

# Prison Reading Groups

## *Annual Review 2022*

*‘Who’d have thought we could spend all this time just talking about a book?’*



# Welcome

For Prison Reading Groups (PRG) 2022 was a year of return and renewal. More of our **reading groups** were able to meet face to face again and new ones got going. Author visits resumed and prisoners were delighted to meet and talk books with writers.

**Family Days** re-started and continue to be a lifeline connecting prisoners to their partners and children.

Our new project **Raising Readers** took off brilliantly and is now running in 21 prison libraries.

PRG volunteer numbers continue to grow and they make invaluable contributions.

Give a Book is PRG's parent charity and partner in everything we do. I am extremely grateful to the team: Victoria Gray, Sarah Moorehead, Ali Palmer and Jade Greene. Special thanks to Mima Ede-Lindner, Projects Manager for both Give a Book and PRG. Mima's energy and ideas help fuel PRG and working with her is a great pleasure.

PRG relies on a network of people: prison governors, librarians, officers and volunteers. Thanks most of all to the men and women in prison with the curiosity and courage to explore what books can do behind bars.

**Sarah Turvey, Director & co-founder**  
*February 2023*

## In 2022 we worked in 73 prisons nationwide



### Reading Groups

**3500+**  
books

**48**  
groups in

**43**  
prisons



### Family Days

**2900+**  
books

**60+**  
days in

**35**  
prisons



### Raising Readers

**3000+**  
books

**21**  
prisons

# Talking books PRG groups

Books connect us – to each other, to the outside world and to ourselves. The principles of our groups are simple: they are voluntary, informal and ongoing, and wherever possible members choose the books they read. New copies are provided for them to keep or pass on to others.

Covid restrictions hit hard and face to face meetings were suspended for many months. But in 2022 groups began to meet together again and new ones started. We now have 48 active groups, of which 7 took off in 2022.

The feedback speaks for itself. Members record their satisfaction at sticking with a book, finding empathy for characters they have nothing in common with, and feeling the thrill of being drawn into unfamiliar times and places. And through it all runs the delight of seeing themselves as readers with responses and opinions worth sharing.

*'This is the first book I've read all the way to the end and I've not stopped reading since.'*

(member, HMP Lincoln)

*'I loved Jamaica Inn. It stands out from the other books I've read. I'm glad I've joined the reading group as it's already broadened the genres I'll look at in the future.'*

(member, HMP Frankland)

*'I spoke to my mum on the phone about [The Map of Knowledge]. She has quite a bit of knowledge on the subject and we had some good discussions, well as good as you can within the 10 minutes allocated phone slot!'*

(member, HMP North Sea Camp)

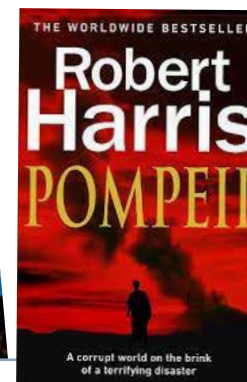
# The reading life of a PRG group

From the PRG volunteer at HMP Brixton

'It's May 2022 and we're back after 2 years of covid absence! With the speed, efficiency and – above all – enthusiasm of a Custodial Manager, we had 7 members, new to us and new to each other, all keen to be there with a wide range of age, reading experience and confidence. We discussed books, films of books, the pros and cons of science fiction – becoming more at ease. It was relaxed and fun and nobody seemed in any hurry to leave. One quiet young member revealed that he wasn't really a reader though his parents kept sending him books – he produced a great bundle that he wanted to share with the others. Another was a volcano expert and had us all riveted. Six months on, the fun continues: the group has grown in confidence, members have got to know one another – a few have left and more have joined but the essence remains and the group is more assured, both in their reading and in sharing their views.'

*'For one man, it was the first time in his life he'd finished a book, or as another man told me, it made him feel a little more normal and less of an outcast when every month without fail [PRG] volunteered their time to come read and discuss with them.'*

(Custodial Manager, Activities)



## Our book choices:

**Slough House** by Mick Herron

**Pompeii** by Robert Harris

**A Christmas Carol** by Charles Dickens

**The Power of the Dog** by Thomas Savage

**To Kill a Mockingbird** by Harper Lee

**The Mystery of Henri Pick** by David Foenkinos

**The Dice Men** by Luke Rhinehart



# Different groups for different needs

## Seacole Mental Health wing at HMP Wormwood Scrubs

PRG has supported this group since 2018. The logistics are tricky and there aren't always officers available for escort but our volunteer is indomitable.

'Great to get going again after covid. We're lucky to have the support of the Occupational Therapy team, working with dedication to organise activities for the men. This is a fortnightly read-aloud group, using material I bring in (Bookstuff a huge help). Our reading diet is varied – prose, poetry, short stories, extracts and thought experiments – as are the responses. 'Delusionary British Empire rubbish' was the verdict of one reader on Kipling's famous poem. But for another member, 'If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you': 'yeah should have listened to myself'. (PRG volunteer)



## Neurodiversity wing at HMP Pentonville

This new wing supports prisoners with a range of issues from autism, severe anxiety or depression, to ADHD and addiction recovery. With the help of an Unlocked Graduate officer, the library and two intrepid volunteers, PRG has started a fortnightly read-aloud group to encourage sociability and build confidence. Holding the ring can be a challenge but members keep coming back and conversations range from the remembered pleasure of reading in primary school to wanting to share a book with a younger sibling.



*'Insightful conversations. The PRG volunteers make the group accessible to readers with diverse abilities and attention spans'*

(officer)

# The pleasures of feedback



Reading feedback brings us into group conversations despite the distance. It's such a pleasure to be able to join the book chat remotely, especially when you come across brilliant one-liners. It's a real combination of wit, disgust and delight.

A novel about four elderly people living in a care home: does this mean it only appeals to older readers?

*No. That would be like implying Jaws only appeals to sharks.*  
(The Thursday Murder Club, HMP Lincoln)

Which character in the book would you most like to meet and why?

*I'm in prison. Why punish me again?*  
(Nine Perfect Strangers, HMP The Verne)

*'A delightful piece of codswallop from beginning to end.'*

(Exit, HMP Garth)

*'Plenty of twists and misdirection from the author who takes you in one direction then stops on a pinhead and throws a jellyfish at the reader.'*

(John Dies at the End, HMP Wymott)

*'Dulcie reminds me of Mary Poppins, but one that drinks, smokes and swears.'*

(The Offing, HMP Rye Hill)

*'I certainly learnt that Spanish winters can be as miserable as ours.'*

(The Shadow of the Wind, HMP Dartmoor)

# Resources

## Book Talk

A website resource to help groups choose. We post two suggested titles each month and include questions and discussion topics to help groups that are still operating remotely. We try to offer as much variety as possible and to tempt groups out of their reading comfort zone.

*'Many are looking forward to the classics and the selections cover the whole ethnic community.'*  
(Librarian, HMP Bure)



## Myth Detectives LONDON Horror



## Finding a Good Read

This is our monthly column in Inside Time, the national prisoners' newspaper. It provides a brief overview of a different genre or theme each month and suggests writers and books to follow up on. We started it during lockdown when prisoners couldn't get to the library and it remains a popular resource especially for less experienced readers.

## Reading Group Roundup

Opposing views are the lifeblood of all good reading groups. Our regular roundup report, from a different group each time, gives a flavour of the lively debate and discussion that goes on around a chosen book. And groups love to see themselves in print.

*'Confusing – too much'*  
*'Beautiful writing'*  
*'The perspective on slavery was upsetting'*  
*'For a debut novel it was amazing – would like to read any further books by the author'*  
(Homegoing, HMP Grendon)



*'Just wanted to let you know how thrilled our book club members were about being featured in Inside Time. They have been coming up to me all week asking if I've read it and telling all their mates about it.'*  
(Librarian, HMP Lancaster Farms)

## Bookstuff

A fortnightly handout of literary bites and book trivia created during lockdown and still going strong after more than 50 issues. We send it to librarians for the library or the wings and it now has a devoted following, including some staff newsletters. It's also used by some of the reading groups to round off a session.



**BIG QUESTIONS**  
*Can you feel an emotion if there's no word for it?*  
*Does language express ideas or create them?*

*'Thanks, our guys love these.'*  
(Librarian, HMP Lancaster Farms)

### Siesta of a Hungarian Snake

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# Reading in Prison Day



Our annual Reading in Prison Day brings together people from all the groups PRG works with – ex-prisoners, librarians, prison staff, volunteers, publishers and other reading organisations – to explore what books can do behind bars.

The 2022 event was in-person again for the first time in three years and it was great to see everyone catching up and making connections.

Ali Smith's keynote was electrifying and the day included presentations, panel discussions and hands-on workshops, all leading up to the PRG Awards and the wonderful PRG cake. Not to mention a super-charged poetry performance from Errol McGlashan of Word on the Kerb.

'Books are always an open window in a locked room.'  
(Ali Smith)



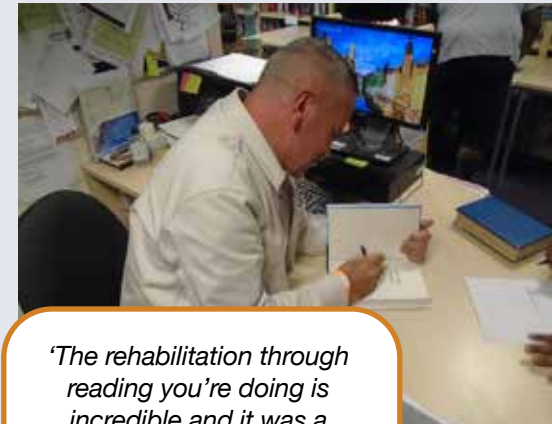
*'It's been really lovely this week with people congratulating me on the award and asking about the group and PRG. The Governor shared it in the staff newsletter... great to have our profile raised and a chance for us to celebrate the group and reading.'*  
(Librarian, HMP Warren Hill)



# Author visits

Author visits demonstrate how books connect us and bridge the gap between reader and writer. This year authors included Tracy Chevalier, DJ Fat Tony and Ilona Bannister, who all spoke candidly about their writing and their lives.

DJ Fat Tony talked openly about his 28-year battle with addiction and Ilona Bannister shared her struggles with mental health. The visits create a buzz and excitement around reading for everyone, from the avid readers to those just getting started. It's a breath of fresh air and highlights that reading groups are so much more than just chat.



*'Who knew prison could be so inspiring? All my stereotypes were blown out of the water. The men were bright, engaged and asked great questions. The library was well stocked and well run, and clearly an oasis.'*

Tracy Chevalier



*'The rehabilitation through reading you're doing is incredible and it was a humbling experience.'*

DJ Fat Tony



# Simon Callow

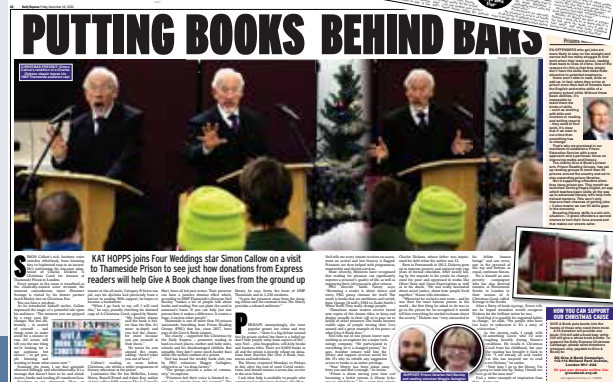
'A book can be a key that opens the world, even if only in your mind.'

(Simon Callow, *The Daily Express*, Nov 22)



2022 culminated with a visit from the renowned actor, narrator and Dickens interpreter Simon Callow, who brought his one-man adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* to the residents of HMP Thameside.

He began with a brief introduction about how Dickens portrays Christmas, and about the power of stories and the impact of performance. He praised Dickens for the exploration of social justice in his work. The first thing the author did when he arrived at a new place was visit the prison – his way of identifying how a society treated its people. For the hour of Simon's visit a real festive atmosphere was brought inside the prison walls and the embodiment of Scrooge, Cratchit and all the other characters in the novel was the perfect Christmas treat.



# Family Days in Prison

Family Days help prisoner parents connect with their families. Coming into prison can be very unsettling for children so prisons work hard to make these days relaxed and filled with activities for families to enjoy together.

PRG and Give a Book support Family Days with books for every child and where possible a volunteer to help parents and children choose a book to read together. Sharing a story fosters closeness and fun for the whole family.

The Christmas Family Day at HMP Wandsworth stands out thanks to the performance of MasterChef Mo from the **Little Angel Theatre Company**. A magical spectacle which had everyone hooked and keen to be involved in the action. To go with it, we sent in a selection of festive food titles for the children to enjoy.



# Raising Readers

While COVID restrictions were still in place at the start of the year and family visits limited, we thought about other ways to support family connections through books. Raising Readers invites prisoner parents to choose a children's book from a display in the library to send home to their child.



We provide bookplates for the parent to write a message, a tangible reminder for the child and a gift from their parent despite the distance and difficult circumstances. One copy is sent home and a second is given to the parent

so they can share it over the phone or during a visit. We provide a handout to help less confident parents choose the best book for their child. And library staff are also there to advise in person.



'If you could see the kids' faces on the visit you'd know how much you're appreciated.'

(Librarian, HMP Warren Hill)

# Volunteers

Our volunteers are invaluable, both inside and out. They contribute to our remote resources and they research diverse and lively booklists for different groups including babies, young adults, beginner readers and those with dyslexia.

PRG volunteers also go into prisons to run reading groups and support book events in the library. For prisoners, visitors bring in the outside world and are evidence that they haven't been forgotten.

*'Ted is endlessly enthusiastic, friendly, knowledgeable and has made a real difference to the men's lives inside. They keep on coming back to the reading group and we always look forward to him coming in.'*

(Prison Library Adviser, HMP Hewell)

*'It was a privilege to volunteer at the Family Day. We were able to offer a selection of books that the children could choose from, for the younger ones a time to read along with dad and for the older ones a chance to talk about books they liked. It makes a real difference.'*

(volunteer)



Family Day volunteers help children choose a book gift and encourage families to enjoy it together on the day and afterwards as a reminder of good time spent with one another.

And working with PRG gives our volunteers a better understanding of what prisons are like and how they could be made better places.

If you are interested in volunteering with PRG, contact [alison@giveabook.org.uk](mailto:alison@giveabook.org.uk) for more information





# PRG in the spotlight



PRG co-founders Sarah Turvey and Jenny Hartley received the Prime Minister's **Points of Light Award**, given to 'outstanding people who are making a change in their community and inspiring others'.

PRG volunteers Maggie Gallagher and Graham Coster were shortlisted for the prestigious **Butler Trust Awards** in recognition of their work with the reading groups at HMP Thameside.



The **Daily Express** chose Give a Book, PRG's parent charity, to be its Christmas charity campaign. PRG Director Sarah Turvey was interviewed on Radio London and quoted in the paper:

*'Becoming a reader is about choice and every PRG group chooses for itself... Readers receive brand new copies of the chosen titles, to keep and display proudly in their cell or to pass on to family or other prisoners. The books become visible signs of people turning their lives around and a great example of the power of what Give a Book does.'*



# Plans and Partnerships for 2023



The 2022 Ofsted review of reading education in prisons highlighted the need for more informal initiatives to help prisoners become readers. In response, PRG is spearheading **Reading the Way**, a project to help beginners develop skills and confidence. It is an innovative partnership with prison libraries, Education provider Novus, the Shannon Trust and specialist adult literacy consultants. We hope it will provide a model that can be rolled out widely across the prison estate.



Together with Give a Book we have funding to create **HMP Isis: A Reading Prison**, a project to embed reading initiatives throughout the prison and create a genuine reading culture among the young men serving time there.



**Unlocked Graduates** is a rigorous two-year training programme for talented university graduates who want to work as front-line prison officers. PRG is delighted to be working with UG officers, who have been invaluable in helping us start and run some of our projects.



**What Happens Next?** is a workshop project to help prisoner parents feel more confident about choosing and sharing books with their children. After a covid hiatus it's back and will run in both women's and men's prisons in the spring.

We are also working with prison librarians from **HMPs Lancaster Farms, North Sea Camp and Northumberland** to explore ways of collaborating on new and existing initiatives.

# Thanks



Thanks above all to **Give a Book**, PRG's parent charity and partner in everything we do. Together we have extended the reach of our work and created exciting new projects. Give a Book's brilliant fund-raising team have made PRG secure and able to grow and we are hugely grateful.



Our partnership with **Penguin Random House** continues to flourish. Alongside generous book donations and audiobooks for prison broadcast, PRH authors are becoming regular visitors, including an upcoming remote interview with James Patterson in which prisoners will be able to quiz him about his work. We also have a growing band of PRH volunteers whose book knowledge is very welcome.



**The Siobhan Dowd Trust** works to give young people the opportunity to read and enjoy literature. The Trust have generously supported our family reading initiatives for almost ten years and it has made an enormous difference.



## Julia and Hans Rausing

We are extremely grateful to Julia and Hans Rausing for their generous support of all the work of PRG.

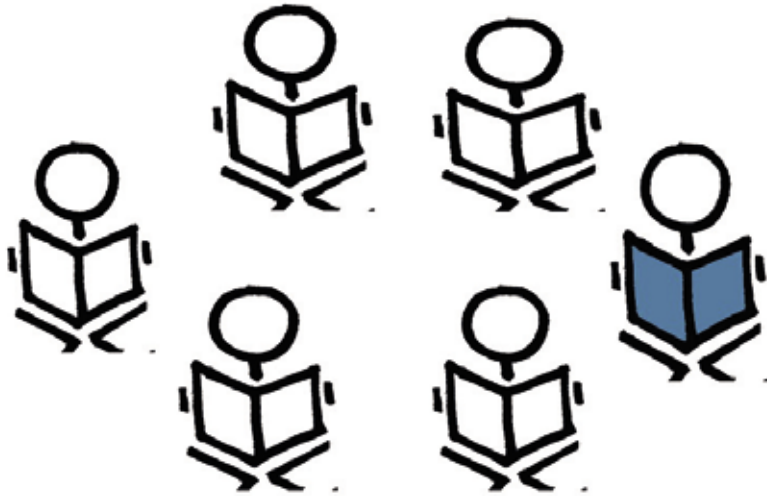
**The University of Roehampton** and PRG have enjoyed a partnership to share expertise and volunteering opportunities. We are also grateful for the university's support of our annual Reading in Prison event.

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

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And a heartfelt thank you to all the donors and supporters who fund our work and spread the word about PRG and the powerful pleasure of reading inside.



*“We had a really zinging conversation”*



[www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk](http://www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk)

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