

Prison Reading Groups

Annual Review 2016

“The reading group provides an environment to nurture a different side of ourselves that would otherwise be lost”

‘It’s the most grownup discussion I have in prison’



‘When I read a book it gives me the chance to escape into another world. I love the reading group because it’s great to share that world with other people and learn about the journey they have been on whilst reading the books we share. It is a relaxed and enjoyable setting where all opinions and views are welcome’

‘I’m having a good day. I’ve got this book!’



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Welcome

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) had a fine year in 2016 despite increasingly tough challenges in prisons. We set up 13 new groups, bringing our total to 45 groups in 31 prisons UK-wide, from Edinburgh to the Isle of Wight.

We increased our support for Family Days to 26 days across 17 prisons, providing books and book bags to 1,143 children.

We worked with World Book Night and Cityread London to increase targeted book support in prisons and our groups enjoyed a wide range of author visits and literary events.

PRG's annual Reading in Prison event in June attracted over 120 delegates to celebrate what books can do behind bars. Guest speakers included Dame Helena Kennedy and writer Cathy Rentzenbrink.

PRG continues to advocate for better prison education and learning through our membership of the Prisoner Learning Alliance.

Our work in 2016 was made possible through the generosity of our funders and partners: Give a Book; the Booker Prize Foundation; Penguin Random House; the Siobhan Dowd Trust; the Drapers' Charitable Fund; Wandsworth Council, and many individual donations. Thanks are also due to the University of Roehampton which has hosted and supported PRG since our beginnings.

The success of PRG is due above all to our librarians, volunteers and prisoner members. Their commitment and determination make working with them an inspiration and a pleasure.

Philip Coales, PRG's Coordination and Development Officer leaves us in September 2017. In addition to managing PRG's systems and social media, Phil supervised the very successful 2016 Family Days project and the subsequent report. We wish him all the best.

I am delighted to report that from September 2017 PRG will formally become part of Give a Book, the charity with which we have worked closely since 2011. The partnership is a natural fit and will enable PRG to flourish and expand. We very much look forward to it.

Sarah Turvey

Director, Prison Reading Groups
May 2017

News from the Groups

PRG achieved heartening growth in 2016 despite the challenges of understaffed prisons and the ongoing difficulties of prisoner escort and access to the library.



New groups in 2016
Ashfield
Birmingham
Brixton
Bronzefield
Edinburgh
Ford
Isis
Lewes
Parc
Wandsworth (VP)
Warren Hill (Elm/Maple)
Wayland x 2

Ongoing groups	
Albany x 2	Pentonville
Bure x2	Send
Bullingdon	Springhill
Downview	Thameside x3
East Sutton Park	Wandsworth x2
Full Sutton	Warren Hill (Progression)
Grendon x5	Wormwood Scrubs
High Down x2	Wymott x2
Highpoint x2	
Kirkham	
Leicester x1	
Lewes	

Flexibility

There is no single model for PRG groups. Each one develops a format that best suits its membership: experienced readers or those who have never read a book before; young offenders or older prisoners, perhaps with dementia; those with addictions or mental health issues that make concentration very difficult. Groups may meet monthly or weekly or something in between. They may read aloud or discuss a book read on their own in advance. Meetings may last just an hour or more than two, and group sizes vary from half a dozen to twelve or more.

Reading and sociability

The benefits of reading start with pleasure not coercion so membership is voluntary and the meetings are informal. Wherever possible groups choose the books they read and funding means that the copies are theirs to keep, to display proudly in their cell or pass on to family or other prisoners.

Also as a big bonus we also get a copy to keep which is always very appreciated and I am so grateful to be able to own these books as my own

Member at HMP Bullingdon

Group discussions develop important social skills: speaking and listening; discovering and debating other points of view.

Very sociable and great to see others interpretations of books. A great way to escape prison life is getting lost in a fantastic book. I recommend the reading group to anyone.



Prison is isolating and can increase stress and alienation. The groups play an important role in helping prisoners participate.

I found it difficult when I first came into prison. I suffer from social anxiety. I started going to the library and started reading books and escaped from the prison surroundings. I heard about the book club. Hearing other peoples views on different books was fascinating. I highly recommend it to anyone.

Getting started and settling in

Thirteen new groups took off in 2016. Prisoners brought different expectations to the early meetings and a few people decided it wasn't for them. But many more were intrigued and soon became hooked on the energy and enthusiasm of the discussions.

'We met for the first time in October to get the ball rolling. I arrived to find the conversation already in full swing: eight or nine women around a table covered in books, discussing what they liked reading, recommending favourite writers, passing books around. Job half done before we'd introduced ourselves!'

Cathy Wells-Cole, volunteer at HMP Downview

'A few of the group were evidently very well read (there was a brief argument about whether a quote was from Goethe), while others really didn't read much at all. One said his reason for joining was that his TV was broken. A younger man said he was dyslexic and had always struggled with reading'

Katy Oglethorpe, volunteer at HMP Wandsworth

Appetite and aspiration

The groups stir individual ambition and a sense of achievement that members are eager to share.

'C proudly told us that he had just completed his first book and had asked for the TV to be removed from his room so he could really focus on improving his reading without the distraction'

Amanda Phillips, volunteer at HMP Grendon

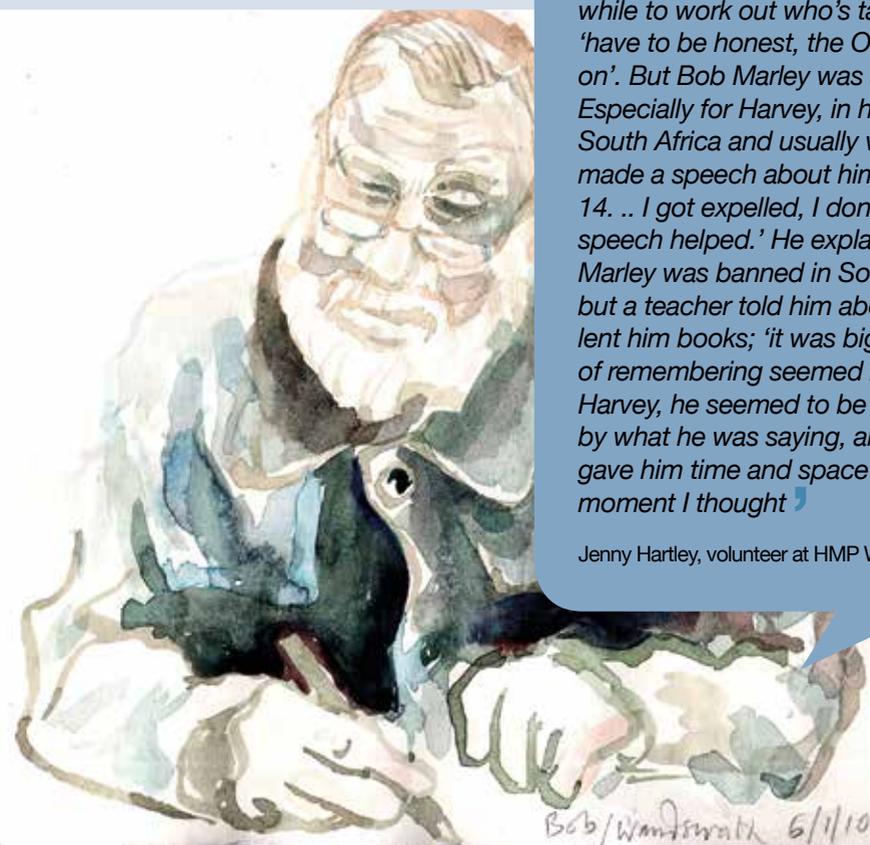
'The most poignant comments came from Mohammed. English is not his first language but reading literature in English is a delight for him. 'Every book I read is a new book' he told the group with a fervour that put the rest of us to shame'

Ruth Packwood, librarian at HMP Wymott

As groups get established members take more risks and move out of their comfort zones.

'Marlon James, A Brief History of Seven Killings was a really difficult book for the group, but quite a few had a go, and were much more tolerant of its difficulties than I expected. 'Took me a while to work out who's talking'. Also, 'have to be honest, the Olympics were on'. But Bob Marley was a great pull. Especially for Harvey, in his 60s, from South Africa and usually very quiet. 'I made a speech about him when I was 14. .. I got expelled, I don't think the speech helped.' He explained how Marley was banned in South Africa, but a teacher told him about Marley, lent him books; 'it was big'. The act of remembering seemed important to Harvey, he seemed to be quite moved by what he was saying, and the group gave him time and space – a very good moment I thought'

Jenny Hartley, volunteer at HMP Wormwood Scrubs

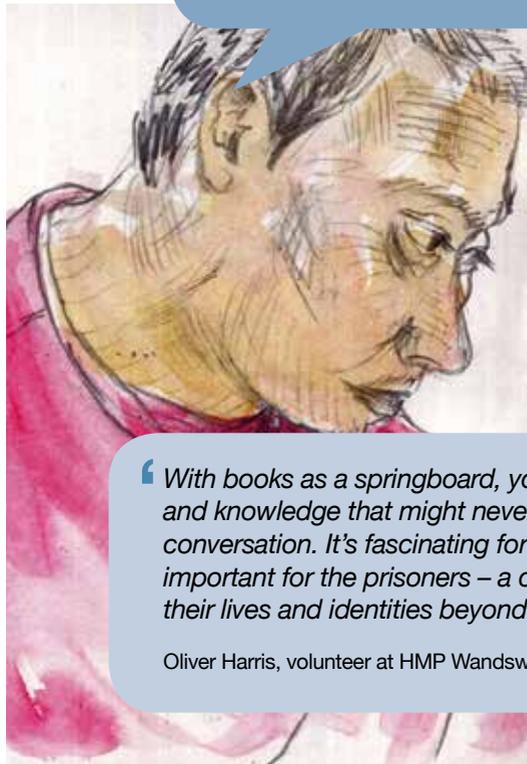


Connections

Perhaps the most important benefit of the groups are the connections they foster for members: with each other, with books, with family, with wider society, and with themselves. Meetings are a space in which people can explore and develop their identity as readers rather than prisoners. Reading creates cultural capital and through the group members develop the skills and confidence to move with ease and pleasure around the world of books.

[On True Grit] We talked a lot about the narrator, 14-year old Mattie Ross. R spoke about how struck he was by her 'sass' and J declared 'she's my favourite character out of any of the books we've read, maybe out of everything I've ever read!' C brought up Scout from To Kill a Mockingbird and we had a really interesting discussion comparing the two heroines]

Sinead Moriarty and Sarah Pyke, volunteers at HMP Isis



Books can also connect prisoners with family. Partners may read the same book and the experience of the group makes many members more engaged with their children's reading.

Reading group discussions often move between the world of the book and contemporary issues and can thus help prepare prisoners for release and positive re-engagement with society.

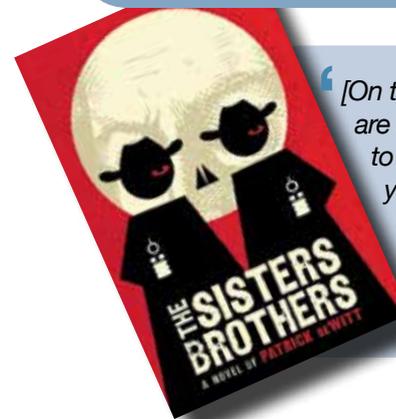
[With books as a springboard, you discover interests, experiences and knowledge that might never have arisen in other conversation. It's fascinating for me and by their own accounts, important for the prisoners – a chance to connect with aspects of their lives and identities beyond the prison walls]

Oliver Harris, volunteer at HMP Wandsworth

Reading and discussion promote both empathy - what it feels like to be someone else, and critical self-reflection – what does this character tell me about who I am, who I would like to be; how is this like and unlike my life and experience?

[The author of Room has described a strange world through the eyes of a person we can never be, in a position we cannot really understand. Yet she makes it real and in the end comprehensible]

Member at HMP Ford

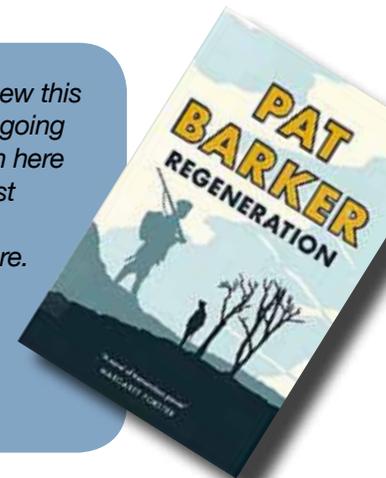


[On the characters of The Sisters Brothers] The brothers are stuck and I understand this. Sometimes you want to change, for people involved in drugs or whatever, you want to get out of it. But you don't know how, everything in your life is connected to this business and it keeps sucking you back]

Member at HMP Isis

[On Pat Barker's Regeneration] Fifty pages in and I knew this wasn't for me, too real, too much like the therapy I'm going through here'... 'It was because it was so much like in here that I found it fascinating' ... 'And me. I finished it just before I went to see the governor and I found it quite moving' ... 'It did feel like the way they treat you in here. That when you are asked a question you are trying to think ahead, trying to work out what is the answer they want to hear]

Members at HMP Ashfield



Case Study: The Reading Life of a PRG Group



The High Down VP group celebrated its second anniversary in March 2017 with a reading of *Wuthering Heights*, which was amazingly entertaining. Or at least the discussion was. One new member who hadn't had a chance to read it said he thought it would be too girly but he was soon disabused.

Not everyone reached the end of Emily Brontë's passionate tale but there was enough drama along the way (strangled puppies, bloody encounters with dogs and windows, graves being opened) to sustain interest for most of the men.

This group experiences relatively little churn and attendance is consistently good. One member has not missed a single meeting which is a real achievement. He is leaving next month and as a parting gift he compiled a list of all the books read since March 2015. You can imagine how much he will be missed.

2015: *Three Men in a Boat*; *1984*; *The Time Machine*; *Treasure Island*; *Shark*; *The Way of the Wyrd*; *Just Kids*; *Brighton Rock*; *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*; *True Grit*

2016: *The Rum Diary*; *The Song of Achilles*; *Ten Days*; *Our Endless Numbered Days*; *Catch-22*; *Blott on the Landscape*; *The Girl with All the Gifts*; *Stuart: A Life Backwards*; *HhHH*; *Apple Tree Yard*; *Down and Out in Paris and London*; *The Big Sleep*; *A Christmas Carol*; *Maigret Sets a Trap*

2017: *Pompeii*; *The Milkman in the Night*; *Stars and Bars*

The group clearly goes for male-authored modern classics but enjoys lighter reads too.

William Boyd's *Stars and Bars* – an Englishman abroad in America's Deep South and having trouble with the food, the language and the women – had us almost literally rolling around. I think this is one of the real payoffs of group reading: individually most of us had found the novel amusing enough but when people started remembering funny bits and reading them aloud, it all got genuinely hilarious.

And our next choice, unpredictably enough, is Carrie Fisher's *The Princess Diarist*.

Cathy Wells-Cole
Volunteer at HMP High Down

Poetry in Prison

Like those outside, prisoners are often wary of poetry: 'I didn't get it at school and I don't get it now'. But with the help of determined facilitators, more PRG groups are exploring poems, often a single one at the end of a meeting but sometimes for a whole session. For those willing to give it a go and especially when it's explored together, poetry can move from seeming like a trap to a playful invitation to participate.

One group has read selections of Housman, Kipling, Yeats, Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy as well as First World War poems and the Penguin anthology *Poems by Heart*. Larkin in particular was a great success. 'Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty-three' was a good ice-breaker of course, but the men were also keen to puzzle out the 'The Whitsun Weddings' and most agreed that the ending is a surprising moment of found connection. But there was trenchant criticism as well: 'He'll still have the jam out of your doughnut'.

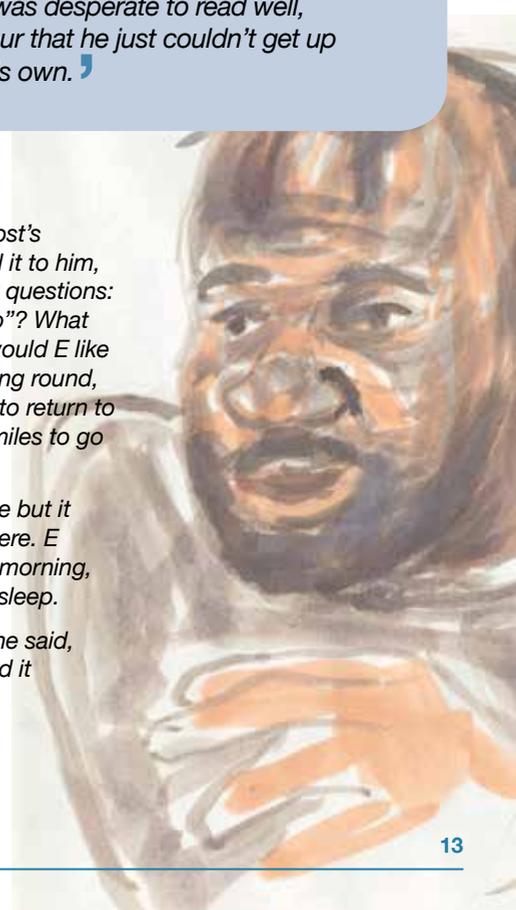
'E was a member who kept taking books off to his cell to read and bringing them back unopened. He was desperate to read well, but explained with disarming candour that he just couldn't get up the motivation to open a book on his own.'

I'd printed out a few poems, including Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. I read it to him, and as we went through it slowly, E began to ask questions: 'What does he mean by "I have promises to keep"? What promises?' I said I didn't know. What promises would E like this man to keep? Other members began crowding round, making suggestions: to be home for Christmas? to return to his girl? 'But why does he repeat that line "And miles to go before I sleep?"

The prison's therapeutic regime is very impressive but it makes daunting demands on the men who go there. E told me that he sometimes wakes at three in the morning, sweating and shaking and unable to get back to sleep.

'You won't believe what goes through my head' he said, 'but this poem might take some of it away if I read it often enough.'

Pam Thomas
Volunteer at HMP Grendon



Librarians and volunteers

Librarians are the lynchpins of PRG groups. They advertise and recruit through posters and word of mouth, and they make sure numbers are kept up as members are released or transferred. Most importantly, they act as champions for the reading groups and their importance as part of the prison's rehabilitation strategy. This may involve determined interventions to ensure that members are unlocked, and skilful negotiation with senior management to ensure that working prisoners do not lose pay when they attend.

In some prisons the librarian also runs the group and many describe it as one of the great pleasures of the job.

"The reading group is one of the highlights of the library month. The prisoners who attend always surprise me with their comments and this brings other parts of their lives into the room. And I have read totally out of my comfort zone, I am so pleased about this"

Dawn Channon, deputy library manager at HMP Bullingdon

"We will be celebrating our VP group's first anniversary in January 2017 and are aiming to do a review of 2016, the books enjoyed (and not) and what we have learned from being part of the group. I have been so impressed by the members' commitment and willingness to read and discuss books suggested by others"

Ruth Packwood, librarian at HMP Wymott

"Nelson's Parrot reading group has been in existence since October 2016 but so much has it become part of the fabric of the library here, that it seems to have been running a lot longer. We meet every month and discussions are always both lively and entertaining. I would encourage any other prison librarian who is contemplating such a group to go ahead and start one!"

Linda Collins, librarian at HMP Ford

PRG volunteers have varied backgrounds and experience. There is a lawyer, an electrician, an artist, teachers, writers, charity workers, publishers and many more. What they have in common is an enjoyment of books and a desire to share it with others. The presence of someone from outside helps members up their game as readers, and volunteers report that the benefits are two-way.

"I never cease to be astonished at how widely our conversations range and the diversity of views, always respectfully listened to; the appetite for learning to make up for lost education, and the eagerness to try new things. And that includes me too, as I am regularly introduced to new genres and authors, and to books I should have read – it is both a humbling and a very rewarding experience"

Amanda Phillips, volunteer at HMP Grendon



"Ours is a new group, but we seem to be finding our feet. None of the books read so far has received 100% agreement and the discussions have been all the better for that. The group enjoy digging down to the bones of the books, and they don't want the reading experience to be "like TV"."

David Kendall, volunteer at HMP Ashfield

"Members show each other mutual respect and tolerance, which means that even the most reserved come out of their shells and join the discussion. I always have a pleasant buzz on my journey home"

Trevor Grant, volunteer at HMP Grendon



‘Our two book groups afford the joy of reading books and sharing them through refreshing adult conversation. And they provide a safe forum for the men to address their feelings, behaviours, psychology and ultimately their crimes through the filter of imaginary characters, places, times and the lives of others’

Julian Earwaker, writer in residence and volunteer at HMP Warren Hill



‘The prison has had a rough year: staff and funding cuts, violence and a new regime that puts one wing a day on lockdown. Maintaining regular attendance and morale has been difficult for the members. Despite this there have been great highlights including the discussion of Oliver Twist which the group agreed as ‘a gripping story full of suspense’. One reader suggested that nowadays Nancy would be described as the classic battered wife, trapped in a relationship and unable to get away – echoes of Helen and Rob in The Archers!’

Alex Manolatos, volunteer at HMP Pentonville



‘After discussing Predator by Wilbur Smith we read ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling. It was a new group of readers and after being very noisy, the poem left them moved and completely quiet’

Yvette Ball, volunteer at HMP High Down

Family Days

Research confirms the value of family contact for prisoner rehabilitation and for the emotional wellbeing of their children. Family Days enable prisoner parents to spend time with their partners and children - talking, playing games and enjoying being together. With our partners Give a Book, PRG supports these days with books and book bags for the visiting children, together with volunteers to encourage family reading activities.

In 2016 we supported 26 Family Days in 17 prisons and provided individually chosen books for 1,143 children.



26

Family Days



1,143

books for children

It was lovely to read a book as a family together.

We always look forward to the book bag, because we read them at home and it brings back the good memories we have with dad

Talks and Consultancy

Professor Jenny Hartley and PRG director Sarah Turvey delivered a joint paper to the Open University conference, 'Prison Education: What is it? What should it be?' Jenny and Sarah co-founded PRG in 1999 and Jenny continues to be an inspiration and tremendous support for the project.

In 2014 PRG helped Carol Finlay establish what has become a network of reading groups across Canada and we now enjoy an informal partnership with her Book Clubs for Inmates. In 2013 we provided start-up support for Karen Lausa in Colorado. Her Words Beyond Bars is now recognised by the Department of Corrections as a best practice initiative. In Karen's words 'we're growing, established and making an impact'.

In 2016 we were approached by new reading and restorative justice projects in England, Scotland, South America and Australia.

Sarah is also pleased to be a member of the advisory board for The Reading Agency's Reading Outcomes project.

Plans for 2017

PRG's merger with Give a Book will create opportunities for expansion and development of both reading projects for adult prisoners and family reading initiatives. Our partnership will increase PRG's reputation and reach and it will open up new fundraising possibilities. We very much look forward to it.

We are working with World Book Night and Cityread London to involve our groups and to create prison-wide book events.

Other projects include Unsilencing the Library, a partnership with researchers from Oxford University to re-stock the library of the Compton Verney country house with books chosen in part by members of PRG groups.

It's the fact that the reading group has nothing to do with being in prison which seems of greatest value to the prisoners. It is a moment of normality, humanity and camaraderie.



Funders and Partners

We are very grateful for the funding and support of all of our donors and acknowledge in particular the following:



Give a Book

Give a Book was set up in 2011 in memory of playwright Simon Gray, who loved to read and share his reading. GAB facilitates the giving of new books to selected charities and other organisations. Each donation buys and sends a book to someone who really needs one.



Booker Prize Foundation

As well as awarding the Man Booker Prize and the Man Booker International Prize, the Booker Prize Foundation also works to promote the art of literature for the public benefit through various schemes, initiatives and projects.



Penguin Random House

Penguin Random House is a cultural institution committed to editorial excellence and long-term investment in new ideas, creativity, and diverse content, leading campaigns worldwide that promote literacy and reading culture.



Siobhan Dowd Trust

The Siobhan Dowd Trust works to give young people the opportunity to read and enjoy literature. The money earned through royalties and foreign sales of Siobhan Dowd's books allows the trust to support deserving projects.



The Drapers' Charitable Fund

The Drapers' Charitable Fund awards grants each year with the aim of improving the quality of life and expectations of people and their communities, especially those disadvantaged or socially excluded, and particularly in Greater London.



Cityread London

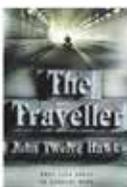
Cityread London is a celebration of the power of reading to bring communities together.

It is celebrated every April, across all of London's 33 boroughs, with libraries at its heart.



Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons



The report this month comes from HMP Albany Isle of Wight, where the group recently read *The Traveller* by John Twelve Hawks.

Los Angeles: A city where you have to work hard to live beneath the surface. Gabriel and Michael Corrigan are trying to do just that. Since childhood, the brothers have been shaped by the stories that their mystical father, a man of strange powers and intuition, has told them about the world in which they live. After his violent death, they have been living 'off the grid' - that is, invisible to the intricate surveillance networks that monitor our modern lives.

London: Maya, a tough and feisty young woman, is playing at being a citizen, is playing at leading a normal life. But her background is anything but. Trained to fight since she was a young girl, she is the last in a long line whose duty is to protect the gifted among us.

Prague: Nathan Boone, a disciplined and amoral mercenary, watches Maya leave the meeting with her father before brutally killing him. Tasked to hunt down the brothers, he tracks Maya as she seeks to fulfil what turns out to be her father's last command. When Maya flies to California to find them, an extraordinary chase begins, the final running battle in the war which will reveal the secret history of our time...

The Traveller is the first instalment of 'The Fourth Realm' trilogy by John Twelve Hawks who claims himself to "live off the grid". This book generated a lively discussion about how we live today with CCTV, microchips in passports and credit/debit cards, and identity trails from personal computers, tablets and smartphones. Big Brother is here and watching us closely! Would we be willing to sacrifice this technology for complete privacy? Not sure about that!

Most members enjoyed both the story and the characters:

"I do not enjoy Sci Fi but found the characters very real and the story gripping. A warning of how things are and becoming worse."

"Once you get past the clichés, you find a good book with some intriguing concepts. Yes, the dialogue is a little stilted sometimes and slips into far too much 'telling' and not enough 'showing', but despite this the plot flows along with some okay twists. It's the concept of higher planes that really grips and makes you want to carry on reading."

"Good read, not a lot of 'filler'. A nice plot with a few twists and turns with Maya, the last of the harlequins, defending the last of the travellers who keep people from being controlled."

"An easy read with a compelling storyline, however I believe that it was written in the hope of a movie franchise deal. It has a storyline that would work well as a movie."

"A good book that looks into the future and gives you something to think about."

One member found similarities with 1984 "but George Orwell definitely has the edge". He also thought there was too much gratuitous violence in *The Traveller* and "not enough positivity or useful messages."

But the majority view was much more positive and FIVE of the book group members have requested to read the two other books in the trilogy. A successful read!

The Albany 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

The connecting power of books

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

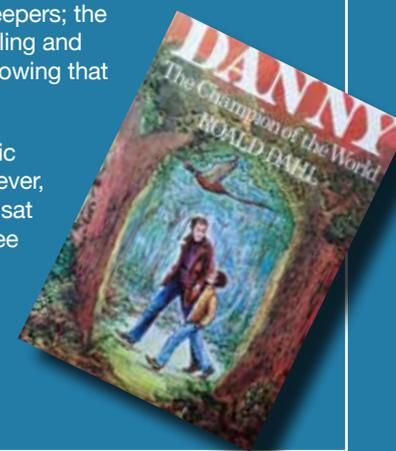
As a child after school and weekend time was for playing in the streets, in the field behind our house or swimming in the Thames – not for reading.

Books were for school but 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 within a couple of chapters and couldn't wait for the next lesson when she'd read a few more chapters.

Not knowing my own father didn't seem important to me but I think 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 Danny come up with ideas of his own.

The way Dahl described their adventures: Danny driving the car to rescue his dad; hiding from Mr Victor Hazell's gamekeepers; the noise as the pheasants fell from the trees – it was thrilling and made me want more. I read a lot more on my own following that one book.

As a father I have a daughter who is a very enthusiastic reader who will read and read and read. My son, however, would rather be playing computer 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. He's still not a big fiction reader but it's always nice to sit down with him and read together



Member at HMP Bullingdon

All drawings courtesy of Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net
Design courtesy of Susie Bush Design www.susiebushdesign.com

