



## Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

The report this month comes from Bullingdon where the reading group has been going strong since 2001 and has been enjoyed by hundreds of members over the past sixteen years.



ML Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans* is set in the aftermath of the First World War and is about a childless couple on a remote lighthouse island off the coast of Western Australia. When a small boat washes up containing a dead man and a small baby they make a decision that has far-reaching and heart-breaking results.

“ This is why I joined the book club. I'd never have picked up this book but I loved it. It made you put yourself in all those different lives and I just had to read to the end. ”

'I couldn't put it down, I read it in a day. It's all about how every action has its consequences and how the wrong thing can also be the right thing. I've got to admit I got through a box of tissues reading it'.

'I liked the way the point of view moves around and you find yourself sympathising with different characters in turn. And it was so intense, I loved that'.

'It's about mothers and their powerful feelings of course, but it's also about fathers and the way they bottle themselves up'.

'The settings were brilliant - the lighthouse which is so isolated that you try to forget or maybe you just think you can ignore what's right and wrong in the rest of the world. But the town on the mainland is full of contradictions too: warmth and community but also gossip and malice and the violence that sets everything in train'.

The book had been chosen from a handout with cover pictures and brief descriptions of a range of titles. The one we chose had a picture of a lighthouse overwritten with the title. But the copies we received had a soft focus child's face and a curly script 'The' for the title.

Only one member hadn't read it. He was new to the group and wasn't there at the previous session when we chose it. 'I guess you really can't judge a book by its cover. When I got my copy I thought no way is this for me. But now I'm definitely taking it back to my cell to read'.

Others were torn between wanting to keep it on their bookshelf and wanting to pass it on to their partners.

Everyone was impressed that this is a first novel and we were all really curious about the original idea and the whole writing process. We're following up to see if there's any chance of a visit from the author - we'd love to quiz her!

Many thanks to Penguin Random House who generously donate books to PRG groups. We're very grateful.

*If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the Prison Reading Groups 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, and by publishers including Penguin Random House.*

## Bread and circuses? No, give them Chess

Says the former wino vagrant who conquered the world with the sport of kings and words, praises new chess book

John Healy

The economy was in a mess. Mass unemployment, crime figures soaring. The workers were revolting. Sounds familiar? Yeah only this was Russia 1921. As the government met to discuss how to solve the problem, an event taking place a few blocks away was to supply the answer. Capablanca, (José Raúl Capablanca, the Cuban grandee and chess champion of the world) was giving an exhibition of his skill tackling 30 players of the Russian intelligentsia simultaneously. Within an hour the grand master had defeated them all, and the event might have been forgotten, except that one of the players was a government official who, on returning to his office somewhat late, began compounding his misdemeanour by proposing to his boss the outrageous idea of teaching the peasants to play chess.

The concept, though distasteful, was put in motion. Since chess is essentially a blood sport, the Soviet idea at first was simply a rehash of Ancient Rome's ploy - keep the mob at bay with arena play. So why would barbarians or prisoners or any deprived people want to play chess? Well, it's a sport, it's an art and it's very nearly a science, and when a concoction like that merges in the mind, whatever the outward circumstances, significant

changes occur. For instance, it significantly alters the way we experience time.

*'Chess can transform lives for the better. It is not in the least bit glamorous to devote so many hours of time to helping those who have fallen foul of the law. Carl is a great guy, with an infectious, optimistic spirit. He also loves the game - one which teaches men and women to be responsible for their own actions. I do hope that this book finds a much wider audience than just the chess community. It certainly deserves to'.*

Grandmaster Nigel Short MBE

As chess develops the mind, the multifaceted elements combine to produce that which all true education is about anyway: critical thinking. Chess commands attention, like a form of psychic unarmed combat or mental kung-fu. Unwittingly the Soviet government had hit on a plan that slowly raised the consciousness of a deprived nation. Soon the illiterate, the semi-illiterate, the good the bad and the ugly were queuing up in multitudes to learn how to read so that they might study chess books to better hold their own on the chess board.

Could chess be of any use in Britain's deprived prisons where futility seems to have gained a new dimension? Reading Chess Behind Bars, I

think it could indeed offer some solace. Such an interesting, challenging project could supply the perfect tool with which prisoners might express themselves. It certainly infuses a positive element into life. New friendships, language, motivation, competition. Well it did a lot for me I can't deny it. Drunks, druggies, incorrigibles, semi-incorrigibles, of every denomination can find fulfilment in chess.

And what is more, they won't even have to give up their old ways either. As my old cell mate Harry the Fox who taught me chess used to say about chess, "What else is it but breaking and entering when you force your way into your opponents castled position, hi-jack his pieces, steal his pawns, capture his Queen and mug his King in broad daylight?"

*John Healy is the author of Penguin Modern Classic The Grass Arena, 'An autobiographical classic' (Irish Post) 'A savage masterpiece' (Books) 'Stuns the reader like blows from an invisible assailant' (London Review of Books) 'Disturbing and compellingly readable' (Sunday Times)*

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**Chess Behind Bars (hardcover) by Carl Portman**  
ISBN: 978-1-78483-032-8  
£24.99

### Foy Vance 'The Wild Swan' competition

Congratulations to Robbie Ellis of HMP Littlehey who was first out of the hat in the Foy Vance Wild Swan competition. A copy of Foy's superlative album *The Wild Swan* is on its way to you. Congratulations also to the other winners and thank you to everyone who took part.

**MASZ PROBLEM Z PICIEM? POTRZEBUJESZ POMOCY?**

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**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.

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All aspects of prison law, including adjudications, parole, DLP, recall, categorisation, and judicial Review	Advice can be given on what can be done to protect your home whilst you are in prison and how to apply for social housing on release.	Divorce, domestic violence, cohabitation and civil partnerships
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