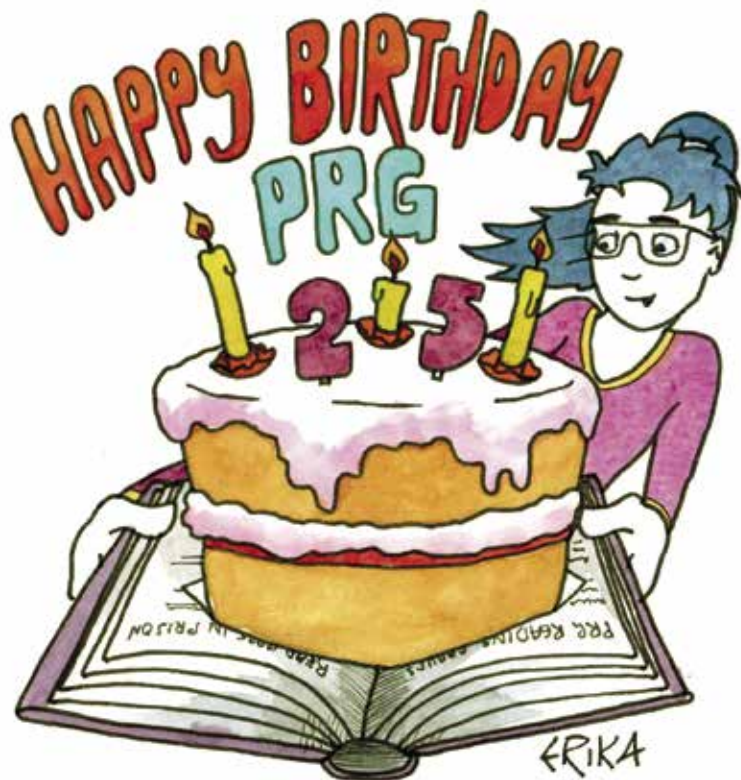


# Prison Reading Groups

## *Annual Review 2024*



Prison Reading Groups  
25 years  
1999-2024

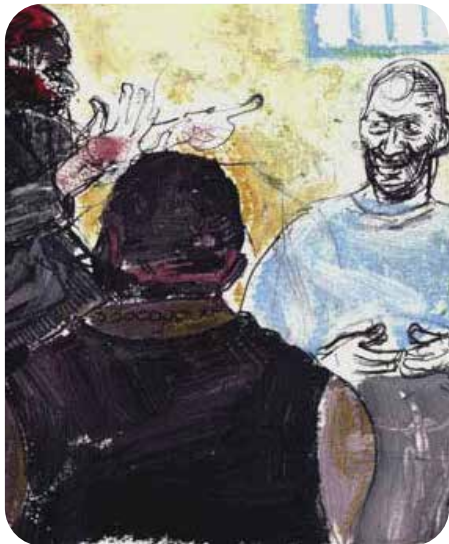
# Welcome

In 2024 PRG celebrated 25 years of running reading groups in prisons.

From our start in two jails, we now run over **110** groups in more than **80** prisons nationwide, as well as supporting family reading projects in prisons across the estate.

PRG has been part of the charity **Give a Book** since 2017 and we are hugely grateful for our partnership which has widened our horizons and enabled us to flourish.

In June we hosted our biennial **Reading in Prison Day** and welcomed Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe as our keynote speaker.



**Evaluation** of PRG's reading groups was completed and will be published early in 2025.

**PRG's promotional film** was launched to great acclaim in November and is now in widespread circulation.

2024 saw **increased national attention to prisons** and the challenges they face: dangerous over-crowding, ongoing concerns about literacy levels, and the need for more focus on purposeful activity and rehabilitation. PRG's contribution has never been more needed and we are proud to be part of the solution.

Above all we celebrate the men and women who join our groups and discover the powerful pleasure and change that reading in prison can bring.

**Sarah Turvey, Director & Cofounder Prison Reading Groups**  
*January 2025*

## PRG in numbers



### Reading Groups

**8500+**

books

**110+**

groups in

**80+**

prisons

**70%**  
increase  
since 2023



### Family Days

**6400+**

books

**160**

days in

**55**

prisons

**88%**  
increase  
since 2023



### Raising Readers

**7500+**

books

**40+**

prisons

**60%**  
increase  
since 2023



### Reading the Way

**20**

groups

### PRG Milestones

**1999**

PRG founded by Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey

**2000**

First reading group at HMP Coldingley

# PRG aims

## Connection

PRG groups connect people: to fellow prisoners, to family, to the world outside, and to themselves. They help overcome the isolation of prison and the loss of purpose. Our groups also foster respect and mutual support which can be hard to find for those inside.

*'We are our own little community. We share our opinions, thoughts and other books. Everyone has their own say and it's very welcoming.'*

*'I get to talk about the book with my family. My family are happy, I'm happy.'*

## Challenge

Our groups increase confidence, encourage more ambitious book choices and the ability to think more clearly and sharply. And this leads to greater engagement with ideas and the world outside.

## Change

PRG groups help members develop a more positive sense of self and the possibility of moving towards change.



*'I don't feel like a forgotten member of society.'*

*'Without contact with other people you start to lose yourself.'*

*'I like me now.'*



# Projects

## Reading Groups

There are over 110 groups in more than 80 prisons nationwide. The groups are voluntary and flexible so they can be adapted to local needs. Members choose the books they read and discussion is lively and full of debate. Everyone receives a new copy of the chosen book to keep or pass on to others.

*'I'm going to take all my books out with me. Start me a library.'*

## Reading the Way

Reading the Way is our project for emergent readers in prisons. Becoming a reader is not only about decoding skills, it is also about developing stamina, confidence and interest. The groups create a space for supported reading and enjoyable book talk. They read a wide variety of short texts, from poems and short stories to letters, recipes and song lyrics, all chosen in response to member interests.



*'It makes me feel more like someone who reads.'*

What do you enjoy most about the group? *'That each person gives each other the confidence to do better.'*

2001

PRG group features on Radio 4 Bookclub

2001

The Reading Groups Book published

2010

14 PRG groups and growing

2010

PRG awarded an AHRC grant to develop a network



# Family reading

## Raising Readers



PRG sends new books each quarter for display on a special stand in the library. With the help of library staff and a handout, prisoner parents can choose a title to send home. We also provide bookplates so the book becomes a personal gift. And there's a second copy for the prisoner so parent and child can read together over the phone or at a visit.

*'My son loves his book and at one point he was sleeping with it. Every night I rang home we had to read it.'*



## Family Days



PRG supports prison Family Days with books for families to enjoy together and for children to take home as a tangible reminder of a good time spent with their mum or dad. Where possible we also provide volunteers to encourage parents and children to read together.

*'My son loved that he got to keep the book he read with his daddy, it's created a memory. Now every time we read the book we will talk about dad.'*



25 years

2024 was PRG's 25th anniversary and wonderful birthday messages came from all over.

Our biennial Reading in Prison Day started with an inspiring keynote from Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe about the solace and inspiration of books during her years as a prisoner in Iran.

*'Books help you to take refuge in the world of others.'*

The event featured panel discussions and performance poets as well as contributions from literacy specialists, librarians, volunteers and of course ex-prisoners.

We honoured outstanding contributions in our PRG Awards and we rounded up the day with drinks and the famous PRG cake.

*'You've made my job an absolute joy!'*

Prison librarian

*'Thank you for helping me to find books again.'*

Ex-prisoner and reading group member

*'You perfectly demonstrate the power of reading to change lives, one page at a time. Many congratulations.'*

Arts Council England



2011

PRG gets a monthly column in Inside Time

2013

Prison Reading Groups: What Books Can Do Behind Bars published

2012

Sadiq Khan, Shadow Justice Secretary, visits a PRG group

2012

PRG a founder member of the Prisoner Learning Alliance



# Solace and Connection Through Reading

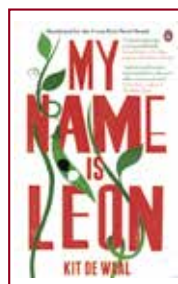
In November PRG launched a short film to show the power of books both inside and outside prison.

It stars award-winning actor Ralph Ineson and tells the story of a prisoner who joins a PRG reading group and finds a way to re-connect with his hurt and angry daughter.

The book they both read is Kit de Waal's *My Name is Leon*, a narrative about a broken family that resonates with many prisoners. People forget that many prisoners were once vulnerable children and may now be parents themselves struggling to stay in touch.

The film, written and directed by Davy Lazare, was made with support from Media Trust and the Criminal Justice Alliance and funded by The Crucible Foundation.

Scan the QR code to watch the film on PRG's website home page.



*'This charity does life-changing work and it was a pleasure to be part of this film.'*

Ralph Ineson

*'I want this film to show how something as simple as reading and family connection can enrich a person's life – even a person in prison.'*

Davy Lazare

# What Groups Read

Choice is a fundamental aspect of our reading groups.

In an environment where people are denied agency at every turn, it is important that members of our reading groups choose what they read and discuss. Titles are very varied and members get new copies to keep or pass on to others.

*'A clean copy makes me feel I have some ownership of my opinions.'*

Here are the books chosen and read by 3 groups in the last 6 months:

## A Category C men's prison

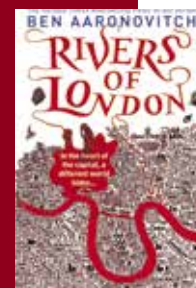
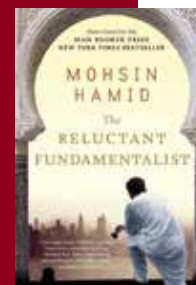
*I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson  
*Letters From an Astrophysicist* by Neil deGrasse Tyson  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey  
*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams  
*Rivers of London* by Ben Aaronovitch  
*Orbital* by Samantha Harvey

## An open prison for women aged 18 and over

*Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin  
*The Book of Two Ways* by Jodi Picoult  
*Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen  
*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck  
*Christmas Days* by Jeanette Winterson  
*Winter in Madrid* by C. J. Sansom

## A Category C prison for young men aged between 18 and 27

*You Don't Know Me* by Imran Mahmood  
*Chain-Gang All-Stars* by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah  
*Ego is the Enemy* by Ryan Holiday  
*Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* by Akala  
*After the Lights Go Out* by John Vercher  
*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid



2012

PRG helps National Prison Radio set up a broadcast book club

2013

PRG creates the Family Days project

2014

PRG wins an Impact award from NCCPE

2016

Simon Callow directs Scrooge in the Scrubs scripted and acted by prisoners



# What Members Say

Feedback comes in different forms: facilitators quote member comments in their regular reports and members write reviews or sometimes draw a response if they don't feel confident with writing.

The voices and focus are wide ranging. For some, it's the delight of being transported to another time and place, real or imagined.

*'That first part talking about food. I was back there in my gran's kitchen [...] I mean I can't say how strange it was to have all that come back to me. Stuff I'd forgotten, hadn't thought about for years and years.'*

(on *Without Warning and Only Sometimes*)



There's also the sense of widening horizons and self-improvement, even when expressed with a comic edge.

*'These are the kind of books I want to read. That make you think. Everything's better now I'm a reader. Even my dreams are better. I never used to remember my dreams but since I've been reading, I remember them all.'*

The difference of view among members is always fascinating.

*'A real marmite book. In one group the volunteers just didn't get it – 'I hope someone will tell me what it's about'. A couple of members agreed, 'confusing, just words on a page'. But others put them straight: 'an amazing book, ahead of its time', 'Sublime!' 'a great love story.'* (on *This is How You Lose the Time War*)

And there's plenty of praise for the way the groups support mental health and wellbeing.

*'NV said at the end that the reading group had saved him in prison – in fact he said there were two things: having a shower and the monthly reading group.'*

*'Being in this room now, so close to other people, is very hard for me – it feels like sensory overload and makes me anxious' But you're here? 'Yes, because I know I need to make more connections – and I have.'* (during a discussion of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*)



Letters from ex-members are heartening confirmation of the lasting difference the groups can make.

*'A library in a prison is a sanctuary and according to the girls who came through the doors "a safe place"... We read a huge range of novels in the group. Thanks to PRG this allowed us to expand our imagination and escape the day to day routine of prison life.'*

Members who are transferred are often keen to find a PRG group in their new prison.

*Hi Sarah! This is George from [redacted], now moved to HMP [redacted]. Thanks for setting up the wonderful group at [redacted]. This is just a quick note to ask is there any chance PRG could set up a book club here? As far as I've been able to tell there's nothing of the sort here unfortunately. Warm regards, George*

2017

PRG becomes part of Give a Book

2017

PRG partners with Oxford University for Unsilencing the Library

2019

PRG is awarded a Longford Prize

2019

PRG creates the annual PRG Awards

# PRG in the Spotlight

2024 was a high-profile year for PRG and included a number of best-selling author visits.

**Simon Armitage**, UK Poet Laureate, visited HMP East Sutton Park in March to discuss his collection, *Book of Matches*.

*'The women seemed very engaged and were curious about what poetry is, exactly. I ask myself the same question most days! I think I brought a little bit of contemplation and humour to the gathering and went home grateful for the opportunity.'*



**Sathnam Sanghera** came to HMP Brixton in the same month to talk with the reading group about his book, *Empireland*. He shared his experience in a Times column:

*'The intelligent response to my work, from people for whom books are an escape from loneliness, boredom, fear and societal rejection, was inspiring.'*



In May, **Mick Herron** made his third visit to HMP Bullingdon where PRG has worked for over 20 years. He talked about his Slough House novels and the Apple TV adaptation, *Slow Horses*. BBC News South

broadcast a segment on the event and the Daily Express featured a double page spread about it, including an interview with Mick that focused on how reading can encourage empathy.

*'If you're reading, you're [...] putting yourself in somebody else's head and the ability to walk in someone else's shoes makes for greater understanding, greater co-operation, less conflict.'*

Mick Herron

In October South Korean TV station EBS included PRG in their series about the power of reading featuring initiatives from other countries.



PRG director Sarah Turvey was interviewed and the programme also included contributions from PRG volunteer Julian and former UK prisoner and prison library orderly Louise, who discussed their experiences and the value of reading in prison.

Best-selling writer Kate Summerscale, author of *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, came to Wandsworth in November to talk about her new book, *Peepshow: The Murders at 10 Rillington Place*. The PRG volunteer at the prison wrote an account of her visit for The Tablet:



*'I don't suppose Kate was quite what they were expecting: softly spoken, with blonde curls, she focussed intently on everything they asked. The men had read their books, and prepared a polite, intense inquisition.'*

Kate herself said of the event:

*'I found it a wonderful experience -- such an attentive audience, and such great questions about my work. It was striking that the officers were so engaged too, and lovely to think that this might make a difference on the wing.'*

2020

PRG and PRH work with Radio Wanno to provide audiobooks for broadcast

2020-22

PRG responds to Covid lockdown with new in-cell resources

2022

PRG creates Raising Readers

2022

Jenny and Sarah receive Points of Light award from the PM's office

# Partnerships



PRG depends on close partnership with prisons and we are grateful for their support. Special thanks to library staff who champion our projects and help make them happen. Their determination to connect prisoners with books is inspiring.



Penguin Random House (PRH) continues to support PRG and Give a Book with great generosity. They also provide volunteers and work closely with us on projects that include audiobooks for broadcast on prison radio. It's a pleasure to be in partnership.



We are grateful to all the publishers who support us with free books and discounts.

PRG has two regular columns in Inside Time, the national prisoners' monthly newspaper, that spread the pleasure of books and reading across the prison estate.



The Royal Society of Literature (RSL) donates welcome foreign language editions of the works of its Fellows. Every quarter PRG invites an RSL author to take over our Finding a Good Read column in Inside Time.

## Volunteers



*'The volunteers were incredibly kind, warm and passionate about the cause and the family day. It was such a treat to have their support.'*

Family Day organiser

Our volunteers bring great energy and enthusiasm and they come from all over: in groups from Penguin and the MOJ and from all walks of life. They run reading groups, support Family Days, produce resources and tailored book lists, and help pack hundreds of books every month for mailout from our store. Thank you!

2023

PRG creates Reading the Way

2023

Sarah and Jenny are awarded OBEs

# Thanks

Our heartfelt thanks go to Give a Book, our wonderful parent and partner since 2017.

Victoria Gray, Executive Director and Sarah Moorehead, Chair of Trustees are brilliant colleagues who are closely involved with PRG's work. They also both run thriving reading groups.

Alison Palmer, Funding & Partnerships Manager, is a whirlwind of creative initiative and spearheaded some of our most exciting projects in 2024.

We said goodbye to Mima and Sam, and we've welcomed Rosa Kranidiotis and Ella Blacksell as new members of the team.

Give a Book's trustees have provided wise and unwavering support and the expertise of the advisory board has been a great help.

We are very grateful to all the generous donors and supporters who make our work possible. With particular thanks to

Lightbulb Trust



Siobhan Dowd Trust



The Julia Rausing Trust



The Sheriffs' and Recorder's Fund

Make My Day Better



Hughes Fowler Carruthers



The Grocers' Charity



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www.susiebushdesign.com





*“Thank you for giving me back the joy of reading.  
Thank you for everything you do.  
It means more than you’ll ever know.”*



Registered charity  
number 1149664

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

112–114 Holland Park Avenue  
London W11 4UA

[info@giveabook.org.uk](mailto:info@giveabook.org.uk)

 [@prg-uk.bsky.social](https://twitter.com/prg-uk.bsky.social)

 [@Prison Reading Groups](https://www.linkedin.com/company/prison-reading-groups)



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