

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was created in 1999 to set up, support and fund informal reading groups in prisons. We now support more than 60 groups in over 45 prisons nationwide. PRG is part of Give a Book.



First featured in Inside Time in November 2021

Finding a Good Read: Families

A regular column to help you find a good read even if you can't get to the library yet

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
Leo Tolstoy, ***Anna Karenina***

Families are everywhere, in life and in books. And almost all readers have experience of family – good, bad or both. Here are some categories and titles to look out for.

Crime, Thrillers and Horror

Lisa Jewell, ***The Family Upstairs*** or ***The House We Grew Up In***: Lisa Gardner, ***Right Behind You***; Stephen King, ***The Shining*** or ***Carrie***: Linwood Barclay, ***Never Look Away***; Gillian Flynn, ***Dark Places***; Shirley Jackson, ***We Have Always Lived at the Castle***. And the greatest crime family of 'em all in Mario Puzo's ***The Godfather***.

Families of the Wider World

The story of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's ***The Grapes of Wrath*** is also about the devastation caused by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl in 1930s America.

The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett is about Black twin sisters who run away to New Orleans as teenagers but from there take different life paths. When they are finally reunited they have to reckon with their choices.

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie is a twisty and surreal book that connects a family's history to India's independence and partition in the 1940s.

Chinua Achebe's ***Things Fall Apart*** is about Okonkwo, an Igbo wrestling champion, and his family. But it's also about the effects of British colonialism on Nigerian culture and beliefs.

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi tells the story of half-sisters Effia and Esi in 18c Ghana. One marries an Englishman and lives in splendour, the other is shipped off to America where her children and grandchildren will be raised in slavery.

The Secret Scripture by Sebastian Barry uncovers the story of an old woman in a mental institution. In the process it also tells a story about the 20c history of Ireland.

Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart is a painful, powerful novel about a little boy growing up in Glasgow and his love for his damaged mother, drinking herself slowly to death.



Memoirs

Family looms large in memoirs, from terrible parental failure to comic accounts of growing up in loving mayhem.

Lots of life-stories play on the comedy of family life. Bill Bryson's *Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, Romesh Ranganathan's *Straight Outta Crawley* and David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* are laugh aloud funny. Or check out Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, the adventures of an English family who move to Corfu to live eccentrically among toads, scorpions, octopuses, bats and puppies.

At the other end are so-called 'misery memoirs' like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Constance Briscoe's *Ugly*, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* or Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It*. For some readers they just feel like a catalogue of mistreatment and neglect, summed up in a famous line by the poet Philip Larkin: 'They f*** you up, your mum and dad'. But they can be a powerful read.

Standout titles about children who are failed by family and society include *My Name is Why*, Lemn Sissay's searing story of growing up in care, and Jeanette Winterson's account of the misery of her adopted childhood in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. Tara Westover's *Educated* tells the story of her determined escape from her survivalist Mormon family in order to experience the world and get an education.

In between are memoirs with both humour and seriousness. Alan Bennett's *Untold Stories* is both funny and poignant about growing up in Leeds, and Nigel Slater's *Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger* is a touching story of childhood told through memories of food.

Childhood memoirs can be both hilarious and horrifying. In *Priestdaddy*, Patricia Lockwood writes about her wacky gun-toting father who underwent a religious conversion on a submarine and became a Catholic priest despite already having a wife and children. Or try Augusten Burroughs' *Running with Scissors* about his adolescence spent with the family of his mother's crazy psychiatrist.



Top TV family

Who's it to be: Dynasty, Mum, Succession, The Good Wife, Outnumbered, The Sopranos, Malcolm in the Middle, Downton Abbey, Dallas, The Addams Family??? Reader, you decide.

If you've read a good book recently send a review in no more than 100 words and mark it 'Finding a Good Read'. We'll print the best ones.

