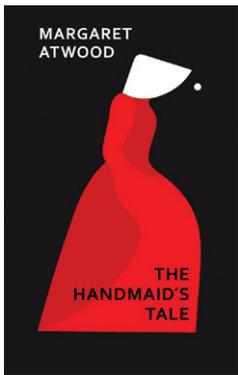




# Reading Group Round-Up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

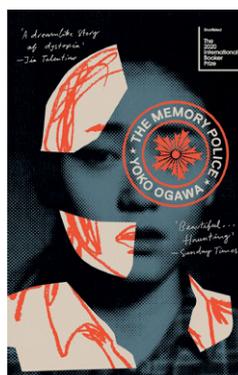
PRG groups were very active all the way through 2025, with meetings full of ambitious books and lively book talk. In November and December, choices ranged from dystopian nightmares to the heartwarming redemption of A Christmas Carol.



The group at The Mount read Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, first published in 1985 but still relevant more than 35 years later. It has also been made into six very successful TV series, running from 2017 to 2025. Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She has only one function: to breed. If Offred refuses to enter into sexual servitude to repopulate a devastated world, she will be hanged. But Offred fights back.

Discussion ranged widely around the questions raised by the book: the meaning of freedom and the difference between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'; the structure of the book and the frequent flashbacks that reminded some members of their prison experience and time spent thinking back to happier times and wondering what went wrong.

Discussion ranged widely around the questions raised by the book: the meaning of freedom and the difference between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'; the structure of the book and the frequent flashbacks that reminded some members of their prison experience and time spent thinking back to happier times and wondering what went wrong.

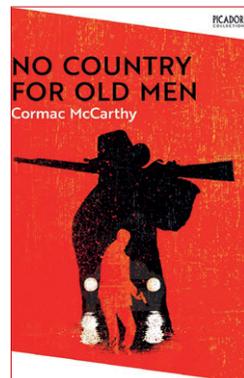


At Wandsworth, one of the groups read Yoko Ogawa's quiet dystopia, *The Memory Police*. On an unnamed and isolated island, familiar things – hat, ribbon, bird, rose – suddenly have no meaning and the inhabitants docilely co-operate with the memory police to destroy and

forget all trace of them.

The book raises big questions and provoked

great discussion. 'What are we if our memories are simply removed?' 'What I found unsettling was that their life just continued despite the losses.' One member had first-hand experience of Japanese customs and language, which fascinated everyone. The memory police themselves were seen as an 'unsettling and insidious threat' and raised many questions: who were they, why didn't they forget? The overall effect of the book was well summed up: 'It's haunting and it stays with you'. For some, the story brought back memories of dead loved ones. As the facilitator put it, their willingness to talk about this was 'a testament to the safe space the book club has become for the members'.



Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is a dystopian Western where it's no longer possible to know who the bad guys are, much less overcome them. The story is set close to the Texas – Mexican border, where drugs control everything. At the center of the book is the voice of Sheriff Ed Bell, a kind of tragic hero who knows he's defeated even as he tries to bring order and decency back.

The group at Wormwood Scrubs read it with great care, and readers were alert to both the big questions of morality and McCarthy's distinctive style, 'I've never seen "and" used like that before'. There was detailed recall of individual scenes and the best kind of discussion, both lively disagreement and genuinely collective talk – 'What did we all make of it?' The power of the book had also already led one member to read several other McCarthy novels. In the words of the facilitator, 'Wonderful.'

Like many others, one of the Frankland groups read Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* for their December meeting. The discussion was full of gusto, from comparisons with the Muppets' version to the book's message: 'Do the right thing, repent your past failings and be reborn!' Some were fascinated by the details of social history – 'the goose cooked in the baker's oven because there wasn't one at home'. And how could anyone resist Dickens' delight in Christmas, from the food and tomfoolery to the warm togetherness and good cheer?

Like many others, one of the Frankland groups read Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* for their December meeting. The discussion was full of gusto, from comparisons with the Muppets' version to the book's message: 'Do the right thing, repent your past failings and be reborn!' Some were fascinated by the details of social history – 'the goose cooked in the baker's oven because there wasn't one at home'. And how could anyone resist Dickens' delight in Christmas, from the food and tomfoolery to the warm togetherness and good cheer?



## Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

Erin

### Music

Some of the best music comes from artists who consider themselves poets and storytellers rather than musicians.

The music industry is full of people seeking fame, money and power, and the music they make often focuses on great love and painful loss. It's therefore unsurprising that there are some amazing and entertaining books about music.

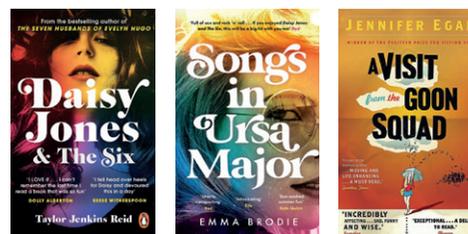


#### Classical music, classic books

*The Phantom of the Opera* (Gaston Leroux) may be better known as a musical, but the drama started on the page.

Set in the midst of a long-term hostage situation, *Bel Canto* (Ann Patchett) emphasises the ability of beautiful music to bring people together across cultures and languages.

*An Equal Music* (Vikram Seth) and *The Ensemble* (Aja Gabel) show how even in the classical world personal relationships can impact the music being made.



#### Looking back (in anger)

Relationships between band members were a big feature of the '70s and '80s music scene.

*Daisy Jones & The Six* (Taylor Jenkins Reid), loosely inspired by Fleetwood Mac, follows the coming together and falling apart of a rock band. *Songs in Ursa Major* (Emma Brodie) is based on Joni Mitchell and James Taylor's romantic and musical partnership.

A memoir as compelling as fiction, *Just Kids* (Patti Smith) documents Smith's career and relationship with friend and lover Robert Mapplethorpe.

*The Final Revival of Opal & Nev* (Dawnie Walton) follows the trajectory of an interracial musical partnership. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Jennifer Egan) uses interconnected short stories to weave tales across the music industry.

#### Boys, bands, boybands and more

There are few things more dramatic and passionate than the relationship between teenagers and their musical idols.

*The Commitments* (Roddy Doyle) follows the rise of a working-class Irish soul group, and *Kill the Boy Band* (Goldy Moldavsky) gives a

darkly comic take on what happens when fans get a bit carried away.

*Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist* (Rachel Cohn and David Levithan), *If This Gets Out* (Sophie Gonzales and Cale Dietrich) and *The Music of What Happens* (Bill Konigsberg) all use music as the backdrop for burgeoning YA romances.

#### Jazzy times

Many of the popular images which define the 1920s, namely the outfits and the parties, are also synonymous with jazz music. *Tales of the Jazz Age* (F. Scott Fitzgerald) is just one of the author's works of that time.

Stretching into the 1930s and 1940s, *Rules of Civility* (Amor Towles) and *Half Blood Blues* (Esi Edugyan) continue to build on jazz's brand of glamour laced with gritty darkness.



#### Tunes that slay

Offering a more violent interpretation of musical passion, *Kill Your Friends* (John Niven) is a satirical take on the commercialism of the '90s pop music era.

In a novel where characters must literally kill their friends, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Suzanne Collins) puts music at the centre of The Hunger Games prequel.

*Orfeo* (Richard Powers) depicts an artist accused of bioterrorism as a result of his unusual musical work.

#### Dancing to your own tune

Dancing needs music and music is brought to life by dance.

*Ballet Shoes* (Noel Streatfeild) made generations of little girls desperate for ballet lessons, though Maggie Shipstead's more adult perspective on ballet in *Astonish Me* shows a less magical and more sinister side of the art form.

*Swing Time* (Zadie Smith) uses tap dance to tell a story of friendship across years and continents.

With thanks to PRG and Give a Book volunteer Erin.

**BARTFIELDS**  
FORENSIC ACCOUNTANTS

**CONFISCATION PROCEEDINGS UNDER POCA!**

Bartfields have considerable UK wide experience of analysing and revising prosecution benefit calculations within tight deadlines. (Legal aid available)

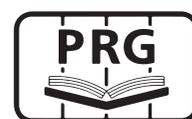
Free prison visit for all pre-confiscation hearing cases

Recent Cases:

	Prosecution Benefit	Bartfields Benefit
Mr M	£190,000	£52,500
Mr H	£667,000	£67,000
Mrs D	£271,000	£45,000
Mr R	£1,280,000	£134,000
Mr O	£378,000	£16,000

Contact Elisabeth Scott or Emma Whitaker on 0333 222 4445 (option 3)

Bartfields Forensic Accountants  
St Paul's House, 23 Park Square, Leeds, LS1 2ND  
info@bartfieldsforensic.co.uk  
www.bartfieldsforensic.co.uk



Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was created in 1999 to set up, support and fund informal reading groups in prisons. We currently support more than 75 groups in over 50 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.

## TurningPages

### Prisoners who can read teach prisoners who can't

If you would like more information on how to become involved, as either a Mentor or a Learner, contact the Reading Plan Lead in your prison (ask a Shannon Trust Mentor who this is) or write to:

Freepost SHANNON TRUST

