

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.



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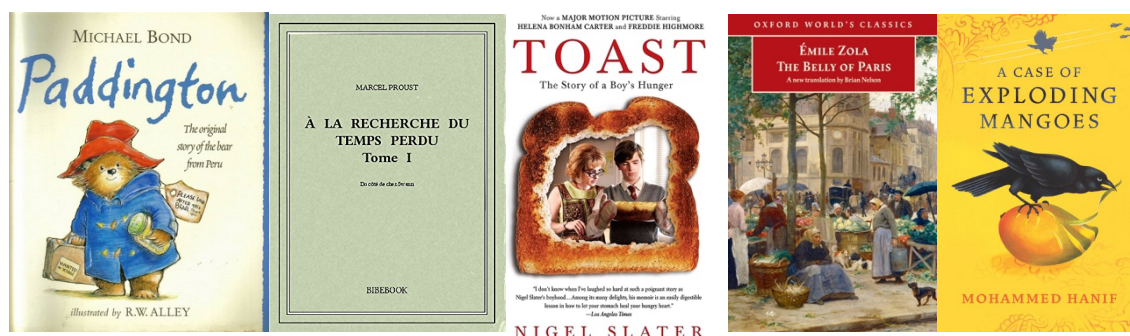
Finding a Good Read: Food

A regular column to help you find a good read.

Food nourishes and sustains us. It can also delight and comfort us, sometimes triggering happy memories of childhood. Food and ways of cooking help us define who we are, where we come from. And eating together cements bonds of family and community.

But food can also disgust, sicken and destroy us. Just think of the Bushtucker trials of I'm a Celebrity... Maggot smoothie anyone? Whatever your feelings about food there's a book out there to satisfy your appetite.

Children's books are full of food fantasies – like the perfect picnic with 'lashings of ginger beer' in Enid Blyton's **Famous Five** series. Or **Paddington's** marmalade sandwiches offered to the Queen at her Platinum Jubilee. Or **Just William's** trips to the sweet shop to buy - or sometimes just 'trouser' when there's no pocket money left - pear drops, aniseed balls, bull's eyes and gob-stoppers. Mealtimes can be a bore for kids being told to eat up their broccoli and take their elbows off the table, so food mayhem is a sure winner in many children's books including Judith Kerr's **The Tiger Who Came to Tea** - and ate and drank everything in the house.



Food can bring back memories and feelings. The most famous example is in Marcel Proust's novel **A La Recherche du Temps Perdu**, translated as **In Search of Lost Time**. When the central character takes a bite of a little madeleine cake, the taste brings memories flooding back. Or try **Toast**, the memoir by food writer Nigel Slater in which he remembers the pains and pleasures of growing up through the foods he loved or loathed – rice pudding, mince pies, tinned ham, bourbon biscuits and of course toast, for lots of people the greatest comfort food of them all.

Charles Dickens is the master of great food scenes, from the famous words of the hungry boy in **Oliver Twist**, 'Please sir, I want some more', to the talking pork pie of **Great Expectations** or the groaning Christmas feasts in **A Christmas Carol**.

Food helps define different cultures and is a central theme in many novels. There's Joanne Harris's **Chocolat**, about small-town life in rural France and a battle for the souls of the community between the local priest and the exotic stranger who arrives to tempt them with his chocolate concoctions. Or for a grittier take on France and food, try Emile Zola's 1873 novel, **Le Ventre de Paris**, translated as **The Belly of Paris**. Food is a powerful motif in many books about India, including Salman Rushdie's **Midnight's Children** and Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, both dazzling epic novels. It's also the main plot device in Mohammed Hanif's, **A Case of Exploding Mangoes**, about General Zia's brutal actions in Pakistan.

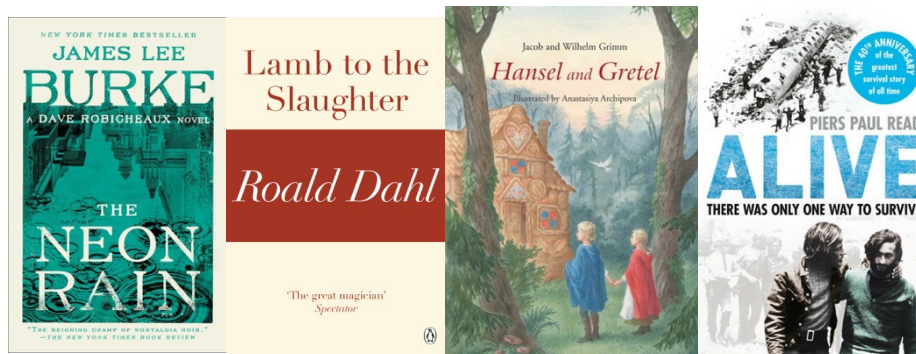
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Cooking features in a surprising number of detective novels, often helping the detective unwind after a day of gruesome investigation. **James Lee Burke's** Dave Robicheaux is a Louisiana cop who likes nothing more than rustling up fried shrimp or steaming gumbo when he gets home. **Donna Leon's** novels are set in Venice and feature Commissario Guido Brunetti. However urgent his police work is, Brunetti always seems to have time to return home at lunchtime for perfectly cooked pasta. James Patterson's Alex Cross is a police detective who's also a mean cook and competes with his grandmother Nana Mama in the kitchen.

Food can also be at the heart of dark plots, from the frozen leg of lamb in **Roald Dahl's** 'Lamb to the Slaughter' to **Agatha Christie's** novels, which are littered with corpses whose last breaths smell oddly sweet or bitter or of almonds.

The great taboo of food is cannibalism which is a recurrent theme in myth and folktale, from the ancient Greek Titan **Kronos**, who ate all of his children except Zeus, to the wicked witch of **Hansel and Gretel**.



Cannibalism provokes both disgust and fascination and there are many real and fictional stories of desperate survivors driven to eat one another. Piers Paul Read's 1974 book, **Alive, The True Story of the Andes Survivor**, is an account of a Uruguayan rugby team's airplane crash in the remote Andes mountains in 1972 and the cannibalism they were driven to. Nathaniel Philbrick's **In the Heart of the Sea** tells the true story of the Essex, a whaling ship which was rammed and destroyed by a sperm whale in 1820. Twenty survivors took to the ship's three small boats. Three months later another whaling ship spotted one of the boats floating helplessly in the open ocean. As it pulled alongside, the sailors saw piles of bones in the bottom of the boat, at least two skeletons' worth, with two men – almost skeletons themselves – sucking the marrow from the bones of their dead ship-mates.

Alongside the grisly accounts of real-life murderers who have eaten their victims, there is the horror and grotesque comedy of Thomas Harris's novel **The Silence of the Lambs**. The central character is Hannibal Lector, a cannibalistic serial killer with a taste for fine dining:

'A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti.'

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