



Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

The report this month comes from volunteer Maggie Gallagher at HMP Thameside. The session was the last of a series of brilliant author visits organised by the librarian Neil Barclay as part of the prison's literary festival at the end of 2016. Author and ex-police officer Clare Mackintosh came to discuss her novel 'I See You'.



Clare was a police officer before becoming a writer and she described the process of morphing from one into the other. She had always enjoyed the paperwork in the police job, unlike most of her colleagues!

She especially enjoyed doing things like witness impact statements where she would work hard to ensure that the victim's authentic voice came through, and always felt she was trying to present a story to a court, letting it (jury or judge) make up its own mind.

After a family tragedy she started blogging. She submitted some articles to a local magazine and then to a magazine with a bigger circulation, and making money from writing began to snowball. The idea of being a writer had always attracted her but she had not grown up knowing people who were writers so it seemed an impossible ambition.

But her first book, I Let You Go, sold over 700,000 copies and is now being made into a film. There are also discussions about a TV mini-series of I See You. Clare can now devote herself to full-time writing and does not miss policing at all!

The spark for I See You was the recognition of both the way that routine fills many lives, providing easy targets for criminals, and also the growth of websites and apps like Tinder that allow strangers to make contact. Those two elements combined presented many possibilities for evil as well as good, as is amply demonstrated in her book.

She was asked about whether any situations in the book were taken from life and whether any characters were based on people she had encountered in her time on the Force. She said there were elements of some characters in her books - though not as many as people thought. Ex-colleagues tended to be very disappointed when they were told that they were not the model for a particular character. She emphatically denied ever punching a prisoner in the face, or having a red mist episode as happens to the female detective in the novel! "I was a good cop!"

She was very interesting on the subject of character development, who we sympathise with in stories and why. Her protagonist had started out being the victim, Zoe Walker. The detective was originally male and a much more minor character. She eventually realised that the story wasn't working because the detective wasn't sufficiently invested in the victim's story, couldn't really empathise with her fears. With a female detective whose past helped her relate to the victim, the story came alive.

Other issues included police corruption, writing description that convinces, e-books and self-publishing, starting a literary festival, early influences (Agatha Christie and Daphne Du Maurier), the objectification of women through such apps as Tinder, getting the atmosphere right in police procedurals and the therapeutic nature of writing. A great session!

The Thameside 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 and the Booker Prize Foundation. 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

Five minutes with...



Jon was amazed by what he had written

Jon Herbert Scott spent ten years working as a journalist before getting a job as a prison governor. He subsequently worked in five different prisons, three of them in London. Now he is an author. Trouble on the Wing is his first novel

What advice would you give to your younger writer self?

It took me so long to realise that other people don't always know best - and that if you try and meet other people's expectations, you can lose sight of what you're doing. So my advice to my younger writer self would be to trust yourself. Do your own thing. Only when you've finished and know that you've done your best - only then come up for air and see what others think of your handiwork.

What was your favourite book as a child?

I was never a bookworm and even now I'm more likely to watch a film than read a book. But I can remember, aged 10 or 11, being addicted to a series about two American boys collecting animals from around the world for their dad's zoo. They were by Willard Price, these stories, and called things like Whale Adventure, Safari

Adventure, Amazon Adventure. I must have read each one three, four, five times ...

What was your worst moment as a prison Governor?

Governors spend so much of their time fire-fighting and having to sort out things that have gone wrong. In fact each Morning Meeting is almost exclusively about incidents that have occurred the day before, often for quite avoidable reasons. That used to frustrate me. Obviously prisons are big complex places and everyone is under a lot of pressure, so stuff happens. But they should primarily be about opportunities and getting lives back on track. Sadly a lack of government will and funding means this does not happen nearly enough.

What was your best moment as a prison Governor?

Sport is a great leveller, I always think. I could never

join in football matches because I have terrible coordination, but I do remember a marathon on the rowing machines at Feltham one day. It was a relay race for charity and involved a dozen or so teams from right across the prison. It started off gently but ended up with loads of shouting and whooping, with everyone encouraging everyone else. It would be great to have one of those every week ...

Is life better as a writer or as a prison Governor?

For me, I prefer being a writer because it's about creating something from nothing and being 100% responsible for what I produce - something I find reassuring. That said, writing can get a bit lonely sometimes - which is why I often take myself off to a cafe, just so I can hear voices around me.

Trouble on the Wing by Jon Herbert Scott Price £5.99 ISBN: 978-0995733602

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