



# Reading Group Round-Up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

## What do groups read?

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) runs over 110 reading groups in more than 80 prisons nationwide. Groups themselves choose the books they read and the variety of titles is fascinating. Here's a snapshot of a few recent choices and discussions from three different groups.



North Sea Camp readers chose Caz Frear's *Five Bad Deeds*.

Ellen Walsh has done something very, very bad. If only she knew what it was...

Ellen is a teacher, mother, wife, and all-around good citizen. Out of nowhere a note arrives in the mail declaring:

Sooner or later everyone sits down to a banquet of consequences.

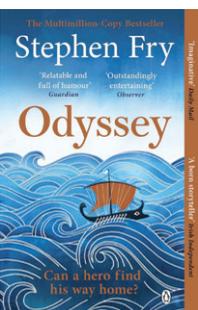
Ellen has no idea why someone would send this to her. As she races to discover who's set on destroying her life, more messages arrive, each one hitting closer to home and everything that she cherishes.

Overall, it was a thumbs-up from the group:

'Like an onion – many different layers to be peeled back.'

'It seemed like everyone had a reason to bring Ellen down. Give her a break, please!'

'When did we all figure it out? In the end, perhaps a bit obvious but the author sure fooled us.'



The Rochester group took a dive into ancient Greek myth through a re-telling by Stephen Fry of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*:

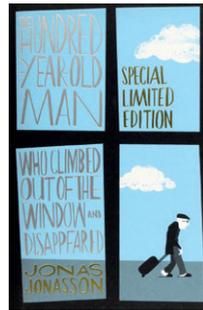
Troy has fallen – and the victorious Greeks head home...

Setting sail, hero

Odysseus dreams of returning to his beloved wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. However, gods toy with the desires of little mortals. Angered by this upstart's presumption, Poseidon – God of the ocean realms – curses our hero to wander the seas for ten long years. Encountering one-eyed giants, six-headed monsters, terrible storms, titanic whirlpools, hypnotic sirens, seductive witches and jealous goddesses, Odysseus is tempted and tormented beyond any man's endurance. Yet he is no mere mortal – and the lure of his wife and son draws him, step by step, stroke by stroke, ever closer to home and his destiny.

Most agreed that Fry's version was a good way into a big text. Favourite bit? The Cyclops

got a lot of votes but one member singled out Calypso, the beautiful creature who offers Odysseus a perfect life if he stays with her. 'But his heart is looking west so she lets him go, poor nymph!'



At Belmarsh the choice was *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson.

Sitting quietly in his room in an old people's home, Allan Karlsson is waiting for a party he doesn't want to begin. His

one-hundredth birthday party to be precise. Escaping (in his slippers) through his bedroom window, Allan makes his getaway and begins his unlikely journey involving criminals, several murders, a suitcase full of cash, and incompetent police. As his escapades unfold, Allan's earlier life is revealed. A life in which - remarkably - he played a key role behind the scenes in some of the momentous events of the twentieth century.

Described in one review as 'a loopily free-wheeling debut novel about ageing disgracefully', the book is full of absurd characters and encounters. It also sparked connections for members of the group, especially Allan's determination to 'move forward, to stay curious and reflective and to find escape through imagination, reading and conversation'. A very good description of what a reading group can do!



Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was created in 1999 to set up, support and fund informal reading groups in prisons. We currently support more than 110 groups in over 80 prisons nationwide. If you're interested, check with your library to see if there's a group in your prison. PRG is part of registered charity Give a Book.



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## Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

Erin

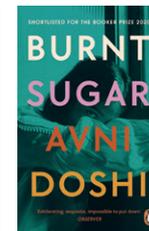
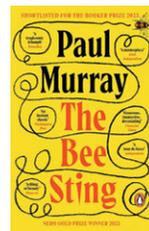
### Parents and children

Relationships between parents and children can create amazing subject matter for books. They inspire tales of joy, drama, comedy, heartbreak, philosophical reflection, devotion and even horror!

Atticus Finch, the father in *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Harper Lee), is often considered an example of a great fictional parent for how he patiently teaches his children about morality.

Containing slightly naughtier behaviour, *Danny the Champion of the World* (Roald Dahl) begs parents to have as much fun with their children as Danny's dad has with him.

Not every parent-child relationship is so positive, but the complexity makes for interesting reads.



#### Parents are people too

Some of the most layered stories help remind readers that their parents are flawed humans – just like them.

*Anna Karenina* (Leo Tolstoy's) characters barely notice their children as they deal with their own life dramas.

*Tom Lake* (Ann Patchett), *The Bee Sting* (Paul Murray), *The Love Songs of WE DuBois* (Honorée Fanonne Jeffers) and *Everything I Never Told You* (Celeste Ng) show the early lives of parents that their offspring could never imagine.

*Burnt Sugar* (Avni Doshi) and *White Oleander* (Janet Fitch) document complicated mother-daughter bonds, while *Long Island* (Colm Tóibín) reflects on how parents build new lives after their children have grown up.

#### Parenting in a new culture

Raising a family in a place where the language and customs are more familiar to your chil-

dren than yourself takes special courage.

*Pachinko* (Min Jin Lee), *The Joy Luck Club* (Amy Tan) and *The Poisonwood Bible* (Barbara Kingsolver) show very different ways this can work.

#### Unusually challenging parenting

In some books, characters must continue parenting as the world ends. *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy) and *The End We Start From* (Megan Hunter) are intense depictions of single parents struggling to keep their children safe in an apocalypse.

*Room* (Emma Donoghue) shows the lengths a parent will go to in order to protect their child. In the dystopia of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, protection is impossible as children are taken away from their parents and given to elite families.

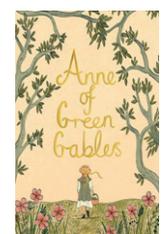
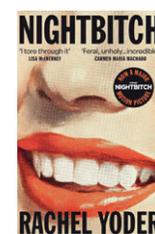
Sometimes the risks are posed by the children themselves. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lionel Shriver) and *Nineteen Minutes* (Jodi Picoult) both consider how mothers react to their children committing serious crimes.

#### Stressful motherhood

Even well-behaved fictional children aren't exactly relaxing.

Elena Ferrante's novels all wrestle with the conflicting desires of mothers who also want to be professionally and creatively successful.

*Nightbitch* (Rachel Yoder) and *Beloved* (Toni Morrison) use magic as a technique to explore parental challenges. *Ducks, Newburyport* (Lucy Ellmann) is a memory of motherhood told as a stream of consciousness.



#### No parents, no problem (mostly)

With no supervision or need to stay in one place, fictional orphans go on some great adventures.

In several of Charles Dickens' novels, such as *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield* (entertainingly retold as *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver), his heroes must overcome their lack of parents as well as many other hurdles. The girls in *Anne of Green Gables* (Lucy Maud Montgomery) and *The Secret Garden* (Frances Hodgson Burnett) get into mischief while adjusting to their new homes.

*Peter Pan* (J. M. Barrie), James in *James and the Giant Peach* (Roald Dahl) and Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling) form unconventional new families of fairies, insects and animals.

*Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Bronte) and *Harry Potter* (JK Rowling) find their homes, and new families, through their respective schools.

With thanks to PRG and Give a Book volunteer Erin.

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