



# Reading Group Round-up

*Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons*

The report this month comes from Oxford University lecturers Sophie Ratcliffe and Eleanor Lybeck who have been visiting PRG reading groups as part of their new project 'Unsilencing the Library'.

'Books find us sometimes.' This comment - so simple and so true - was made during a meeting of the reading group at HMP Bullingdon that we had the pleasure of visiting this March. Our visit formed part of our new project about how reading has mattered to different people at different times.

It all began with some books that we found in a neglected Victorian library in a Warwickshire museum. The room's shelves were empty, but one thing remained - a doorway framed with imitation books. Looking closely, you could see these 'books' were all written by women. It's a rare thing to showcase women's writing like this - even rarer in the nineteenth century - an age when women's rights were barely spoken about. This old room was trying to tell us a story about reading and equality that has found its way into the twenty-first century.

The empty shelves still needed filling, and the museum asked us to help. So we set out to ask people to suggest what to put on them. Actress and campaigner Emma Watson, broadcaster and gardener Alys Fowler, and writer Margo Jefferson all sent us lists of their favourite books. So have teenagers from a Warwickshire comprehensive. And so have dozens of members of Prison Reading Groups.

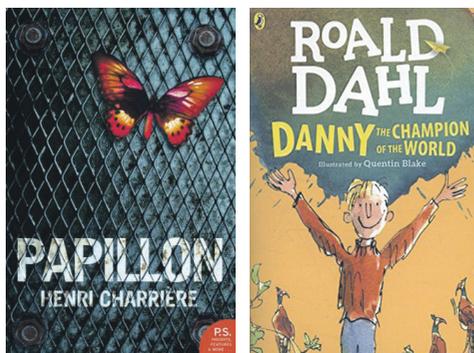
PRG readers nationwide have shared some extraordinary choices, from tales of shipwrecks and smuggling to transformational self-help books and comic novels. Many of their choices will feature in our exhibition, which will open to the public in June.

We're privileged that PRG readers have shared the reason why their books matter. One reader describes how Henri Charrière's autobiography Papillon helped him at a time when he was in 'a very dark and lonely place void of hope'. The book, he writes, 'took me out of the prison system.' Another tells of the importance of shared reading:

"If I had to choose a book that I deemed more important in my life than any other then I'd pick Danny the Champion of the World by Roald Dahl.

As a child of the '80s, after school and weekend time were for playing in the streets, the field behind our house or swimming in the river - not for reading. Books were for school and I remember to this day sitting with my legs crossed and arms folded as Miss Hindle began reading about Danny and his dad's adventures. I was hooked ...

Not knowing my own father didn't seem impor-



tant to me at that age but I think that hearing about Danny's bond with his dad filled my head with ideas of grandeur about my own. It wasn't the fact that his dad was there for him but that he put Danny first and let him come up with ideas of his own.

As a father, I have a daughter who is a very enthusiastic reader ... My son, however, would rather be playing video games. But when I sat him down and started reading Danny to him, I could see the same glint in his eyes that I must have had."

Setting out on this project, we couldn't have imagined receiving such generous responses. We are hugely grateful to PRG Director Sarah Turvey, to the librarians who have passed on details of our work and collected numerous responses, and - most of all - to those members of PRG who have taken part so far. We are so glad that your books have found us.

*Unsilencing the Library will be on display at Compton Verney Art Gallery and Museum in Warwickshire between June and December this year.*

*If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the Prison Reading Group website [www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk](http://www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk) PRG is generously supported by charities including Give A Book and the Booker Prize Foundation.*

## TurningPages

**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: Shannon Trust, Freepost RTKY-RUXG-KGYH The Foundry, 17-19 Oval Way, LONDON SE11 5RR.

**ShannonTrust**

## Book Review



### SHORT SENTENCE Three-years in Dartmoor Prison

by Jessica Berens

Review by Noel Smith

Grosvenor House Publishing Limited / £9.99 / ISBN: 978-1786230379

"HMP Dartmoor is a cross between Gormenghast and an Escher drawing; rusty metal exterior staircases wind up granite walls and stop; enter a door that several people have claimed leads to 'Administration' and end up in 'Offender Management; don't bother with C Wing, it was condemned for 'sanitation' reasons and is derelict. Aim for the 'Resettlement Unit' and end up in the freezing twilight zone that is the passage to D Wing where everything is, for reasons best known to itself, painted orange and the cold wasteland is dominated by curving wooden structures and pointless glass cubicles..."

Above is the blurb from the back of the book, which will give you a flavour of Dartmoor prison. I spent time in Dartmoor, back in the 90s, and I can well remember the unique ambience of the place,

a kind of forlorn prison outpost at the edge of time. A place where the oppression was almost palpable.

*"I think Jessica Berens captures the atmosphere of Dartmoor prison very well, from the endless weird corridors to the loud, brash boasts of the younger prisoners"*

She manages to document the more interesting prisoners she has come across whilst teaching creative writing/art in the prison. What they look like, how they interact with her, what they are in for and their attitudes, and this, along with her sharp and sometimes funny observations on the state and fabric of the prison is what makes for such an

absorbing book.

The late JP Bean (Julian Broadhead), founder of Prison Writing and senior Sheffield Probation Officer, once warned me against Writers-in-Residence, stating - 'All they are there for is to appropriate prisoners' stories to use in their own books'. But for the incarcerated, who have no writing skills and no voice in the outside world, this is the only way their stories will ever see the light of day. So, I applaud Jessica Berens for this book.

Those who have spent time in the unhallowed halls of Dartmoor prison will recognise it straight away, and those who haven't will be glad they never passed through the gates.

A great little book and highly recommended.

## instalaw

**National Prison Law Solicitors**

[www.instalaw.co.uk](http://www.instalaw.co.uk)

**Instalaw Solicitors have over 40 years combined experience representing prisoners rights and we can represent you no matter where you are in the country!**

*Specialists in Parole Board paper reviews, oral hearings & independent adjudications*

### Our Prison Law Experts can help you with:

- Parole Board oral hearings
- Paper Parole Reviews
- Recalls
- Discretionary Lifer Reviews
- Mandatory Lifer Reviews
- IPP Paper & Oral Parole Reviews
- Independent Adjudications
- Private cases (Transfer/HDC)

**Call us today for free advice on: 01782 560 155**

**Nottingham office: Instalaw, 4th Floor Parliament House, 42 - 46 Upper Parliament Street, Nottingham, NG1 2AG**

**Staffordshire office: Instalaw, 2nd Floor Copthall House, King Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, ST5 1UE**

Robert Welsh - Partner (Staffordshire)    Simon Howland - Partner (Staffordshire)

Stephen Luke - Partner (Nottingham)    Craig Sinclair - LLB HONS (Staffordshire)

Reise Wright - Prison Law Advocate BA HONS (Nottingham)

Plus Nationwide Consultant Prison Law Advisors