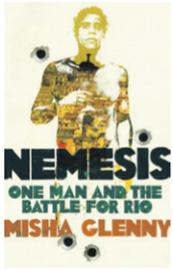




Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

The report this month comes from Alex Manolatos, volunteer facilitator at HMP Pentonville. The group recently read Misha Glenny's Nemesis and a week later enjoyed a visit from the author.



Glenny's account of politics and society in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro focuses on the life of one inhabitant, now known universally as Nem, as he gradually becomes the most powerful man in the district, challenging even the authority of the government. Ultimately he is arrested and

accused of murder and corruption, but dealing with him now may be as fraught with difficulties as when he was a free man...

All the members who attended the reading group meeting had read the book so we were able to have a good discussion all round.

One reader thought the first half, which deals with Nem's family circumstances and with the history of the Rio favelas, was a little rambling, but he found the second half about the power struggles Nem faces very exciting. Personally, I wanted to know more about the history and social developments within these lawless areas of Rio.

Most of us found it extraordinary that the Brazilian government has such a complicated law enforcement system, with three entities each with little trust in the competence of the others. As well as this, there is the problem of corrupt policemen who Glenny says are easy prey to bribes because of their lamentably low salaries. More information about the government's strategy for dealing with the corruption would have been interesting.

We talked at length about whether Nem is villain or hero. On one hand he was clearly a murderer running an illegal organisation. On the other hand we are told that he managed to reduce the level of violence in the favelas and

that he helped to make improvements to the education of its inhabitants as well as to health care. Most readers, I think, agreed with Glenny's view that Nem had on the whole an ameliorating effect on his society. I was amazed the government had got to the stage where they were too frightened to intervene.

Nem's early years, growing up in a family struggling to make ends meet is a key part of the book, in part explaining why he got involved in the cartel. Some readers wondered whether he fell into the organisation naively, or whether he would have been plainly aware of the implications of accepting money from the 'don'.



Misha Glenny

Misha Glenny gave a good talk a week after our meeting. The audience was especially taken by the author's liberal attitude towards his anti-hero, and his interest in Nem's childhood and the events that led to his criminal activities.

Misha told us that he was in the process of securing the film rights to Nemesis and that they would be filming in situ in Rio de Janeiro soon. Some members expressed an interest in taking part as extras should they be released in time!

The Pentonville 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 and the Booker Prize Foundation www.themanbookerprize.com 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