



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.



Reading Group Round-Up

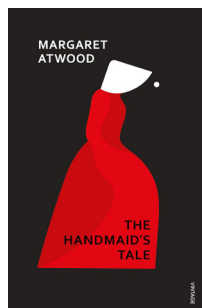
Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

This month we report on groups that have tackled books with big themes: race and racism, women's oppression and how geography influences politics and history.



Percival Everett's novel *The Trees* (2021) is a hard-hitting exploration of racism in America. When the town of Money, Mississippi is beset by a series of brutal murders, a pair of Black detectives from the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation arrive. They're prepared for the hostility of the local white sheriff, his deputy and the racist white townsfolk. What they haven't reckoned with is the second corpse that appears at each crime scene: a body that strangely resembles the real-life Emmett Till, a Black boy who was brutally murdered in the town in the 1950s. The book is a mix of horror and knockabout comedy that unsettles the reader at every turn. Everett is a Black writer who puts shocking derogatory language into the mouths of his racist white characters and makes us read it. The result is a book that sometimes feels like a slap in the face.

For the group at Huntercombe it opened up wide-ranging discussion of the history of lynching, the horrifying story of Emmett Till and the book as a kind of revenge that creates white characters who are not just vicious but also ignorant and absurd.



Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a dystopian novel that has been adapted and extended for six TV series. Offred is a Handmaid in The Republic of Gilead, a religious totalitarian regime in what was once the United States. The regime is totally controlled by men; women have only one function: to breed and re-populate a world devastated by a catastrophe that remains mysterious. Offred belongs to the household of the Commander, Fred Waterford, who also names her - 'Of-Fred'. If Offred refuses to enter into sexual servitude, she will be exiled and will likely die. The novel is about her attempts to fight back.

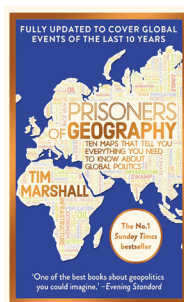
One of the members at Standford Hill had read it 30 years ago and was keen to see if it was still as powerful. The group's answer was a resounding yes and their discussion raised crucial questions about women's position in contemporary society as well as in the fictional Gilead. The novel explores the idea of freedom in terms of protection v choice, 'freedom from' v 'freedom to', and the group debated it with thoughtful energy. They also commented on how relevant the issues still are: "*There were passages that actually made you stop reading to think about what was happening, because there was a resonance with things happening now.*"

Have you ever wondered:

How did the USA become a superpower?

Why do countries go to war?

Why are some countries rich while others are so poor?



Prisoners of Geography (2015, updated 2025) by Tim Marshall is a non-fiction book about how geography has shaped world history. It's organised around 10 regions, from Africa and the Arctic to Europe, the Middle East and the Americas, India and Pakistan, Japan, Korea, Russia and China, and it explores how mountains, rivers and seas have affected historical events in each one.

It's a big book but in recent months groups at both Pentonville and Wandsworth have read it with gusto. The sections can be read in any order and there was lots of discussion about which regions were most interesting and why. Members also commented on how relevant the book is to current events, from Trump's invasion of Venezuela to the US/Iran war and the Straits of Hormuz. Along with the big picture overview, the book is also chock-full of fascinating facts, from the cost of an Arctic ice-breaker (£750 million) to the crucial importance of deep-water harbours. Both groups agreed it was a great read, either all at once or to dip in and out of.

And for quite a few it was a great way to get a better handle on things happening today: "It helped me understand the news better and I'm now much more interested in it."



Finding a Good Read

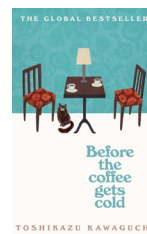
A column to help you find intriguing books

Erin

Time to read

Having the opportunity to experience different historical periods, or see your alternate life paths, could be fun and satisfying - being trapped in an infinite time loop probably isn't.

Playing with the concept of time makes for quirky, funny and sometimes just baffling plots - *Cloud Atlas* (David Mitchell) is considered as much a puzzle as it is a story.



If I could turn back time

The Time Machine (H.G. Wells) is credited as the first popular time travel book.

11/22/63 (Stephen King) and *The Man Who Folded Himself* (David Gerrold) offer thoughtful, if quite stressful, considerations on how this power could be used.

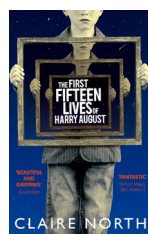
Outlander (Diana Gabaldon) and *The Time Traveler's Wife* (Audrey Niffenegger) are slightly soapier takes on the concept. *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* (Toshikazu Kawaguchi) is a heartwarming variation on the idea.

Back to the future

Usually checking what happens at the end of the book before starting to read it is considered a cheat. Stories that run backwards in time let you do this guilt-free.

The Night Watch (Sarah Waters) and *Time's Arrow* (Martin Amis) both take their stories from finish to start.

The short story *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (F. Scott Fitzgerald) takes the concept one step further, with a main character who ages backwards.



Can't escape the book

Repeating the same day (or life) over and over again is usually a nightmare for the character experiencing it and great fun for the reader.

This device is used in different ways and with different results in *The First Fifteen Lives of*

Harry August (Claire North), *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* (Stuart Turton), *Replay* (Ken Grimwood), and *On the Calculation of Volume* (Solvej Balle).

Kindred (Octavia E. Butler) uses the idea to explore the theme of slavery. *Oona Out of Order* (Margarita Montimore) emphasises the importance of living in the moment, even if those moments aren't when they are meant to be.

What might have been

Finding out what your life could look like if your actions, tiny or huge, had been different is a great fiction trope.

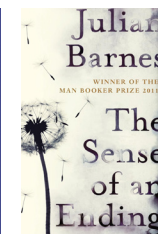
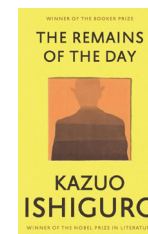
Festive classic *A Christmas Carol* (Charles Dickens) is a famous exploration of this theme.

The companion piece to Kate Atkinson's time-looping *Life After Life*, *A God In Ruins* explores what might have happened to her main character if it had not been for a World War. *Light Perpetual* (Francis Spufford) looks at the same topic.

While *Recursion* (Blake Crouch) focuses on a corporate mystery of memory manipulation, *The Midnight Library* (Matt Haig) is an uplifting story about how it's never too late to alter a life path gone awry.

The never-ending story

Keeping a character alive for centuries is a great way of exploring time periods without introducing too many new people. *How to Stop Time* (Matt Haig) and *Orlando* (Virginia Woolf) do this expertly.



Memories

Even a normal approach to time can trigger a lot of emotions - particularly when musing on how fast it passes. Regret, nostalgia, joy and hope all make for great story drivers.

Kazuo Ishiguro masters this area, with *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* both offering gorgeous and heartbreaking reflections on life. *The Sense of an Ending* (Julian Barnes) also looks at how life can be shaped by unreliable memories.

Time and its passing is integral to both *The Notebook* (Nicholas Sparks) and *One Day* (David Nicholls), and their tales of love over many years remain popular on the page and the screen.

With thanks to Give a Book and PRG volunteer Erin

TurningPages



Shannon Trust

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: Freeport SHANNON TRUST