

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: Schools

A regular column to help you find a good read.

Most of us have memories of school: best friends and worst bullies; hard work and skiving; excitement and excruciating boredom; brilliant teachers and sadistic tyrants. They are also a fascinating theme in many books.

### Iconic schools

Right up there has to be **Harry Potter's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**. Located somewhere in the Scottish Highlands, there are seven compulsory subjects for all first-year students: Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, History of Magic, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Astronomy and Herbology. Flying lessons (on broomsticks) are also required. There are four houses: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin, and there is intense rivalry among them. Harry is in Gryffindor of course, whereas most of the Death Eaters belong to Slytherin, including Harry's arch-enemy Lucius Malfoy. The school is so popular among fans of the book that whole websites have sprung up to create new stories and 'facts' about it.

Enid Blyton's **Malory Towers** novels were written in the 1940s and set in a post-World War II girls' boarding school but they have lasting appeal and were made into a television series in 2020.



### Comic schools

**How to be Topp** by Geoffrey Willans is a very funny book written as advice to new pupils at St Custard's given by Nigel Molesworth, a hardened student at the school. He is a completely unreliable guide with the worst spelling in the history of schoolboys – 'as any fule kno'. The illustrations by the cartoonist Ronald Searle are also brilliant.

Evelyn Waugh's **Decline and Fall** is a stinging social satire, written and set in the 1920s but still laugh out loud today. On Desert Island Discs David Mitchell named it as the book he would take to the island: 'one of the funniest books I've ever read and exactly the sort of novel I would like to have written'.

## Classic schools

Schools (mostly terrible ones) feature in a lot of classic novels of the 1800s including Lowood School where Charlotte Brontë's **Jane Eyre** suffers deprivation and desperate loneliness. Worst of all perhaps is Dotheboys Hall (geddit?) in Charles Dickens' **Nicholas Nickleby**, run by the sadistic, one-eyed Wackford Squeers.

## School memoirs

George Orwell is most famous for *1984* and *Animal Farm* but his essays are also a great read, including 'Politics and the English Language', 'A Hanging', 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'Books v Cigarettes'. **Such Such Were the Joys** is an exploration of his miserable early boarding school experiences. It's also about class conflict, oppression and the psychology of children.

Lemn Sissay's **My Name is Why** is a blistering account of growing up in care as a black child and includes a devastating account of the racism and violence he encountered at school.



## Scandal and horror in school

Zoe Heller's **Notes on a Scandal** is a taut thriller about a female teacher's sexual affair with an underage pupil and the terrible fallout. It was also made into a successful film in 2006 with Judi Dench and Cate Blanchett.

**Never Let Me Go** by Kazuo Ishiguro is a dystopian novel set in a boarding school where the pupils are being prepared for a shocking future that emerges only gradually as we read on.

School shootings have become a commonplace real-life horror, especially of course in the US. Lionel Shriver's novel **We Need to Talk About Kevin** explores the attempts of a teenaged shooter's mother to understand her psychopathic son.

Note: your library may not have all of these titles or even any of them, but it's sure to have some of the authors mentioned. So if you like the sound of any of the books mentioned, just include 'or any other books by ...' on your request app.

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