

# Unfinished sentences

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**'It's the most grown up discussion I have in prison.' Participants testify to the redeeming value of reading groups in prisons**

Why do we read? For information and instruction of course but also for distraction and escape, comfort and consolation, and the desire to imagine and inhabit other

worlds and other lives. Reading groups add another dimension: a kind of critical sociability, a space in which to share and test out our judgements and feelings. For prisoners all these benefits can be especially valuable in the effort to go straight and re-join society.

I taught English Literature for many years at the University of Roehampton. The idea for Prison Reading Groups (PRG) came from research with my colleague Professor Jenny Hartley into the resurgence of reading groups towards the end of the twentieth century. As well as writing about them, we wanted to make use of what we learned and decided to see if such groups could work in prisons. We started in 1999 with a skeleton website and two enthusiastic librarians at HMPs Coldingley and Bullingdon. Twenty years later we fund and support over 50 groups in more than 40 prisons nationwide. In 2018 we supplied over 3,600 books.

The groups are flexible to meet the needs of different target readerships: experienced readers or emergent ones; young offenders or over-50s; those with addiction or mental health problems. Groups may meet weekly or monthly or something in between and regular attendance varies from six or seven members to more than a dozen.

We work closely with library staff and where possible groups are co-run with an



outside volunteer for whom PRG provides mentoring and support.

*'We normally argue a bit, laugh and try to listen to each other. It's undoubtedly the best part of my [prison librarian] job and I come away from the group thinking Wow! I get paid to do this!'*

*'Most rewarding for me as a volunteer is watching hesitant prisoners develop the confidence to talk with passion and understanding about books that have provoked strong reactions'*

Research confirms that rehabilitation – desistance – is a process, so our groups are open-ended rather than fixed-term projects. They promote skills over time and prisoners remain members for as long as they want.

The core principles of PRG are informality

and choice. For many prisoners, school was the scene of failure and alienation so we stress that there are no tests, no certificates and no right or wrong answers.

*'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 reading group everyone is given a voice, all have an equal say.'*

Becoming a reader is about choice so wherever possible groups choose the books they read and discuss. Choices are ambitious and eclectic as the list of one group's recent reads shows:

- Julian Barnes**, *The Noise of Time*
- Anthony Horowitz**, *The Word is Murder*
- Charles Dickens**, *A Christmas Carol*
- Yeonmi Park**, *In Order to Live*
- Lindsey Fitzharris**, *The Butchering Art*
- Colm Toibin**, *Brooklyn*

*'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 entirely.'*

Funding from generous supporters means PRG can supply new books and members can keep their copies or pass them on to others. For prisoners, as for all of us, books provide important cultural capital and they are often displayed proudly in-cell. After release one ex-member sent us a photo of all the reading group books he had collected while inside, now given pride of place in his lodgings.

Reading builds empathy, the ability to put yourself in the shoes of someone else, to experience the world in new and unexpected ways. It is also seen as an important element of rehabilitation and the reading group is a space where empathy



Pride of place



can be explored and enjoyed. Feedback from a group's discussion of Laird Hunt's novel *Neverhome* shows this in action:

*A cracking session, full of energy and enthusiasm. One chap declared, 'I was hooked from that opening sentence'. Another said 'I loved that fierce independent girl, she was like Mattie Ross in True Grit (a book we had read in the group many months before). 'I felt swept up in her life and I loved the language like when she writes "I miss you fierce".'*

*The letters in the novel and a poem we read towards the end of the session led us to letters in prison and the pleasure for some in writing and reading them. 'I never really wrote letters 'til I was inside and I like the way writing them makes you think about the other person and what you really want to say. Very different from texts and twitter.' Another man talked about how the handwriting in a letter seems to create a physical connection and that sometimes the way the writing moves can let you trace the feelings behind it.*

Books connect us: with family and other people, with the wider culture outside

and with ourselves. For prisoners, the group becomes a place of mutual respect where members learn not only the skills of speaking and listening but how to encourage and support each other.

*'P found the beginning of the book hard going but M on the wing encouraged him to stick with it and soon he found he couldn't put it down'*

Many prisoners pass on their books to family members, which creates a bond and a way to break the ice during often tricky phone calls and visits.

*'My daughter shadow reads our group books and this connection with my family has helped keep us strong and dedicated to one another.'* [A prisoner who had been inside for 16 years.]

Membership builds confidence and ambition and can be a stepping-stone to further learning.

Above all perhaps, the reading group is a place where prisoners can recognise themselves and start to construct a new identity – as readers with ideas and

responses worth sharing with others.

*'There's a lot of pressure on men inside to come across as one of the lads. Book club is a place where I can be myself'*

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Sam reading about the Wild West. CREDIT FOR DRAWING: Matthew Meadows, an artist who has worked in prisons for some years, teaching and supporting prisoner artists. There are other great images on his website [www.matthewmeadows.net](http://www.matthewmeadows.net)