



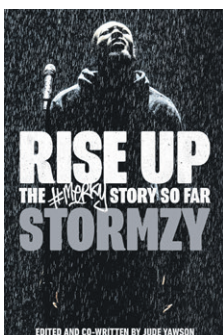
# Reading Group Round-Up

**Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons**



The report this month comes from HMP Bristol where librarian Sophia Dutton worked with some of the men to set up a cultural awareness reading group that would challenge assumptions and create good discussion.

To get things started one of the men went round the wing to get suggestions for good books to tackle. The titles he collected ranged from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* to Stormzy's *Rise Up* along with Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Mikey Walsh's *Gypsy Boy* and *Redemption*, the autobiography of ex-LA gang leader Stanley 'Tookie' Williams.



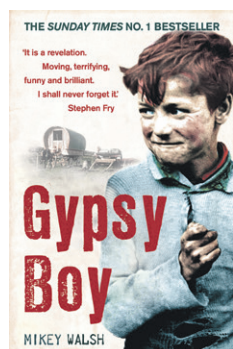
## Rise Up

The group decided to kick-off with Stormzy's autobiography and it provoked plenty of lively debate. Where does inspiration come from, especially for those in prison trying to 'chip away at doubt and negativity'? For some, Stormzy is a role

model for young black men - someone who makes anything seem possible. And indeed he has helped make it so by creating the Stormzy Scholarship to fund black students at Cambridge University. In his words: 'There are so many young black kids all over the country who have the level of academic excellence to study at a university such as Cambridge - however we are still under-represented at leading universities. I hope this scholarship serves as a small reminder that if young black students wish to study at one of the best universities in the world, then the opportunity is yours for the taking - and if funding is one of the barriers, then we can work towards breaking that barrier down.'

But for others in the group, Stormzy's image and music are more complicated. How do we read the cover of his album *Gang Signs and Prayer*: Stormzy in the middle of a black table, wearing all black and leaning on his fists, surrounded by figures in balaclavas, including a young child?

'And what do you think when you hear that line "kick up the yout"?'



## Gypsy Boy

At every meeting, conversation moves freely between the chosen book and individual experience. For example, in the discussion of Mikey Walsh's *Gypsy Boy*, Romany members were able to provide context and deeper understanding

for others through some of their own life stories. And overall, the group provides a safe space where members can explore the effects of prison, in particular the ways in which it forces people 'to wear a mask' to protect themselves. But as one member put it, 'the mask can lead to a loss of identity, to not knowing who you are anymore'. This is exactly the danger explored by the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in his poem 'We Wear the Mask' written well over 100 years ago:

*'We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes-  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask...*

Reading confidence and experience in the group vary but members are alert to this and go out of their way to support each other. As one man put it: 'it's unlike anything else in prison ... an opportunity to relax in the library and talk about things you would never normally discuss on the wing.

For Sophia: 'the book is the springboard that lifts everyone out of the prison environment for that one meeting'.

**HMP Bristol is part of the Prison Reading Groups (PRG) network, which helps set up, fund and support reading groups in more than 45 prisons nationwide. In 2018 we provided over 3,000 books. If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to look at the Prison Reading Groups website [www.prison-readinggroups.org.uk](http://www.prison-readinggroups.org.uk).**



Poet Mr Gee will be judging the Speak Out competition

## NPR EXCLUSIVE: 'Speak Out' - a spoken word competition



Are you into poetry, rap or spoken word? For this month only on NPR we're running an exciting competition in partnership with Shannon Trust called 'Speak Out' - where

you could win an NPR T-Shirt and have your bars read out on air!

All you have to do is send us 100 words on the theme of success. What does success mean to you? Is it about family, friends, good health, keeping hope, achieving

things? Maybe you've had successes and achievements in prison which you're proud of, no matter how small? Maybe prison has changed how you think about success? Or maybe you have an idea in your head of an ideal scenario you'd like to be in?

The best entries will be read out on air, and the top ten will win an NPR T-Shirt and feature in a special 'Speak Out' show on NPR over Christmas ... where we will announce the ultimate winner!

We've got a panel of amazing judges who will be looking through the entries, so listen out for some exciting announcements about who'll be deciding the winner.

Remember - it's just 100 words and it's spoken word - so you don't have to be great at writing to take part; just get your pad-mate or someone you trust to write your words down for you. Or if you're reading this and you know someone who should enter, help them do it. Then tell everyone on your wing and get them to do the same!

Entries should be posted to: **Speak Out, National Prison Radio, HMP Brixton, London SW2 5XF.** We need to get your entry by **Friday 6th December** for your spoken word piece to be considered.

**'Speak Out' is sponsored by Shannon Trust, who train people in prison to help others unlock the power of reading.**

## Roll Call: The show for ex-forces returns to NPR this month!



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organisations which can help you on the inside and after you get released, and there could be support for your loved ones on the out as well as you during your sentence - from financial assistance to specialised mental health services.

We'll be travelling across the country to hear stories of prisoners who've been in the forces, the specific issues they face, and how they're using their time to prepare for Civvy Street. And if you've been in the forces yourself, no matter how long you served, we want to hear from you! It could really help other ex-service personnel inside. Just tell us if you want it to be anonymous.

Maybe you've got help in prison from SSAFA or another armed forces charity? Perhaps you want to get some advice about what support is available? Or maybe you just want to share your story?

**Write to Roll Call, National Prison Radio, London, SW2 5XF. And make sure you tune in every Tuesday in November at midday and 6pm to hear the show!**

Have you spent any time in the armed forces? Even if it was just a day, you could be entitled to more support in prison - and from this month there will be more information about this on NPR.

Roll Call, our show for ex-service personnel, is coming back from 5th November for 6 weeks and there will be loads of information about the support you can get if you're ex-forces. There are some amazing charities and