raised: is Heathcliff the embodiment of evil; and if so, is this due to his nature or a result of his upbringing? The group agreed Heathcliff was a 'Machiavellian being', as Miles put it, but the jury was still out by the end on the whether nature or nurture



CHAPTER SEVEN: The Way Forward

“For one hour a month the walls of my confinement crumble to dust and I feel respected. Not just by fellow inmates, but by citizens from the wider community, members of the society into which I’ll one day be released - by the two women who run the group, and by the visitors they invite. For one hour a month my opinion is valid, I am listened to and others care what I say. In the book group, everyone is given a voice, all have an equal say. For one hour a month I am allowed to be the individual I used to be and not defined by my crime.”

Group member

New funding

A generous donation from Give a Book will enable the project to continue for the next three years. Random House, Profile Books and Harvard University Press also generously support us with books.

Further funding would allow PRG to expand and develop in new directions as outlined below.

Spreading the word

The project is thriving, with a whole range of new prisons, groups and formats. Since September 2012 the number of groups has risen from twenty-eight to thirty-eight in a total of twenty-five prisons. New enquiries are coming all the time, sometimes with prisoners themselves as the driving force. Two librarians who recently contacted us had been told about the project by new arrivals transferred from PRG prisons.

Reading Group Roundup is our regular column in *Inside Time*, the national prisoners’ newspaper. Each month a different group reports on its chosen book and discussion.

PRG worked with the Prison Radio Association to set up a regular book club on National Prison Radio. NPR invites listeners to ‘bang up with a book’ and broadcasts nightly book readings, featuring a different title each month. At the end of the month, prisoners and guests take part in a roundtable broadcast discussion.

“I listened to the show you made about autism and the lad Christopher [in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*]. My son is 8 and is in the care of the local authority. They think he may have autism, and listening to the show was the first time I heard anything in-depth about it. Although autism is common, no one has ever explained exactly what it is – so thank you. It was educational for me to hear about so many of the issues that affect my son.”

Elaine, Eastwood Park

We also worked with NPR to produce guidance notes for prisoners interested in setting up reading groups (see Appendix Four: How to Set Up Your Own Book Club in Prison).

Going Global

We have spoken at conferences throughout the UK and in Europe; and our website attracts constant traffic. We are now first port of call for people wanting to work in this area, and see what a reading group in prison can do. They visit, email and phone us.

From Ontario we were consulted by Dr Carol Finlay. She borrowed our model, and now runs eight reading clubs in Ontario penitentiaries.

Abeid DeCunha, Prisoners’ Training Coordinator for the Guyana Prison Service, also contacted us recently for advice on setting up a pilot reading group there.

Supporting the groups

Support for our network of librarians and volunteers is crucial. Feedback from our two workshops welcomed the chance to get together to compare experience and ideas: for recruiting, choosing books, managing meetings, and generally keeping things lively and stimulating. We keep in regular touch through our e-list and with individual visits, phone calls and emails.

Additional funding would enable us to extend this support and develop the website as a resource for information and interaction.

Our volunteers have searched out a great range of poetry, short stories and non-fiction to suit very different levels of reading experience and taste. We would like to be able to share this material more widely, perhaps through a more systematic database.

Plugging the gap for higher level learners

The *Brain Cells* 2012 survey revealed that a lack of courses at a high enough level was the top reason for respondents not engaging in learning in prison. One prisoner put in a plea for:

“A wider range of more advanced classes for long termers / lifers and those of higher than level 2 ability. This lack causes some prisoners to become bored easily and work through the Ed Department quickly leaving them with no focus.”

This is particularly worrying since higher level learners are the backbone of prison volunteering. The new rules for prison education provision (OLASS 4) could exacerbate this hole in provision. The emphasis of the new contracts has shifted from learner participation to outputs: the number of qualifications achieved regardless of level or length of course.

Reading groups for these prisoners can help plug the gap, a point stressed by one of the librarian respondents to our evaluation:

“OLASS4 will be launched in August 2012 with a major emphasis on Basic Skills for prisoners in the first month or two of their time in custody and vocational training with embedded Basic Skills in their last 6-9 months. In the middle phase of their sentence, which could be anything between a month or two to umpteen years, they are unlikely to be entitled to any educational provision at all so the scope for PRGs to plug that gap and maintain some continuity of literacy will be critical.”

Librarian, PRG Evaluation

New prison / university partnerships for learning

We would like to see closer working relationships between a prison and its local university. Partnerships between prisons and universities for higher level learning are a good fit: prisoners need more opportunities and universities are committed to volunteering and community engagement. Both institutions would benefit greatly from working more closely together.

PRG has already helped to connect several prisons with local universities to support learning inside. We are currently working with colleagues in London and Manchester to develop informal prison philosophy groups. There are also some excellent programmes developed by others, but overall initiatives tend to be piecemeal.

Further funding would enable us to conduct a comprehensive audit, in order to identify and publicise good practice, and to start to create sustainable learning partnerships.

Networks

In addition to PRG's prison groups, we have been able to start some groups in cognate environments. We fund a group in YMCA-supported housing for young people aged 16–25; and one in a daycentre for those with substance abuse issues. We are also looking at possibilities with the Probation Service. In addition, PRG has built some useful partnerships and networks with fellow travellers who want to learn from what we are doing and adapt it to their circumstances. Examples include the Fountains cancer therapy centre in Guildford, Surrey, and the St Mungo's charity for the homeless. We are also a contact point for volunteers who are interested in literacy work in prisons.

We work closely with relevant organisations such as The Reading Agency, including the Six Book Challenge, to share and learn good practice. Our links with TRA and publishers have connected us to the Reading Partners working group, which links librarians and publishers. This has opened a further pathway for us.

We collected group responses to World Book Night and advised the organisers on how to deliver their books into prisons effectively. We also piloted a prisoner giver scheme (see Appendix Five for PRG / WBN initiatives and feedback).

We regularly liaise with PEN and their Readers and Writers in Prison programme. Groups relish author visits, and we can help authors with training and advice.

Advocacy and collective action

PRG is one of sixteen member organisations of the Prisoner Learning Alliance, founded in 2012 and spearheaded by the Prisoners Education Trust. Its declared aim is:

To bring together diverse non-statutory stakeholders with senior cross-departmental officials, to provide expertise and strategic vision to inform future priorities, policies and practices relating to prison education, learning and skills.

The Alliance has identified three key themes for its work in 2013. One of these is exploration of the benefits of learning beyond narrowly-defined 'employability'. There is widespread acceptance that rehabilitation is about more than being 'job ready' and prison learning opportunities need to have a wider focus. Empathy, critical reflection and social engagement all have a part to play. In our view this report provides examples and evidence of the substantial contribution reading groups make.

Recommendations

This report evidences the success and good practice of PRG over the last decade. We want to sustain this good work, and we want to expand and develop. These are the directions we want to take:

- Sustain and expand our network of prisons and volunteers
- Build on and source new funding streams
- Conduct and publish an audit of current university and higher level learning initiatives in prisons
- Model and pilot new partnerships between selected universities and their local prisons

“Having met with Jenny and Sarah when we were in the planning phase of setting up a reading group for oncology patients, we found their advice invaluable. We subsequently modelled our group on their proven formula, which has resulted in a successful group running for the last couple of years. We are hoping to expand the service to provide a reading group for carers.”

Gail Maguire, The Fountain Centre/Macmillan Information Centre Manager; The Fountain Centre, Royal Surrey County Hospital, Guildford.

Last word

The success of the Prison Reading Groups project is due above all to the librarians, volunteers and members of our groups. The final words belong to them.

“What would you say to the Justice Secretary if you were crossing the car park with him?”

- Come along to a group! And listen to the men
- Reading reduces re-offending
- Great for informal learning, soft skills, and rehabilitation
- We're cheap!
- The more we encourage prisoners to read and discuss ideas, the more likely they are to feel a part of society when they come out
- Purposeful use of time
- Imagine not having had your education and try being in a cell for a week
- They promote empathy

Feedback from a workshop with librarians and volunteers

.....
The thing about this book group is that it surprises me every time. Books and subjects I thought I hated I find fascinating. And now I can even read out loud!

The book group was a fantastic step towards a new passion, a non-judgemental space to enjoy reading.”

Group members

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(Celebratory cake at the final AHRC workshop)

Appendix One

Books read recently by PRG groups, together with comments by facilitators and a list of online resources

HMP Albany

Stephen Kelman: *Pigeon English*
Jon McGregor: *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*
Simon Lelic: *The Child Who*
S. J. Watson: *Before I Go to Sleep*
Sarah Waters: *The Little Stranger*
Patrick Gale: *A Perfectly Good Man*
Anthony Bourdain: *Kitchen Confidential*
Robert Harris: *Pompeii*
Malcolm Gladwell: *What the Dog Saw*
Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*
Suzanne Collins: *Mockingjay*
Suzanne Collins: *Catching Fire*

As this was the first meeting, all group members and facilitators introduced themselves and talked about what books they liked to read. Icebreaker books for the first proper group were given out. The facilitators had chosen a selection of detective novels and wrapped them in gift wrap and numbered. Each group member pulled a number out of the hat so that the books were chosen at random. The group liked the idea of having different surprise books on a theme and decided to do this for every other group, alternating a surprise book with a fixed title.

HMP Brixton

Patrick deWitt: *The Sisters Brothers*
George Orwell: *Animal Farm*
Luke Rhinehart: *The Dice Man*
Victoria Hislop: *The Island*
Richard Dawkins: *The Magic of Reality*
Simon Rich: *The Last Girlfriend on Earth*

Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* got mixed reactions and so a good discussion. The highlight was the comparison one member made with photography, and how you can make the ordinary extraordinary though e.g. juxtaposition – a perfect analogy for this book.

HMP Bristol Group 1

Jennifer Egan: *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
Patrick deWitt: *The Sisters Brothers*
Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*
Jon McGregor: *Even the Dogs*
Eowyn Ivy: *The Snowman*
Philip K Dick: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
Kate Summerscale: *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*
Ernest Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea*
Slavomir Rawicz: *The Long Walk*
Joseph Heller: *Catch 22*
Mark Haddon: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*
Angela Macmillan, ed: *A little Aloud*

The men are careful with those who haven't finished and try to make sure the final resolution of the story is not given away. People are given the space to speak and others make sure they listen. There are major surprises. In one group a Chinese member was asked what he felt about the book:

'The typesetter did a terrible job. All these different fonts in use are confusing and the book is not laid out properly at all. He must learn his trade better.'

Fair to say no one else had noticed the typesetting. His opinion is always sought out now.

HMP Bristol Group 2

John Boyne: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*
Dawn French: *Dear Fatty*
Flann O'Brien: *The Poor Mouth*
Edward Fitzgerald: *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*
John Steinbeck: *Of Mice and Men*
James Patterson: *Witch and Wizard*
Richard Van Emden: *The Soldier's War*
George Orwell: *Animal Farm*
James Frey: *A Million Little Pieces*
Jon Ronson: *The Psychopath Test*
Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*
Neil Gaiman: *Anansi Boys*

There was humour again today and one man who hasn't finished a group book yet was challenged to do so and 'maybe discover something you enjoy and didn't expect'. The group has found a structure even though the turnover is so high. It seems to be an enjoyable experience for the men and it certainly is for those of us who join them!

HMP Bronzefield

Sophie Hannah: *Little Face*
Peter May: *The Blackhouse*
DBC Pierre: *Vernon God Little*
Julian Barnes: *Flaubert's Parrot*
Kathryn Stockett: *The Help*
Charles Dickens: *Sketches by Boz*
Andrea Levy: *The Long Song*
Helen Garner: *The Spare Room*
Rachel Simon: *The Story of a Beautiful Girl*
Bernardine Evaristo: *Blonde Roots*
Andrea Levy: *Every Light in the House Burnin'*
Aimee Bender: *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*
Ben Okri: *The Famished Road*

The monthly sessions vary: sometimes we discuss a novel chosen and distributed in a prior session, and sometimes we read poetry or short stories aloud together. For the November session, the six members took turns to select and share poems from the Bloodaxe anthology *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, edited by Nick Astley. Discussion was energetic, ranging widely across readers' personal responses, reflections on genre and form, and questions about author and voice. One woman gave a particularly entertaining performance, reading Edwin Morgan's 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song' to delighted applause.

HMP Bullingdon

Melanie McGrath: *Hopping*
Bryce Courtenay: *The Potato Factory*
Brian Cox & Jeff Forshaw: *Why Does E=Mc²?*
Patrick McCabe: *Butcher Boy*
Cormac McCarthy: *The Road*
Athol Fugard: *Tsotsi*
Richard Bach: *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*
Caryl Phillips: *In the Falling Snow*

The group was fascinated by David Hendy's *Noise: A Human History* and discussion ranged from the sounds of pre-historic caves to the uses of radio in wartime. One man reported: 'I took the book into the gym and read out the passage about the men swinging lead weights, holding their breath and straining themselves. When I told the guys it was written two thousand years ago, they were gobsmacked. But a lot of wincing when I got on to the armpit-plucking.'

HMP Bullwood Hall

Jonas Jonasson: *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared*
Alan Hollinghurst: *The Stranger's Child*
Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*
Chris Cleave: *The Other Hand*
William Boyd: *Waiting for Sunrise*
Carlos Ruiz Zafon: *The Shadow of the Wind*
Hans Fallada: *Alone in Berlin*
Rosie Thomas: *The Kashmir Shawl*
Monica Ali: *In the Kitchen*
Henning Mankell: *The Man from Beijing*
Andrew Miller: *Pure*

The discussion of *The White Tiger* was wide-ranging, with some comparing the caste system to their own cultures in Africa. The characters were at times a little muddled up in terms of trying to remember who was who! On the whole, though, the book was enjoyed by the majority of the group. And two others, one who found the book difficult to get into, and the other a new member, thought that given the general enthusiasm for the novel, they might read it.

HMP Downview

Constance Briscoe: *The Accused*
Kathryn Stockett: *The Help*
Harlan Coben: *Long Lost*
Charles Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*
Ira Levin: *Rosemary's Baby*
Emily Bronte: *Wuthering Heights*
Stephen Kelman: *Pigeon English*
Michelle Paver: *Dark Matter*
Bill Bryson: *Notes from a Small Island*
Andrew Miller: *Pure*

Sarah Waters' *Affinity* had been a more or less unanimous choice but didn't go down as well as I expected. The group found it monotonous, and had no sympathy at all for the lady visitor. I expected a general feeling of how dreadful Victorian prisons were compared with humane regimes now, but this assumption was briskly shattered.

HMP Eastwood Park

Raymond Carver: *'Neighbors', 'Fat'*
Carol Ann Duffy: *'Mrs Icarus', 'Mrs Sisyphus'*
Sue Townsend: *Woomberang*

Eight members of The Rubies came for the play reading of *Woomberang*. Three chose to listen but the rest joined in. The women read their parts with gusto and were all very funny. Everyone thought the play was very apposite but most of all they really enjoyed it and forgot where they were. There was discussion about putting on the play for others in the prison and people took the scripts away with them.

HMP Everthorpe

Raymond Carver: *Where I'm Calling From*
David Winner: *Those Feet*
Barry Hines: *A Kestrel For A Knave*
Donald Pollack: *Knockemstiff*

Our first chosen title is *Stump* by Niall Griffiths. The lads identify with its themes of rehabilitation and struggle to change. They also like the use of regional dialect, which they were surprised by and I think encouraged to see in a published book. I know Niall and he has agreed to come in and give a talk and a reading / Q&A on the proviso that the lads finish reading the book.

HMP Full Sutton

Daniel Gilbert: *Stumbling on Happiness*
Maya Angelou: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
John Grisham: *Playing for Pizza*
Russ Litten: *Scream if You Want to Go Faster*
Terry Pratchett: *Wyrd Sisters*
Frankie Boyle: *My Sh*t Life so Far*
Patrick Hennessy: *The Junior Officers' Reading Club*
Robert Harris: *Pompeii*
Slavomir Rawicz: *The Long Walk*
Hunter S Thompson: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

On Ben Okri's '10½ Inclinations'

The original tips were written to help parents encourage their children to read. [The volunteer] adapted these to be appropriate for a group of adults. The group discussed what we thought the tips meant and suggested which books we had read that met the criteria mentioned. The first two:

1 *There is a secret trail of books that is meant to inspire and enlighten you. Find that trail.*

The group thought this meant that the trail was personal to each reader; nobody's trail would be the same as anybody else's. Other ideas were that one book leads to another; we read different books at different times in our lives and even the same book differently at different times.

2 *Read out of your own nation, colour, class, gender.*

The group understood this as 'read out of your comfort zone'. Many of the group could give an example of a book that fell into this category. Authors went from Jeffrey Archer to Sven Hassell, and books included *Poisonwood Bible*.

HMP High Down

Charles Dickens: *The Pickwick Papers*
Graham Greene: *The Power and the Glory*
Alistair Urquhart: *Forgotten Highlander*
Cormac McCarthy: *No Country for Old Men*
Patrick Susskind: *Perfume*
Nathaniel Philbrick: *In the Heart of the Sea*
Brian Cox & Jeff Forshaw: *Why does E=MC²?*
Michael Moorcock: *Behold the Man*
Arturo Perez-Reverte: *The Seville Communion*
Eric Lomax: *The Railway Man*
Ken Follett: *The Pillars of the Earth*
Jenni Diski: *Stranger on a Train*

On *Wuthering Heights*

The big questions were raised: is Heathcliff the embodiment of evil; and if so, is this due to his nature or a result of his upbringing? The group agreed Heathcliff was a 'Machiavellian being', as one put it, but the jury was still out by the end on the whether nature or nurture was to blame. Another member thought 'it would be good to know where Heathcliff went for three years - it's amazing that he sustains this level of anger!'

HMP Holloway Healthcare

Alexander McCall Smith: *The Cleverness of Ladies (Quick Reads)*
Priya Basil: *Strangers on the 16:02 (Quick Reads)*
Sheila O'Flanagan: *Follow Me (Quick Reads)*
T S Eliot: *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (The Illustrated Old Possum)*
Wendy Cope, ed: *The Funny Side*
Todd Swift and Kim Lockwood, eds: *Lung Jazz: Young British Poets for Oxfam*
Roald Dahl: *Revolting Rhymes*
Roald Dahl: *The Witches*
Laura Barber, ed: *Penguin's Poems for Life*
The New Faber Book of Love Poems

The project within the secure mental health wing at HMP Holloway aims to provide the women who have complex mental health issues with an opportunity to experience the richness of literature, through reading aloud, listening to readings, performance and discussion. The sense of community that has been built within the sessions is a highlight for me as facilitator, as the women are keen to read in front of one another (even if initially they were nervous) and they are keen to share their past experiences with books, which are of course very diverse.

HMP Holloway Group 1

John Bird: *How to Change Your Life in 7 Steps (Quick Reads)*
Dorothy Koomson: *The Ice Cream Girls*
A Collection of Encouragement
Chunichi: *A Gangster's Girl*
Maggie Stiefvater: *Shiver*
Bernardine Evaristo: *Hello Mum (Quick Reads)*
Harper Lee: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Gautam Malkani: *Londonstani*
Nell Dunn: *Up the Junction*
Karin Slaughter: *Fallen*
Helen Fitzgerald: *The Devil's Staircase*

We started the session with a discussion of why we celebrate Black History Month, which led to an interesting debate about multi-culturalism and equality in Britain. What impressed me was the way the debate was carried out: all the participants were given the opportunity to speak before someone else responded and differing views were heard with respect to the speaker.

We went on to an extract from Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*. Participants were eager to read the different parts themselves. We spoke at length about the issues raised in the poem and one participant borrowed the full text from the library at the end of the session.

HMP Holloway Group 2

Tanya Byrne: *Heart-Shaped Bruise*
Mikey Walsh: *Gypsy Boy*
Pauline Reage: *The Story of O*
Kathryn Stockett: *The Help*
Jessica Thom: *Welcome to Biscuit Land*
Jennifer Egan: *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
Cornelia Funke: *Inkheart*
Kevin Wilson: *The Family Fang*
Graham Greene: *Brighton Rock*

The introductory session was extremely (if not too!) well attended, with twenty women present, as well as two officers. We used the session for introductions and to choose our first books. Everyone described what kind of books they like: thrillers and romance were by far the most popular, though biographies and self-help books were also mentioned. We chose *S't My Dad Says* for the first book (one of the selection we had taken along) and *4.3.2.1* for the next. The session was great fun and good-natured, though the size meant it was sometimes difficult to hold everybody's attention and keep them focussed.

HMP Lewes

Benjamin Zephania: *Gangsta Rap*
Benjamin Zephania: *Refugee Boy*
Darren Shan: *The Demonata (2)*
Garth Nix: *Abhorsen*
Dan Walsh: *These Are the Days that Must Happen to You*
Derek Landy: *Skulduggery Pleasant*
John Boyne: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*
Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*
Aron Ralston: *127 Hours: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*
Madeleine Roux: *Alison Hewitt is Trapped*
Peter James: *The Perfect Murder (Quick Reads)*

The session on *Across the Nightingale Floor* was really positive, with all members really enjoying the book and there being lots of discussion. There was an issue with one member dominating and talking about things that weren't relevant, but for the most part discussion was very productive. Two members read out their poetry and the rest of the group were very supportive, providing great praise for the reader.

HMP The Mount

Markus Zusak: *The Book Thief*
Alice Walker: *The Color Purple*
Colm Toibin: *Brooklyn*
George and Weedon Grossmith: *Diary of a Nobody*
David Pearce: *The Damned United*
Ali Smith: *There but for the...*
J K Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

All found *Diary of a Nobody* very funny and enjoyed recalling particular incidents (the mansion house ball, the séance and the bath scenes especially!) A light satire poking fun at the middle classes with wonderful characterisation. A lovely afternoon. Scored 8/10

Nelson's Gate

Roald Dahl: *Tales of the Unexpected*
The Nation's Favourite Poems
Alice Sebold: *The Lovely Bones*
Charles Portis: *True Grit*
Louis Sachar: *Holes*
Angela Carter: *The Bloody Chamber*
Neil Gaiman: *Fragile Things*

We reviewed *The Lovely Bones* and compared it with the film. The general feeling was that the film was better than the book in that some of the more brutal elements of the book were softened. We finished by reading 'The Way Up to Heaven' from Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected*. The story was seen in different ways by different people and we compared views.

Open Door Oasis

Aesop: *Fables*
Richard Russo: *Nobody's Fool*
The Dalai Lama: *The Art of Happiness*
Nikki Sixx: *The Heroin Diaries*
Griff Rhys Jones, ed: *The Nation's Favourite Comic Poems*
Daisy Goodwin, ed: *The Nation's Favourite Love Poems*
The BBC: *The Nation's favourite Poems of Journeys*
Kevin Crossley-Holland: *Short: a Book of Very Short Stories*
Kevin Crossley-Holland: *Short Too! A Second Book of Short Stories*
James Thomas and Robert Shapard: *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*

In a recent session we read a story from *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart* anthology. The discussion centred on how it was a metaphor for the choices we make in life and how they can be positive or negative. People spoke about being moved by the story and how much difference kindness can make.

HMP Pentonville

Cormac McCarthy: *The Road*
Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*
William Boyd: *Ordinary Thunderstorms*
Robert Harris: *Pompeii*
Kate Mosse: *The Cave*
Gile Foden: *The Last King of Scotland*
Guy de Maupassant: 'The Necklace'
Stephen Kelman: *Pigeon English*

In the session on *The Hunger Games* one member suggested that the parallels with 'I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!' were striking, especially when prizes or presents are parachuted down to the various 'contestants'. On the subject of facing and overcoming challenges, another said: 'the ongoing arrival of challenges and the determination to overcome them is an inspirational element.' I enjoyed our discussion hugely – a good chance to chat with others about a common theme.

HMP Rye Hill

Iain Banks: *The Wasp Factory*
Bill Bryson: *Notes from a Small Island*
Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman: *Long Way Round*
Mitch Albom: *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*
Danny Wallace: *Join Me*
Tony Hawkes: *Round Ireland with a Fridge*
David Mitchell: *Black Swan Green*
Art Spiegelman: *The Complete Maus*
Julian Barnes: *The Sense of an Ending*
Tim Moore: *Do Not Pass Go*
Mil Millington: *Things my Girlfriend and I Have Argued About*

We started off talking about the programme about Mary Shelley on telly the night before, before moving on to the book, *Couch Potato*, which to our surprise we had all enjoyed. We talked of our own experiences of therapy of different kinds, and we discussed how the author had approached the subject, the footnotes giving a commentary on the process.

The discussion moved on to the science of therapy, and on to being observed. We decided that after reading *Life* by Keith Richards next time we would tackle *1984* by George Orwell.

HMP Send

Arto Paasilinna: *The Year of the Hare*
David Aaronovitch: *Voodoo Histories - How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History*
Joseph O'Connor: *Ghost Light*
Sebastian Barry: *On Canaan's Side*
Sebastian Barry: *The Secret Scripture*
Elizabeth Gilbert: *Eat Pray Love*
Kazuo Ishiguro: *Never Let Me Go*
David Ebershoff: *The Nineteenth Wife*
Laurie Graham: *The Importance of Being Kennedy*
William P Young: *The Shack*
Jamie Ford: *The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

The group identified with the protagonist of Rachel Joyce's best-selling *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. 'I haven't done RAPT (the addiction recovery course in the prison) but from what I hear there are similarities here – the journey you go on.' We discussed whether this was a Christian book because of the pilgrimage aspect, and decided it was a more general spiritual thing. The man connecting with others after a lifetime of disconnect, the ordinariness which is also unique: these were the strong aspects of a book which moved everyone in the group.

CRI Southend

Stieg Larsson: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*
Alice Sebold: *The Lovely Bones*
Paulo Coelho: *The Alchemist*
Lauren Oliver: *Before I Fall*
James Frey: *A Million Little Pieces*
J D Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*

The first session seemed to go well and when it came to a close one lady commented that she was really getting into it, sitting here talking about books.

HMP Wandsworth Literature Group

George Orwell: *Down and Out in Paris and London*
Albert Camus: *The Outsider*
Ernest Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea*
Joe Simpson: *Touching the Void*
George Orwell: *Animal Farm*
Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*

This group is facilitated by a tutor in the Education department but she is keen for it to be a reading group rather than a course. Many of the members have higher level qualifications already and are attracted by the possibilities for free choice of books and wide-ranging discussion.

HMP Wandsworth Heathfield

Nathaniel Philbrick: *In the Heart of the Sea*
Helen Dunmore: *The Siege*
Michelle Paver: *Dark Matter*
Kevin Barry: *City of Bohane*
Harper Lee: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Patrick deWitt: *The Sisters Brothers*
Bryce Courtenay: *The Potato Factory*
Stephen Kelman: *Pigeon English*
Frances Kay: *Micka*
Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

A big disagreement about whether Robert Harris's *Pompeii* was just airport reading or a gripping window on the Roman world. One member was worried by the blurred boundary between fact and fiction. But another insisted that fiction can do things straight history can't: 'It can make us feel, smell and live in the past'.

HMP Wandsworth Onslow

Olaudah Equiano: *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*
Slavomir Rawicz: *The Long Walk*
Alan Bennett: *A Life Like Other People's*
Mark Haddon: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*
J. G. Farrell: *The Siege of Krishnapur*
Graham Greene: *Brighton Rock*
Franz Kafka: *The Trial*
Emma Donoghue: *Room*
Ned Beaman: *Boxer, Beetle*

Opinion divided sharply over Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. 'Wonderful because it doesn't tell you what to think' was one member's view. But for another there was just not enough to get the imagination going: 'It's so cut down there's nothing left, just a mirror for the reader's own feelings, a blank page'.

HMP Wolds

John Niven: *The Amateurs*
William Golding: *Lord of the Flies*
Niall Griffiths: *Kelly + Victor*
Stephen King: *Misery*
Andrea Levy: *Small Island*
Mark Billingham: *Sleepyhead*
Paul Coelho: *The Alchemist*
Roald Dahl: *Someone Like You*
Tom Benn: *The Doll Princess*
Andrey Kurkov: *Death and the Penguin*

John Niven's *Kill Your Friends*, a dark and paranoid tale set in the late 90's music business, was applauded for its black humour, savage wit and cracking pace. One of the group expressed disquiet at the totally abhorrent behaviour of the main character, most pertinently his lack of remorse for his victim's family. This led to a healthy discussion about whether or not it was necessary for a 'bad' main character to have at least one redeeming quality. Other topics touched upon were the illusory nature of fame, the Americanisation of England and the gradual decline of easily identifiable youth subcultures.

The group concluded that it was, at heart, a moral book that sought to highlight the hypocrisy and spin under the sheen of New Labour's initial feel-good factor.

Appendix Two: Words on Wednesday material

Sets of books chosen by groups and donated by Random House

Nathaniel Philbrick: *The Last Stand*
James Morton: *The First Detective: The Life and Revolutionary Times of of Vidocq*
Margaret Humphreys: *Oranges and Sunshine*
Alex Kershaw: *To Save a People*
Joseph O'Connor: *Ghost Light*
Michael J Fox: *Lucky Man, A Memoir*
Bram Stoker: *Dracula*
SJ Watson: *Before I Go to Sleep* (twice)
Bill Bryson: *Notes from a Small Island* (twice)
Anthony Summers: *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J Edgar Hoover*
Bruce Dessau: *Beyond a Joke*
Adrian Tinniswood: *The Pirates of Barbary*
Rachel Joyce: *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*

Sets of books donated by Profile Books

David Hendy, *Noise*
Adrian MKinty: *The Cold Cold Ground*
Attica Locke: *The Cutting Season*
J Robert Lennon: *Familial*
Cathi Unsworth: *Weirdo*
Simon Rich: *The Last Girlfriend on Earth*
Paul Watson, *Up Pohnpei*
Jami Attenberg, *The Middlesteins*
Polly Morland, *the Society of Timid Friends*
Thomas Buergenthal, *A Lucky Child*
Russ Litten, *Swear Down*
Anthony Cartwright, *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher*
Wilbert Rideau, *In the Place of Justice*

POETRY WEBSITES

<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/npc30/>
<http://www.best-poems.net/>
<http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/59>
<http://www.thepoetrytrust.org/>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/saturdaypoem>
<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/home.do>
<http://www.poemhunter.com/>
<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html>
<http://poetry-archive.com/>
<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/>
<http://www.applesandsnakes.org/page/1/Home>
3 brilliant poetry anthologies: publisher – Bloodaxe, editor – Neil Astley
Staying Alive (2002) *Being Alive* (2004) *Being Human* (2011)

SHORT STORY WEBSITES

<http://www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/short-stories/stories/>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/shortshortstories>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/jul/22/summer-short-story-special?INTCMP=ILCNETTX3487>
<http://www.granta.com/Archive/111/Missing-Out/1>
<http://www.short-stories.co.uk/>
<http://www.classicshorts.com/>
<http://www.classicreader.com/browse/6/>
<http://www.storybytes.com/view-length/index.html>

Reading group – Horror & Vampires – 11.8.10 – Julia Spicer

Texts

Lamb to the Slaughter – Roald Dahl

A Persistent Woman – Marjorie Bowen

Excerpt from It – Stephen King

Open All Hours – Rajinder Kaur

Love Bites – Nicholas Royle

We started with a general discussion about what makes a horror novel and the group came up with a number of suggestions including the following:

An everyday scenario that becomes menacing – something that could happen to you. Work involving the supernatural or paranormal.

Work involving the psychological that plays with the mind – that keeps you on the edge.

Not something that is just 'gross'.

We also discussed the distinction between crime/mystery and horror in the context of the Thomas Harris' *Silence of the Lambs* trilogy. One participant made the very clear definition that a crime book was about the solution of a mystery where the character is already dead – the outcome is generally good. Horror on the other hand frequently involves the gruesome death of the main characters and the outcome can be quite catastrophic.

Another participant introduced the topic of vampires and we then broke for a reading and I chose one with which I was unfamiliar – *Open All Hours*. This is a story of a female vampire from Amritsar, now living in Birmingham. The women found this story sad rather than frightening and one thought it was quite badly written, finding the story and characters neither compelling or interesting – "we never actually got to the present – it was all back story" she commented.

We then broke for another discussion around film and horror and which we find better, books or films and inevitably we ended up citing Stephen King's work. We also discussed the rise of torture porn and gratuitous violence and none of the women liked that. Opinions of *Blair Witch* were completely polarised from those who dismissed it as a film which is scary if you're afraid of twigs to those who had been unable to sit through it.

We discussed the comparative immediacy (both literal and metaphorical) of an actual text and how what you imagine might be worse than what can be shown cinematically.

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We discussed the comparative immediacy (both literal and metaphorical) of an actual text and how what you imagine might be worse than what can be shown cinematically.

We next read the short text suggested by Sarah Turvey which everyone really enjoyed and appreciated for its ingenuity. I was quite surprised by this as I thought they would dismiss it for its brevity!

We then had a brief discussion about the 6 book challenge and everyone except one who had already completed signed up for it.

I was going to read Lamb to the Slaughter for the final text but all but 2 of the women were familiar with it – I should of course have considered this possibility – so instead I read the Nicholas Royle piece. This turned out to be a humorous work where rather than smoking people bite each other. This was better received than the first text from the same book (Bloody Vampires Ed Bob Nayyar) though again no points for fear or menace.

In conclusion, I and the women thoroughly enjoyed this session. They complimented me on my reading skills (!) and all fully participated in the discussions. I have promised to prepare one of our library brochures on horror books based on their comments and recommendations which I collected at the end of the session.

I don't think the texts I chose were particularly interesting (I went on favourable reviews I'd read) but I thought it was a good idea to bring stories that I was also coming to fresh so would experience in the same way. I think the level I pitched it at was just about right for the very mixed ability group that came. We ended with quite an interesting discussion about short stories that I think would be good to pursue at some point.

Appendix Three: Poetry Group hand-out, Holloway Resettlement Centre



Nocturne

All the earth a hush of white,
White with moonlight all the skies;
Wonder of a winter night--
And . . . your eyes.

Hues no palette dares to claim
Where the spoils of sunken ships
Leap to light in singing flame--
And . . . your lips.

Darkness as the shadows creep
Where the embers sigh to rest;
Silence of a world asleep--
And . . . your breast.

Amelia Burr

Meeting in a Lift

We stepped into the lift. The two of us, alone.
We looked at each other and that was all.
Two lives, a moment, fullness, bliss.
At the fifth floor she got out and I went on up
knowing I would never see her again,
that it was a meeting once and for all,
that if I followed her I would be like a dead man in her tracks
and that if she came back to me
it would only be from the other world.

Vladimir Holan

(translated from the Czech by Ian and Jarmila Milner)

Drouth

(dry time or drought – old Scottish word)

O Western wind, when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

Anonymous

1

You're my home

When you look into my eyes
and you see the crazy gypsy in my soul
it always comes as a surprise
when I feel my withered roots begin to grow.

Well I never had a place
that I could call my very own
but that's all right my love
cuz you're my home.

When you touch my weary head
and you tell me everything will be all right.
You say use my body for your bed
and my love will keep you warm throughout the night.

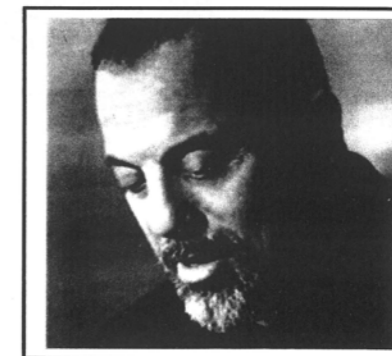
Well I'll never be a stranger
and I'll never be alone
wherever we're together
that's my home.

Home could be the Pennsylvania turnpike
Indiana's early morning dew
high up in the hills of California
home is just another word for you.

Well I never had a place that I could call my very own
but that's all right my love
cuz you're my home.

If I travel all my life
and I never get to stop and settle down
long as I have you by my side
there's a roof above and good walls all around.
You're my castle, you're my cabin
and my instant pleasure dome.
I need you in my house
cuz you're my home.

Billy Joel



3

**from Some mangled Dream Songs for Henry
who is twenty-eight years dead and past caring**

Shadowed by your father
in his terrible pose, the shotgun crammed
into his mouth, and inside the house
the bewildered little boy who heard
the echo of that shotgun blast
through every dawn that ever rose

far off in the reddening east
as each bright morning rose.
Your lover's face turns briefly
on the crumpled pillow, her cheeks warm,
her sweet, delicious lips, pouting
and closed just like a morning rose.

Yes, you'll ruin her too, tear her root and limb
from the soil that nourished her
and try not to cram her in the glass
that sits clearly on your windowsill,
cursing when her sharp claws scratch you
and crying like a little boy

when night comes and she's gone home.

Tracey Herd



Madeline smiles at the thought

An older woman, 56, has enemies who make her life difficult.

At work, they ridicule her mild stutter, and because she is heavy they fill the office pantry with doughnuts and cupcakes. They put exercise diagrams in her cubicle, and they leave coupons for low-fat food on her chair.

And Madeline, for that is the woman's name, ponders, idly, what she would do to these persecuting colleagues if she had the chance.

For years, she has assumed that she would use a gun. She would take a small handgun and press it to the forehead of each offender, and tell them - three men, two women - that they shouldn't have done what they did. Then she would pull the trigger.

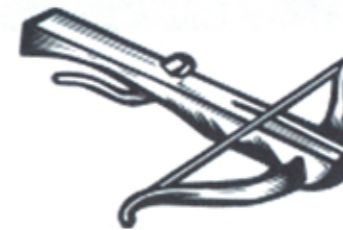
But tonight she is lying in bed, staring at her grey-blue wall, thinking that she should use a crossbow. She has just seen a movie, with her teenage son, featuring a hero adept with a crossbow, and she now wants to use this exotic weapon, not the simple gun, to vanquish her aggressors.

The crossbow has more personality, seems to be more her, and is quieter, which would allow her to dispatch more enemies before being detected. The only downside is that it seems - though she is not sure; she won't be sure until she goes online tomorrow during lunch - to require more distance to function.

Could she press the crossbow to the forehead or chest of a co-worker, so he or she could know what they'd done, what brought Madeline to this point? It is essential that they know.

If she can work that part out, she will be happy, because the crossbow will make her daydreams much more interesting for a while.

Dave Eggers



Yes

It's like a tap-dance
Or a new pink dress,
A shit-naïve feeling
Saying Yes.

Some say Good morning
Some say God bless -
Some say Possibly
Some say Yes.

Some say Never
Some say Unless
It's stupid and lovely
To rush into Yes.

What can it mean?
It's just like life,
One thing to you
One to your wife.

Some go local
Some go express
Some can't wait
To answer Yes.

Some complain
Of strain and stress
The answer may be
No for Yes.

Some like failure
Some like success
Some like Yes Yes
Yes Yes Yes.

Open your eyes,
Dream but don't guess.
Your biggest surprise
Comes after Yes.

Muriel Rukeyser



Homage to my hips

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places, these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have know them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

Lucille Clifton

from August

If I could step into
your skin, my fingers
into your fingers putting on
gloves, my legs your legs,
a snake zipping
up. If I could look
out of your tired eyeholes
brain of my brain,
I might know
why we failed.
(Once we thought the same
thoughts, felt the same things.)

A heavy cloak, I wear
you, an old black wing
I can't shrug off.

O heart of my heart,
come home. O flesh,
come to me, before
the worm, before earth
ate the girl,
before you left without
belongings.

Esta Spalding



The Broken Field

My soul is a dark ploughed field
In the cold rain;
My soul is a broken field
Ploughed by pain.

Where windy grass and flowers
Were growing,
The field lies broken now
For another sowing.

Great Sower, when you tread
My field again,
Scatter the furrows there
With better grain.

Sara Teasdale

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening



Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats



How to set up your own Book Club in prison

With a lot of time on your hands, reading is a great way to while away an afternoon or an evening. Whether you're looking for a biography to inspire you, a thriller to keep you turning the pages or a fantasy to transport you to another dimension, there are books for everyone in prison libraries – books that can move and challenge you, expand your imagination, make you think.

Book clubs are a great way to share all the ideas and feelings that you take from a book. Talking about books is great conversation that often goes in fascinating directions. And listening to other people's views can open up a book even more. Whether it's an organised prison reading group or simply a chat with your cell mate – sharing the experience of reading and discussing your opinions on the book can make it all the more fun and meaningful.

A book club can also help you kick-start a reading habit and develop important skills, like considering themes and language, and learning to listen to and debate other people's ideas.

If you're interested in setting up your own book club in prison, here are a few suggestions to get you started...

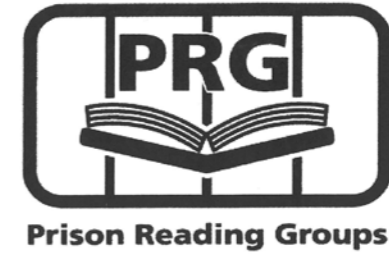
- **Before you start**
 - Talk to other potential book club members about what kind of group you want – do you want to meet to talk about a single book everyone has read in advance? Do you want to read a book aloud in the session itself? A mixture of the two?
 - Talk to your librarian – they should be able to help you with things like choosing and getting hold of books, when and where to meet, recruiting members etc.
 - Tell your librarian about the Prison Reading Groups (PRG) website: www.coehampton.ac.uk/prg – it has information, suggestions and feedback from existing groups. The PRG is very happy to offer email or phone advice and support as well.

- **What to talk about**
 - Start each group with a short response to the book from everyone – this breaks the ice and lets everyone have a chance to speak
 - Don't be too structured in your discussion – let the conversation flow naturally as people bounce ideas and opinions off each other
 - If people are struggling to get started, you could try a few of these questions:
 - What did you like / dislike about the book?
 - What messages and themes are in the book?
 - Could you relate to the characters? Were they believable?
 - How important was the plot? How important was the place or time in which it was set?
 - Can you relate any of your own experiences to something in the book?

- **Ongoing organisation**
 - Try to elect a 'secretary' for the group. They will usually:
 - keep a list of members and their locations
 - send out reminders in advance of each meeting
 - talk to the librarian about books and a place to meet
 - act as a contact for officers or other staff who are asked about the book club
 - It may take time for your group to get going, and there may be a few hurdles and complications.
 - Don't give up: there's nothing like the challenge and satisfaction of reading and talking about books and you'll be glad you persevered.



Appendix Five: World Book Night in prison



WORLD BOOK NIGHT 2012

Almost all of the 22 PRG libraries were also involved in WBN 2012 and there was some very interesting feedback. Many thanks to all who contributed.

Advance publicity

Everyone commented on what a great initiative WBN is and how much prisoners enjoy being given books. Quite a few people suggested that advance publicity would help create a buzz - colourful posters, bookmarks etc. And many thought leaflets with book covers and a short blurb on each of the titles would be a good way to hook in prisoners.

Linked activities and author visits

Several people said they would welcome ideas for activities centred on the books and there was widespread support for linked author visits: 'If WBN could sort out author visits, we'd be thrilled!'

Book requests and delivery

Groups were delighted by WBN's generosity and the opportunity to choose titles. They were also very pleased to get multiple mixed boxes of all 25 titles:

Being able to have multiple copies of all the titles instead of just lots of copies of the same book creates more options. You can reach more prisoners and staff – people like being able to choose and can almost always find at least one title to their liking.

Several librarians wondered if it might be possible to get the books earlier:

Nothing happens quickly in prison and we really needed the books to be delivered about a month in advance to have any hope of getting them distributed on or close to World Book Night itself. My books took 3 weeks to arrive in the library from the gate.

A few people reported that they couldn't get the books delivered to their prison, which made things more complicated:

This year, I was unable to arrange delivery directly to the prison. Instead I had to arrange for the library service to collect them from the library and bring them to us. Again, hassle and time.

What do you want to read?

For groups that want to do their reading in the sessions:

- there are lots of good collections of short stories – genre collections of crime, sci-fi, horror etc can be useful too
- there are good collections of theme-based poems – love, comic verse etc.
- your librarian could probably photocopy stories and poems from collections already in your library

If your group wants to read the same book in advance:

- ask your librarian if the county library has sets available for groups
- PRG has a list of about 30 book titles, each with 6-8 copies that we are happy to send out
- PRG also has some limited funds to help groups in the early stages – your librarian can find out more

Do some research:

- Displays in the library will have a good range of new books and you'll find reviews in *Inside Time* and other newspapers
- Listen out for the National Prison Radio Book Club every night at 22.30 – there is also one broadcast every month on Radio 4, and there have been several series of a new TV Book Club on Channel 4
- When you have discussed titles with your group, make a wish list of books to choose from and talk to the librarian about getting hold of them

What are other books clubs reading?

Decide with your group what you'd all like to read. Here are some suggestions of books that have worked well in the National Prison Radio Book Club or in book clubs at other prisons...

- Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected*
- The Motorcycle Diaries* - Ernesto Che Guevara
- Dreams from my Father* - Barack Obama
- Mr Pip* - Lloyd Jones
- Dark Matter* - Michelle Paver
- The Last King of Scotland* - Giles Foden
- Race to the Pole* - James Cracknell & Ben Fogle
- Millions* - Frank Cottrell Boyce
- True Girl* - Charles Paris
- Brighton Rock* - Graham Greene

How do you get more book club members?

- Start with posters or book marks in the library and on the wings
- Word of mouth is key – talk to people who are interested and pass on the word about the book and the club
- Ask library staff and orderlies to spread the word to people using the library
- If your prison has National Prison Radio, write to them at HMPr Brixton, London SW2 6XF with details (when is it, where is it, who runs it, what are you reading etc) and the radio station will promote your club

8-10 members is a good target but you may want to have a waiting list as well so that people who are released or transferred can be replaced quickly.

The first meeting

The first meeting is a great time for everyone to talk about what they already enjoy reading and what they want to get out of the book club: the chance perhaps to discover new authors and titles, from classics to current books that everyone is talking about.

Other ice-breakers you could use to get to know each other:

- Each person talks to the group about something they love for 1 minute
- Each person talks about the last thing they read (including newspapers or magazines) and something interesting they got out of it
- Word association game – start with a word / phrase e.g. 'adventure novel' / 'science-fiction' / 'romantic fiction' and everyone responds with another word or phrase – see where it takes you and how views differ

Decide on some ground rules from the start, such as:

- No interrupting or talking over people
- Everyone's views should be listened to and respected
- Everyone gets the chance to speak
- Everyone is welcome, even if they haven't read the book that month

But remember – too many rules can be a turn-off: the point of the group is, after all, for everyone to enjoy reading and talking about books.

Book titles

There was lots of enthusiasm for the range of titles and some good suggestions for the future:

In general I thought it was a good selection. In fact, I think my only criticism is that there wasn't much in the way of non-fiction; *Stuart, A Life Backwards* was our choice last year and was so popular that I still had people asking for a copy weeks later. It would also be nice to see some poetry as this is hugely popular in prisons and I think can be less daunting to reluctant readers.

Most of the books were quite difficult for those not used to reading novels. Perhaps next time WBN could include a few Quick Reads or other shorter / easier books?

One librarian even sent helpful stats:

297 copies of Martina Cole's *The Take* were given away to staff and prisoners.
16 mixed boxes (a total of 400 books) have been given out to staff and prisoners
The four most popular titles:
The Take Martina Cole
The Alchemist Paolo Coelho
Misery Stephen King
*The Damned United*** David Pearce

**But this was one of the 'leftovers' in another prison. Which just goes to show...

Distributing the books across the prison

There were some good initiatives here. One prison, for example, handed out some of its WBN books at a resettlement fair.
HMP Bullingdon produced a handout (attached) that included all the titles and an invitation to request one. The handout was delivered to every cell in the prison and copies were available in the library as well. The response has been excellent: to date, about 150 books have been distributed and requests are still coming in.

Prisoner givers

HMP Wandsworth trialed a scheme to allow prisoners themselves to be givers. All 25 titles were arranged on a stand in the library and prisoners were invited to fill in a form (attached) to send a chosen title to someone on the outside. The forms were checked by Security and then forwarded to PRG for posting.
Almost 50 requests have been processed so far and they are still coming. As the librarian put it:

Not many prisoners are in a position to give anything to those outside and they really enjoy the chance to send a book out: to mothers, fathers, children or friends.

Overall, almost everyone agreed that WBN 2012 has been a real success in PRG prisons and was well worth the extra effort:

World Book Night was a huge success here. The books have been flying off the stand and the chance to have copies sent out to family is proving really popular.

Sarah Turvey on behalf of PRG
September 2012

An offer from the Library...

HMP Bullingdon



On April 23rd this year we celebrated World Book Night and the organisers sent hundreds of books (titles overleaf) into Bullingdon to be given to prisoners. The idea is that you will read a book of your choice and hopefully, if you enjoy it, pass it on to someone else (within the Prison) to share the experience. We hope to reach out to people who aren't regular library users and who may find the passion to read through this book exchange, but even if you do visit the library regularly, why not choose something out of your usual range and swap it with others after you've read it.

There are 25 titles to choose from this year, chosen by a panel to represent a range of styles and subjects. We may not be able to satisfy all requests, so tick 3 choices next to the books overleaf, together with your name, number and cell number and we'll allocate the books on a first come, first served basis. We'll send a note when the orders are ready for you to collect from the library.

NAME

NUMBER CELL NO

Drop this order in to the Library in person or use the box on your wing





Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey teach English Literature at the University of Roehampton. Since 1999 they have also been involved in setting up and running prison reading groups. The Prison Reading Groups (PRG) project provides advice and support for new groups, facilitators and volunteers.

For further information visit the website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prison-reading-groups or email s.turvey@roehampton.ac.uk

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Images courtesy of Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net