



Reading Group Round-Up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

PRG groups hit the ground running in 2026 and we've had great feedback from up and down the country. Our selection this month shows the variety of groups, the range of book choices and how discussions shift and turn.

The group at Lincoln chose Gillian McAllister's *Wrong Place, Wrong Time*.



Can you stop a murder after it's already happened? It's late. You're waiting up for your son. Then you spot him: he's with someone. And – you can't believe what you see – your funny, happy teenage boy stabs this stranger. You don't know who. You don't know why.

You only know your son is charged with murder. His future is lost. That night you fall asleep in despair. But when you wake ... it is yesterday. The day before the murder. Somewhere in the past lie the answers – a reason for this crime. And your only chance to stop it...

A universal thumbs up from all 10 members. 'The book grabs you in the first few pages and from there it's hard to put down.'

For one member the biggest question raised by the book was 'how far do you have to go back to prevent a crime from happening, or yourself from committing it?' Before he read the book, he reckoned his answer would have been the night of the crime itself but now he thought he'd have to go 'a lot further back'. And others too said it had made them think more about their lives.

One of the **Pentonville** groups tackled Gary Stevenson's *The Trading Game*. From the back cover: *Ever since he was a kid, kicking broken footballs on the streets of East London in the shadow of Canary Wharf's skyscrapers, Gary wanted something better. Something a whole lot bigger.*

Then he won a competition run by a bank: 'The Trading Game'. The prize: a golden ticket to a new life, as the youngest trader in the whole city. Where soon you're the bank's most profitable trader, dealing in nearly a trillion dollars. A day. But what happens when winning starts to feel like losing? When the easiest way to make money is to bet on millions becoming poorer

and poorer - and, as the economy starts slipping off a precipice, your own sanity starts slipping with it? You want to stop, but you can't. Because nobody ever leaves.

Great reading group sessions don't depend on great books. The **Pentonville** group were sceptical about this one – they didn't quite believe his story, they thought it was ghost-written, and they wanted more reflection from him. But there was plenty to talk about and some very funny one-liners: 'Nobody likes sushi. It's like Russian literature, they just pretend to', 'I've never seen the point of Ilford'.



At **Maidstone** the group treated themselves to Dan Brown's *Origins*. It's a rollercoaster thriller with all his signature themes: art, religion, technology and hidden history. And it hit the spot: 'Gripping, a fanatic villain with a traumatic past, a murder, a chase

around Europe. The tension is sky high'. But the book also felt worthwhile and led to thoughtful discussion.

'I like that all the places, works of art, science and organisations are real... so it feels like an education too. There were times when I wished I could Google stuff.'

'Religion is designed to fill gaps in our knowledge. The more advances in science, the less need we have for it.'

'Every discovery we've made since fire can be used for the benefit or harm of mankind.'

And Brown's sense of place drew readers as well: 'It made me want to visit Barcelona!'



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.

Prison Focus

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Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

This month the column comes from Toby Litt, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, who shares some favourite books with Inside Time readers



Credit: Toby Litt

Toby Litt: "No shortcuts"

Toby Litt

Five great writing manuals

As a creative writing teacher, the advice I give out most often is 'There are no shortcuts'. That sounds quite harsh. But I always follow this with 'There are no wasted hours'. Which sounds more hopeful.

I can already hear you saying, 'If there are no shortcuts, then what's the point of a writing manual? What use is it?'

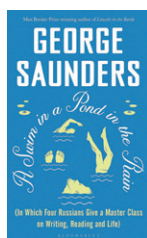
Well, the best ones can be a map of the territory you're planning to enter. For example, the first time you find yourself lost in the middle of a novel.

Here are five books about different kinds of writing: novels, realist short stories, fantasy novels, memoir, and screenplays.



Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story by Ursula K. Le Guin

I only discovered *Steering the Craft* a few months ago, but it's become the one book I recommend if you want to get inside a writer's head. There are great writing exercises, and useful excerpts, but what's best is Le Guin's advice about how to write rhythmic, vivid prose. You'll find examples of this in the fantasy and science fiction novels she wrote. Le Guin speaks from years of teaching experience. Everything here is shipshape.



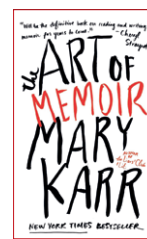
A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading and Life by George Saunders

This is a book about how to write short stories, and the models it gives are wonderful



Wonderbook (Revised and Expanded): The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction by Jeff VanderMeer

If you want to write fantasy or science fiction, this is the best manual. It's crammed with illustrations and diagrams, digressions and author interviews. VanderMeer, author of the uncanny doomed mission novel *Annihilation*, which was turned into a Netflix movie, gives practical advice on world-building. He is equally solid on matters like plotting, character-building and point of view.



The Art of Memoir by Mary Karr

Karr's practical advice – on serious issues like writing a memoir that alienates your friends and family – is straight talking and wise. She is not afraid to warn you off starting

if it's the wrong time, or you're not yet the right person. She knows the territory. She's the author of *The Liar's Club* and *Lit: A Memoir*. And her taste is perfect. All the memoirs she references are stunning. For example, Michael Herr's head-twisting Vietnam War report, *Dispatches*.



Story by Robert McKee

I've hesitated over my last recommendation, of a screenwriting manual. My alternative would be John Yorke's *Into the Woods*, which is less dogmatic and better about writing for television. But McKee's book is a gnarly, macho, stubborn landmark in writing about writing. He asks the hard questions and takes great pleasure in giving the hard truths. You might end up hating him, but you'll have learned something – perhaps even had a revelation or two.

Toby Litt teaches Creative Writing at the University of Southampton. He has written in many forms. The Netflix series *Dead Boy Detectives* was based on his comic of the same name.



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