

Prison Reading Groups

Annual Review 2018

‘My brain needed to breathe and it did today’

Welcome



My time in prison has been largely putting on a performance as 'one of the lads'... book club is one of the few places where I can actually be myself and it's by far the highlight of each month for me

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) started in 1999 and has been growing ever since. Our original aim was to set up, fund and support reading groups in UK prisons. Since 2015 we have also supported family reading initiatives inside and we now work in 60 prisons.

In 2017 PRG became part of Give a Book, a small dynamic charity and a perfect fit. We've pooled our expertise, ideas and experience and have developed new joint projects and initiatives as well as expanding our core work.

I am especially grateful to Victoria Gray, Executive Director of Give a Book, Sarah Moorehead, Chair of Trustees and Adeela Khan, Director of Projects. Thanks are also due to Olivia Loveridge, PRG's wonderful administrator and projects manager.

In 2018 we started 11 new groups in 9 prisons and supported 20 new Family Days. We also piloted a new project to help prisoner parents feel more confident about engaging with their children through books.

The numbers are especially heartening in light of the challenges prisons face. Our groups rely on exceptional people: dedicated librarians who take on all the internal organisation; committed volunteers who persist in the face of clearance delays, lockdowns and lost books; and above all prisoners who are willing to give the group a go and then come back to discover and explore what books can do behind bars.

Sarah Turvey
Director, Prison Reading Groups
April 2019

“The reading group is like an afternoon out”

2018 At a glance

Reading Groups



49

groups



34

prisons



3000

books



1100

Prisoners

Family Days



2000

children



52

prisons



3000+

books



56

days

PRG Prisons

Reading Group Prisons

Ashfield	Frankland	Parc
Birmingham	Grendon	Pentonville
Berwyn	Hewell Grange	Ranby
Brixton	High Down	Rye Hill
Bristol	Isis	Send
Bullington	Kirkham	Shotts
Bure	Lewes	Standford Hill
Dovegate	Lincoln	Thameside
Downview	Long Lartin	The Verne
East Sutton Park	Maidstone	Wandsworth
Edinburgh	North Sea Camp	Warren Hill
Erlestoke	Northumberland	Wayland
Ford	Norwich	Wormwood Scrubs
		Wymott

Family Day Prisons

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

The core elements of PRG are simple:

1

Groups are voluntary and informal, not part of prison education provision.

3

Groups are open ended... prisoners join at any time and remain members for as long as they want to come.

2

Members choose the books they read and are given new copies to keep or pass on to others.

Challenge

The groups increase reading stamina and encourage members to read more widely. They also foster respect and mutual support which can be hard to find in prison.

A new member hadn't had a chance to read *Brain on Fire* yet but had told his mum on the phone about joining the group. He was chuffed to discover that she had read it 'and she loved it! I'm really looking forward to talking to her about it'

We had one guy attending for the first time who said how wonderful he found it to be made so welcome, 'everyone sat and listened and discussed with one another with such courtesy'

Connection

Books connect us – to family and friends, to the wider world and to ourselves. PRG groups strengthen all these ties.

Continuity

Research confirms that rehabilitation is a process. PRG groups are ongoing rather than fixed-term projects. They build relationships and skills over time. Even in the face of prison churn, there are PRG members who have been part of their group for two years or more and have never missed a meeting. Librarians report that new arrivals often ask if there's a reading group they can join 'like the one at my last prison'.

'I got an offer to study English and Comparative Literature at university. The reading group was a fantastic first step'

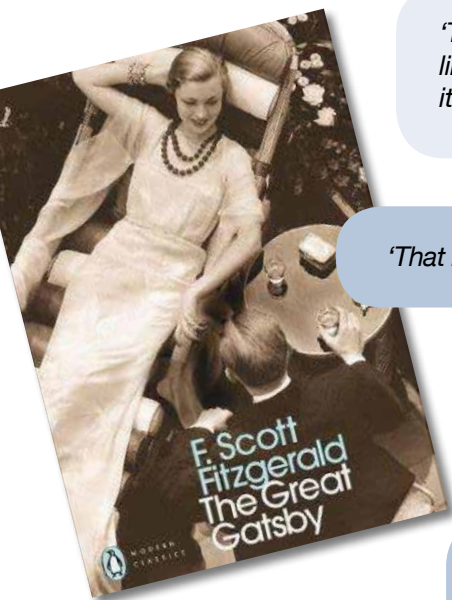
Change

PRG groups build confidence and ambition and help prisoners re-think their sense of self and possibility: from criminal to reader, and from dead-end to new beginning.

Groups in action

Difference of view is the lifeblood of any reading group. PRG members vary widely in education and reading experience but find common ground together. The regular feedback we get shows how discussion may stay closely focused on the book or freewheel between the issues raised and members' own lives.

On F Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*



'The first third – I couldn't see the point. It was like the people on Made in Chelsea. But then it changed, I got it and loved the rest of it'

'That last line – is it all pointless then?'

'Nobody is who they say they are. They're so unlikeable. What do these people do for a living?'

'That we can't escape our past – it's bleak'

'I felt I couldn't touch the words. As a non-native speaker I know what the words mean but felt I was missing something. I couldn't feel it, you know. Perhaps I will read it in my language and see if that gets me closer'

On Sydney Padua, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage*

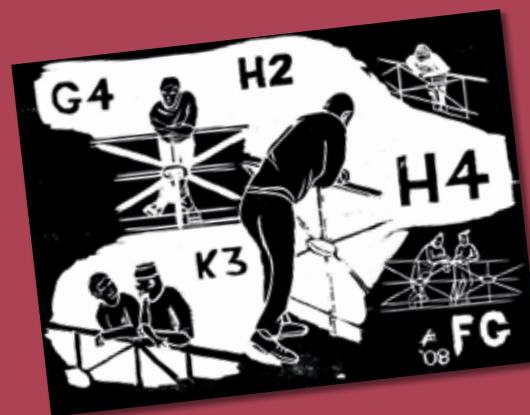
'One man is a lifer who's been inside prisons for 20 years. He's very savvy, listens to Radio 4 and knows all the news but couldn't relate to the discussion of social media as he's never experienced it.

Another looked very unwell, said he'd been up all night alone and had written a note which he had with him in case he was dead in the morning - how scared and lonely is that?

And then there was the conspiracy theorist, the chap who believes the earth is flat but we're being told lies to manipulate us. He couldn't say what advantage there was but was convinced there are bigger forces at work.



A quiet and thoughtful member challenged the flat-earth theory but agreed about bigger patterns. He hesitantly explained that he is a Muslim and for him there is a higher being overseeing the earth.'

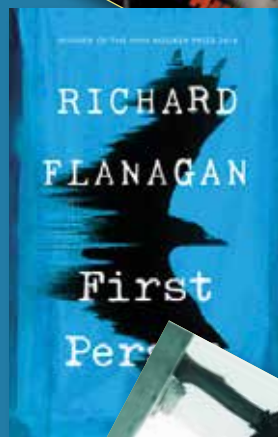
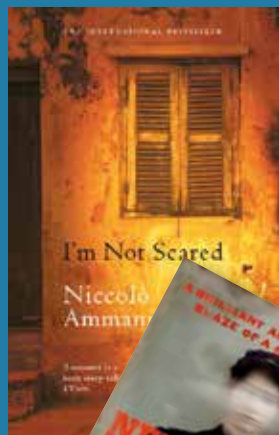


Spotlight on books

Group choices are ambitious and wide-ranging: fiction and non-fiction, popular and classic, film tie-ins and prize winners, books with a media buzz and vaguely remembered GCSE texts.

A year in the life of a PRG group

Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
 RL Stevenson, *Treasure Island*
 Niccolo Ammaniti, *I'm Not Scared*
 Laird Hunt, *Neverhome*
 Matthew d'Ancona, *Post-Truth*
 Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*
 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
 Jessie Burton, *The Muse*
 Richard Flanagan, *First Person*
 Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time*
 Anthony Horowitz, *The Word is Murder*
 Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*



Group initiatives

In the last year groups have initiated a range of exciting projects.

HMP Ford set up a joint session at the prison with a local reading group from outside to discuss Sebastian Barry's *Secret Scripture*. The group was also chosen by West Sussex Libraries to shadow the long list for the 2018 Booker Prize. Members read all thirteen titles and some of the men were granted ROTL (release on temporary licence) to attend a celebratory event in Horsham library.

A member of the Wymott group got the whole prison involved in a project to celebrate poetry. *Poems in the Garden* ran a competition and posted both famous poems and new work by prisoners on trees all over the grounds of the prison.

The over-50s group at Kirkham created a communal book space to showcase their PRG books and invite other prisoners to borrow one, read it and come back for a conversation with one of the members.



Author visits are a highlight and our groups welcomed writers including Adam Kay, Heather Morris and Anthony Horowitz who spoke warmly of PRG's 'wonderful and important work'.

Family Reading

‘Good family relationships are indispensable...prisoners who report improved family ties are significantly less likely to re-offend’

Farmer Report, Ministry of Justice 2017

Family Days

Prisons organise family days to help prisoners connect with their children and partners. PRG and Give a Book support these days with book bags and a specially chosen book for children to read with their parents on the day and to take home as a lasting reminder of good time spent together. There is also a bookplate so parents can personalise the book as a gift. Where possible our volunteers attend to help children and parents choose their book and to support reading together.



What do you like best about your book?

‘That it’s from my dad’

‘The books were a lovely gift, a great way to spend time with the kids, reading to them and getting them to read too’

What Happens Next?

A chance to read and spend time together



This is a new project to help prisoner parents feel more confident about interacting with their children through books. The pilot sessions were run by David Kendall, a prison reading specialist, and supported by postgraduate volunteers from the University of Roehampton. Feedback from both the workshops and the family event was very positive and we hope to extend it in 2019.

Was the workshop useful?

‘Yes, an eye-opener about choosing the right books for your kids’

What did you like best about the family event?

‘Look around at all this energy. It’s like coming up for air with our kids’

PRG in the public eye



Reading in Prison Day

Over 100 people gathered in September for our annual event to celebrate and explore the power of books and reading inside. Nick Hardwick opened with a great keynote on why reading matters. He described prison libraries as ‘oases of calm in the midst of increasing violence and dysfunction’ and he boldly celebrated the pleasure of reading – for prisoners as much as for those outside. Other highlights included Alex Wheatle’s electrifying talk about his introduction to books by a Rastafarian cellmate who told him ‘Boy, it’s time to educate yourself’.

‘Taking some words for a walk’

PRG co-founder Jenny Hartley spoke at a symposium for an AHRC-funded project on adults reading aloud in Britain today. She talked about her read-aloud group and the pleasure they find in ‘taking the words of others and making them your own for a moment’.



Reading Group Roundup

PRG has a regular column in Inside Time, the national newspaper distributed to all prisons in England and Wales. It’s a chance for individual groups to showcase their reading and for PRG to spread the word about our work.

Partners and funders

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 selected 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.



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. The generosity of the Trust supports our Family Day work and we are very grateful.



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.

PRG is proud to be one of PRH’s Creative Responsibility partners and we are very grateful for generous donations of book sets for our reading groups and children’s titles for family projects. We welcome PRH volunteers and several of our groups were pleased to host their audiobook club project for World Book Day in March 2019. PRG also advised PRH on how to extend their WriteNow author mentoring project to prisons.



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.



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.



Evan Cornish

www.wandsworth.gov.uk

Evan Cornish Foundation works to achieve equality and justice for all by supporting the most marginalized and promoting human rights. We are grateful for their support for our reading groups and family days.



Cityread

www.cityread.london

Cityread's mission is to 'get Londoners reading'. The special focus for 2018 was on harder to reach readers and the chosen book was Jessie Burton's *The Muse*. PRG advised as a specialist partner and our London prisons created a buzz with the copies Cityread supplied.

'Several people at the reading group reported seeing other men on the wing with a copy and stopping to have a chat about it'



Forward Arts Foundation

www.forwardartsfoundation.org

Generous donations of Forward Prize collections have helped whet the poetry appetite of a number of PRG groups. Jo Shapcott's 'Vegetable Love' reduced one women's group to 'helpless giggling – they loved the conceit'. And a member of another group used the anthology to convert his wing.

'When guys see me with this book, they start off 'Poems – shite'. But then I read them 'The Politics of' and they love it – language they can understand and all that anger under cool control'



Bloomsbury

www.bloomsbury.com/uk

Through its imprint Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury publishes over 2000 drama and performance titles. The list includes some of the world's most popular playwrights from Bertolt Brecht to Tom Stoppard. Methuen generously invites PRG groups to choose titles and receive free sets for members to read and explore together. In 2019 we hope to arrange visits and workshops run by some of the writers.

Thank you to all our donors and supporters and in particular to Whitley Asset Management and Hughes Fowler Carruthers.

Thanks to Susie Bush www.zedidesign.com for this design and to Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net for all original artwork.

PRG and the prison

Inside/outside, locked up/free – these oppositions are stark. And for those who invented the prison, they were meant to be. Jeremy Bentham talked about his design for the ideal prison – the Panopticon – to concentrate all the prisoner's energies and attention on the crime that lost him his freedom and subjected him to the prison regime. Research on total institutions reinforces this sense that being inside is simultaneously to be trapped in a shrinking mental world where the daily round of prison life wholly absorbs the attention of the inmate.

Prison Reading Groups was founded in the belief that prisoners may need support in crossing these boundaries – from inside to out – and to do that they often also need support in nurturing an internal and reflective world that is not wholly focused on their daily routines or their pasts. In the groups we have run over the last twenty years we have had repeated confirmation that reading and discussion about the worlds and people encountered in books give prisoners something that can widen their interior world and help them re-think the possibilities open to them both within prison and after release.

“This reading group is a wonderful thing because I would never have read such a book on the outside and it's changed my point of view completely.”



Sam reading about the wild west
w/s



“ You could think you weren’t in prison,
you could have been in a book club
anywhere and it was lovely ”

Lesley Graham on Reading and Literacy in Prison

www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk
info@prg.org.uk | [@prg_uk](https://twitter.com/prg_uk)