

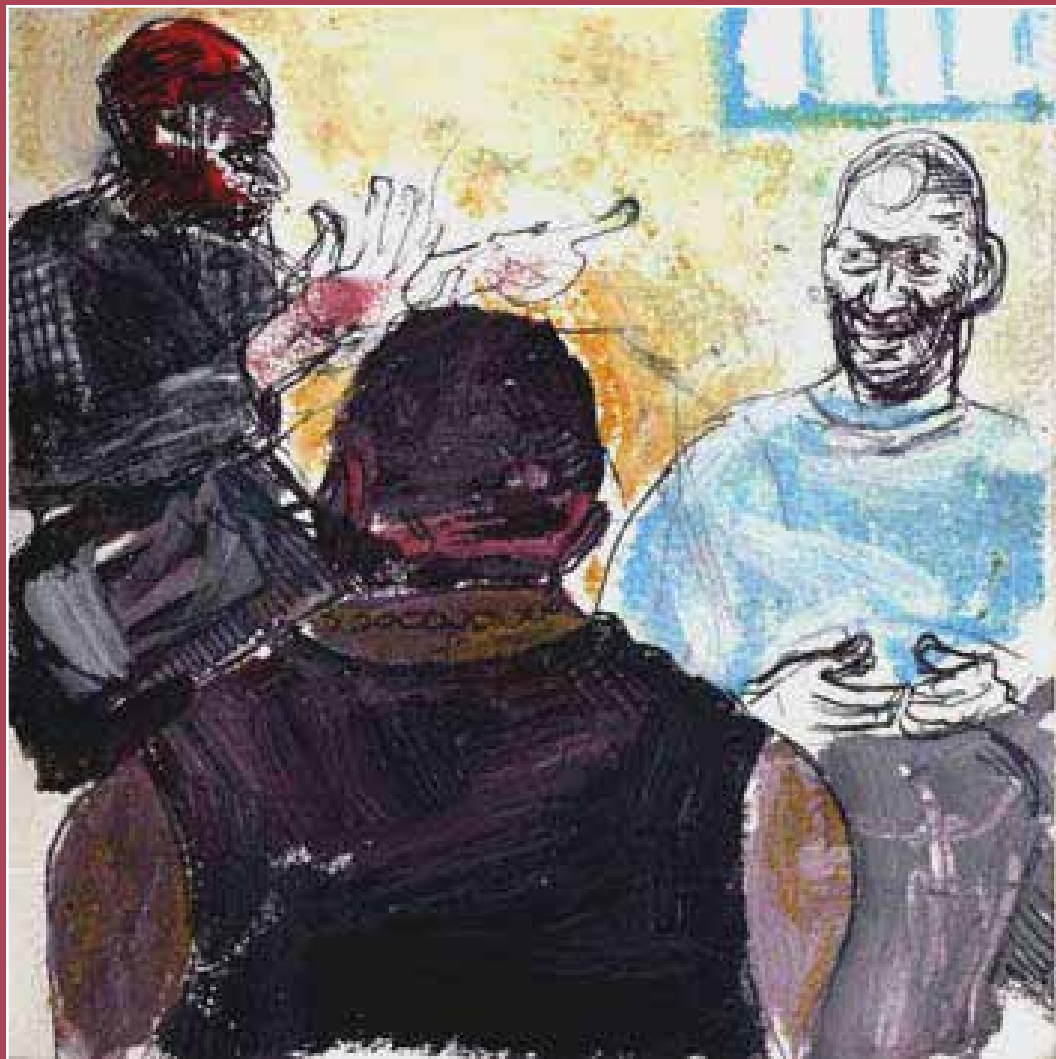
Prison Reading Groups

Annual Review 2020



*‘You can laugh and
feel like a person’*





‘ A conversation where you have to proper listen and not just sound off ’

Welcome

At the start of 2020 PRG was flying high. We had just been awarded a Longford Trust prize for outstanding contribution to prison reform and we had over 56 thriving reading groups in 43 prisons with more in the pipeline.



‘ In the book club we don’t necessarily agree – and why should we? That’s the beauty of it. We always give various works a fair crack of the whip and all thoughts are safely welcomed and encouraged ’

We were also on course to support 60 Family Days with books and volunteers and were planning a further roll out of *What Happens Next?*, our workshop with prisoner fathers to help them enjoy books with their children.

Then came the first lockdown in March: no visits, no library access, no Education classes, no gym or association and in some prisons bang-up for 23+ hours a day.

The challenges were daunting: how do you promote books and reading when libraries are closed and there are no library staff on site? how do you run reading groups if people can’t meet and have no internet access? how do you support family reading when there are no visits?

PRG went into action fast to look for new ways of working and together with our parent charity Give a Book we found them. We’re very proud of what we achieved in 2020 and delighted to share it in this Annual Review.

It is clear that our projects won’t return to normal for some time, but we’re confident that PRG has the flexibility and resilience to sustain and extend our work in 2021 and to nurture the pleasures of books and reading in even more prisons nationwide.

Sarah Turvey, Director
Olivia Loveridge, Projects Manager
 January 2021

Cover image credit: Lawrence Mathias

Supporting libraries and reaching readers

When the first lockdown hit in March all prison libraries were closed and as 'non-essential', library staff were not allowed on site. But we stayed in touch and with library advice PRG and Give a Book sent in boxes of varied titles for trolleys on the wings. These included many foreign language translations donated by Royal Society of Literature authors.

In total we sent more than

3000+
books to
37
prisons





'His face when I said he could keep the book was a treat and more excited than I thought anyone could be, it was like I had given him a car! It just shows how important books are to the men right now.'

(HMP Lincoln)

New Resources

Many prisons have now introduced a 'request and delivery' service to enable prisoners to ask for specific books that are then collected from the library and delivered in-cell. To encourage reading and help less experienced readers make their requests, PRG has created new resources.

Bookstuff

is a weekly handout that promotes the pleasures and possibilities of books. We created it early in lockdown and it's now going strong, often focusing on current events such as #Black Lives Matter, the US election and – of course – the pandemic.

Finding a good read in the library

This is a short guide that outlines different genres and major writers. We are now also working on a video version that can be shown on prison television and media channels.

'I work on the Equalities team and I've just seen your Black History Month Bookstuff issue. It's brilliant and I'll include it in the information pack for new prisoners. Please keep sending them.'

(HMP Downview)



Poem of the week

A bookish quiz

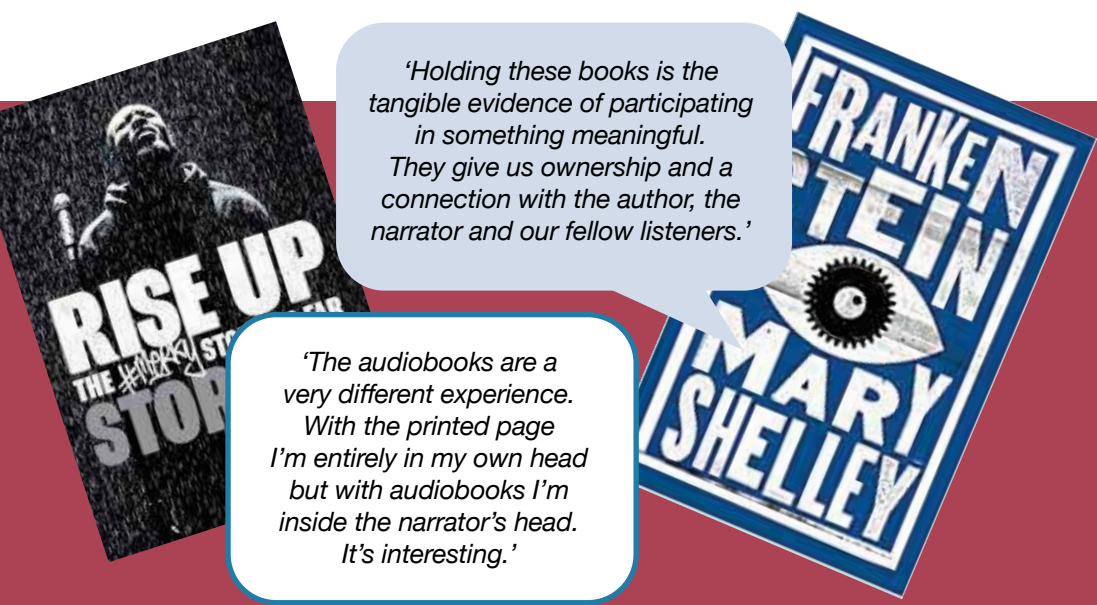


"Books and doors are the same thing. You open them and go through into another world"



Audiobooks

are a great way to enjoy books, especially when you can't get to a library. When lockdown started PRG worked with Penguin Random House and Radio Wanno's Bookclub to provide audio files for broadcast, together with hard copies for listeners who want to read along. The chosen titles are a great mix including Stormzy's autobiography *Rise Up*, H G Wells's *War of the Worlds* and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.



'Holding these books is the tangible evidence of participating in something meaningful. They give us ownership and a connection with the author, the narrator and our fellow listeners.'

'The audiobooks are a very different experience. With the printed page I'm entirely in my own head but with audiobooks I'm inside the narrator's head. It's interesting.'


The project has been a great success and will be rolled out further in 2021.

'You can only achieve things like this by working in partnership, so I'd like to extend a hand of thanks to PRG, Penguin Random House and the people involved for making it possible. One of the HMPPS motifs is Changing Lives Together and I think that's happening here.'

Kevin Field, Head of Communications,
Radio Wanno and Events, HMP Wandsworth

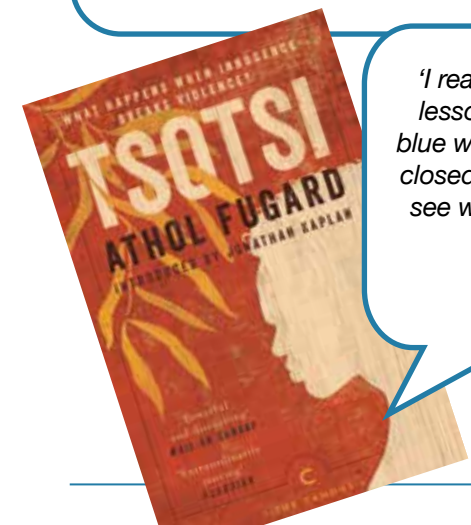
The power of reading in prison

Books are partly a private pleasure, connecting the reader with self and personal experience. And this can be especially valuable for prisoners who often feel themselves reduced to a number and defined only as a criminal loser.



'The situation in this book was very akin to being in prison – you have no idea what your family is going through and they have no idea what you are going through. This creates fear and worry. The book was comforting and thought-provoking and helped me through my first week here.'

(HMP Ford)



'I read it at school and I loved English lessons. Our classroom had beautiful blue walls and when we read the teacher closed the curtains so all we could really see was the print on the page. It made you see the story instead.'

(HMP Bullingdon)

Reading groups and sociability

Reading groups allow that individual experience to be shared, compared and enriched through discussion with others.

'Our group is very varied and gives you contact with those from other wings. Our discussions bring different perspectives and often unlock something I may have missed or misunderstood.'

PRG groups are flexible and varied but share core elements: they are voluntary and informal; members choose what they read, and groups are open-ended so prisoners can join at any time and remain members for as long as they want to come. Where possible the group is run by an outside volunteer with invaluable support from library staff.

A recent PRG survey also indicates that membership of the group builds confidence and sociability, and can encourage volunteering – from mentoring for the Shannon Trust literacy scheme to working as a Samaritan Listener.

And being in the group can help members connect with family as well.

'Michael has a 13 year old daughter he hasn't seen much of but really wants to connect with. He told me "it's great I can tell her I'm reading books and in this group".'

(HMP Bullingdon)

'I now help design the booklet that each prisoner receives on arrival.'

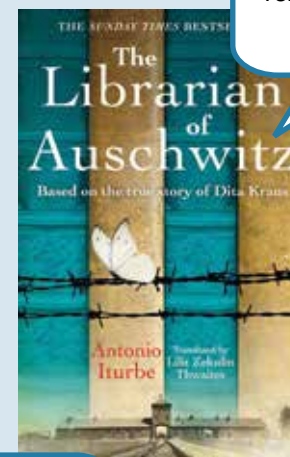
'I now try to see more than my own point of view.'

(HMP Rye Hill)

PRG Voices

PRG groups often bring together members with very different backgrounds and reading experience. A pre-lockdown discussion of Antonio Iturbe's *The Librarian of Auschwitz* at HMP Wandsworth put this in sharp relief but also showed how books can open up the world and connect people across divides.

The book is based on the true story of Dita Krauss, a teenaged Jewish girl put in charge of the secret, 8-book library in Block 31 of the camp. The men had very different starting points – from the Polish member who went to the camp on a school trip in primary school to the 20-something young man, 'I didn't know anything about this'. But everyone was keen to contribute.



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

Prison parallels were a way in for some of the less experienced readers – crowded bunks, inspections, food – but everyone was very careful to stress the different scale. After the meeting one of the members followed up with a written reflection.

'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 discussion pushed us up against a wall of introspection. A female hairdresser from Bavaria, turned Nazi, turned executioner – an everyday German who in another era would have remained so. We ask: who are we? What are we capable of?'

Reading groups in Lockdown

Lockdown made face to face meetings impossible and could have threatened the survival of our reading groups. Instead it stimulated brilliant ideas for ways to adapt.

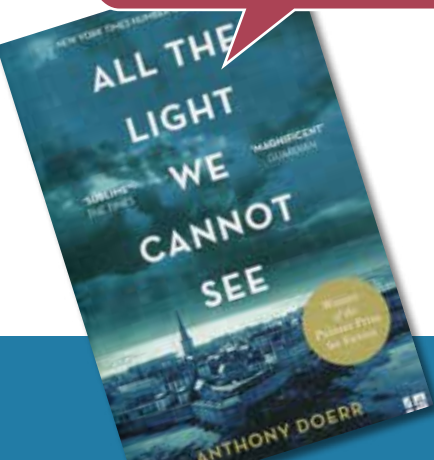
In some groups the inside contact gets book suggestions from individual members and then works with a volunteer to produce discussion notes for the chosen title. Members read on their own but their written comments are collected, collated and shared with the rest of the group through a newsletter. Responses are full and thoughtful and confirm just how much appetite there is for reading and sharing views.

'Perhaps we need fairy tales precisely because they are not "true" – because we need to be able to dream of a better world, full of light we cannot see.'

(member, HMP Ford)

'The second of our virtual meetings for the group again proved successful. The responses were varied and engaging – and combine to provide a genuine form of "discussion".'

(facilitator, HMP Warren Hill)



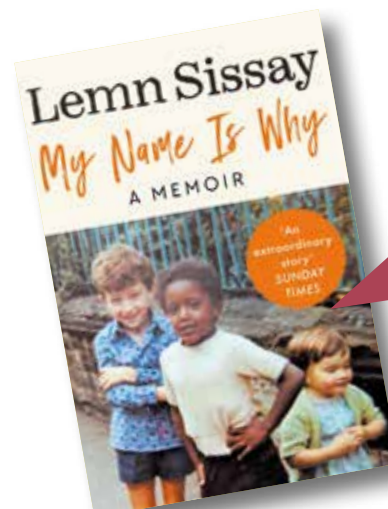
Things to think about

1. Gay Talese was heralded as one of America's first 'New Journalists'. What seems new, or at least original, about the way he chooses to tell the story of each of his subjects?
Noticing the small things, being a fly on the wall and your earwigging in the scenes and conversations.
2. What characteristics do a lot of the people Talese chooses to profile in this book have in common? Was he looking for the same thing in them each time?
Successful or have tasted success. A certain age and experience. Have experienced loss

Book Talk

To support these new ways of working we've created a website resource called Book Talk with monthly book suggestions and discussion notes. It's popular and we now have 40 remote groups across the country.

Individual prisons have adapted their groups to meet local need. In one Young Offenders Institution (YOI) officers and their assigned young men have become 'reading pairs' who read and talk about the book with each other and then write feedback together for other pairs. The bold first choice was Lemn Sissay's memoir *My Name Is Why*, a devastating account of growing up in care which provoked some very searching discussion.



'The boys discuss the book one to one with their officer or with Education staff. It can be an icebreaker especially for the hard to reach YPs.'

(HMP YOI Cookham Wood)

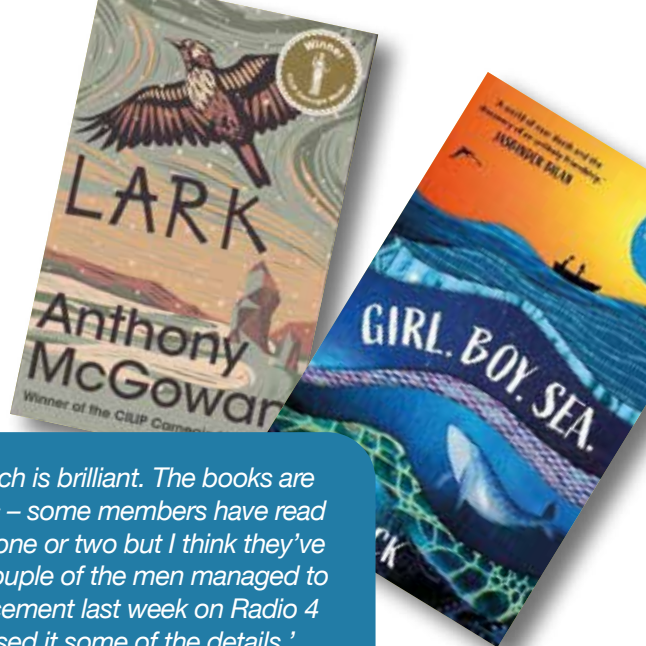


Carnegie book prize

Another group decided to shadow the Carnegie book prize and they read all the books on the 2020 shortlist.

'It's a real mix of opinions which is brilliant. The books are being read at a range of paces – some members have read nearly all of them, others only one or two but I think they've enjoyed the project so far. A couple of the men managed to listen to the winners' announcement last week on Radio 4 and I'll send those who missed it some of the details.'

(Librarian, HMP Erlestoke)



#Black Lives Matter

In the wake of George Floyd's death a prison contacted us for advice and support to create a #Black Lives Matter reading group. We were able to provide suggestions, books and discussion ideas, and the group took off very successfully.

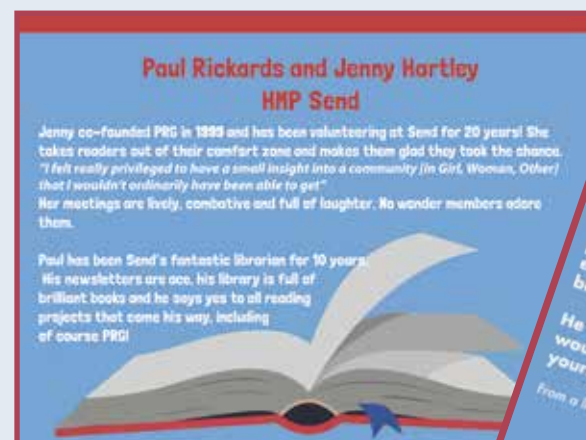
'One of my 5 best novels I've read in my entire life. Amazing story telling. It kept me sad and teary all the way through but I'm happy that authors like C. Whitehead are talking about reality using fiction. Best book to read if you think BLACK LIVES MATTER.'

(HMP Rye Hill)



PRG awards

In 2019 we inaugurated the PRG Awards for outstanding work by those involved: librarians, volunteers, officers, groups and individual members. In 2020 we couldn't hold a live event so we celebrated on social media which generated lots of interest and support.



PRG award winners

Diane Brown, Librarian, HMP Dovegate

Kelly Fuller, Librarian, HMP Erlestoke

David Herd, Librarian, HMP North Sea Camp

Julian Earwaker, Prison Contact, HMP Warren Hill

Kirstin Anderson, Volunteer, HMP Shotts

Chaplain **Liz** and Custody Manager **Anna**, Joint Award, HMP Wandsworth

Paul Rickards, Librarian and **Jenny Hartley**, volunteer, Joint Award, HMP Send

Group award, Best Discussion, HMP East Sutton Park

Family Reading

Since the March lockdown there have been almost no family visits and many prisoners have gone for months without seeing family face to face. PRG and Give a Book have provided over 2000 children's books at 31 prisons for parents and children to share in phone calls or video visits. It's a great way for families to connect and to break the ice at the beginning of a call.



Books from PRG at HMP Sudbury

"Thank you so much for your donation of titles to enable our men to read stories over the phone in their cell. They've been greatly received and we are now putting together a mini booklet to advertise these for our men."

**PRG and Give a Book
have provided over 2000
children's books at 31 prisons**

There were also some great initiatives at individual prisons including books to accompany CD recordings, prizes for competitions to bring prisoners and their kids together, and birthday presents sent out from parents inside.

'We can't get prisoners to the library so I've organised for a number of staff here to record children's stories. I sent brochures out into the prison last week for the men to choose a story or two and then we will send them out to their families from Dad. The dads have also been encouraged to add their own letter/ picture to send with the CD.'

(HMP Parc)

We commissioned a special audio recording by Toby Stephens of *The Night Before Christmas*. It went out on Radio Wanno in December and there were 100 copies available for listeners and their children. The broadcast was repeated regularly throughout December so the men could practise along with the book in their cell and feel confident for the Christmas call.



PRG in the spotlight



August 2019:

PRG good practice cited in the UNESCO report *Books Beyond Bars: The Transformative Potential of Prison Libraries* (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning)



November 2019:

PRG awarded a Longford Trust prize for *outstanding contribution to prison reform*

March 2020:

Jenny Hartley, 'Twenty Years Behind Bars: Reading Aloud in Prison Reading Groups', *Changing English*, 27 (1)



December 2020:

Sarah Turvey, 'Books Behind Bars' in *The Royal Society of Literature Review 2020*

January 2021:

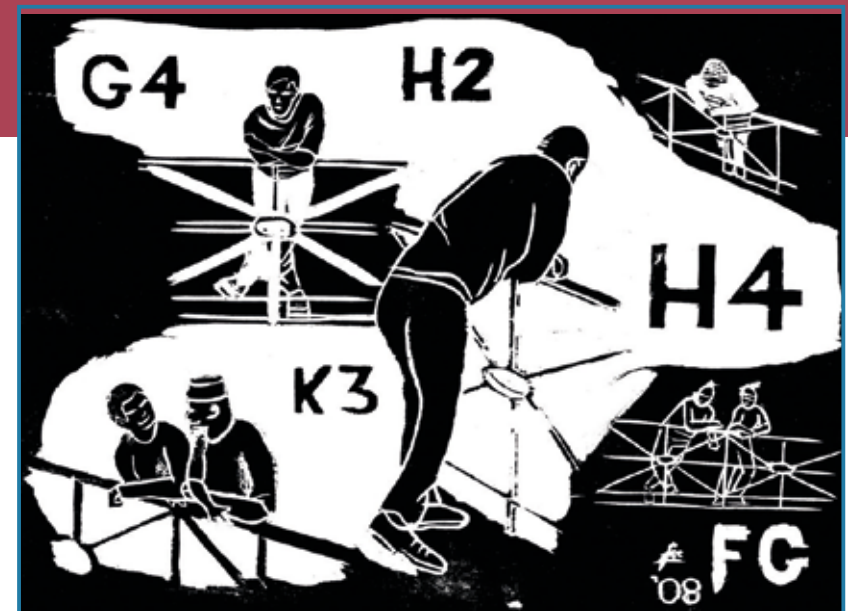
cited in Sam Duncan, *Oral Literacies, When Adults Read Aloud* (Oxford and New York: Routledge)



PRG also has a regular column in *Inside Time*, the national newspaper for prisoners. Reading Group Roundup reports every other month about a different group book choice and discussion to highlight the pleasures and challenges of reading for those inside.

2021 and beyond

As the year goes on we hope that prisons will be able to open up activities for prisoners and access for outside organisations. Meanwhile, PRG will continue to provide as much support as we can for remote reading groups and family reading projects.



We will also focus on new prison radio and tv projects that can promote books and the pleasures of reading across whole prisons.

'You are doing a great job and during these unnerving times it is nice to see positives emerge. Thank you'

www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk | www.giveabook.org.uk

Partners and funders

We are very grateful to all our donors and partners and in particular:



Give a Book

www.giveabook.org.uk

Give a Book is a UK registered charity, set up in 2011 in memory of writer and playwright Simon Gray, who loved to read and to share his reading. They are dedicated to promoting books and the pleasure of reading in the hardest places, working mainly in prisons, schools and with disadvantaged children. PRG is delighted to be part of Give a Book.



Penguin Random House

www.penguinrandomhouse.co.uk

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 reading projects. We welcome PRH volunteers and helped them lead a workshop on *The Poetry Pharmacy* at HMP Wandsworth for World Book Day in March 2020.



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 reading initiatives and we are very grateful.



University of Roehampton

www.roehampton.ac.uk

PRG and the University of Roehampton enjoy a partnership to share expertise, volunteering opportunities and research projects.

Original artwork courtesy of Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net and Darren and Frank of the My Life Now project at HMP Wandsworth

Thanks to Susie Bush www.susiebushdesign.com for design work.



'This book club is great –
good books, robust discussions
– more of the same please!'



"No, thanks. Reading is my escape."

CartoonCollections.com

Image credit: Tom Toro

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