

Prison Reading Groups

Annual Review 2021

‘A time where we could just be us’



Welcome

2021 was another tough year in prisons. COVID-19 kept regimes restricted and put pressure on both prisoners and staff. Most libraries did not re-open until the autumn and then only for a couple of months until the omicron spike forced them to close again. In many prisons, family visits were suspended for most of the year and prisoners did not see their children for twelve months or more.



I have a parole hearing at the end of July, which if I get means I won't have many more wonderful books to read before I get out. I will miss this. J

In conditions like these, books are more important than ever. They offer escape of course but also comfort, challenge and connection.

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) worked hard to spread the pleasure of reading and the power of books and there is much to celebrate: the extended roll-out of new ways of working and resources; reaching wider readerships through TV and radio, and more projects to connect prisoner parents with their children.

PRG's parent charity is Give a Book (GAB) and we are immensely proud of what we have achieved together. As one supporter put it: 'Parent, big sister and above all the biggest best friend to PRG.'

Special thanks to Mima Edye-Lindner, PRG & GAB Projects Manager. Mima took up the role mid-year and has helped guide PRG with energy and brilliant ideas. Not to mention great patience and unflappability.

Our success relies on the resilience and determination of those we work with: librarians, prison staff, family reading staff, volunteers and above all, prisoners with an appetite for reading and connecting through books.

Sarah Turvey, Director & co-founder
February 2022

Reading across the prison

PRG provided books for initiatives like the '**Great Big Read**' at HMP Lancaster Farms. Both prisoners and staff took part and the librarian produced a brilliant display of responses that was shared across the prison.

World Book Night is an annual celebration of books and reading, overseen by The Reading Agency. One of the 2021 titles was *Elevation*, by Stephen King. PRG offered it to our prisons and it was read in six of them, including HMP Rye Hill:

'Love the variety, and now we can immerse ourselves deeper with a degree of ownership as we hold in our hands and read from the books themselves. I personally practise reading aloud as the voice on Radio Wanno'

(listener survey response)

Audiobooks at Wandsworth

Radio is a great way to reach people in prison, especially when they can't get out of their cells. In partnership with Penguin Random House, PRG supports Radio Wanno's bookclub with audiobooks plus hard copies for those who want to read along.

'Stephen, ye canna change the laws of physics. But it drew me in.'



Resources

Finding a Good Read

In 2020 PRG created **Finding a Good Read** to help readers make requests without access to the library or a catalogue. It started as a monthly column in *Inside Time*, the national prisoners' newspaper, and is now also a handout that can be put on the wings or inside books when they're delivered. Themes and genres covered

include thrillers, biography and memoir, London, families, historical novels and books to film.

In 2021 we commissioned four short **Finding a Good Read** videos that were first broadcast on WayOut TV and have now been offered to all prisons with a media channel.

'This is superb. We'll play as is this week!'

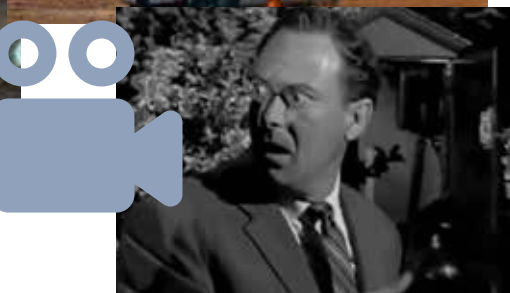
(Jezz Wright, Head of Digital Learning and Strategy including WayOut TV, People Plus)

'This is brilliant! Can't wait to see more.'

(HMP Durham)



FANTASY & SCI-FI



"No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting." Mary Wortley Montagu

Bookstuff

Mrs Darwin 7 April 1852

Went to the Zoo.

I said to Him –

Something about that chimpanzee over there reminds me of you.

Did you know...???

Our fortnightly handout of poems, short stories, philosophical conundrums and book quizzes circulates widely in all our prisons and seems to be enjoyed by prisoners and staff alike. We've produced nearly 40 since lockdown began and it's still going strong.



'We put segments of it in the staff newsletter.'

(Librarian, HMP Thameside)

'It's a great resource...we always include a copy in our request and delivery packages from the library.'

(Librarian, HMP Ford)

3. Name those dogs:

- i. Dorothy's dog in *The Wizard of Oz*
- ii. Bill Sykes' dog in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*
- iii. Dennis' dog in *Dennis the Menace* comic
- iv. Tintin's dog
- v. Obelix's dog (*Asterix* comics)



Puns to make you groan

I invested a lot of money in an origami business, but it folded.

Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.

I had a crazy dream last night. I was swimming in an ocean of orange soda. Turns out it was just a Fanta sea.

I don't trust stairs because they're always up to something.

Reading groups and Book Talk

The pleasure and power of a reading group is the chance to connect with other people and test out responses and ideas. Good groups always involve a difference of view but they're also a collective effort to extend meaning.

Remote conversations

For most of the year very few of our groups could meet face to face so we had to find alternatives. Our solution was to create a new monthly resource called **Book Talk** with suggested titles and discussion notes for a new way of working. Our brilliant librarians organise recruitment, distribution and feedback and it's been a great success in more than 40 prisons.

Responses are thoughtful and often detailed and are powerful evidence of the appetite for reading and book talk even in the trickiest circumstances.

'Such a shame we have had to hold back on meeting in person but I'm sure we'll be able to have another session soon. Meanwhile, here are all the feedback comments on January's choice.' (library newsletter, HMP Send)

*We're up and running again!
Well, virtually at least.
Can't quite explain how happy
this has made me!*

(Librarian, HMP Northumberland)



*'Being able to share and discuss
once again was brilliant, and of
course we had the odd laugh too.'*

(Member, HMP North Sea Camp)

Face to face again!

Libraries began to open up again in the autumn and a few groups were able to meet in person again. After 18 months of reading alone, there was both excitement and nervousness.

But all the feedback confirms the renewed pleasure of being together again for live book talk.

*'Such a long time since our last
meeting that all the previous
members have left. Lots of
advertising and promoting but
would anyone turn up?'*

(Library Manager,
HMP North Sea Camp)



*'The most enjoyable thing I've
done since the start of covid.'*

(Member, HMP North Sea Camp)

...and back to the cell

The omicron spike towards the end of the year sent groups back to remote reading and 'talking'. But there is great determination and resilience out there and they've taken it in their stride:

'We managed one in-person group before tighter restrictions came back and we're back to written feedback at the moment. The books continue to be a great relationship builder – even when I'm just handing them out.'

(Reader in Residence, HMP Warren Hill)



Vital connections

Books connect us – with each other, the world and ourselves – and these connections have never been more important than over the last two years. So it's been especially heartening to read what PRG members have discovered.

'It was amazing to hear them talk to each other about all those things. On the landings they mostly just try to sound tough.' (Officer, HMP Wandsworth)

'Some of our readers always have something to say about the choices. One man stopped me yesterday to wax lyrical about The Toymakers.'

(Librarian, HMP Rye Hill)



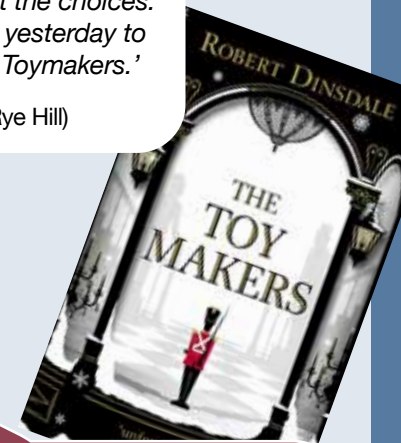
'It's terrifying to think that while these characters are fictional, the horrors they lived through are the reality of thousands and thousands.'

(Member, HMP Wymott)



'A young man who had been pretty disengaged suddenly came to at the mention of Andrea Levy's Small Island. 'I remember a teacher reading it to us at school. You could just sit there, all relaxed, like watching a film but you got to direct it yourself.'

(Volunteer, HMP Wandsworth)



The rewards of running a reading group

PRG groups are voluntary and informal and may be run by the librarian, a volunteer, a writer in residence or a prisoner member. They all stress the delight of being involved.

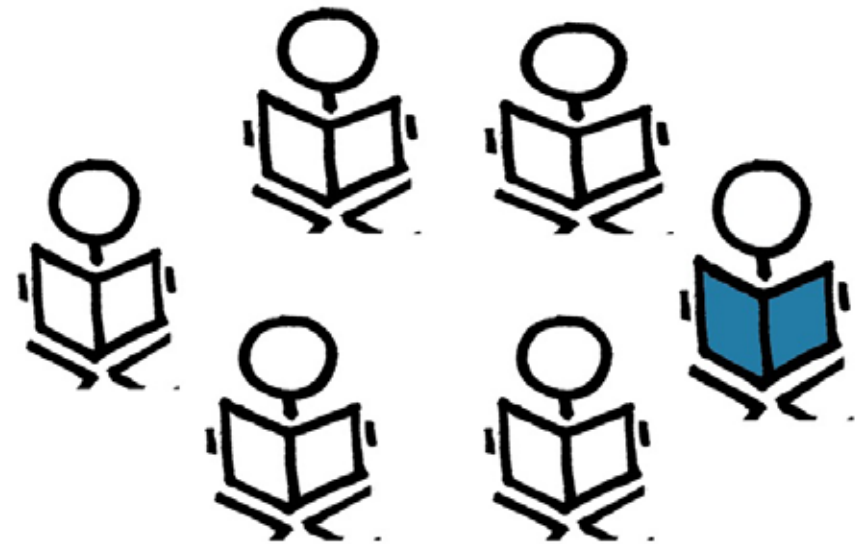


'HMP Wandsworth might look forbidding, but I've grown to love it. Friends ask: "Aren't you scared?" Never. I just hope the men return to their cells with a small inner glow; that the book we've read leads to more books; that reading becomes a sustenance and solace through the weeks, months, years ahead.'

Maggie Fergusson, Volunteer HMP Wandsworth

'An hour and a half meeting that is probably the best part of each month for all of us. To hear that a family member is reading the same book at home or simply to hear that 'I am going to join a reading group when I get out soon' are highlights that brighten my day.'

David Herd, Librarian HMP North Sea Camp



"We had a really zinging conversation"

'I pass reading group people on their way somewhere else and they'll say things like 'I like this one', 'I can't' stop reading it', 'Where are you up to?' - snippets that feel bigger than the few words. I've come to see more and more the connecting and the relationships that are built from being part of the book group.'

Heidi Hollis,
Reader in Residence HMP Warren Hill



Family Reading

The exact number of children with a parent in prison is unknown but current research suggests that it may be as many as 300,000 a year.



Research also shows that reading for pleasure with children builds powerful family bonds.

Family contact was drastically reduced by COVID-19 restrictions and many prisoners did not see their families in person for over a year.

Our family projects help families connect through books and the pleasure of reading together even in difficult situations.

Very few in-person Family Days took place in 2021 but we were able to support 17 events in 15 prisons, most of them just before Christmas.



We provide books for video visits and phone calls, now with a copy each for parent and child so they can read it together.

'My son was happy when he got his book, he reads to me on the phone, happy he was.'

(HMP Wealstun)

'Some of the men told me about their families receiving the books they had sent – one dad said he found out that his son wouldn't let go of the book all day.'

(HMP Warren Hill)

The 'Share a Story' version at HMP Sudbury was commended by HMIP (the prison inspectorate) as 'innovative positive practice'.

We also send books home for birthday and Christmas presents with bookplates to make them personal gifts from parent to child.

'Someone who sat and read I'm Not a Mouse! said it would be ideal for his niece who he always calls pet names which make her laugh.'

(HMP Warren Hill)

Milo Imagines the World

Having a parent in prison is tough to live through or talk about and it's rarely a subject for children's books. PRG and Give a Book worked with Radio Wanno and Macmillan to broadcast their new book *Milo Imagines the World* and to offer copies to be sent home. Give a Book's consultant David Kendall introduced it to listeners and wrote a wonderful blog piece called The Absent Word:

'Books are vital maps that show what exists in the world...yet there is still terra incognita on these maps. How many picture books feature prison – something that affects over 300,000 children in the UK each year? Divorce affects less than a third of that.'

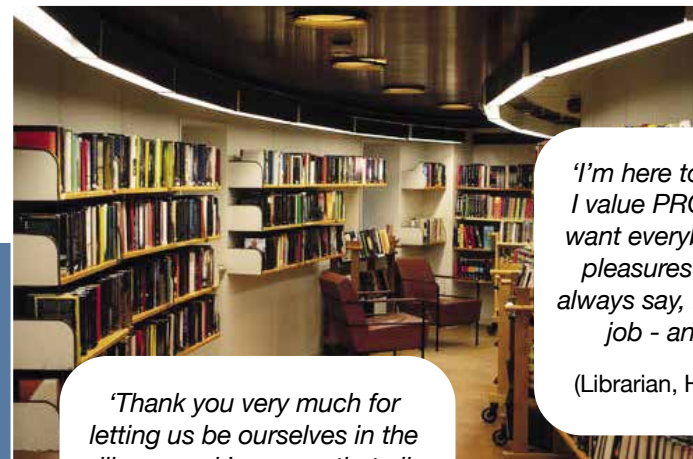


I did enjoy it as I was happy when my son was trying to read it. That made me very happy.

'Yes, it was very useful but my child [is] only 3 years old, my partner every day tries to show and read to her. Thank you very much. Maybe a few years later we can read together this book and I can tell her where I have been in this hard and bad time.'

In praise of librarians


Librarians are the linchpins of almost all our work and we are hugely grateful for their exciting ideas and determination to make things happen. For many prisoners, librarians are the most humanising presence in their surroundings and a great force for good.

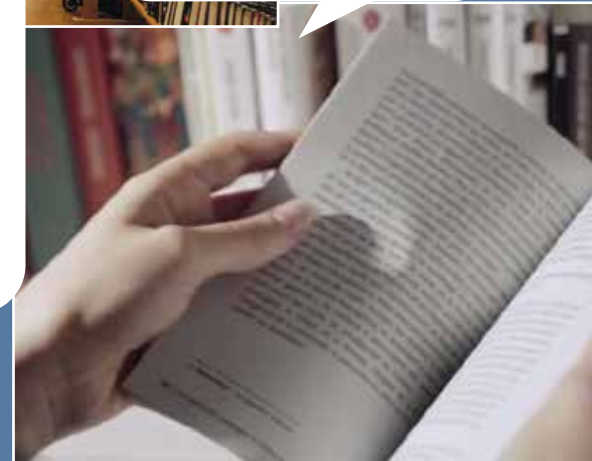


'I'm here to help. You know I value PRG initiatives and I want everybody to enjoy the pleasures of reading. As I always say, I'm only doing my job - and enjoying it!'

(Librarian, HMP Wandsworth)

'Thank you very much for letting us be ourselves in the library and I can say that all the books I have are more than just that, the books are reminders of the change I have had to do.'

 (a twitter message from an ex-prisoner and library orderly at HMP Thameside)



Volunteer voices

PRG volunteers are a wonderful support: running reading groups in person and remotely; helping with family reading events, and creating fresh and exciting resources including Book Talk, Bookstuff and Finding a Good Read.

We couldn't do it without them and it's great to know they enjoy it too.

'My experience volunteering with PRG has been wonderful as it has enabled me to become involved with content creation. I have loved sharing my ideas for Book Talk and receiving feedback from the reading groups. I think it is brilliant that PRG allows the volunteers to get involved with the creative aspect of the charity.'

(Ella Davies)



'Yes, the book club is remote for now, and giving and getting feedback is a challenge. But somehow we are keeping going with our guiding principle of sharing the love of reading and making that still possible, even behind bars.'

(Maggie Gallagher)



SCAN ME



Reading in Prison Day

Reading Lessons; Lockdown and Beyond was our first virtual conference, attended by over 75 people. The day was introduced with a stimulating message from Gabriel Krauze, author of the 2021 Booker-longlisted novel, *Who They Was*.

'I enjoyed every minute and as always feel re-energised and raring to get going with our development work.'

(Participant)

Governor Ralph Lubkowski's keynote was a powerful statement of the vital importance of books inside.

'Reading and books are crucial to wellbeing in prison. Books stimulate people in the least stimulating circumstances. The evidence is clear: the arts in prison are a need-to-do, not just a nice-to-do.'

The event concluded with the annual PRG Awards for outstanding contributions to reading in prison.

'Whatever you're going through, you can find it in books that make you realise you're not alone.'



The categories and winners:

Outstanding Family Reading Coordinator

Kathryn Durkan at HMP Sudbury

Outstanding Feedback

HMP Rye Hill

Outstanding Reading Group Facilitators

Alan McLoughlin-Ashton & Library Orderly at HMP Garth

2021 in numbers

3200+

books for Family Reading
initiatives & Family Days

3000+

books sent to Reading Groups
& whole prison reading projects

61

We work in 61 prisons across
the UK.

Going forward

PRG is developing new radio, tv and print projects to promote libraries, reading and family connection.

Our reading group numbers are rising again and our aim over the next three years is to have thriving groups in 100 or more prisons nationwide.

Above all we look forward to another year of supporting the pleasure of reading and the power of books behind bars.

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www.recordedinart.com and Matthew Meadows
www.matthewmeadows.net

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

With thanks to our partners and supporters including



Give a Book

www.giveabook.org.uk

Give a Book is dedicated to promoting books and the pleasure of reading in the hardest places, working mainly in prisons, schools and with disadvantaged children.



Penguin Random House

www.penguinrandomhouse.co.uk

PRG's partnership with Penguin Random House began with very generous book donations for our prison work and has grown into exciting collaborative projects including audiobooks for adults and children, author involvement and growing numbers of PRH volunteers.



Inside Time

www.insidetime.org

Inside Time is the national prisoners' newspaper and publishes PRG's regular columns: Finding a Good Read and Reading Group Roundup.



University of Roehampton

www.roehampton.ac.uk

PRG and the University of Roehampton enjoy a partnership to share expertise and volunteering opportunities. We are also grateful for the university's support of our annual Reading in Prison event.



Siobhan Dowd Trust

www.siobhandowdtrust.com

The Siobhan Dowd Trust works to give young people the opportunity to read and enjoy literature. The generosity of the Trust supports our family reading initiatives.

'It was an absolute joy just to sit with like-minded people and be able to discuss a shared book, hear each other's views and opinions. We can't thank you enough!'



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