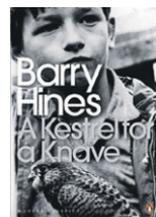


Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons



The report this month comes from Stephen P and the group at Wymott. They recently read Barry Hines's 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave*, which became Ken Loach's classic film *Kes* a year later.

Amazingly almost everyone had read the book. More amazingly still, it was universally enjoyed. Craig started things off: 'It was a bit like my own life', he said. Stephen U felt that it was informative about falconry and gave great details of the history of this ancient pursuit. Bill liked the style, describing it as a 'stream of consciousness.' He even referenced a phrase that he particularly liked: 'boiler pipes like branches of a beanstalk'. Now there's poetry!

Paul struggled at first with the South Yorkshire vernacular, but soon got the hang of it. Ian, born and bred in Yorkshire, relished a book set in 'the best place in England'. Nigel thought the use of dialect was 'very homely' and felt he could relate especially to the family scenes. His favourite was at the beginning of the book where the mother asks a reluctant Billy Casper to go to the shop for 'ciggies' which results in slapstick chase round the kitchen.

Pete D and Pete G concurred on the innovative use of language. Pete D loved the phrase from DH Lawrence: 'If men were as much men as lizards are like lizards'. Pete G loved the use of words - 'tanner', 'snicket', 'snap' - and the author's ability to render an urban setting as poetic. Stephen P said the book made him 'proud to be working class'.

Muhammad, as ever, made a revelatory contribution: 'The story shows two sides of life, darkness and light, freedom and captivity'. The hawk, he thought, represents freedom when he is allowed to fly, but is ironically kept a prisoner.

What was not in dispute was Billy Casper's

passion for nature generally and for the kestrel 'Kes' in particular. Colette asked the group if anyone had experienced a similar kind of passion for a subject that helped them cope with the trials of life.

After a short silence, the answers came: 'art', 'physics and astronomy', 'creative writing'. Ian expressed his love of Rome and Bill regaled the group with stories of Santiago de Compostella in Spain. Other passions included music, poetry and etymology. Pete D was silent about his private passion but the way he devoured the final chocolate biscuit suggested a love of 'ate-emology'.

The story of 'Kes' resonates and moves us because it destroys the lie that people on the margins are defined by their circumstances and their surroundings. Billy is a heroic figure whose love of nature transcends and transforms his environment. Despite the tragic end to the story, the message of the book is one of hope in beauty.

One final sad note to the proceedings was the news that Barry Hines had died recently. Pete told the group that Hines had been quite a prolific author in his time but was remembered primarily for just this book and its successful transformation into film. One of the consequences of this book choice was the commitment by the library to obtain some other of Hines's books. If he is looking down from that great eyrie in the sky, I'm sure he would have been delighted by the enjoyment he has given to our book club. Thanks Barry!

The Wymott 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.prison-reading-groups.org.uk