



Prison Reading Groups

Annual Review 2017

‘I love everything about the discussion because you get people’s different perspectives on the books. It also cheers me up.’



Now that I am able to contact PRG I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for the work you do... Although basically literate, I could count on two hands the number of fiction books I'd read before prison. The reading group forced me to read books I would never normally have looked at and this broadened my horizons... And the group has continued to influence my reading. Mister Pip inspired me to read Great Expectations which was the first time I'd read anything by Dickens

(email from ex-member, HMP Thameside)

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Welcome



Joining a group can be daunting for an inexperienced reader but it can also be a pathway to valuable new skills and a more positive sense of self.

Prisons continue to be tough places for staff and outside organisations as well as prisoners. The challenges are familiar: violence, self-harm, psycho-active substances, short staffing, changes in ministerial leadership and policy direction. But excellent work continues and PRG is proud to be part of it. Our reading groups are flourishing and our family reading initiatives are expanding.

In September 2017 PRG formally became part of Give a Book, a dynamic charity that focuses on prisons and children. It is an ideal fit and has already led to new ideas and initiatives. We are delighted and very grateful to Give a Book, in particular Executive Director Victoria Gray, Sarah Moorehead and Adeela Khan. Thanks also to Olivia Loveridge, PRG's new administrator. Her organisational skills and great good humour have been invaluable.

We are grateful to the University of Roehampton which hosted PRG from its start in 1999 until the transfer to Give a Book. I'm pleased to report that we will continue to share expertise, volunteering opportunities and possible research projects.

PRG's success depends above all on the dedication and enthusiasm of our librarians and volunteers, and the commitment of our prisoner members. Joining a group can be daunting for an inexperienced reader but it can also be a pathway to valuable new skills and a more positive sense of self.

Sarah Turvey

*Director, Prison Reading Groups
April 2018*

2017 At a glance

Reading Groups



44

groups*



26

prisons



3150

books



294

meetings

* 7 new groups in 2017 and 7 more new groups to date in 2018

Family Days



750

children



20

prisons*



1300+

books



23

days

* And 45 days in 40 prisons planned for 2018

PRG Prisons

Reading Group Prisons

Aylesbury	Ford	Pentonville
Ashfield	Frankland	Send
Belmarsh	Grendon	Shotts
Brixton	High Down	Styal
Bristol	Isis	Thameside
Bullingdon	Kirkham	Wandsworth
Bure	Low Newton	Warren Hill
Downview	Maidstone	Wayland
East Sutton Park	Norwich	Wormwood Scrubs
Edinburgh	Parc	Wymott

Family Day Prisons

Aylesbury	Ford	North Sea Camp
Ashfield	Full Sutton	Norwich
Birmingham	Grendon	Portland
Brinsford	High Down	Preston
Brixton	Hull	Springhill
Bristol	Humber	Stocken
Bronzefield	Huntercombe	Stoke Heath
Bullingdon	Isis	Styal
Bure	Kirkham	Thameside
Coldingley	Leicester	Usk
Dovegate	Lewes	Wandsworth
Downview	Lincoln	Warren Hill
Erlestoke	Low Newton	Wormwood Scrubs
Exeter	Morton Hall (IRC)	Wymott

What groups read

Becoming a reader is about choice and wherever possible groups choose the books they read and the copies are theirs to keep or pass on to others. Choices are ambitious and wide ranging as typical lists from 2017 show.

A women's prison

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
 ML Stedman, *The Light Between Oceans*
 Daphne du Maurier, *My Cousin Rachel*
 Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn*
 Naomi Alderman, *The Power*

A men's prison

Patrick de Witt, *The Sisters Brothers*
 Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father*
 Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*
 Henri Charriere, *Papillon*
 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

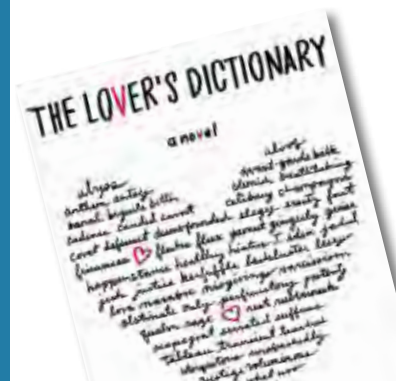


But the lists tell only part of the story. The lifeblood of PRG groups is the difference of view and meetings are full of lively and forthright debate.

‘I loved this book! It was like a collection of little snapshots or vignettes. The characters are in turn deep, passionate, sensual, erotic, flawed, petty and cutting

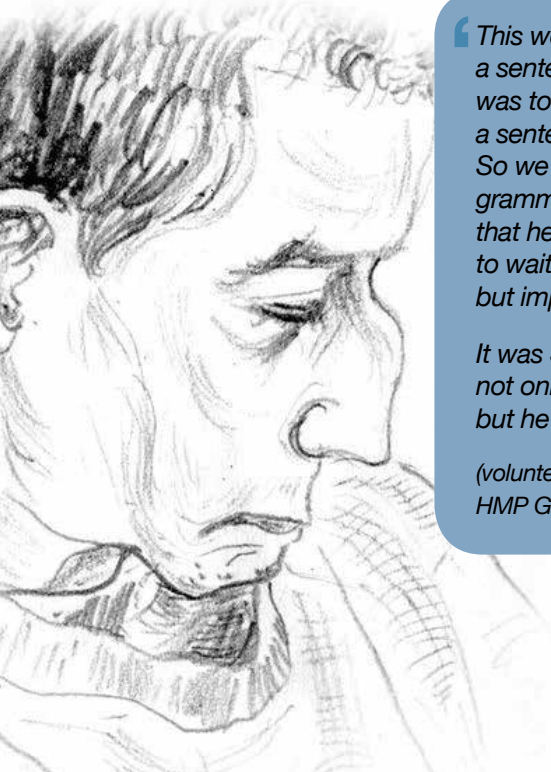
I would rather have a kidney removed than read this again’

members at HMP Wymott on *The Lover's Dictionary*, A Love Story in 185 Definitions



Diversity and flexibility

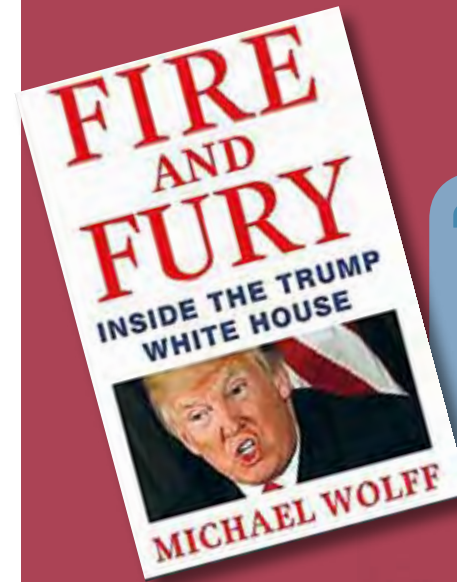
Literacy levels and reading experience vary widely in prisons. Many prisoners struggle with basic skills but there are also higher-level readers for whom there may be few formal learning opportunities inside. Reading initiatives need to be flexible and PRG groups adapt to meet the needs of different memberships.



This week S asked to go back a page to a sentence that had begun with 'And'. 'I was told in Education you must never start a sentence like this but he's doing it here'. So we had a conversation about 'correct' grammar and poetic licence. I was thrilled that he'd not only noticed it but been able to wait until a pause and then go back. Small but important things...

It was S's last session today. He told me that not only is he fairly comfortable reading now but he's much more confident in himself

(volunteer, fortnightly group for new readers at HMP Grendon)



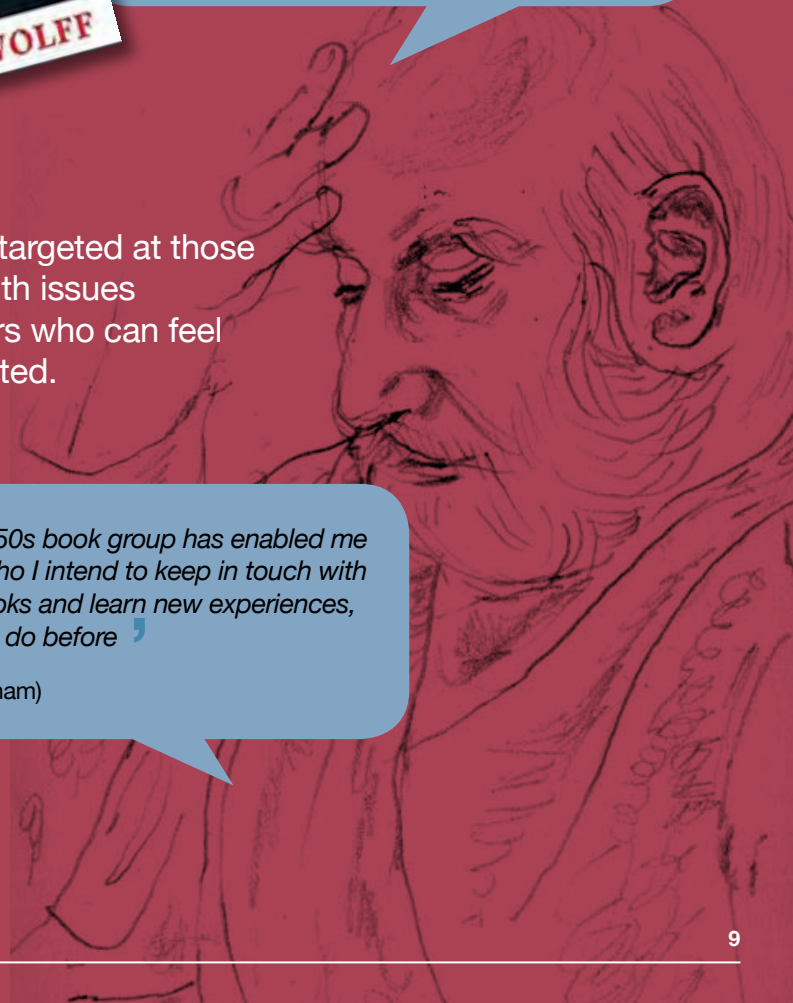
G has been reading lots of philosophy for his course, which led us to a conversation about John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham and Kant, as well as Michael Wolff's new book on Trump

(volunteer, monthly group for experienced readers at HMP Grendon)

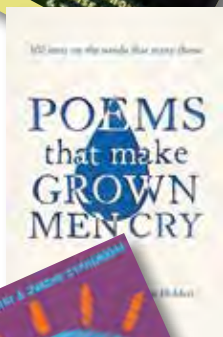
Groups may be targeted at those with mental health issues or older prisoners who can feel particularly isolated.

Being in the over-50s book group has enabled me to make friends who I intend to keep in touch with and talk about books and learn new experiences, something I didn't do before

(member, HMP Kirkham)

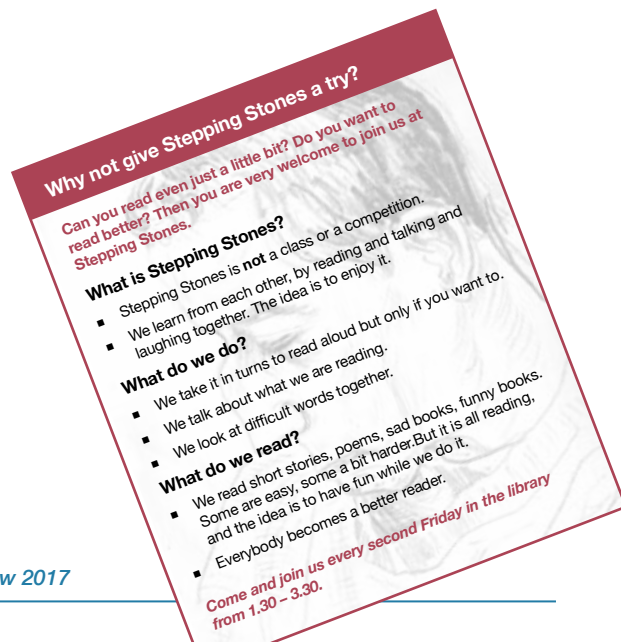


Volunteers



PRG volunteers bring the outside world into the prison and help make the groups come alive. Their determination is undaunted by lockdowns, lost unlock lists, double bookings and difficult encounters at the gate. They work with the librarians to recruit new members and are always on the look-out for short stories, poems and brain-teasers to use alongside the group's chosen book.

At one prison the volunteers recently produced their own poster for a presentation to staff and targeted prisoners about their groups for hesitant readers.



Case Study

The early life of a new group

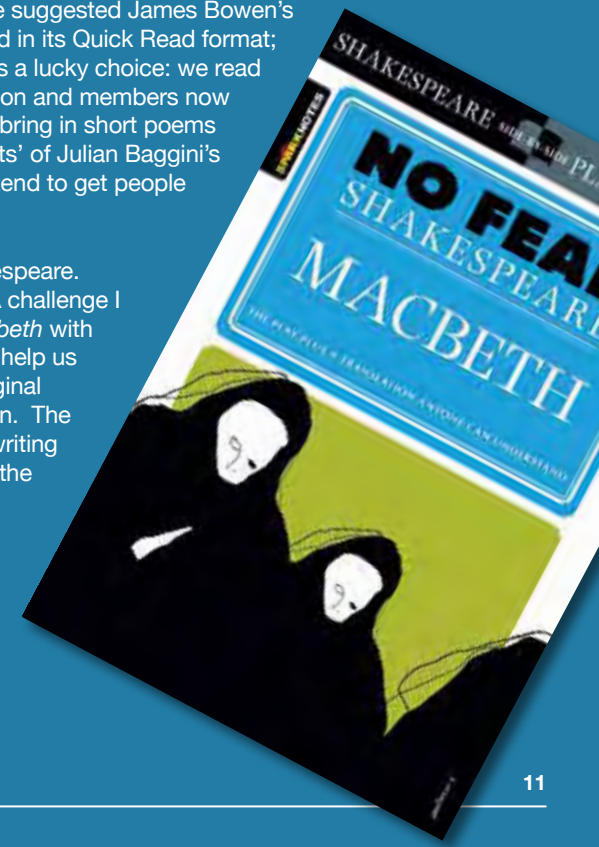
A few months ago the occupational therapist in the mental health day centre at Wormwood Scrubs, came to our monthly book club in the library. Chris was interested in starting a book club in the centre; could we support him?

Chris wanted the group to run fortnightly to give it a chance of success. We decided to start with a mix of stories, poems and extracts, and to ask the group to decide collectively how to proceed.

It's still early days but I've been surprised how quickly the group has found its own identity and ways. About the first decision we took was to try having a book on the go. Someone suggested James Bowen's *A Street Cat Named Bob* which he'd read in its Quick Read format; 'I think there's probably more to it'. It was a lucky choice: we read four or five chapters between each session and members now feel Bob has become 'their' book. I also bring in short poems and stories; also the 'thought experiments' of Julian Baggini's *The Pig That Wants To Be Eaten*, which tend to get people going.

But the biggest surprise has been Shakespeare. 'Never read him, could we have a go?' A challenge I couldn't resist. We've got copies of *Macbeth* with an accompanying modern translation to help us out, but reading short extracts of the original text aloud is the highlight of the afternoon. The witches are irresistible. One member is writing his own gangster version. Watch out for the Scrubs Macbeth.

Jenny Hartley, co-founder of PRG and volunteer at HMPs Wormwood Scrubs and Send



The benefits of reading groups

Process

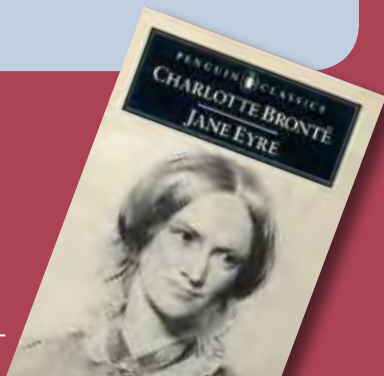
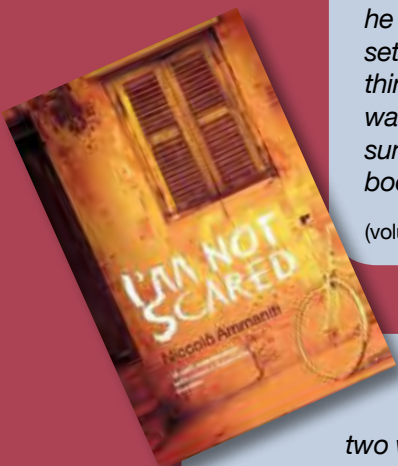
The benefits of membership can take time to develop which is why the groups are open-ended: prisoners join at any time and keep coming for as long as they choose. Like desistance itself, the reading groups are about process and the gradual discovery of both individual motivation and the pleasures of critical conversation.

‘The reaction to I’m Not Scared was mostly a bit lukewarm. The exception was a young man who has been coming to the group for about six months. At first he was pretty hyper and disruptive but has gradually settled down, though he says very little and I don’t think he had ever finished a book before. This time he was itching for his turn and when it came he proudly summarised the entire plot and then declared, ‘This book is great.’ RESULT!’

(volunteer, HMP Wandsworth)

‘One member was delighted to report that he had finished Jane Eyre. He decided to start reading two weeks before the meeting, a chapter a day, but found that one chapter became two, then three, then ‘it was unstoppable’. He declared the book ‘a fantastic story’

(volunteer, HMP Thameside)



Enquiring sociability

Members and visitors often comment with surprise on the open friendliness of the group.

‘At this morning’s session we had one guy attending for the first time who said how wonderful he found it to have been made so welcome, and that everyone sat and listened and discussed with one another with such courtesy’

(volunteer, HMP Thameside)

‘Last week I spent an invigorating afternoon at Wormwood Scrubs speaking to the inmates’ book club under the auspices of the excellent organisation Prison Reading Groups. In a long discussion we talked about identity groups, the future of pluralism (a word raised by one of the prisoners, not me) and the necessity of trust in a healthy society.

A wide range of ethnicities was represented in the semi-circle of library chairs. A mood of optimistic civility prevailed throughout’

Matthew d’Ancona, Evening Standard, Nov 29, 2017

Scenes of reading

Members support each other during and between meetings and books come alive: in cells, on the wings and beyond the prison.

‘A brilliant account from the trio who had read The Moth Catcher together aloud over the month ‘evenings and weekends’; or rather A and P had read it with E, who is severely dyslexic and presents herself as barely able to read. This had been a totally enjoyable experience for all of them – ‘the last 50 pages, we should have stopped as we’d reached our quota of chapters, but we just had to go on and finish’

(volunteer, HMP Send)



'I enjoyed the book especially because another guy in a cell near me was reading it at the same time and we would call out our comments to each other down the wing'

(member at HMP Thameside)

'P was a great contributor to group discussions and sent us his review from the outside. He finished reading The Kite Runner in the probation waiting room'

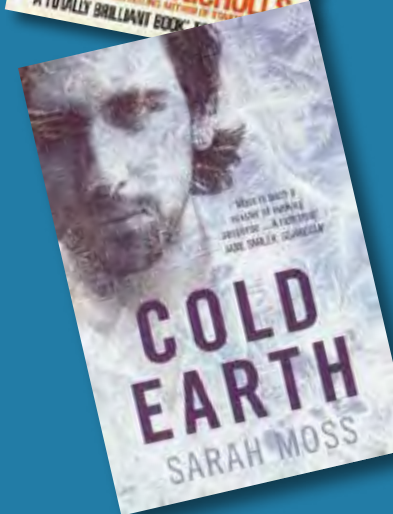
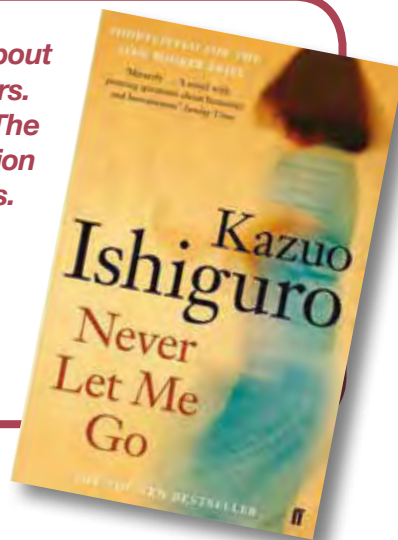
(member report from HMP Ford)

Interpretive communities and the wider world

Discussion can help members make sense of their prison experience and groups often find fascinating connections between books and what goes on inside.

One of the things that struck us most about the novel is the passivity of the characters. 'Why wasn't there a rebellion?' says G. The group nod but A thinks the lack of rebellion is realistic. 'It's the same in here,' he says. 'Some will go up against the system but most just want to get through it with minimal hassle'

(volunteer, HMP Ashfield)



Discussion also moves beyond the prison to contemporary issues, which can help members feel more connected with the world.

To mark the hundredth anniversary of women getting the vote, and in the week of International Women's Day 2018, the reading group at HMP Send celebrated in style with *No Surrender*, a suffrage novel from 1911 by Constance Maud. The group was able to discuss it with a visitor from Persephone Books which also generously supplied copies of the book.

Author visits also connect members with life outside and groups welcomed writers including David Nicholls, Alexander Masters, Oliver Harris, Sarah Moss, Matthew d'Ancona, John Harding and Anne Wafula-Strike.

Dramatic encounters

In December 2016 HMP Wormwood Scrubs and the wider world came together in *Scrooge in the Scrubs*, a version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It was acted by prisoners and narrated by Simon Callow who was then starring in his own much-acclaimed version in the West End. The idea originated in the reading group and several of the members were involved. It was a splendid one-night show performed for an audience of prisoners and outsiders and hugely enjoyed by all.

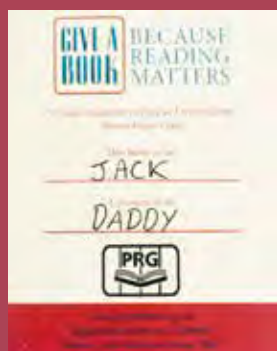
More PRG groups now experiment with plays. The librarian at HMP Bure started a drama group for which PRG provided books on theatre craft. Last Christmas the group put their skills on show with a performance of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Throne*, an adaptation of *Macbeth* written by one of the members.

Family Days

In 2017 PRG supported 23 Family Days in 20 prisons and provided individually chosen books for 750 children, together with mixed titles for book corners.

Prison Family Days enable prisoners to be with their partners and children for longer and in a more relaxed setting than is possible during normal visits. With our partners Give a Book, PRG supports these days with books and book bags for the visiting children, together with volunteers to encourage family reading activities.

The vital importance of contact with family for prisoner well-being and rehabilitation was emphatically confirmed by the Farmer Review, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and published in August 2017. The Review recognised the good work being done but concluded that family needs to be even more of a 'cross-cutting priority' in the running of prisons.



The book bag scheme is a very good idea and it made the children very happy. We all looked at it together as a family and helped each other out - we really enjoyed it and hope to do it next time.

Did the children say anything about being given a book and book bag to take home?

'Can I keep it?'



We are pleased to report that in 2018 PRG support will increase to 45 Family Days in 40 prisons.

Thank you for the Books
My Boys loved them.
Today was perfect.
THANK YOU! Thank you.



Events and Projects

Reading in Prison Day

PRG's annual event took place in June when over 120 people came together at the University of Roehampton to celebrate reading initiatives in prison and what books can do behind bars.

The first panel of the day explored putting libraries at the heart of the prison and offered a snapshot of some of the brilliant projects around: literary festivals, reading and creative writing groups, debating societies, drama workshops, and clubs of all kinds from scrabble to chess.

Library access was a big issue and there were some good ideas about how to get prison managers and officers onside. Above all, speakers encouraged library staff to be 'bloody, bold and resolute' in promoting libraries as places where prisoners can discover the world and themselves.

The reading and families panel introduced a range of programmes that help prisoners and their children bond with books.

As always, one of the highlights of the day was the discussion of reading groups in action and what they have to offer members and volunteers.

The day ended with a poetry workshop followed by drinks and the traditional PRG cake. It was a great success and we are looking forward to this year's event in September 2018.



Such an informative day, thank you!

Thoroughly inspiring, relevant, real and timely!



Unsilencing the Library

Researchers from Oxford University ran a project to stock the shelves of a neglected Victorian library at Compton Verney in Warwickshire and PRG selected the titles for one of the book cases. Reading group members were invited to nominate a book that was important to them and explain why. Dozens of suggestions were made with some fascinating comments and the final selection was placed on the shelves as part of an ongoing exhibition.

Of Mice and Men: 'My father read the whole book to me when I was young and I've always remembered it'

The Naked Civil Servant: 'I read it as a teenager when I was coming to terms with my homosexuality. This book let me know I was not alone'

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: 'Everything I love about science is in there and it's full of laughs – lots and lots and lots of them'





World Book Night

I was amazed at how many people had read the book and thought about it deeply and had such great questions to ask. It was a wonderful afternoon. J

Cathy Rentzenbrink

Like readers outside, PRG members enjoy being connected to the wider world of books and buzz and our groups chose enthusiastically from among the twenty five titles on offer through World Book Night.

We also helped organise an all-prison WBN read at HMP Downview including a visit from Cathy Rentzenbrink, the author of the Wellcome-shortlisted memoir, *The Last Act of Love*. WBN provided additional copies of the book and it was a great success.



The women loved it and were both moved and entertained... I haven't seen such a large prison audience (over 50 attended) so engaged for so long – a great tribute I think J

(librarian, HMP Downview)



Cityread London

Ten PRG groups received copies of S J Parris's *Prophecy* as part of the annual Cityread project to get Londoners reading a chosen book set in the city. The women at HMP Send were also able to welcome the author to their reading group.



Before Stephanie had even sat down they were asking her questions, wanting to engage with her. Pi wanted to let her know that it had been a struggle to get into but that she had risen to the challenge – 'Once I'm in I'm away'... The author met all the questions very openly, took them all on carefully. A small group but very warm and engaged: 'we could have gone on for another hour' J

(volunteer, HMP Send)

Advocacy



PRG is a founder member of the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) which brings together organisations that can provide expertise and strategic vision to inform prison education priorities, policies and practices. The PLA was formed in 2012 and in the same year published *Smart Rehabilitation*, a blueprint for prison education that would be 'outcome-focussed, joined up and value-driven'.



The Alliance has also developed a theory of change to understand the role of learning in helping prisoners turn their lives around. *What is Education For?* was published in 2016 and the holistic view it promotes has been recognised in the Ministry of Justice's new definition of prison education:

'activities that give individuals the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. It should also build social capital and improve the well being of prisoners during their sentences.'



PRG is proud to be part of the PLA where we contribute the voice of informal learning in prison.

In 2018 the PLA is changing to broaden the membership and make it more representative of prisoner learners and the education and criminal justice sectors. PRG looks forward to continuing membership of an even stronger and more effective alliance.

Plans for 2018

Expansion

Reading groups

Generous funding from our donors will enable PRG to increase the number of reading groups we set up and support. In 2018 so far we have already started seven new groups and more are in discussion.

Family Days

With support from the Siobhan Dowd Trust and Penguin Random House we are increasing the number of Family Days we support from twenty three to forty five.

Partnership with Give a Book

Give a Book and PRG have been awarded funding from Wandsworth Council to run workshops for fathers in HMP Wandsworth to help them feel more confident about Family Days and engaging with their children around books. Give a Book is also funding and delivering a related project at HMP Wormwood Scrubs. Together we hope to extend this work to more prisons in 2018-9.

Partnership has also enabled PRG to support GAB's Books for First Nighters, a project to provide books for prisoners when they first arrive and do not yet have access to the library.



Penguin Random House partnership

PRG is one of the publisher's Creative Responsibility partners and we benefit from generous donations of reading group sets, children's books for Family Days and contacts for author visits. PRG provides volunteering opportunities and is currently working with PRH to extend the WriteNow mentoring programme to current and ex-prisoners.

Methuen Drama in the groups

PRG groups are increasingly experimenting with play reading and we were delighted to be offered sets of selected Methuen Drama titles from Bloomsbury Publishers. We hope Methuen playwrights will also be keen to visit in 2018 and perhaps run informal workshops for interested groups.

Forward Arts Poetry

The Forward Arts Foundation have generously donated sets of 100 Prized Poems, Twenty Five Years of the Forward Books, and PRG facilitators are devising creative ways to use them with their groups.

“If we could have eight copies of the anthology there will be enough for some of the men to share if they are on the same wings. I've talked to a couple of members about this suggestion and they think it would go well and might help to develop a love of poetry among others”

(librarian, HMP Wymott)

Funders and Partners

PRG is grateful for the funding and support of all our donors and acknowledges in particular the following:



Give a Book

www.giveabook.org.uk

Give a Book was set up in 2011 in memory of playwright Simon Gray, who loved to read and share his reading. GAB facilitates the giving of new books to elected charities and other organisations. Each donation buys and sends a book to someone who really needs one. PRG is delighted to be part of Give a Book.



Booker Prize Foundation

www.themanbookerprize.com/foundation

As well as awarding the Man Booker Prize and the Man Booker International Prize, the Booker Prize Foundation also works to promote the art of literature for the public benefit through various schemes, initiatives and projects.



Penguin Random House

www.penguinrandomhouse.co.uk

Penguin Random House is a cultural institution committed to editorial excellence and long-term investment in new ideas, creativity and diverse content, leading campaigns worldwide that promote literacy and reading culture.



Siobhan Dowd Trust

www.siobhandowdtrust.com

The Siobhan Dowd Trust works to give young people the opportunity to read and enjoy literature. The money earned through royalties and foreign sales of Siobhan Dowd's books allows the trust to support deserving projects.



Wandsworth Council

www.wandsworth.gov.uk

In 2015 the Council established the Wandsworth Grant Fund to provide grants for community and voluntary sector organisations throughout the borough.



University of Roehampton

www.roehampton.ac.uk

PRG and the University of Roehampton enjoy a partnership to share expertise, volunteering opportunities and possible research projects. We are also grateful to the university for generous support of our annual Reading in Prison Day.

We would also like to thank The Alligator's Mouth children's bookshop, Persephone Books, Whitley Asset Management and Susie Bush for generous support.

Cover image courtesy of Alex Manolatos www.alexmanolatos.com. All other drawings courtesy of Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net and participating prisoners in the *My Life Now* project.

Design by Susie Bush Design www.susiebushdesign.com



Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

The report this month comes from Bullingdon where the reading group has been going strong since 2001 and has been enjoyed by hundreds of members over the past sixteen years.



M.L. Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans* is set in the aftermath of the First World War and is about a childless couple on a remote lighthouse island off the coast of Western Australia. When a small boat washes up containing a dead man and a small baby they make a decision that has far-reaching and heart-breaking results.

“This is why I joined the book club. I'd never have picked up this book but I loved it. It made you put yourself in all those different lives and I just had to read to the end.”

'I couldn't put it down, I read it in a day. It's all about how every action has its consequences and how the wrong thing can also be the right thing. I've got to admit I got through a box of tissues reading it'.

'I liked the way the point of view moves around and you find yourself sympathising with different characters in turn. And it was so intense, I loved that'.

'It's about mothers and their powerful feelings of course, but it's also about fathers and the way they bottle themselves up'.

'The settings were brilliant - the lighthouse which is so isolated that you try to forget or maybe you just think you can ignore what's right and wrong in the rest of the world. But the town on the mainland is full of contradictions too: warmth and community but also gossip and malice and the violence that sets everything in train'.

The book had been chosen from a handout with cover pictures and brief descriptions of a range of titles. The one we chose had a picture of a lighthouse overwritten with the title. But the copies we received had a soft focus child's face and a curly script 'The' for the title.

Only one member hadn't read it. He was new to the group and wasn't there at the previous session when we chose it. 'I guess you really can't judge a book by its cover. When I got my copy I thought no way is this for me. But now I'm definitely taking it back to my cell to read'.

Others were torn between wanting to keep it on their bookshelf and wanting to pass it on to their partners.

Everyone was impressed that this is a first novel and we were all really curious about the original idea and the whole writing process. We're following up to see if there's any chance of a visit from the author - we'd love to quiz her!

Many thanks to Penguin Random House who generously donate books to PRG groups. We're very grateful.

If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the Prison Reading Groups website www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk PRG is generously supported by charities including Give A Book and the Booker Prize Foundation, and by publishers including Penguin Random House.

How to escape from prison

"What's the best way to escape from prison?" asks the ex-convict on the other end of the phone. He told me via email that he'd been released four weeks before our phone call, but I'm starting to wonder whether I might have stumbled into an entirely different story.

'Well, I'm not really sure to be honest with you', I stutter down the line. "I assume the Shawshank thing doesn't work?"

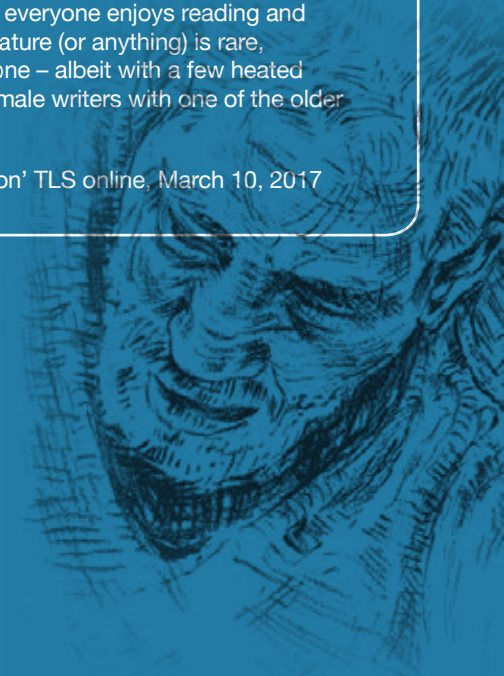
"The best way to escape prison is with a book, Sophie..."

When Matt went into prison aged twenty-one, he'd never read a book in his life. Now, four years later, he reckons he's finished over a thousand...

Katy Oglethorpe runs prison book clubs facilitated by Prison Reading Groups. "In my book club at HMP Wandsworth we recently read *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne", says Katy. "It provoked a really interesting discussion about the Holocaust leading on to further conversation about personal trauma and modern right-wing politics.

"There is a huge range in the group, from someone who holds an MA and has written three novels to someone who left school at fourteen and is tentatively discovering Harry Potter. But perhaps because everyone enjoys reading and because the opportunity to sit and discuss literature (or anything) is rare, the atmosphere is a relaxed and collaborative one – albeit with a few heated discussions about the merits of female versus male writers with one of the older members of the group."

From Sophie Brown, 'How to escape from prison' TLS online, March 10, 2017



‘When people want to stay in the room rather than have a break something must be working’

Reading group member, HMP Bristol



‘This is such a good initiative’

Lord Ramsbotham, former Chief Inspector of Prisons

www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk
info@prg.org.uk