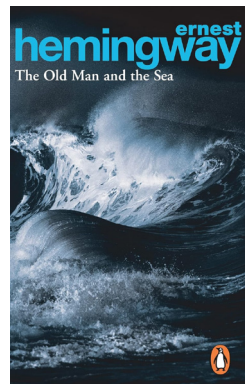




Reading Group Round-Up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

This month the focus is on some classic books – ones that have stood the test of time and can still grip us. They can be challenging, but PRG groups tackle them with gusto and the result is a great discussion.



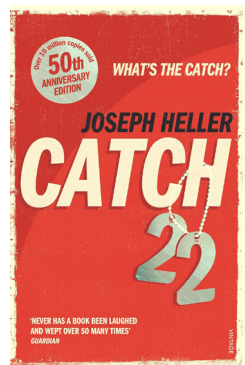
Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* was first published in 1952. It's a very short novel set in the waters off the coast of Havana and tells the story of an old man, a young boy and a fish. It's an epic struggle between the dying fisherman and a giant marlin, but it's also

about much more: loneliness and longing, the power of human connection, and an unbreakable bond with nature.

Both groups at Rye Hill read it, and as always, the difference of views made for zinging book talk. For some it was too short: "I wanted more from it," "I've started looking at books as if I can eat them. This one was just a snack." But others liked it all the more because of the brevity: "I thought it was a Goldilocks book, just the right length for me, like a film shot in one scene."

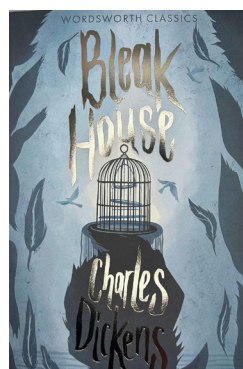
There was lots of debate about the central theme: "It was his determination, the endurance of the human spirit"; "The sharks circle when you're at your weakest but you build yourself back up and go out again."

"I read it all, I read it again a week later, and last night I read it again."



At Rochester, the group took on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, first published in 1961. The book is set in the closing months of the Second World War and centres on Yossarian, a bombardier who discovers that his real enemy is his own military masters and their combination of cunning, incompetence and corruption, all summed up in the *Catch-22* trap. His superiors keep increasing the number of missions the men must fly to complete their service. Flying is suicidal madness. To be excused, Yossarian has to plead insanity, but if he does, they'll know he must be sane so will make him to keep flying.

The tone of the book shifts between hilarity and the horror of war. It's also a hefty read, but the group took it on and had a great time talking about it. Views were mixed, but everyone agreed about the echoes of *Catch-22* in prisons. There were lots of examples, including cell door name cards and negatives for using them and not using them as ID...



PRG groups also prove the classics can be for everyone. The Whatton group is part of PRG's Reading the Way initiative, which is aimed at less experienced readers who want more practice and support to build confidence and reading pleasure. At Whatton, they took on an abridged version of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, first published in 1853. It's a challenging novel that explores and exposes the corruption of Victorian England as Dickens saw it. At the centre is a complicated legal case with tentacles that spread across society and involve lost children, blackmail and murder. The cast of characters ranges from wealthy aristocrats to homeless and starving street children.

The Whatton group reads the chosen book together over a number of sessions. When they finished *Bleak House*, they agreed it had been challenging but satisfying and they are keen to have a go with another Dickens book. A great moment came when a member who hadn't wanted to read aloud at earlier meetings decided to have a go at the last *Bleak House* session. He read a section with the help of a mentor and was rightly proud of his achievement.



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.



Prisons Minister Lord Timpson has agreed to be interviewed by Inside Time. What should we ask him?

Send us your questions and we'll put the best ones to him. Write to: Questions for Timpson, Inside Time, Botley Mills, Botley, Southampton, SO30 2GB.



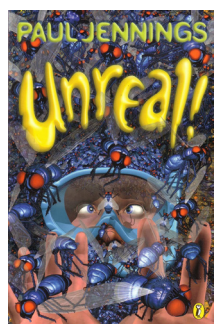
Finding a Good Read

A column to help you find intriguing books

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

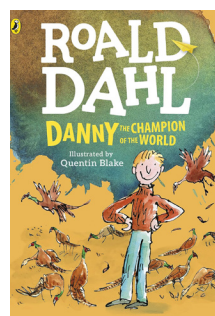


Damian Le Bas



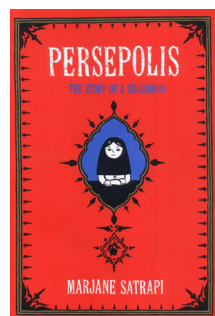
Unreal!
by Paul Jennings

This is the first book I remember reading all the way through just because I wanted to, without a grown-up getting me to read it. It's a set of weird short stories and every one of them has got a twist in it. It amazed me that someone could make up stories like this, and it still does. There are a lot of books in this series and most of them are called 'Un' something: 'Unbelievable', 'Uncanny', and so on. There was a TV series based on them, but the books are even better.



Danny the Champion of the World
by Roald Dahl

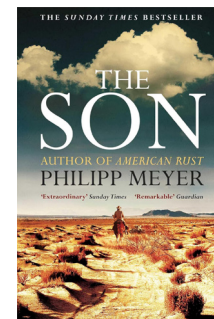
This is classed as a children's book so it's quite easy to read, but I read it when I was 20 years of age. It's about a boy called Danny and his dad. I don't know if they're meant to be Travellers or Gypsy people but they still reminded me of us. They live in a wagon and the dad fixes old motors and does a bit of poaching on the side, but Danny and his dad are the good ones. The local lord has got it in for them and he is the villain. It makes me want to read it again just thinking about it.



Persepolis
by Marjane Satrapi

Persepolis is a graphic novel about the Iranian Revolution. It tells it from the view of a young girl living through these times, and how she has to move to Austria because of it. Really, it's as much about her growing up and learning to understand the world as it is about politics. This book really opened my

mind about what it's like being a woman in some places. It also made me want to think twice before I started shouting about something I hadn't experienced myself. There's a lot of funny moments in it as well. It reminds you that deep down, people are the same everywhere.



The Son
by Philipp Meyer

This is a long book but I swear I've never read a book so fast. The main character, Eli, gets taken away by the Comanches when he's little. They give him a Comanche name and teach him how to be a warrior. The details are unbelievable: everything from how the Comanches butchered a bison and used every part of it, to the way they could break horses faster than white people and survive off the land. It's also got a lot about the history of Texas and people fighting over oil fields. It makes sense of how America became like it is.



War and Peace
by Leo Tolstoy

I didn't know what to expect when I started this book. It's one of the longest and most famous books ever written. People say 'War and Peace' to take the mickey out of something that goes on forever. The funny thing is, it doesn't feel like a long book. The chapters are quite short and there are so many characters and things happening that it goes by fast. It takes a while to get going, then it's like the best film you've ever seen except you're reading it. It's not just the massive battle scenes: it's the way you feel like you know the main characters so well you are almost living as them.

Damian Le Bas's first book, *The Stopping Places*, won the Somerset Maugham Award, an RSL Jerwood Award, and was shortlisted for the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year. Widely published as a journalist and poet, he has received a Society of Authors Travelling Scholarship and an honorary Master of Education from the University of Chichester. Damian read Theology at the University of Oxford. His second book, *The Drowned Places*, was published in 2025. He is a native Romani speaker.



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