Reading group round-up

Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

HMP Kirkham boasts two PRG reading groups supported by the library. This month the facilitator Michelle reports on the brilliantly varied activities of one of them.

At the monthly meetings the group starts with the book we have chosen and read in advance. Recent choices have included Simon Armitage's Walking Home: A Poet's Journey and Boris Johnson's The Churchill Factor.

In 2010 Armitage set out to walk the more than 250 miles of the Pennine Way in 19 days. As one member of the group described it, the poet 'conceived of the project as a modern odyssey, with himself as both Odysseus and Homer'. On his website Armitage offered evening poetry readings in exchange for bed and breakfast and ferrying his luggage to the next destination. Over the course of the walk he read poetry to 1158 people and raised over £3000. 'Better paid than I thought' as one reader commented.

Responses to the book varied from admiration of Armitage's 'wry gritty sense of humour' to a feeling that the book was 'cluttered' with trivial concerns and 'didn't live up to my expectations of what a poet would experience or explore'.

Reactions to Boris Johnson's biography of Churchill were equally mixed. One reader described it as an absorbing 'warts and all' account. Another drew unflattering comparison between the author and his subject: 'They both appear to be egotistical, ambitious, bombastic, insulting, self-centred, arrogant, untrustworthy, disloyal, impetuous … the list goes on.'

The group also often reads and discusses a short story during the session. Stories by Saki (the pen name of H H Munro) have gone down well for their witty twists and all the members have enjoyed taking a turn at reading aloud.

One of the innovations of the group is our discussion of two or three quotations from different sources chosen for the way they echo or challenge each other. A recent set:

1. 'If your aspirations are not greater than your resources, you're not an entrepreneur.' C K Prahalad (1941 - 2010)

2. 'Nobody talks more of free enterprise and competition and of the best man winning than the man who has inherited his father's store or farm.' C Wright Mills (1916 - 1962)

3. 'Pessimists are usually right and optimists are usually wrong but all the great changes have been accomplished by optimists.' Thomas Friedman (1953 -)

To round off each meeting Michelle invites members to talk about books they are reading and enjoying on their own. At a recent meeting one reader described a 'fantastic' book about the rules of business in China and the way the author connects his experience as an entrepreneur today with stories of the great Chinese dynasties of the past. The reading group member was especially struck by a quotation from Mencius, a Chinese philosopher writing over two thousand years ago:

'Heaven, when it is about to place a great responsibility upon someone, first tests his resolution with suffering, wears out his sinews with work, starves his body to skin and bone, exposes him to emptiness and poverty and brings chaos to all that he is. Thus his intentions become resolute and his deficiencies are made good.'

The Kirkham reading group has something for everyone and is hugely enjoyed by all.

The Kirkham group is part of the Prison Reading Groups (PRG) network, sponsored by the University of Roehampton and generously supported by charities including Give A Book www.giveabook.org.uk
If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prison-reading-groups
PRG also worked with National Prison Radio to set up their book club. If you have access to NPR, listen out for details and ways to take part.

Shared Reading

Maggie McCarney reads with prisoners in the PIPE at HMP Eastwood Park.

If

by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, not talk too wise:

If you can think and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools
(verses 1 and 2 of 4)

We had just read Roald's Dahl's short story, 'The Umbrella Man', in our Shared Reading group, and spoken of how the old man's scam about fooling people to buy 'his' umbrella off him for a pound, was quite clever. We did wonder about the little girl in the story; how she felt to see her, 'snotty-nosed mum', as Emma* called her, be taken in by the story of his plight. The girls eagerly related past scams they knew of, and so the mood was lively and engaged as we moved onto the poem, If, by Rudyard Kipling.

I read it out aloud first. Silence. Then Emma responds with, 'It could be better written!' Before I say anything Lucy* states, 'But I like the first verse.' 'Oh yeah,' Emma replies 'That, Being lied about, don't deal in lies,\ Or being hated, don't give way to hating, I try to do that in here, and, And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise…., I try to do that too; causes less trouble.' 'Yep,' agrees Jane, 'That's what I meant'.

Both Emma and Lucy have been in HMP Eastwood Park for quite a while but have not been in the same group with me until now. It is good to see them figuring the poem out together, while recognising their own ways of coping with life. I suggest we hear the poem again, and Lucy reads it out aloud. I am taken by the lines:

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools.

I share from my own life experience how it reminds me of an ex-partner who seemed, I realised later, good at throwing back what I had said and so confusing me. Lucy jumped in suddenly, 'That's why I'm here, cause of an ex and that twisting'. We talk of twisting and twisted, and then of, building up ourselves again, with whatever tools you've got.

It feels like certain words from the poem, e.g. twisted, build, tools are being taken by us and used to help share this complex process of re-building one's life, but also this word If keeps being said in the poem. I mention the title, If. 'Not easy really,' says Lucy. 'Keep trying, I suppose, but there's lots of If's,' states Emma. 'If only this and if only that …'

I am wondering about the use of men/man in the poem and say so. Without hesitation Emma says, 'It's okay, means both'. She then shares how she bravely came out to her Dad: 'He don't like it cause of his religion, but I did it, and I'm glad'. I say how brave that is. I tell them how I know some women would take offence at the use of men in the poem, and not using women, or human, but the group see it all as 'human anyway'.

'But the end sounds a bit religious, that 'Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, \And - what is more - you'll be a Man, my son!' says Lucy. We talk of the expectations put on men and women, and the ones we put on ourselves. Time is running out; Emma has a visitor. She leaves us and we come to an end. Lucy takes away a copy for herself and her best friend.

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*

The Reader is an award-winning charitable social enterprise working to connect people through great literature. In weekly sessions, a practitioner reads aloud a short story or extract and a poem. Anyone in the group may choose to read too: some do, others don't. In this way, connections are made with thoughts and feelings; some people reflect on these privately, others are more vocal. Either is fine. The emphasis is on enjoying the literature.

SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE
GEMA RECORDS.COM
OUR 2015 WINTER SUPPLEMENT IS STILL ACTIVE AND INCLUDES OUR HUGE TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS CD & DVD SALE!
2015 MAIN CATALOGUE #121 OUT NOW!
Have you seen our Wi-Fi removed Xbox 360 'E' Used bundle that is currently being supplied to a number of prisons?
£229.95 NOW ONLY £199.95
Send a £2 payment to GEMA RECORDS, PO BOX 54, READING, BERKS, RG1 3SD to receive either catalogue with a £2 voucher to use against your first order! Alternatively, ask a friend or relative to order online where they can also sign up to our email mailing list!
ORDER SALE ITEMS NOW! (VALID 01/11/15 - 11/01/16. WHILST STOCK LASTS)
DRAKE - NOTHING WAS THE SAME (DLX) WAS £12.95, NOW £5.95
AMY WINEHOUSE - BACK TO BLACK WAS £11.50, NOW £7.50
LINKIN PARK - ROAD TO REVOLUTION (LIVE) WAS £14.95, NOW £6.50
TAYLOR SWIFT - RED WAS £11.50, NOW £5.95
DRAKE - TAKE CARE WAS £6.50, NOW £5.95
THE GAME - DOCUMENTARY WAS £6.50, NOW £5.95
NOV/DEC 2015 NEW RELEASES, ORDER NOW!
£11.50 ADELE - 25
DJ KHALED - I CHANGED A LOT (IMP) £13.95
SKEME - INGLEWORLD 3 (IMP/3CD) £13.95
RICK ROSS - BLACK DOLLAR (MIXTAPE) £9.51
VARIOUS - PERFECTLY CHILLED (3CD) £12.95
VARIOUS - NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL MUSIC 92 (DBL) £12.95
VARIOUS - GUESTLIST: ELITE COLLECTION (DBL) £12.95
SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE - SALE