

# BOOKS BEHIND BARS

Prison Reading Groups celebrated its twenty-first birthday this year. Its co-founder and director, *Sarah Turvey*, explains how it has helped thousands of inmates feel calmer and more confident

AS ALL READERS KNOW, books can be very private encounters that offer escape from our surroundings and daily lives. But books also connect us with other people and with a wider culture. In the 1990s I taught English Literature at the University of Roehampton and with my colleague Jenny Hartley I began research into the benefits of reading groups and the kind of sociability they offer. Over and again members reported the pleasure and challenge of a space where people meet first and foremost as readers even though they may also be friends, neighbours, husbands or wives.

Good book talk requires attentive reading, openness to other views and critical reflection. These seemed to us pleasures and skills that could be of particular benefit to prisoners. They also fit well into current thinking about rehabilitation and the need for offenders to forge a new, socialised sense of self. Reading groups are places where this can happen, where members can define and present themselves as readers rather than failed low-life.

Prisoners recognise and value this. In answer to a survey question ‘What do you like about the reading group?’:

*It's a conversation where you have to proper listen and not just sound off.*

*You can laugh and feel like a person.*

*I've got a 13-year-old daughter I don't see much of but it's great I can tell her I'm reading books in this group.*

PRG began with reading groups in two prisons and we realised early on that the inside support of library staff would be crucial. They organise all the publicity and recruitment, they liaise with officers over unlock and escort and, above all, they help create a culture of reading pleasure in the prison. Good

prison libraries have been described by inspectors as ‘oases of calm’ and visitors invariably comment that they are the one place in the prison that looks and feels like the outside.

We also rely on brilliant volunteers who bring in the wider world and confirm prisoners’ connection to it. Our volunteers come from all kinds of backgrounds: writers, teachers, carers, lawyers and more. They bring many different skills, but all share an enjoyment of books and exchanging views with others: ‘I never cease to be astonished at how widely our conversations range and the diversity of views. There’s an appetite to make up for lost education and an eagerness to try new things. And that includes me too, as I’m regularly introduced to new genres and authors and to books I should have read. It’s a very rewarding experience.’

Since our start in 1999 PRG has grown steadily and we now support more than 45 groups in over 40 prisons nationwide. In 2017 we became part of the charity Give a Book and together we run family reading projects to provide books for children as well as workshops to help prisoner parents feel more confident about reading with their kids.

The core elements of PRG are simple. Our reading groups are voluntary and informal, there are no tests, no certificates and no right or wrong answers. Prisoners join at any time and remain members for as long as they want to come. Numbers vary from five or six to a dozen or more and meetings may take place weekly or monthly or somewhere in between. Coming for the first time can be a challenge for someone not used to reading or talking about books, but most come back for more and many seek out a new PRG group after transfers.

The wide range of reading confidence and lived experience can make for extraordinary encounters. The men who discussed Antonio Iturbe’s *Librarian of Auschwitz* had very different starting points, from a Polish national who went to the camp aged seven on a school trip to the twenty-something young man who confessed, ‘I didn’t know anything about this.’ But everyone was keen to contribute.

*Can you say you enjoyed it? I don't know but I was gripped and moved by it.*

*It was the little ways they found to fight back that gave you hope when you were reading.*

*The pranks made you remember they were kids like ours.*

After the meeting one member followed up with a written reflection:

*A female hairdresser from Bavaria turned Nazi, turned executioner – an everyday German who in another era would have remained so. It makes us ask: who are we? What are we capable of?*

Choice is a crucial part of becoming a reader and groups themselves choose their books. People often ask, ‘What do prisoners read?’ The answer is that most groups want to read as widely and ambitiously as they can. The lists below show six months of choices made by two of our groups.

---

READING IS ABOUT THE OTHER:  
DISCOVERING WHAT THE WORLD  
MIGHT LOOK LIKE TO PEOPLE VERY  
DIFFERENT FROM OURSELVES

---



©CLIFFORD HARPER

MEN'S GROUP

*Beloved*, Toni Morrison  
*Small Gods*, Terry Pratchett  
*The Gustav Sonata*,  
Rose Tremain  
*In Order to Live*, Yeonmi Park  
*Ordinary Thunderstorms*,  
William Boyd  
*You Don't Know Me*,  
Imran Mahmood

WOMEN'S GROUP

*Child 44*, Tom Rob Smith  
*Perfume*, Patrick Suskind  
*Nine Perfect Strangers*,  
Liane Moriarty  
*Mythos*, Stephen Fry  
*You Don't Know Me*,  
Imran Mahmood  
*The Places In Between*,  
Rory Stewart

Like all reading communities, prisoners bring shared experience to their interpretations. The group who read Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* were very quick to recognise the cause of Hanna's strange behaviour, well before it's revealed to the reader. As one member put it:

*If you can't read in prison you're vulnerable and that can make you very aggressive.*

But reading is also about the other: discovering what the world might look and feel like to people very different from ourselves. Anthony Ray Hinton was a prisoner on Death Row in Alabama for 29 years. In a recent Radio 4 documentary he describes the book club he started and tells the story of its one white member, a former Klansman ordered by his own father to kill a randomly chosen African-American. After he read James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and learnt something of what it felt like to be a Black man in America, he told the group, 'I felt ashamed.' A less dramatic but equally telling moment occurred in a PRG group when they discussed Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. The group was racially mixed and the discussion was forthright. At the end of it, a middle-aged white member remarked:

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

Funding from our donors means that members get new copies to keep or pass on to others on the wing. Books are valuable cultural capital and many prisoners display them proudly on a shelf in their cell. Some send them out to family and share views in phone calls or visits.

PRG's work has been widely recognised and in 2019 we were delighted to receive an award from the Longford Trust for outstanding contribution to prison reform.

But then in March came lockdown. The result was no visits, no Education, no association, no gym and of course no access to the internet. In some prisons bang-up lasted 23+ hours a day. Libraries were closed and, as 'non-essential' employees, most library staff were not allowed on site. Many prisons have tried to provide and stock book trolleys on the wings so people can take a book when they collect their daily hot meal. But more than six months later almost all libraries are still shut to prisoners, though some operate a limited delivery service for those who make specific requests from their cells.

PRG and Give a Book have worked hard to adapt what we offer and find new ways of promoting books and reading. Our groups can't meet face-to-face, but some of them have been determined to keep going with solitary reading and individual written comments that are collected, collated and circulated by an inside facilitator. It's harder work for everyone but heartening evidence of the appetite for reading and sharing views.

One group decided to shadow the Carnegie Prize by reading and swapping all eight books on the shortlist. The librarian supported it remotely and reported great success: 'A real mix of opinions which is brilliant. A range of paces – some members have read nearly all of them while others have only read one or two but I think they've enjoyed the project so far. A couple of men managed to listen to the winner announcement last week on Radio 4 and I'm sending those who missed it some of the details tomorrow.'

The librarian in a Young Offenders Institution persuaded officers and some of their assigned boys to team up as 'reading pairs'. They discuss the chosen book and write joint feedback that is shared with others. The first and bold choice was *My Name Is Why*, Lemn Sissay's devastating memoir of growing up in care. Feedback from the project has been very positive and since it began trust between staff and the boys has noticeably improved.

After the killing of George Floyd another prison approached us for advice and support to start a #BlackLivesMatter group. We provided copies of Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* to get them going and the group looks set to last.

Listening to books can also be a great pleasure and a way in for less experienced readers. PRG and Penguin Random House are working with prison radio stations to make more audiobooks available and to provide hard copies for listeners who want to read alongside the broadcasts. Recent titles have included H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, Stormzy's autobiography, *Rise Up*, and Kate Atkinson's *Transcription*.

Foreign national prisoners who may speak little English have been especially hard hit by lockdown. Give a Book teamed up with RSL Fellows to send foreign language copies of their books to prisons where they're needed. The 30+ languages sent so far include Catalan, Farsi, Urdu and Estonian as well as German, Polish, Russian and Spanish. Tracy Chevalier explains: 'I donated books because I know what a transformative power books can have on people. I've worked in prisons before, with the charity Fine Cell Work, and it's clear to me that we have let prisoners down. They need care and support to change – rehabilitation not just punishment. I hope that books can play one small part in that transformation.' ○ *Prison Reading Groups* ([prisonreadinggroups.org.uk](http://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk)) is part of *Give a Book* ([giveabook.org.uk](http://giveabook.org.uk)).

December,  
the last of the year  
gone hard and black

on its hook,  
the day already  
nine hours dark,

the last train taking  
the higher line  
through the edge of town,

looking down  
into back gardens  
and back yards, nosing

through private diaries,  
photographs,  
turned over stones.

A woman framed  
in a bedroom window,  
head in her hands,

is Woman Framed  
In Bedroom Window  
With Head In Hands,

early Anthropocene,  
School of Huddersfield,  
artist unknown.

*Simon Armitage*