

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.



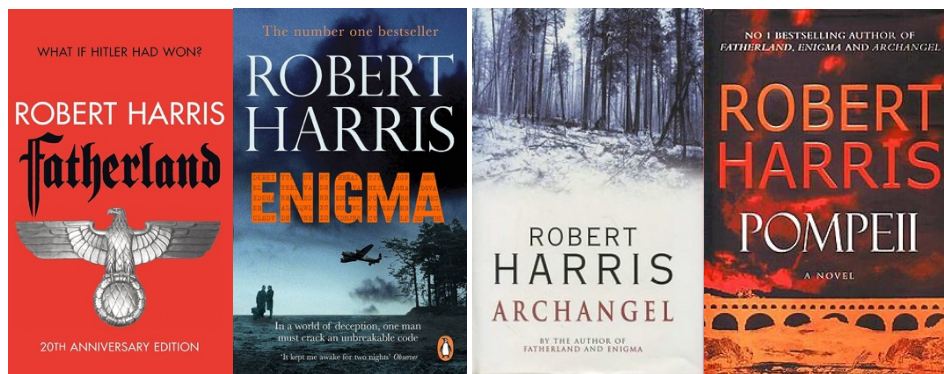
First featured in Inside Time in September 2023  
**Finding a Good Read: Spotlight on Robert Harris**  
A regular column to help you find a good read.

This month we're devoting the column to a single writer. Robert Harris has written more than fifteen novels, with subjects ranging from ancient Rome to the modern Vatican. What they all have in common is the ability to bring history alive through gripping stories.

Harris started his working life as a journalist with a keen interest in politics. He worked on current affairs programmes like Newsnight and Panorama and for a time was political editor of The Observer.

His first novel was ***Fatherland***, an 'alternative history' that imagines a world in which the Nazis won the Second World War and Hitler is alive and still in control. The Third Reich remains a brutal regime but it also wants recognition by other world powers. To achieve it, there is a kind of forced forgetting of the Holocaust and destruction of the evidence.

*'Of course. The Jews had all been evacuated to the East during the war. Everyone knew that. What had happened to them since was not a question anyone asked in public – or in private either, if they had any sense, not even an SS-Sturmbannfuhrer.'*



The novel was a huge success from first publication and continues to be a bestseller. Two more books with World War II themes followed. ***Enigma*** is about the cracking of the German cipher code at Bletchley Park and ***Archangel*** follows the adventures of a British historian in search of a secret notebook believed to be Stalin's diary. Both novels were made into films, one starring Dougray Scott and Kate Winslet, the other with Daniel Craig in the lead.

Harris then shifted the settings and subjects of his books to ancient Rome. He began with ***Pompeii***, which is about a Roman aqueduct engineer working near the city of Pompeii just before the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79. One blurb captures the excitement of the story Harris weaves:

*A sweltering week in late August. Where better to enjoy the last days of summer than on the beautiful Bay of Naples? But even as Rome's richest citizens relax in their villas around Pompeii and Herculaneum, there are ominous warnings that something is going wrong. Wells and springs are failing, a man has disappeared, and now the greatest aqueduct in the world – the mighty Aqua Augusta – has suddenly ceased to flow. Through the eyes of four characters – a young engineer, an adolescent girl, a corrupt millionaire and an elderly scientist – Robert Harris brilliantly recreates a luxurious world on the brink of destruction.*

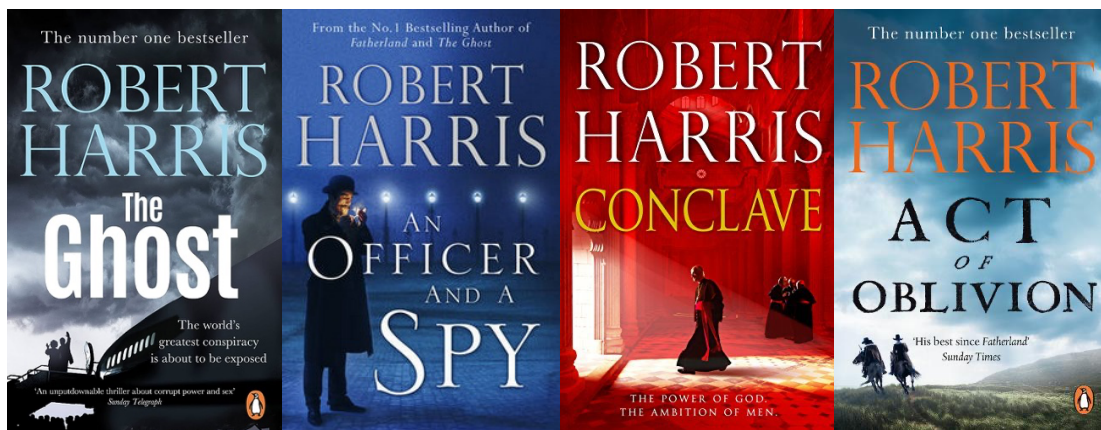
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The ancient Rome focus continues with Harris's trilogy of novels about the great Roman orator and lawyer, Marcus Tullius Cicero: **Imperium**, **Lustrum** and **Dictator**. The novels track Cicero's life through the last years of the Roman republic and the birth of the empire, as seen through the eyes of his slave. Tiro is a shrewd commentator and critic of his master and the political scene but he also reminds himself and the reader:

*'How easy it is for those who play no part in public affairs to sneer at the compromises of those who do'.*

In **The Ghost** Harris turns his attention to more contemporary politics. The novel follows the notes of a writer hired to ghost write the memoirs of an unseated prime minister who bears close resemblance to Tony Blair. The book is given a thriller edge by the mysterious death of the writer's predecessor in a gruesome drowning.



**An Officer and a Spy** explores the story of Alfred Dreyfus, a decorated French soldier who became the victim of an anti-semitic campaign and a terrible miscarriage of justice. In 2019 the book was adapted as a film by director Roman Polanski.

Other memorable titles include **Conclave** which is set behind the scenes at the Vatican and follows the ruthless politics and egotism of the cardinals responsible for electing a new pope.

**Act of Oblivion**, Harris's most recent novel, is set in the aftermath of the 17c English Civil War. It focuses on Goffe and Edward Whalley, two of the historical regicides who signed the death warrant for Charles I. The novel follows them into exile in Puritan America after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. They are pursued by Richard Nayler, a fictional regicide hunter whose motives for wanting the Whalleys dead are wider than just loyalty to his king.

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