Prison Reading Groups
What Books Can Do Behind Bars

“Today we have not been in a prison, just a library

For one hour a month I feel that my opinion is valid, that I am
listened to, and that others care what I say. In the Book Group,
everyone is given a voice, all have an equal say

Reading can change your life. Reading together can add
even more to the experience. Especially if you are in prison.”

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000 we started running reading groups in prisons in the UK: at HMPS Coldingley, Bullingdon, Wandsworth and Send. This was the beginning of Prison Reading Groups (PRG).

In 2010 we were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council Knowledge Transfer Fellowship grant to expand our work. The goal was to start ten new reading groups. The project succeeded beyond all expectations.

During the thirty months of AHRC funding we supported thirty-two groups in twenty-one different prisons, from Yorkshire to Bristol and the Isle of Wight. We have also supported groups in cognate settings, such as community centres for those with substance abuse issues and/or at risk of offending.

Twenty-eight of these groups are still going strong. Since the end of the AHRC funding in September 2012 we have supported ten further groups in six new prisons.

The AHRC project was evaluated in a small-scale, qualitative study which focussed on the benefits for both prisoners and volunteers. The results are presented throughout this report.

The growth of reading groups has been one of the cultural success stories of recent times. Their ability to boost reading and bring people together is widely applauded. Our work in prisons over the past fourteen years has confirmed the particular benefits that reading groups offer prisoners. These include:
- empathy with the lives of others through reading
- critical self-reflection
- mutual respect fostered in group discussion
- connectedness with a wider culture beyond prison
- development of soft skills vital for employability

The success of Prison Reading Groups is due in large part to the dedication and commitment of all those involved. Prison group members have responded with enthusiasm, and risen to the challenge of a rich and varied mix of books and discussions. Prison librarians and volunteers have contributed time, energy, and a host of ideas and suggestions, in sometimes difficult circumstances. To everyone in the project, we are delighted to be able to present such a positive report, and to record our acknowledgements and thanks. We would also like to thank the Prisoners Education Trust, Give A Book, Kate Gunnin at Random House, Irene Garrow at PEN, and Claire Bastable and Alison Sidebottom at Roehampton University, for all their wisdom, expertise and support.

Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey
Department of English and Creative Writing
University of Roehampton
July 2013
As for the Reading Group, I’m delighted that it’s taking place here. As a prison, we want to focus our effort on reducing reoffending by those who pass through here. Now, it would be a stretch to say that a reading group will reduce reoffending, but it does play an important role in getting prisoners to engage with the awful experience of imprisonment in a positive way. At its simplest, we can’t motivate people to change their lives if they’re stuck in a cell ‘keeping their head down’ and waiting for time to pass.

Peter Dawson, Governor HMP High Down, October 2011

The book club at HMP Send is a well established forum for the women to come together to discuss a common theme, the selected book. It generates positive interaction between a diverse mix of cultures, back grounds and experiences, united in the enjoyment of reading. The discussions generated from the chosen book lead to women learning about differences, exploring new ideas on varying subjects, educating women to be accepting of differences in opinion and explore new worlds through the medium of literature. The book club is of a huge benefit for the establishment. Enabling women to learn, share experiences and unite in their enjoyment of books.

Kelly Nethercoat, Deputy Governor, HMP Send, July 2011

This is a valuable donation and enhances prisoners’ lives by the encouragement it gives them to read widely and to talk about what they have read with their peers.

Andy Lattimore, Governor, HMP Bullingdon, November 2012

I was particularly pleased to see that the Prison Reading Groups enjoy . . . volunteer support.

John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, January 2012

Prison reading groups really are an invaluable contribution and I was lucky to be able to attend one such group at HMP Wandsworth. I saw just how the reading group can make a difference to those inside prison... I got the real sense that upon returning to their wings, the prisoners were spreading the message about the work of the group, and sharing around the books amongst other inmates.

Sadiq Khan, Shadow Justice Secretary, May 2012

I learnt a great deal from the experience and got a real glimpse into the importance of work in this area.

Philip Pothen, Head of Communications, Arts and Humanities Research Council, January 2011

I was most impressed by the reading group at Wandsworth prison. The contributions from members varied enormously and demonstrated different levels of reading ability and response but it was clear that all valued and benefitted from the experience that the group offered. We had a spirited discussion, illuminating and provocative, discovering reading preferences and aversions.

Dame Penelope Lively

I really enjoyed meeting the men and I felt a real sense of connection with them as I do with most readers. But here there was something else as well.

Philip Pullman

A lifeline

Prison Reading Group member
Beginnings
Prison Reading Groups originated in the late 1990s, with our research into reading groups in the UK, which led to The Reading Groups Book (OUP, 2001). The research questions focussed on who joins groups and why; what they read together, and what they enjoy about it. What our research highlighted was the significance of belonging to a reading community. The range of benefits included the commitment to exploring the power of books through discussion and debate, a safe space for sharing personal responses, and a sense of connectedness to a wider culture.

As we drew our research findings together, we started to think about the possible benefits for those in prison. We were fortunate to have contact with a prison chaplain, and he helped set up our first prison reading group at HMP Coldingley. Soon after this a group was set up at HMP Bullyngdon, followed by groups at HMP Send (a women's prison) and HMP Wandsworth.

Format of the first groups
Our original idea was to run these groups on a monthly basis, much like many groups in the general community: everyone reads the same book in advance and meets for an hour or so to discuss it. This remains the format for a number of the groups. The facilitator is not there to lead the discussion, but rather to ‘hold the ring’. Sometimes all we have to say is ‘Who wants to start?’ We suggest very few ground rules, but the group sometimes need reminding of them, such as: no interrupting, no side conversations. We usually go round for first responses so that everyone’s voice gets heard. We then open up for general discussion. The last quarter of an hour is devoted to choosing the next book we are all going to read.

Reading and choosing
From the outset we were keen that prison groups would choose their books for themselves. Our survey of reading groups in the UK showed us how important – and often how fraught – the issue of choice is. In prison, it is even more important. Prisoners do not get to choose much, or get involved in democratic decision-making. As we all know, how to choose what to read next can be difficult; and prison reading group members sometimes tell us they are not really comfortable in bookshops or libraries. So one of the things they learn in the group is how you might choose a book. To help in the process, we bring in single copies of books, book reviews and prize short lists, magazines, publishers’ catalogues and descriptions from Amazon. Group members also like to make suggestions: books they have enjoyed in the past and would like others to read, books they have heard about from friends or family.

Getting started
Where possible we wanted to involve volunteers as facilitators, and the evaluation confirmed positive prisoner response:

“It to have someone take time out of their lives and come with us means a lot.”

It was clear from the start that the facilitator always needs someone ‘on the inside’ as it were – someone who works in the prison, usually the librarian, or someone in education – to organise the logistics, such as finding a room for the group, unlocking group members, and arranging access for the volunteer facilitator at the gate. This support from often hard-pressed prison staff has been crucial to the running and well-being of the groups, and we are very appreciative of the work they put in. The groups sometimes have another prop, with one of the members acting as secretary. He or she will find new members and send out reminders. This can be a satisfying role, as well as useful for the smooth running of the group.
**Funding**

For the first ten years we were funded by a variety of sources: Surrey Local Education Authority, Millennium Lottery Funding, charities such as Joseph Rowntree and Paul Hamlyn, and individual donations. The University of Roehampton supported us from their Enterprise and Community Projects Funds. We did not need much money, just for the books. It was and is very important to us that each prisoner gets to keep his or her own copy of the book each month (one of our few rules is that the book should be in paperback).

**The next phase: AHRC funding**

In 2010 we were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant of £120,000. This was a Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, an award designed to spread research work and findings beyond the academic community. For this scheme the university needed a partner to work with, and we were fortunate to find the Prisoners Education Trust (PET). This is the body that provides access to funding for distance learning in prisons, including higher level courses such as the Open University Openings courses. Our work is informal learning, and thus complements the work of the PET well. PET expertise in prison settings and their contacts throughout the sector have been invaluable. They helped us to identify prisons which they thought would be propitious for our scheme; they gave us contact points, and they brought us into the community of organisations working with prisoners. We were also contacted by prison librarians who had read our articles in the Prison Libraries Journal.

As well as finding the prisons and the staff to help us, we needed to find the volunteers to facilitate the groups. We did this through word of mouth, leaflets, and a page on the University website. We also made use of contacts provided or suggested by PET.

Once we had made the necessary contacts, we arranged a series of visits, to take potential volunteers to the prison to meet staff and possible members. We also asked potential volunteers to sit on a session we were running ourselves at Bullingdon, Windsward or Send, to give them first-hand observation of how these groups work.

The volunteers were all given a full pack of information and support material, and the librarians or facilitators inside the prison were given checklists. The pack included material such as notes for volunteers explaining how to get the group started; lists of titles read by prison groups recently and a copy of Waterstone’s Books Quarterly to help the new group choose its first books. We also provided examples of leaflets to help advertise the group inside the prison; an agreement explaining fully what was involved in running the group, and a few short poems and stories to help get initial meetings off the ground. Each volunteer was also given a logbook, as we wanted to plot the progress of our new groups.

**Evaluation**

We conducted a survey of prison reading groups in 2007. The AHRC project was evaluated by Dr Steven Howlett, of Roehampton University’s Business School. Steven Howlett was formerly Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Volunteering Research. He conducted a small-scale qualitative evaluation of the project, comprising a survey and some case-studies. The results and evidence from his evaluation and our earlier survey underpin this report. A longitudinal study of groups is on-going.

The shorter the story the hotter the debate. Raymond Carver’s 1981 collection of very short stories, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, provoked lots of discussion in our group of fourteen members. “These are just middles aren’t they, no beginnings and no ends’’ this was the criticism from one member, but the reason why another was so drawn in. ‘He gets you guessing, working, like when you hear something when you’re walking past on the street.’ Someone else remembered being on a bus when a man stood in front of it for ten minutes on a busy street, stopping the bus from moving. ‘Well, there was that all about, what was going on, what was the story behind that, I’ve never forgotten it. That’s what reading Carver is like.’

Carver’s pared down style, his minimalism, has become famous. We talked about less being more:

- I loved the style of writing, it left me wanting more from every story.
- It was like being a fly on the wall.

For some of the group, Carver’s style rang particularly true:

- It made me think of walking down the wing at night and hearing snippets of totally different conversations as you pass each room.

How much was Carver, and how much his characters’ attitudes? That wasn’t always clear, and could be disturbing.

- His attitude towards women was quite warped. This came out particularly in the story about the two men living ‘ordinary’ lives who had been friends for years. They go out and pick up two girls and end up murdering them methodically with no qualms, no guilt.

We talked about Carver’s own alcoholism and the hard-drinking habits of many of his characters.

- It sounds like a drunk writing it. The stories are disjointed – and yet so real. They made you think.

- I felt uncomfortable reading a few of the stories. His alcoholism and ‘off-key’ attitude to women was reflected in many of the stories. But it was good for me to read something different.

- I did get into the style after a while. I saw the stories as looking at the world through the eyes of an alcoholic. The thinking is skewed, not quite right.

How to read short stories also came up:

- Over the years I have come to admire his stories. But you can’t read too many at once.

Reading all these altogether in an afternoon is not quite right.

- I don’t know…
- … her silver tongue, milk on her fingers, the hurry of pain in her eyes.’ ….. I dunno…
- ‘… her silver tongue, milk on her fingers, the…
- … and ‘afterwards’… even ‘afterwards’. After what?

- Let’s look at this first verse again.
- And we didn’t think about what it belonged and depends equally on the three of us, feeling our way through, sometimes blun-

- Good description… gives me the creeps. Is he psycho burying…
- … like, animal fatty stuff they used to make…
- … those are the marbles, then, aren’t they? ‘…
- ‘the pearl-effect, the cherry-red and gold’;
- Ok, but this is a human, isn’t it? So it might…
- ‘the earth turns cold, my fingers brush the dead’
- ‘woods are like a hymn’
- ‘other people reflect on these privately, others are
- ‘the hurry of pain in her eyes.’ …..

The Reader Organisation is an award-winning charitable social enterprise working to connect people through great literature. In June 2011 we launched the Reading Groups Project (PRG), sponsored by Random House Group 2nd Floor, Royal London House, Shannon Trust. Freepost RSCE-ZSaR-GYaX.
The target for our new funding was to start ten new groups. We thought this was realistic, given our experience of the time needed for any new prison initiative. But we turned out to have under-estimated the appetite and enthusiasm in all the participants: the prison librarians, the volunteers, and the prisoners themselves. The project succeeded beyond all our expectations.

During the thirty months of AHRC funding we supported thirty-two groups in twenty-one different prisons, from Yorkshire to Bristol and the Isle of Wight. We have also supported groups in cognate settings, such as community centres for those with substance abuse issues and/or at risk of offending.

New Models
With the expansion of our groups has come variety. The model we started with, of a monthly group reading a book in advance, will not suit all. Librarians and volunteers have risen to the challenges facing them: they identify areas of need and develop new groups to meet them. An example is HMP Holloway where there are now four different groups: a monthly group on the lifers’ wing; a read-aloud group in the library; a weekly group in the mental-health wing, and an ad hoc poetry group in the Resettlement Centre. Each one works differently. The lifer group meets monthly to discuss a book they have chosen themselves and read in advance. The library group chooses a theme and the librarian puts together a range of short stories, poems, essays and extracts for the group to read in the session. Topics have included: the 60s; family; banned books: horror; and food (see Appendix Two for Words on Wednesday material). The volunteer on the health wing responds to whatever the women want on the day: reading aloud to the group; short spells of one-to-one reading; listening to the women read their own work. The Resettlement Centre group was formed in response to the librarian’s determination to take reading beyond the library. Resettlement appointments often only last fifteen minutes or so but women can spend two hours waiting for free flow. The answer: an ad hoc poetry group. The volunteer recruits on the spot and the group reads and discusses the poems and images she has prepared as an attractive and stimulating hand-out (see Appendix Three).

Choice
Our watchword throughout the project has been choice: as much choice for members, librarians and volunteers as possible. This means choice in both how the group should run, and what it should read. Throughout the PRG project, prison librarians and volunteers have enjoyed the freedom of trying out and developing many different models, as they tailor-make their groups to fit their circumstances. There have been weekly groups, read-aloud groups, groups for older prisoners (including the gloriously named Rubies at Eastwood Park), an audio group for the visually impaired, a group for foreign nationals, and a Family Day reading group for prisoners and their children.

Choice of reading
The lists of some of the books read recently (see Appendix One) show the same variety as books in reading groups on the outside. And they are much more varied than overall borrowings from prison libraries. Chosen titles range from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Great Expectations to Art Spiegelman’s Maus and Hans Fallada’s Alone in Berlin.

There have been many surprise hits. Wuthering Heights was a runaway success with one men’s group, and a male member of another group found himself gripped by Roseanne’s story in The Secret Scripture: ‘I thought it wouldn’t be for me, more something my mother would like. But I was gripped, I loved it.’

Reader, I am smitten. We all loved, loved, loved it! We loved both these independent, intelligent women – the character of Jane and her creator. (Facilitator on Jane Eyre)
As we found in our survey of reading groups across the UK, prison groups also tend to go for a combination of wanting to be part of the conversation and wanting to create their own reading identities. An example of a choice reflecting the books everyone is talking about would be The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins, a best-seller adapted into a successful film. This book was chosen and enjoyed by groups in men’s and women’s prisons. Groups also choose ‘around’ the books of the moment. For example, a group at Holloway chose Pauline Reage’s 1976 The Story of O. They knew that this had been an erotic best-seller in the past, and thought they would do better with it than with the currently best-selling Fifty Shades of Grey. Their choice was influenced partly by their sense of boundaries and appropriateness, and partly by their sense of independence and their wish to assert their individuality as a group making its own choices. Groups evolve their own methods for choosing; the key point is that they should be democratic and group-driven.

The report this month comes from HMP Bullingdon where the reading group has been going strong since 2001

Like most groups on the out, the men at Bullingdon are keen to read the books people are talking about. So it was no surprise that we recently chose Yann Martell’s Life of Pi, the Man Booker winner and now a blockbuster film.

The story recounts the terrifying adventures of an Indian teenager who is trapped on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a 450lb Bengal tiger.

Our discussion was lively, alert and full of surprises. The first member who spoke put us all on our mettle:

‘I thought it was pretty absurd – 227 days on a 26-ft lifeboat: pah! But then I got to the final section and realised what the ‘real story’ was and what the tiger actually meant. Suddenly it all made sense and now I think it’s brilliant’.

The Tyger - by William Blake

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**LIST OF PRISONS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT**

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<th>Prison or Centre</th>
<th>Start date / PRG involvement</th>
<th>Type of Group</th>
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<td>Albany (3 groups)</td>
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<td>Coldingham</td>
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<td>Feltham (YOI)</td>
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<td>Community groups</td>
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<td>Crawley Foyer YMCA</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>fortnightly, read aloud</td>
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<td>Nelson’s Gate CRI</td>
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<td>Oasis Open Door</td>
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* in preparation
From the outset, prisoners have been positive, vocal, and specific about the benefits of belonging to a reading group in prison. Their responses to our survey of 2007, and continuing evidence both oral and written, make the case forcefully for all that reading groups can do for the prisoner.

And prisoners are not the only ones to gain: Steven Howlett’s evaluative survey and case studies enumerate the many benefits reported by librarians and volunteers involved in the groups.

**Benefits for prisoners**

The next chapters of this report describe the various benefits and uses of the reading group for the prisoner. They range from improvements in literacy to the offering of comfort, the provision of purposeful activity, and the development of critical engagement and empathy. We firmly believe that reading in groups has a role to play in rehabilitation.

Our view is supported by many others, inside prison and out: governors, politicians, funders, librarians, volunteers.

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**CHAPTER THREE: Benefits**

*“I never knew you could get so much fun from books*

I enjoy the way the book club is run without any lock and key stuff. I feel confident enough to express my opinions without the fear of repercussions.

*Books allow you to escape these walls for hours at a time; but it’s also great to be involved in an active discussion*

*The book group is a monthly opportunity to have proper conversations about something that everyone in the group has considered*

*It’s good to talk with people you might not otherwise get to know and hear their opinions about a book*

*The book club at HMP Send is a well-established forum for the women to come together to discuss a common theme, the selected book. It generates positive interaction between a diverse mix of cultures, back grounds and experiences, united in the enjoyment of reading. The discussions generated from the chosen book lead to women learning about differences, exploring new ideas on varying subjects, educating women to be accepting of differences in opinion and explore new worlds through the medium of literature. The book club is of a huge benefit for the establishment. Enabling women to learn, share experiences and unite in their enjoyment of books.*

*Kelly Nethercoat, Deputy Governor, Send, July 2011*

*This is a valuable donation and enhances prisoners’ lives by the encouragement it gives them to read widely and to talk about what they have read with their peers.*

*Andy Lattimore, Governor, Bulringdon, November 2012*

*The project does add to my workload and is time-consuming but I think it’s absolutely excellent and I’m very glad we’re involved.*

*Librarian, Holloway*
I see how [the women] open up and can articulate their views and listen to each other...When the officers pick me up they say the women have been talking about the group.

Volunteer, Holloway

We need projects like PRG to give some respite to the sheer slog of prison life and offer a chance to look at different opinions, perspectives and possibilities...I know [Governors] are burdened with numbers and costs and cuts, but there needs to be a reminder that we are not dealing with widgets!

Volunteer, Bristol

The group has been especially beneficial to one member, a man who has been in prison for 22 years and who was very withdrawn and institutionalised — he has become far more outgoing and confident and both prisoners and staff have commented to me about the change in him. He is like a different person.

Librarian, High Down
Prisoner volunteering
There is increasing attention to the importance for rehabilitation of being able to ‘give back’. Steve Barlow and Shadd Maruna suggest that a key element in the process is the empowering effect of feeling you have ‘something to offer the world’. Prisoners, they argue, ‘need opportunities to be useful to others, to discover their own hidden uses, and recognise the rewards of this sort of generative activity’. Volunteering does this.

Our evaluation confirmed that reading group members are more likely to volunteer: as Shannon Trust literacy mentors, as Samaritan listeners, as resettlement workers. Causality is hard to determine: do readers get involved as volunteers or are volunteers more likely to be readers? In either case, as Steven Howlett puts it, ‘the reading group offers a way of expressing certain values – putting emphasis on exchanging views, communication, being involved in constructive time use – that supports other activities like volunteering’ (PRG Evaluation).

Connecting with the wider culture
Like other readers, members often make links between books and contemporary events, and this can lead to thoughtful reflection and a sense of connection with society.

Reading groups also foster a sense of connectedness with readers outside. By definition prisoners are cut off from society. An important first step towards rehabilitation and renewed citizenship is the recognition of ‘community with strangers’, of having shared interests with people you will never meet. This was well demonstrated by the reaction of a men’s group who were reading Marina Lewycka’s A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian. They were intrigued by the author’s account in The Guardian of her visit to an all-women group outside. What the prison group really wanted to know was how these unknown women had responded to the book and its characters. They wrote to the women’s group and an exchange of views followed for several months.

More generally, the chance to read and discuss books being talked about in the media connects prisoners to the wider culture and its debates, whether around Fifty Shades of Grey or Emma Donoghue’s Room.

The project sponsors author visits which also confirm members’ sense of themselves as readers. Authors have included Man Booker winners Penelope Lively and Howard Jacobson, Philip Pullman, Tony Parsons and Deborah Moggach.

When Boris Johnson came to a group to discuss The Dream of Rome, the men quizzed him about everything from his campaign for Mayor of London to Turkey’s possible entry to the European Union.

Informal learning and purposeful activity
Our reading groups are not classes. There is no syllabus; there are no set texts, no points which have to be covered. We have no targets, and award no qualifications or certificates. There is no secret agenda. Many group members have had problems or issues with educational achievement in the past, and may have been put off reading as a consequence. So our groups are to do first of all with pleasure: the pleasures of reading and of talking about books. We all – prison group members, librarians, volunteers – do of course learn much, but in an informal way.

Building family bonds
Reading groups can help strengthen family ties, one of the pathways to rehabilitation recognised by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Books can be ice-breakers on visits or in phone calls, and members often pass on their copies to partners or children:

“Before coming to prison I never read much. My partner does and she suggested I join [the group]. Now I even pass the books on to her.

My daughter is doing English and I have been able to discuss things with her, it gives me pointers for how to discuss books.

Another connection I have received due to the book club was Call the Midwife by Jennifer Worth, which is the only book I have ever discussed with my mother, an avid reader. It gave me yet another feeling of joy that we shared a common interest.”
I welcome the intellectual challenge of reading a book, knowing I shall be sharing my opinion of it with the group – it concentrates the mind.

Prisoner members are sometimes keen to return to books read at school and they are often surprised at the distance they have travelled as readers.

When I read Of Mice and Men at school I couldn’t understand why George killed Lennie. When I re-read it for the group I knew he had to.

At school, I identified with Billy when I read Kes. But when I read it in prison I realised I was more like his brother Jud, the bully.

The goal of purposeful activity is important in prisons. The annual report by the Chief Inspector for Prisons, Nick Hardwick, for 2010–11, states that ‘Prisoners are able and expected to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them.’ Recently a report by the Independent Monitoring Board at Brixton deplored the lack of purposeful activity at Brixton; Nick Hardwick has spoken of the depressing sight of ‘prisoners sleeping through their sentence’. Our reading groups aim not only to keep prisoners awake but to stimulate and challenge them.

Life is going great for me… I’m now doing couriering, which I really enjoy… Both the reading group and my writing helped to make being inside less of a waste of time.

Ex-member, now released

Basic skills
Reading groups can play a big part in supporting the basic skills work of Education departments and the Shannon Trust Reading Plan (the peer literacy scheme formerly called Toe by Toe). The solitariness of reading can be a formidable challenge and new readers sometimes speak of becoming discouraged alone in their cells. The sociability of a read-aloud group can make things much easier. A member of the weekly group at HMP Lewes reported that he came to improve his reading: ‘I couldn’t read at all’, he said, ‘but I’m getting there slowly.’ Sometimes he takes a turn and reads aloud, sometimes he listens and follows the reading in his copy. ‘It’s easier to digest out loud’ he said. This was at a meeting where members volunteered to take turns to read the opening chapters of The Hunger Games. Reading is a long journey for this group. It can take many weeks to finish a book.

A prison reading group is unlike any other. All those involved report that the diversity of views, backgrounds, experience and knowledge are fascinating and absorbing. The volunteers are passionate and committed to their groups. Some read aloud to members and encourage them to read aloud too. For many, it’s the first time anyone has ever read to them.

Laura Marcus, AHRC website
Reaching readers

The flexibility of the project has enabled us to engage with a range of target groups, from emergent to very experienced readers. In 2012 the Prisoners Education Trust report Brain Cells found that 80% of survey respondents had a qualification before entering prison, and that 45% had GCSEs.

The challenge that many prison librarians and teachers often identify is less basic literacy than motivating reluctant readers. This is what a reading group can do so well. A single group often contains a wide spread of reading experience. As trust develops members support each other and reading confidence builds.

Higher Level Learners

Basic skills is the understandable priority for prison Education departments. But it can leave higher level learners with fewer opportunities. Reading groups help plug this gap with challenging books and stimulating discussion that can encourage post-release ambitions.

Groups may combine reading aloud with the chance for members to report on a book they are reading on their own. The Holloway librarian connects her library group with the Six Book Challenge and uses books as prizes for successful completers.

Joining a reading group can help develop reading stamina. A surprising number of our group members are dyslexic, and were put off reading as children. The simplest and most straightforward benefit is the bounce to literacy. Our groups are voluntary and self-selecting, and most of the people who come along are reasonably fluent readers, but not always, and not always very confident ones. ‘I’m not a reader’ was the comment from a woman who amazed herself with her response to Barack Obama’s Dreams from My Father: ‘I was gobsmacked’, she said, ‘I couldn’t put it down’. This was someone not used to that relationship with a book, and certainly not that kind of book, by a president of the United States. She was enjoying not just the book but the pleasure of joining a reading community.

Reading groups can also build concentration and stamina, important skills for further learning and employability. As one member wrote of his group: ‘It concentrates the mind’.

...I was encouraged by a fellow member of the Creative Writing class to join the Book Group...

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The benefits were immediate. I found myself reading a far wider variety than before, encouraged to read classics and genres of which I was previously ignorant or not attracted to, widening my education and reading experience. The lively and informative discussions reinforced the old cliché that ‘you can please some of the people some of the time, but you can never please all of the people all of the time’, with others’ opinions, often polar opposites, pitted intelligently against one another. This learning informed my writing, encouraging me to go further and study Creative Writing through the Open University and funded by the Prisoners Education Trust.

...I was encouraged by a fellow member of the Creative Writing class to join the Book Group...

A dramatic example of the reading group boost to literacy was the member taught to read by his cellmate and then brought along to a meeting. He became a regular member and an enthusiastic reader.

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...I got an offer to read English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths...The reading group was a fantastic first step towards a new passion and without overstating it, a new future...It was a non-judgemental space to enjoy reading...
Day 1
Not really looking forward to reading this book but I’m gonna need it for the book club. Loads of mountaineering jargon—finding it hard going like bundling up a mountain itself.

Day 2
Joe and Simon reach the summit—bit of an anticlimax as my interest was starting to build up as they neared the top.

Day 3
On their way down when suddenly, accident happens. Now we’re getting somewhere. Human emotions + nature—same whether you’re in the jungle or up a mountain in Peru!
I got the impression Simon was pissed off with Joe for breaking his leg.

Day 4
Simon was rope. It’s good line another uses italics for Simon’s thoughts. At first I thought Simon was cut the rope it chance he got—to save his own skin but reading his thoughts are driving me a little. However, I still suspect him a little because I think you’d have to be quite a selfish person to want to go on such dangerous expeditions—without thinking about family etc...
Joe was too proud I think not wanting to ask Simon for too much help.

Day 5
Really into the book now—just want to get to the bit where Joe finally makes it back to the camp even though I know he must have something.

Joe’s made it! I agree it is a story worth writing home about! No one apart from the two climbers know exactly what happened up there but the fact remains Simon cut the rope, leaving his mate who had a broken leg & Joe made it back to camp with that broken leg. (The doctors took him enough just to walk through) The pictures show the true beauty of the sights you see from the summit. There is no other way a helicopter could land you down there so I suppose the only way is by climbing up there, but try the views—Montanus go for the challenge—don’t really go for the scenery.

P. 117—My views exactly!
Benefits for facilitators

The project evaluation confirmed rewards for facilitators as well as prisoners. Many volunteers highlighted the insight gained into the prison system and the need for a wider public debate about it. Facilitators also spoke of the pleasure and satisfaction the groups provided for them:

- Volunteers said they benefitted from hearing the views of prisoners and that they were gaining new knowledge and insights about the prison system and the lives of prisoners.
- Volunteers said that they got to meet and discuss books with people they would not normally meet.
- Volunteers felt they were acquiring new skills from running the groups.

PRG Evaluation

A husband and wife team wrote with regret about the closure of the prison where they volunteered:

“We have met some great characters, learned a lot about other cultures…and our lives will be the poorer for not being able to continue with the group. Like us, some read books that they would not necessarily have chosen and actually enjoyed them…We felt privileged to be there to listen and support. I have a real passion for literature and reading, and sharing this with people who have very different opinions is really exciting.

Volunteer at a women’s prison

We had a small group before the project but it could take a while for inter-loan library books to arrive. This funding liberated us and meant prisoners could be offered a genuine choice, same as for other reading groups. It’s also great for me as I’ve read books I wouldn’t have dreamt of reading for example, Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks. I had one member in my group who would only ever read fantasy novels and science fiction. Then one day he suggested The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold. These groups always surprise and challenge you. I think that’s why people love being part of them.

Librarian at a men’s prison

Facilitating the group is a privilege, both for the opportunity to meet these lively and interesting women, and for the pleasures of sharing the act of reading

What have you got out of it, as librarian or volunteer?

- Helping prisoners to engage
- The group has been a good forum for discussion and retreat
- Giving an individual a tool to help to something positive with their sentence
- Reading books I wouldn’t necessarily read – and enjoyed!
- It has been a pleasure to help men into the habit of reading
- Knowing the prisoners get a lot out of being a member of the group
- Satisfaction to see new readers – amazing feedback
- Observing confidence being built
- New perspectives and books to experience
- Access to network of reading groups, hearing about what works in prisons – and what doesn’t

Feedback from a workshop with librarians and volunteers

I’ve been in reading groups before but they felt a bit limiting as I was with people just like me so tended to have similar views. The prison reading groups here are far more diverse and I get a lot from them. I’m not there to be top down to tell them what to think or just give my views. Crucially I am there to receive views too.

Volunteer at a women’s prison
Employability is a key element of current rehabilitation strategy, and policy documents recognise the increasing interest of employers in so-called ‘soft skills’.

The Funding Rules and Guidance 2012/13 for the Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service includes employability skills as one of three ‘priority learning aims’ and includes under the heading ‘a wide range of team working, personal, social and other skills’. There is also acknowledgement of the challenge these skills pose for many prisoners:

“This component [employability skills] recognises the importance of the personal and social skills which employers rate highly in employees and must take account of the distance many offenders will have to travel in developing these softer employability skills in order to be considered ‘job ready’.”

Reading groups and soft skills

Our emphasis on choice is a great strength when it comes to the development of soft skills. Prison reading groups provide informal learning which can aid self-development in many ways. In our groups members are improving and refining soft skills such as communication, articulacy and decision making. They learn how to persuade and argue a point of view and get it across, how to debate and discuss, how to listen and communicate, how to negotiate what to read next. All these skills are vital for employability.

Imaginative capital

Writing about ‘Crime and Lifelong Learning’, the educationalist Tom Schuller argues that prisoners need to grow three sorts of capital: human capital (skills); social capital (networks, family learning); and identity capital (a sense of worth and future). In the development of all of these, reading groups have much to offer.

In addition to these three sorts of capital, many prisoners also need to develop what we see as a fourth sort of capital: imaginative capital. This is what a reading group can foster so well. Why is imaginative capital important? It matters because it concerns the growth of the self: reflection and thinking, crucially about other situations and other people. This is often what prisoners need to do. An invitation to invest in imaginative capital proposes that I might be able to understand my own situation better by reading about someone else’s. Also, that I may be able to care about someone else; after all, how can I care about you if I never think about you?

The gift of the unpredictable

Official prison strategy in this country also wants to get prisoners thinking about the situations of others, and about the consequences of actions. Prisoners take part in Offending Behaviour Programmes, which are compulsory for IPP prisoners (indeterminate sentence for public protection). The problem with some of these Enhanced Thinking Skills courses is that they do not always engage the imagination. ‘I know what I’m supposed to think’, is how one IPP prisoner put it. He and many others are wary of programmes like this. And they are backed by criminologists such as Fergus McNeill who refers to the ‘overly-scripted, manualised, homogenised approaches’ of cognitive behavioural interventions like these. The virtue of the reading group – as extolled by many groups in our surveys – is that you don’t always know what you are supposed to think, and you cannot always guess what others are thinking. Unpredictability is the big feature, the big gift to and from the imagination. It is when you do not know what you are supposed to think, that the work starts happening, with the critical engagement with the text.
Bringing books alive

It is not enough, though, just to give a prisoner a book. The imagination is a delicate plant. Our great novelist of the prison, Charles Dickens, shows this towards the end of Little Dorrit, when Arthur Clennam is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea. Clennam finds prison an uncongenial environment for reading. ‘One day when he might have been some ten or twelve weeks in jail...’ he had been trying to read, and had not been able to release even the imaginary people of the book from the Marshalsea; the imagination needs space, it would seem. The confinement of the prison is hostile to the powers of the imagination. So one thing we want to do is bring books alive, and we are delighted to report success on this front.

And as members discover the power and pleasure of words in books, their own comments take on vivid force.

“A man who had to search out death to understand what life is for.”

It was like that coat could get up and walk across the room at you (on gripping description in The Potato Factory)

Pretty much like prison food – all in there but none of it very nice (on The Slap)

Books are alive in this project. Prison can be tedium and terrorsome. Something which arrives, lights a flame and then is sustained, is rare. Six months in, we are seeing so many positive things.”

PRG facilitator

“Who’d have thought we could spend all this time just talking and arguing about a book?”

Oh, so it’s OK to disagree about a book is it, not like school?

“It’s a real joy to be able to disagree and remain friends afterwards.”

In the Heart of the Sea starts on Nantucket, off the coast of Massachussets. In the nineteenth century it was the world’s largest supplier of whale oil, a product used by millions and in great demand. The book reveals many contradictions, including the fact that the fiercely competitive and bloody business of whaling was controlled by Quakers, a religious sect renowned for their peace-loving and simple lifestyles.

The book provides a detailed and vivid picture of the bravery and resourcefulness required by the whaling industry. Imagine throwing a harpoon from the bow of a 28-foot whaleboat, and from a distance of perhaps 15 feet, into the head of an animal 70 feet long and weighing up to 60 tons. The boat was then dragged along by the whale until it bled and could be finally killed with all manner of cutting instruments. Not for wimps!

The author, Nathaniel Philbrick, tells the true story of the whaleship Essex. In 1820 it left Nantucket and sailed all the way around the tip of South America and into the Pacific Ocean before being rammed and sunk by a sperm whale 2000 miles off the coast of Chile. (The story of the Essex inspired Herman Melville to write Moby-Dick.)

Before the ship finally capsized, the survivors managed to salvage food and water and create makeshift sails for the three whaleboats in which they hoped to reach the South American coast. One of the boats disappeared and was never found, the other two became separated from each other and were not spotted and rescued until after more than 90 days at sea.

The survivors were in a shocking condition – starved, dehydrated and disoriented. They had also resorted to cannibalism and the men in one of the boats were found clutching the bones of their dead companions.

Philbrick gives good insight into the probable thought processes of the men and how the authority of the officers on the boats was accepted or questioned. He also creates a powerful sense of the sailors’ experience of poornesses and aimless drifting. It became easy to appreciate how loss of control leads to blamed feelings – like those experienced by many prisoners.

The author includes many detailed ‘science book’ facts, such as what happens to the body during dehydration, and he makes comparisons with other famous cannibalism events, such as the 1972 Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes. He also speculates about the fact that the 7 men who were eaten included all 6 of the black members of the crew. Like many other non-Americans, we had little knowledge of American history except for obligatory episodes like the Boston Tea Party. In the Heart of the Sea introduces a new and fascinating part of America’s past.

However, there was sometimes a feeling of fanatically explored facts (did you know that the Pacific Ocean is larger than all the land masses of the earth put together?), or of hearing David Attenborough as your mind’s narrator. We also found ourselves rebelling against some of the too-pro-USA claims; that American whalers were the greatest sailors, explorers, fishermen and survivalists ever. For instance, if the Essex crewmen were so superstitious, why did they choose to eat each other when they could have used the dead bodies as shark bait? It’s what the English sailors used to do...

The Wandsworth group is part of the Prison Reading Groups project (PRG), supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We are also grateful for generous support from Random House Publishing Group. If your prison doesn’t have a reading group encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.northampton.ac.uk/Prison-Reading-Groups

PRG has also worked with National Prison Radio to start a radio book club. If you have access to NPR listen out for details and ways to take part.

News and views from prison reading groups around the country. This month Chris and Conrad report from HMP Wandsworth on In the Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick

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Reading group round-up

In the Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick

In the Heart of the Sea starts on Nantucket, off the coast of Massachussets. In the nineteenth century it was the The author includes many detailed ‘science book’ facts, such as what happens to the body during dehydration, and he makes comparisons with other famous cannibalism events, such as the 1972 Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes. He also speculates about the fact that the 7 men who were eaten included all 6 of the black members of the crew. Like many other non-Americans, we had little knowledge of American history except for obligatory episodes like the Boston Tea Party. In the Heart of the Sea introduces a new and fascinating part of America’s past.

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The Heart of the Sea

In the Heart of the Sea

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Empathy and the imagination

Empathy could be seen as the daughter of the imagination. In the eighteenth century Adam Smith saw them as necessarily linked:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.


More recently, the psychologist Simon Baron Cohen describes empathy as ‘our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion.’

While the relationship between reading and empathy is currently a matter for debate, there seem to be two apparent underlying beliefs: one, that you get empathy from reading novels, and secondly that empathy is and must be a good thing. As the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott put it in 1970, ‘A sign of health in the mind is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person’. Two years before that, in Philip K Dick’s 1968 dystopia, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* it is vital to be able to tell humans from non-human androids; the definition of being human is the power to feel empathy for others.

For our purposes, empathy is to do with thinking or feeling yourself into the position of the other, and also having some kind of appropriate response. ‘Appropriate’ can be tricky here. Empathy is not sufficient for morality: you might enjoy contemplating the sufferings of others. So we need a moral framework, to supply the appropriate, and this is where literature comes in. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it: ‘It is impossible to care about the characters and their well-being in the way the text invites, without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself’.

Group members notice this aspect themselves:

A willingness to see another’s point of view. An understanding of why we read for pleasure and not just to educate or find information for another purpose.

So do the librarians:

More openness from some to others and interest / empathy. One of the prisoners has now started an additional book club for the Over 50’s.

The fiction dividend

Our experience with prison reading groups aligns us with Nussbaum, Winnicott and Dick. And what we observe is that fiction is the highway to empathy. Men prisoners in particular can be hostile to fiction – the point of resistance being that this is not real. This is how one prisoner put it, at a session attended by Penelope Lively to discuss her book *Making it Up*. Before, said this man, he wouldn’t read fiction and wouldn’t listen to recommendations; he thought there wouldn’t be anything in fiction for him, because of the lack of reality. However, he has had to go along with the group’s choices of fiction, and now he says, ‘fiction has made me realise that there’s someone else in the room, and what’s going on in their head you have no idea, and fiction makes you think what’s going on in that other head.’ To which Penelope Lively responded: ‘I couldn’t have put it better myself.’
Reading group round-up

News and views from prison reading groups across the country, Russ Litten is Writer in Residence at HMP Wolds.

Lee Child’s Killing Floor at HMP Wolds

A her a prolonged period of inactivity, our group met in July. We received a gift from HMP Evercreech of half a dozen copies of Lee Child’s ‘Killing Floor’, the first in the Jack Reacher series. I took a walk around the units and spoke to a few men I did one-to-one work with, as well as the attendees of the morning Creative Writing Groups. In all, we recruited five people to the group. We agreed to read the first three chapters for our next meeting.

At our first gathering one of the group confessed that he had found the book so engrossing that he had finished it in a couple of sittings. This meant that he had to keep his counsel as the rest of us tried to analyse the opening scenes of the plot. “Killing Floor” opens with the book’s hero, Jack Reacher, drifting into a small American town and immediately being arrested for a murder he didn’t commit. The book is told in the first person, so the reader is forced to consider the preoccupations and narrative leap from Reacher’s point of view. The group members who had stuck to the original reading plan derived a lot of pleasure from trying to unravel the initial action. It was obvious that there was something kind of conspiratorial afoot, and Child seemed to have presented us with several clues, but the first three chapters only offered tantalizing snippets.

We discussed the book’s style. The sentences were short and clipped in a Hemingway-esque minimalist style. Some of the group appreciated this technique, as it allowed them to propel themselves quickly through the story, and the lack of lyrical description allowed them to paint their own pictures of what was happening to Reacher. Some of the group felt that Reacher was a bit far-fetched as a protagonist - he was firmly in the Bruce Willis/Keanu Reeves/Viggo Mortensen mould. His military police background making him both physically strong and mentally brilliant. The short biography at the beginning of the book confirmed his pedigree as a thoroughbred fighting machine with the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes. However, such a two-dimensional character was accepted by the group as being all in the name of good silly fun, and not to be taken too seriously.

The group enjoyed the swift twists and turns of the plot and the cerebral nature of the story’s central theme. There were several spin-off discussions concerning America and its economic and political system, its power in the world and the way it conducts its affairs both at home and overseas. The police procedure and jargon also provoked healthy discussions.

As we read on, it became clear that several aspects of the plot were becoming increasingly far-fetched. Some of the group accepted this as part of the “killing floor” feel of the novel, whilst others found this to be lacking the boundaries of believability somewhat. Ultimately, we all enjoyed “Killing Floor”, not least for the shared sense of discovery it provided. One of our members provided the following review:

“Reading this author for the first time I have to say that I was not in my comfort zone as I have been a reader of sci-fi and fantasy most of my prison life, but reading this book has made me see there is more out there to feed the imagination than space and heights. From the first chapter I was into this book because the setter had used a style that was easy for me to accept my imagination into the story as I have always been a visual kind of reader, where I would like to feel that I am part of the story and the author made that possible.

Before the story starts there is a bio on Jack Reacher, the main character in this book, and it told you what he had done before - a good idea as it did not make it long winded thing to find out about the man to make you understand what he is about.

The way that the story was told made me not want to put this book down because most of it could be believed and understood; I have to say that I will be reading more from this author and I hope the standard of writing stays the same.

The parts that I found a bit surreal was when Reacher would go into a monologue about calculating things angles and speed of machines, as it seemed to me that at times this man must be a machine, but as I have said before, I never stopped me from enjoying this book.”

Russ Litten is Writer in Residence at HMP Wolds. The Wolds group is part of the Prison Reading Group (PRG) project, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. If your prison doesn’t have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.norwichprisonreaders.org.uk The PRG is also currently working with National Prison Radio to support their radio book club.

Questions of empathy fuelled the discussion of Mark Haddon’s Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time. At the heart of the book is fifteen-year-old Christopher, an autistic maths genius unable to connect emotionally. Several members commented on their sense of kinship with him and one made the point very explicitly:

“It’s a great book and I recognised so much of it since I have mental health issues of my own, especially OCD. I had to stop and work out all the maths and spent more time on that than reading the rest. But I think that’s what Christopher would have done too.”

The same man went on to talk in detail about how difficult the situation must have been for Christopher’s parents, how they clearly loved him but were driven close to breaking point by the strain of looking after him. The book had clearly made this reader feel the empathy he thought he lacked.

Another member vividly described the pleasure of recognition:

“I didn’t want to start it; I flicked through and thought what the bloody hell is this all about? But as soon as I started it, I loved it. I think Christopher is my kind of character, he’s like me. After I finished it I just kept re-reading it; at one point I was re-reading bits at 11.30 pm and laughing out loud. My cellmate thought I was mad but the book just kept making me see all these brilliant pictures.”

Reader uncertainty and the moral dividend

The other gift of fiction is its unpredictability: its ability to wrong-foot the reader, to keep us guessing, keep us thinking. This was illustrated by the women’s group reading Colum McCann’s novel Brooklyn. As one member commented: ‘I usually know what I think about a character; it’s straightforward, black and white. But with Ellis I’m thinking, yes you should, no you shouldn’t. This “what should she do” dilemma (should Ellis go back to Ireland or stay in New York) – is what novel-reading is all about, and the ‘should’ shows up well that these are often moral questions, and always framed for the reader in the context of the moral framework of the novel. What should she or she do, what would you do?’

The group discussing Anna Shreve’s novel Testimony were also drawn to ‘should’ questions. The novel asks who is to blame for a drunken incident at a private school, and the group debated whether someone in the headmaster’s position should do. This was empathy in the sense of thinking yourself into the position of someone very unlike yourself.

Blame is, of course, something prisoners know a lot about; in offering no cut-and-dried answers the novel gave the group a forum for exploring issues of guilt and responsibility:

- I got fearful for Mike (the headmaster)
- I blamed Mike
- I didn’t blame Mike
- I don’t blame Mike. He could have buried it under the carpet
- How can someone (Mike) run with a situation and get it all wrong, blow it out of all proportion?
- Mike judged the boys yet he was doing the same himself – having sex with someone else’s wife and cheating on his own
- The police and the media played a big part in blowing it up
- Would any of this have happened without alcohol? No, people do things they normally wouldn’t do
- Surely the teachers at the party saw what was going on and should have done something before the drinking got out of control

We can assist you with:

- Conviction & Sentence
- Confiscation
- Judicial Review
- Categorization
- Licence Recall
- Adjudication (internal and external)
- Confiscation
- Judicial Review
- Categorization
- Licence Recall

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It is empathy which can put you in the shoes of the other, and then move on to judge yourself looking at that other: no mean feat. A sixty-year-old white woman responded to the twenty-year-old Bangladeshi woman in an arranged marriage in Raphael Selbourne’s novel Beauty: ‘I found the book gripping and felt the issues raised in the book topical but very disturbing. I tried to put myself in the position of Beauty or any other person in this position, an intolerable situation. It’s easy for most of us to say to person in this position. Leave home – get away. But how can you leave with nowhere to go – no one to support you – no money…’

Empathy can take the reader to surprising places. A young man who read Schindler’s Ark wondered why Schindler would do this ‘good thing’ as he called it, when there was nothing in it for him. ‘Why would you do a good thing when you don’t have to, and when you’re putting yourself at risk?’ He was drawn to consider the nature of altruism, an important moral question elicited by reading and discussing this novel.

Non-fiction too, can breed unexpected reflectiveness, and yield unlooked for moral dividends. Eric Lomax’s prisoner-of-war memoir, The Railway Man, ends with the author returning to the Far East and meeting up with one of his wartime torturers. For one group member this book was ‘both painful and helpful’. It had forced him to think through and rethink his attitudes about victims and his previous impatience. His line had always been, ‘why can’t people move on; the past is the past’. This book had made him see and then feel the experience of something very much otherwise.

Closeness and distance
The most powerful books are sometimes those that encourage empathy but also ask the reader to step back from it, even to resist it, in favour of critical distance and judgement. For prisoners especially this can be challenging.

Alexander Masters’ Stuart: A Life Backwards tells a true story of childhood abuse, disability, drug addiction and eventual death. One member summed up his experience of the book very directly: ‘Good but close to home’. Despite this, what the group went on to explore were the limits of identification and the need for individuals to take responsibility, whatever the disadvantages of background or upbringing.

The tension between closeness and distance was even more evident in a discussion of Jonathan Trigell’s Boy A. It is a novel about a young man’s attempt to create a life for himself after many years in prison for his part in the killing of another child. The details of the murder are held back for most of the book while sympathy is built up for ‘Boy A’ and his effort to start again after release. The final revelation that he was as much responsible as ‘Boy B’ is shocking. It led the group to a very searching discussion of what it means to experience sympathy and revulsion at the same time. The Governor was at the meeting and commented afterwards on the impressive level of engagement he had witnessed.
Reading groups as communities

Reading groups are an example of what the critic Stanley Fish calls ‘interpretive communities’. These are groups of readers with shared ways of reading and understanding books. When prison groups first get started, members often concentrate on the authenticity or otherwise of the way books deal with crime, prison and punishment. This can be details about court procedures, prison regimes or even the food on offer. But discussion may move on to more fundamental understandings about what prison experience brings. The discussion of Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader was a case in point. What fascinated the group was the secretive and unpredictable behaviour of one of the characters. They had all recognised her illiteracy long before the novel reveals it: ‘Anyone in prison knows that people who can’t read find it almost impossible to trust others’.

Alongside this shared knowledge, there is also great variety of background and experience in our groups. In the best discussions, members discover solidarity amid diversity. This was clear with Adrian Tinniswood’s Pirates of Barbary. The facilitator wrote that the group included ‘Muslims (Sufi and otherwise), Catholics and Protestants’. Members were fascinated by the book’s presentation of relations among these same groups in the seventeenth century. Mutual respect alternated with murderous hatred ‘on what seemed to us as whims’. She went on to report:

“Trust and openness grow as the reading group community develops, and meetings become places where both vulnerability and strength can be safely displayed. During a discussion of Thomas Keneally’s Schindler’s Ark one man became distressed as he talked about the book’s exploration of the Holocaust. Another member quickly took up the thread while the man was quietly comforted by those on either side of him.

From the edge to the middle

Getting into a reading group can take some time: not just in the sense of having to be on a waiting list to get into the group, though that can be the case, but more in the sense of getting into how a group like this operates, what it is all about. New members will often start off at the edge; perhaps they have been along brought by a cell-mate or friend, and they are a bit suspicious of the whole thing; perhaps they do not think of themselves as readers or as people who operate well in groups. But gradually the pattern of moving from the edge to the middle may emerge. Members will identify themselves as fully paid up, part of a group which has an identity, and over time has read and critiqued a variety of texts together. Being part of a group like this is relatively new to some members, and you can see their initial surprise as well as their growing confidence in the role.

Once the ground is prepared, the turning point is often a particular book that just clicks. For one member it was Tim Gautreaux’s The Missing. After months of hesitancy, he took the floor and spoke at length about how he had loved it. He apologised for ‘going on’ but the rest of the group were delighted and from then on he clearly felt involved and at home among them.

Desistance and pro-social identity

Much recent thinking about ‘going straight’ sees it not as a single event but as an ongoing process of not offending, of desisting from criminal activity. Desistance theorists stress the importance of offenders being able to create new ‘pro-social’ identities for themselves to replace that of ‘criminal’. As part of the process they need to be able to act out these new identities and create new social networks. As Shadd Maruna (1999) puts it: ‘Identity is very much shaped within the constraints and opportunity structure of the social world in which people live.’ Reading groups are rare spaces in a prison where a pro-social identity can be asserted and tried out.
One young man’s story illustrates this clearly. When he first joined the group he seemed uneasy and reluctant to contribute. But he stuck with it and was eventually persuaded to submit a review to Inside Time, the national prisoners’ newspaper. The review was printed and he reported to the next meeting that it had been read and commented on by people throughout the prison, even the nurse in healthcare! Better yet, his mother had been able to read it online and had told him how pleased and proud she was. For our member, the reading group and his review advertised and cemented a new pro-social identity as a reader: someone who reads, discusses, thinks and writes about books.

Reading groups can also act as one of the ‘hooks for change’ that help prisoners identify and consolidate the process of desistance.

The High Down group has read a fantastic range of books – contemporary novels to non-fiction to war memoirs – but Wuthering Heights, an 1848 ‘classic’, was still a slightly unusual choice for us. What was also unusual was the group’s unanimous approval for the book. Math said as far as he commended it as ‘one of the best books I’ve ever read’.

Wuthering Heights was the first and only novel by Emily Brontë, published when she was 29. She died the following year. It was originally published under the pseudonym ‘Ellis Bell’. Emily, like her sisters Charlotte and Anne, initially adopted a male pen name to sidestep the prejudice of the publishing industry of the day. Wuthering Heights was written in the family’s parsonage in Haworth, high up in the (arguably) bleak West Yorkshire moors.

The novel is narrated by a newcomer to the moors, a southerner, who finds himself renting his house from a very disagreeable landlord named Heathcliff. After a night of bad dreams and worse attacks from Heathcliff’s family (and dog), the narrator asks his maid to relate the prequel of the publishing industry of that day. Wuthering Heights was written in the family’s parsonage in Haworth, high up in the (arguably) bleak West Yorkshire moors.

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CHAPTER SEVEN:
The Way Forward

For one hour a month the walls of my confinement crumble to dust and I feel respected. Not just by fellow inmates, but by citizens from the wider community, members of the society into which I'll one day be released - by the two women who run the group, and by the visitors they invite. For one hour a month my opinion is valid, I am listened to and others care what I say. In the book group, everyone is given a voice, all have an equal say. For one hour a month I am allowed to be the individual I used to be and not defined by my crime.

Group member

New funding
A generous donation from Give a Book will enable the project to continue for the next three years. Random House, Profile Books and Harvard University Press also generously support us with books.

Further funding would allow PRG to expand and develop in new directions as outlined below.

Spreading the word
The project is thriving, with a whole range of new prisons, groups and formats. Since September 2012 the number of groups has risen from twenty-eight to thirty-eight in a total of twenty-five prisons. New enquiries are coming all the time, sometimes with prisoners themselves as the driving force. Two librarians who recently contacted us had been told about the project by new arrivals transferred from PRG prisons.

Reading Group Roundup is our regular column in Inside Time, the national prisoners’ newspaper. Each month a different group reports on its chosen book and discussion.

PRG worked with the Prison Radio Association to set up a regular book club on National Prison Radio. NPR invites listeners to ‘bang up with a book’ and broadcasts nightly book readings, featuring a different title each month. At the end of the month, prisoners and guests take part in a roundtable broadcast discussion.

I listened to the show you made about autism and the lad Christopher [in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time]. My son is 8 and is in the care of the local authority. They think he may have autism, and listening to the show was the first time I heard anything in-depth about it. Although autism is common, no one has ever explained exactly what it is – so thank you. It was educational for me to hear about so many of the issues that affect my son.

Elaine, Eastwood Park

We also worked with NPR to produce guidance notes for prisoners interested in setting up reading groups (see Appendix Four: How to Set Up Your Own Book Club in Prison).

Going Global
We have spoken at conferences throughout the UK and in Europe; and our website attracts constant traffic. We are now first port of call for people wanting to work in this area, and see what a reading group in prison can do. They visit, email and phone us.

From Ontario we were consulted by Dr Carol Finlay. She borrowed our model, and now runs eight reading clubs in Ontario penitentiaries.

Abeid DeCunha, Prisoners’ Training Coordinator for the Guyana Prison Service, also contacted us recently for advice on setting up a pilot reading group there.

Supporting the groups
Support for our network of librarians and volunteers is crucial. Feedback from our two workshops welcomed the chance to get together to compare experience and ideas: for recruiting, choosing books, managing meetings, and generally keeping things lively and stimulating. We keep in regular touch through our e-list and with individual visits, phone calls and emails.

Additional funding would enable us to extend this support and develop the website as a resource for information and interaction.

Our volunteers have searched out a great range of poetry, short stories and non-fiction to suit very different levels of reading experience and taste. We would like to be able to share this material more widely, perhaps through a more systematic database.
Plugging the gap for higher level learners

The Brain Cells 2012 survey revealed that a lack of courses at a high enough level was the top reason for respondents not engaging in learning in prison. One prisoner put in a plea for:

"A wider range of more advanced classes for long termers / lifers and those of higher than level 2 ability. This lack causes some prisoners to become bored easily and work through the Ed Department quickly leaving them with no focus."

This is particularly worrying since higher level learners are the backbone of prison volunteering. The emphasis of the new contracts has shifted from learner participation to outputs: the number of qualifications achieved regardless of level or length of course.

Reading groups for these prisoners can help plug the gap, a point stressed by one of the librarian respondents to our evaluation:

"OLASS4 will be launched in August 2012 with a major emphasis on Basic Skills for prisoners in the first month or two of their time in custody and vocational training with embedded Basic Skills in their last 6-9 months. In the middle phase of their sentence, which could be anything between a month or two to up to years, they are unlikely to be entitled to any educational provision at all so the scope for PRGs to plug that gap and maintain some continuity of literacy will be critical."

Librarian, PRG Evaluation

New prison / university partnerships for learning

We would like to see closer working relationships between a prison and its local university. Partnerships between prisons and universities for higher level learning are a good fit: prisoners need more opportunities and universities are committed to volunteering and community engagement. Both institutions would benefit greatly from working more closely together.

PRG has already helped to connect several prisons with local universities to support learning inside. We are currently working with colleagues in London and Manchester to develop informal prison philosophy groups. There are also some excellent programmes developed by others, but overall initiatives tend to be piecemeal.

Further funding would enable us to conduct a comprehensive audit, in order to identify and publicise good practice, and to start to create sustainable learning partnerships.

Networks

In addition to PRG’s prison groups, we have been able to start some groups in cognate environments. We fund a group in YMCA-supported housing for young people aged 16-25; and one in a daycentre for those with substance abuse issues. We are also looking at possibilities with the Probation Service. In addition, PRG has built some useful partnerships and networks with fellow travellers who want to learn from what we are doing and adapt it to their circumstances. Examples include the Fountains cancer therapy centre in Guildford, Surrey, and the St Mungo’s charity for the homeless. We are also a contact point for volunteers who are interested in literacy work in prisons.

We work closely with relevant organisations such as The Reading Agency, including the Six Book Challenge, to share and learn good practice. Our links with TARA and publishers have connected us to the Reading Partners working group, which links librarians and publishers. This has opened a further pathway for us.

We collected group responses to World Book Night and advised the organisers on how to deliver their books into prisons effectively. We also piloted a prisoner giver scheme (see Appendix Five for PRG / WBN initiatives and feedback).

We regularly liaise with PEN and their Readers and Writers in Prison programme. Groups relish author visits, and we can help authors with training and advice.

Advocacy and collective action

PRG is one of sixteen member organisations of the Prisoner Learning Alliance, founded in 2012 and spearheaded by the Prisoners Education Trust. Its declared aim is:

To bring together diverse non-statutory stakeholders with senior cross-departmental officials, to provide expertise and strategic vision to inform future priorities, policies and practices relating to prison education, learning and skills.

The Alliance has identified three key themes for its work in 2013. One of these is exploration of the benefits of learning beyond narrowly-defined ‘employability’. There is widespread acceptance that rehabilitation is about more than being ‘job ready’ and prison learning opportunities need to have a wider focus. Empathy, critical reflection and social engagement all have a part to play. In our view this report provides examples and evidence of the substantial contribution reading groups make.

Recommendations

This report evidences the success and good practice of PRG over the last decade. We want to sustain this good work, and we want to expand and develop. These are the directions we want to take:

- Sustain and expand our network of prisons and volunteers
- Build on and source new funding streams
- Conduct and publish an audit of current university and higher level learning initiatives in prisons
- Model and pilot new partnerships between selected universities and their local prisons

"Having met with Jenny and Sarah when we were in the planning phase of setting up a reading group for oncology patients, we found their advice invaluable. We subsequently modelled our group on their proven formula, which has resulted in a successful group running for the last couple of years. We are hoping to expand the service to provide a reading group for carers.

Gail Maguire, The Fountain Centre/Macmillan Information Centre Manager; The Fountain Centre, Royal Surrey County Hospital, Guildford."
**Last word**

The success of the Prison Reading Groups project is due above all to the librarians, volunteers and members of our groups. The final words belong to them.

"What would you say to the Justice Secretary if you were crossing the car park with him?"

- Come along to a group! And listen to the men
- Reading reduces re-offending
- Great for informal learning, soft skills, and rehabilitation
- We’re cheap!
- The more we encourage prisoners to read and discuss ideas, the more likely they are to feel a part of society when they come out
- Purposeful use of time
- Imagine not having had your education and try being in a cell for a week
- They promote empathy

Feedback from a workshop with librarians and volunteers

The thing about this book group is that it surprises me every time. Books and subjects I thought I hated I find fascinating. And now I can even read out loud!

The book group was a fantastic step towards a new passion, a non-judgemental space to enjoy reading.

Group members

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**Bibliography**


(Celebratory cake at the final AHRC workshop)
Appendix On

Books read recently by PRG groups, together with comments by facilitators and a list of online resources

HMP Albany
Stephen Kelman: Pigeon English
Jon McGregor: If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things
Simon Lelic: The Child Who
S.J. Watson: Before I Go to Sleep
Sarah Waters: The Little Stranger
Patrick Gale: A Perfectly Good Man
Anthony Boulevard: Kitchen Confidential
Robert Harris: Pompeii
Malcolm Gladwell: What the Dog Saw
Susanna Collins: The Hunger Games
Susanna Collins: Mockingjay
Susanna Collins: Catching Fire

As this was the first meeting, all group members and facilitators introduced themselves and talked about what books they liked to read. Toward books for the first proper group were given out. The facilitators had chosen a selection of detective novels and wrapped them in gift wrap and numbered. Each group member pulled a number out of the hat so that the books were chosen at random. The group liked the idea of having different surprise books on a theme and decided to do this for every other group, alternating a surprise book with a fixed title.

HMP Brixton
Patrick deWitt: The Sisters Brothers
George Orwell: Animal Farm
Luke Rhinehart: The Dice Man
Victoria Hislop: The Island
Richard Dawkins: The Magic of Reality
Simon Rich: The Last Girlfriend on Earth

Jon McGregor’s If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things got mixed reactions and so a good discussion. The highlight was the comparison one member made with photography, and how you can make the ordinary extraordinary through juxtaposition – a perfect analogy for this book.

HMP Bristol Group 1
Jennifer Elder: A Visit from the Green Squad
Patrick deWitt: The Sisters Brothers
Susanna Collins: The Hunger Games
Jon McGregor: Even the Dogs
Ewan Ivy: The Snowman
Philip K. Dick: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?
Kate Summerscale: The Suspicions of Mr Whicher
Ernest Hemingway: The Old Man and the Sea
Slavomir Rawicz: The Long Walk
Joseph Heller: Catch 22
Mark Haddon: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time
Angela Macmillan, ed: A Little Aloud

The men are careful with those who haven’t finished and try to make sure the final resolution of the story is not given away. People are given the space to speak and others make sure they listen. There are major surprises. In one group a Chinese member was asked what he felt about the book: “The typeretter did a terrible job. All these different fonts in use are confusing and the book is not laid out properly at all. He must learn his trade better.”

Fair to say no one else had noticed the typesetting. His opinion is always sought out now.

HMP Bristol Group 2
John Boyne: The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas
Dawn French: Dear Fatty
Flann O’Brien: The Poor Mouth
Edward Fitzgerald: The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
John Steinbeck: Of Mice and Man
James Patterson: Witch and Wizard
Richard Van Emde: The Soldier’s War
George Orwell: Animal Farm
James Frey: A Million Little Pieces
Jon Ronson: The Psychopath Test
Daniel Delel: Robinson Crusoe
Neil Gaiman: Anansi Boys

There was humour again today and one man who hasn’t finished a group book yet was challenged to do so and ‘maybe discover something you enjoy and didn’t expect’. The group has found a structure even though the turnover is so high. It seems to be an enjoyable experience for the men and it certainly is for those of us who join them!

HMP Brixton

Neil Gaiman:
Robinson Crusoe
The Psychopath Test
Jon Ronson:
Witch and Wizard
Of Mice and Men
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
Edward Fitzgerald:
Flann O’Brien:
The Poor Mouth
Dawn French:
Dear Fatty

HMP Brixton Group 2

HMP Bullingdon

HMP Bullwood Hall

HMP Brixton

HMP Downview

Constance Briscoe: The Accused
Kathryn Stockett: The Help
Harlan Coben: Long Lost
Charles Dickens: A Christmas Carol
Ira Levin: Rosemary’s Baby
Emily Bronte: Wuthering Heights
Stephen Kelman: Pigeon English
Michelle Paver: Dark Matter
Bill Bryson: Notes from a Small Island
Andrew Miller: Pure

Sarah Waters’ Affinity had been a more or less unanimous choice but didn’t go down as well as expected. The group found it monstrous, and had sympathy at all for the lady visitor. I expected a general feeling of how dreadful Victorian prisons were compared with humane regimes now, but this assumption was briskly shattered.

HMP Eastwood Park

Raymond Carver: Neighbors”, “Fat”
Carol Ann Duffy: “Mrs Knaves”, “Mrs Slapshaus”
Sue Townsend: Wombiwarang

Eight members of The Rubus came for the play reading of Wombiwarang. Three chose to listen but the rest joined in. The woman read their parts with gusto and were all very funny. Everyone thought the play was very good but most of all they really enjoyed it and forgot where they were. There was discussion about putting the play for others in the prison and people took the scripts away with them.
Our first chosen title is Stump by Niall Griffiths. The lads identify with its themes of rehabilitation and struggle to change. They also like the use of regional dialect, which they were surprised by and I think encouraged them to see in a published book. One lad has agreed to come in and give a talk and a reading / Q&A on the project and the way it started.

HMP Ewellthorpe
Raymond Carver: What I'd Call It From Donald Daver: Those Feet Barry Hughes: A Knob For A Knave Donald Pollock: Knokelmsiff

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HMP Full Sutton

On Ben O'Driscoll's '10½ Inclinations'
The original tips were written to help parents encourage their children to read. [The volunteer] adapted these to be appropriate for a group of adults. The group discussed what we thought the tips meant and suggested which books we had read that met the criteria mentioned. The first two:

1. There is a secret trail of books that is meant to inspire and enlighten you. Find that trail.
   The group thought this meant that the trail was personal to each reader; nobody else would be able to find it. Other ideas were that one book leads to another; we read different books at different times in our lives and even the same book differently at different times.

2. Read out of your own nation, colour, class, gender.
   The group understood this as “read out of your comfort zone.” Many of the group could give an example of a book that fell into this category. Authors went from Jaffrey Archer to Sven Hassel, and books included Poisonwood Bible.

HMP High Down


On Mothering Heights
The big questions were raised: is Heathcliff the embodiment of evil; and if so, is this due to his nature or a result of his upbringing? The group agreed Heathcliff was a “macho/woman being”, as one put it, but the jury was still out by the end on whether nature or nurture was to blame. Another member thought “it would be good to know where Heathcliff went for three years - it’s amazing that he sustains this level of anger!”

HMP Holloway Group 1

We started the session with a discussion of why we celebrate Black History Month, which led to an interesting debate about multi-culturalism and equality in Britain. What impressed me was the way the debate was carried out: all the participants agreed to speak before someone else responded and differing views were heard with respect to the speaker.

We went on to an extract from Jackie Kay’s The Adoption Papers. Participants were eager to read the different parts themselves. We spoke at length about the issues raised in the poem and one participant borrowed the full text from the library at the end of the session.

HMP Holloway Group 2

The introductory session was extremely (if not too) well attended, with twenty women present, as well as two officers. We used the session for introductions and to choose our first book. Everyone described what kind of books they like: thrillers and romance were by far the most popular, though biographies and self-help books were also mentioned. We chose 9/11 My Day at the Pentagon for the first book (one of the selection we had taken along) and 432.1 F for the read. The session was great fun and good-natured, though the size meant it was sometimes difficult to hear everybody’s attention and keep them focussed.

HMP Lewes

The session on Across the Nightingale Floor was really positive, with all members really enjoying the book and there being lots of discussion. There was an issue with one member dominating and talking about things that weren’t relevant, but for the most part discussion was very productive. Two members read out their poetry and the rest of the group were very supportive, providing great praise for the reader.

HMP Holloway Healthcare

The project within the secure mental health wing at HMP Holloway aims to provide the women who have complex mental health issues with an opportunity to experience the richness of literature, through reading aloud, listening to readings, performance and discussion. The sense of community that has been built within the sessions is a highlight for me as facilitator, as the women are keen to read in front of one another (even if initially they were nervous) and they are keen to share their past experiences with books, which are of course very diverse.
which is also unique: these were the strong aspects of a book which moved everyone in the group.

We haven't done RAPT (the addiction recovery course in the prison) but from what I hear there are similarities here – the
The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry
The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet
The Shack
William P Young:
David Ebershoff:
Kazuo Ishiguro:
Elizabeth Gilbert: E
Sebastian Barry:
Sebastian Barry:
Joseph O'Connor:
Voodoo Histories - How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History
David Aaronovitch:
Arto Paasilinna:

In a recent session we read a story from The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart anthology. The discussion centred on how it was a metaphor for the choices we make in life and how they can be positive or negative. People spoke about being moved by the story and how much difference kindness can make.

HMP Pentonville
Cosmic McCarhy: The Road
Suzanne Collins: The Hunger Games
William Boyd: Ordinary Thunderstorms
Robert Harris: Pompeii
Kate Mosse: The Cane
Oile Foden: The Last King of Scotland
Guy de Maupassant: 'The Necklace'
Stephen Kelman: Pigeon English

In the session on The Hunger Games one member suggested that the parallels with 'I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!' were striking, especially when prizes or presents are parachuted down to the various ‘contestants’. On the subject of facing and overcoming challenges, another said: 'the ongoing arrival of challenges and the determination to overcome them is an inspirational element.' I enjoyed our discussion hugely – a good chance to chat with others about a common theme.

HMP Rye Hill
Ian Banks: The Wasp Factory
Bill Bryson: Notes from a Small Island
Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman: Long Way Round
Mitch Albom: The Five People You Meet in Heaven
Danny Wallace: Join Me
Tony Hawk: Round Ireland with a Fridge
David Mitchell: Black Swan Green
Art Spiegelman: The Complete Maus
Julian Barnes: The Sense of an Ending
Tim Moore: Do Not Pass Go

Millington: Things my Girlfriend and I Have Argued About
We started off talking about the programme about Mary Shelley on telly the night before, before moving on to the book, Couch Potato, which to our surprise we had all enjoyed. We talked of our own experiences of reading by different kinds, and we discussed how the author had approached the subject, the footnotes giving a commentary on the process.

The discussion moved on to the science of therapy, and on to being observed. We decided that after reading

HMP Sand
Arto Paasilinna: The Year of the Hare
David Aikinovich: Blood History - How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History
Joseph O'Connor: Ghost Light
Sebastian Barry: On Carusor’s Side
Sebastian Barry: The Secret Scripture
Elizabeth Gilbert: Eat Pray Love
Kazuo Ishiguro: Never Let Me Go
David Ebershoff: The Nineteenth Wife
Laurne Graham: The Importance of Being Kennedy
William P Young: The Shack
Jannie Ford: The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

The group identified with the protagonist of Rachel Joyce’s best-selling The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry. 'I haven’t done RAPT (the addiction recovery course in the prison) but from what I hear there are similarities here – the journey you go on.' We discussed whether this was a Christian book because of the pilgrimage aspect, and decided it was a more general spiritual thing. The man connecting with others after a lifetime of disconnect, the ordinariness which is also unique: these were the strong aspects of a book which moved everyone in the group.

CRI Southend
Shel Lanson: The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
Alice Sebold: The Lovely Bones
Paula Coelho: The Alchemist
Lauren Oliver: Before I Fall
James Frey: A Million Little Pieces
J D Salinger: The Catcher in the Rye

The first session seemed to go well and when it came to a close one lady commented that she was really getting into it, sitting here talking about books.

HMP Wandsworth Literature Group
George Orwell: Down and Out in Paris and London
Albert Camus: The Outsider
Ernst Hemingway: The Old Man and the Sea
Joe Simpson: Touching the Void
George Orwell: Animal Farm
Chinua Achebe: Things Fall Apart

This group is facilitated by a tutor in the Education department but she is keen for it to be a reading group rather than a course. Many of the members have higher level qualifications already and are attracted by the possibilities for free choice of books and wide-ranging discussion.

HMP Wandsworth Heathfield
Nathaniel Pritchard: In the Heart of the Sea
Helen Dunmore: The Siege
Michelle Paver: Dark Matter
Kevin Barry: City of Bohane
Harper Lee: To Kill a Mockingbird
Patrick deWitt: The Sisters Brothers
Bryce Courtenay: The Potato Factory
Stephen Kelman: Pigeon English
Francois Kay: Micka
Art Spiegelman: Maus

A big disagreement about whether Robert Harris’s Pompeii was just airport reading or a gripping window on the Roman world. One member was worried by the blurred boundary between fact and fiction. But another insisted that fiction can do things straight history can’t: "It can make us laugh, smile and live in the past!"

HMP Wandsworth Oval
Olafudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of Olafudah Equiano
Slavomir Rawicz: The Long Walk
Alice Sebold: The Lovely Bones
Mark Haddon: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time
J. G. Farrell: The Siege of Krishnapur
Graham Greene: Brighton Rock
Franz Kafka: The Trial
Emma Donoghue: Room
Ned Beauman: Boxer, Beetle

Opinion divided sharply over Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea. ‘Wonderful because it doesn’t tell you what to think’ was one member’s view. But for another there was just not enough to get the imagination going: ‘It’s so cut down there’s nothing left, just a mirror for the reader’s own feelings, a blank page’.

HMP Wolds
John Niven: The Amateurs
William Golding: Lord of the Flies
Niall Griffiths: Nelson’s Gate
John Niven: Kill Your Friends

Chinua Achebe: Animal Farm
Joe Simpson: Death from a Height
Patricia Highsmith: Death and the Penguin
Andrey Kurkov: Death and the Penguin
Roald Dahl: James and The Giant Peach
J D Salinger: The Catcher in the Rye

The group concluded that it was, at heart, a moral book that sought to highlight the hypocrisy and spin under the sheen of New Labour’s大厅 feel-good factor.
Sets of books chosen by groups and donated by Random House
Nathaniel Philbrick: The Last Stand
James Morton: The First Detective: The Life and Revolutionary Times of of Vidocq
Margaret Humphreys: Oranges and Sunshine
Alex Karahawa: To Save a People
Joseph O’Connor: Ghost Light
Michael J Fox: Lucky Man, A Memoir
Bram Stoker: Dracula
SJ Watson: Before I Go to Sleep (twice)
Bill Bryson: Notes from a Small Island (twice)
Anthony Summers: Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J Edgar Hoover
Bruce Dessen: Beyond A Joke
Adrian Timmiswood: The Pirates of Barbary
Rachel Joyce: The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry

Sets of books donated by Profile Books
David Hendy, Noize
Adrian McKinty: The Cold Cold Ground
Attica Locke: The Cutting Season
J Robert Lennon: Familiar
Cathi Unsworth: Weendo
Simon Rich: The Last Girlfriend on Earth
Paul Watson, Up Pohpepe
Jami Attenberg, The Middlesteins
Polly Montand, the Society of Tired Friends
Thomas Buergenthal, A Lucky Child
Ross Litten, Swear Down
Anthony Carterlight, How I Killed Margaret Thatcher
Wilbert Rideau, In the Place of Justice

POETRY WEBSITES
http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/npc30/
http://www.bl.uk/poems.net/
http://www.thepoetrytrust.org/
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/banners/saturdaypoem
http://www.poetryarchive.org.org.uk/poetryarchive/home.do
http://www.poemhunter.com/
http://www.isc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html
http://poetry-archive.com/
http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/
http://www.applesandalmons.org/page/1/home
3 brilliant poetry anthologies: publisher – Bloodaxe, editor – Neil Astley
Staying Alive (2002)
Being Human (2011)

SHORT STORY WEBSITES
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/shortshortstories
http://www.granta.com/Archive/111/Missing-Out/1
http://www.short-stories.co.uk/
http://www.classicshorts.com/
http://www.storybytes.com/view-length/index.html

Reading group – Horror & Vampires – 11.8.10 – Julia Spicer

Texts
Lamb to the Slaughter – Roald Dahl
A Persistent Woman – Marjorie Bowen
Excerpt from It – Stephen King
Open All Hours – Rajinder Kaur
Love Bites – Nicholas Royle

We started with a general discussion about what makes a horror novel and the group came up with a number of suggestions including the following:
An everyday scenario that becomes menacing – something that could happen to you.
Work involving the supernatural or paranormal.
Work involving the psychological that plays with the mind – that keeps you on the edge.
Not something that is just ‘gross’.

We also discussed the distinction between crime/mystery and horror in the context of the Thomas Harris’ Silence of the Lambs trilogy. One participant made the very clear definition that a crime book was about the solution of a mystery where the character is already dead – the outcome is generally good. Horror on the other hand frequently involves the gruesome death of the main characters and the outcome can be quite catastrophic.

Another participant introduced the topic of vampires and we then broke for a reading and I chose one with which I was unfamiliar – Open All Hours. This is a story of a female vampire from Amritsar, now living in Birmingham. The women found this story sad rather than frightening and one thought it was quite badly written, finding the story and characters neither compelling or interesting – ‘we never actually got to the present – it was all back story’ she commented.

We then broke for another discussion around film and horror and which we find better, books or films and inevitably we ended up citing Stephen King’s work. We also discussed the rise of torture porn and gratuitous violence and none of the women liked that. Opinions of Blair Witch were completely polarised from those who dismissed it as a film which is scary if you’re afraid of twigs to those who had been unable to sit through it.

We discussed the comparative immediacy (both literal and metaphorical) of an actual text and how what you imagine might be worse than what can be shown cinematically.
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We next read the short text suggested by Sarah Turvey which everyone really enjoyed and appreciated for its ingenuity. I was quite surprised by this as I thought they would dismiss it for its brevity.

We then had a brief discussion about the 6 book challenge and everyone except one who had already completed signed up for it.

I was going to read Lamb to the Slaughter for the final text but all but 2 of the women were familiar with it – I should of course have considered this possibility – so instead I read the Nicholas Royle piece. This turned out to be a humorous work where rather than smoking people bite each other. This was better received than the first text from the same book (Bloody Vampires Ed Bob Nayar) though again no points for fear or menace.

In conclusion, I and the women thoroughly enjoyed this session. They complimented me on my reading skills (!) and all fully participated in the discussions. I have promised to prepare one of our library brochures on horror books based on their comments and recommendations which I collected at the end of the session.

I don’t think the texts I chose were particularly interesting (I went on favourable reviews I’d read) but I thought it was a good idea to bring stories that I was also coming to fresh so would experience in the same way. I think the level I pitched it at was just about right for the very mixed ability group that came. We ended with quite an interesting discussion about short stories that I think would be good to pursue at some point.
Appendix Three: Poetry Group hand-out, Holloway Resettlement Centre

Nocturne
All the earth a hush of white,
White with moonlight; all the skies;
Wonder of a winter night--
And . . . your eyes.

Hues no palette dares to claim
Where the spools of sunken ships
Leap to light in singing flame--
And . . . your lips.

Darkness as the shadows creep
Where the embers sigh to rest;
Silence of a world asleep--
And . . . your breast.

Amelia Burr

Meeting in a Lift
We stepped into the lift. The two of us, alone.
We looked at each other and that was all.
Two lives, a moment, fullness, bliss.
At the fifth floor she got out and I went on up
knowing I would never see her again,
that it was a meeting once and for all,
that if I followed her I would be like a dead man in her tracks
and that if she came back to me
it would only be from the other world.

Vladimir Holan
(translated from the Czech by Ian and Jarmila Milner)

Drought
(dry time or drought - old Scottish word)

O Western wind, when wilt thou blow
That small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

Anonymous

You’re my home
When you look into my eyes
and you see the crazy gypsy in my soul
it always comes as a surprise
when I feel my withered roots begin to grow.

Well I never had a place
that I could call my very own
but that’s all right my love
cuz you’re my home.

When you touch my weary head
and you tell me everything will be all right.
You say use my body for your bed
and my love will keep you warm throughout the night.

Well I’ll never be a stranger
and I’ll never be alone
wherever we’re together
that’s my home.

Home could be the Pennsylvania turnpike
Indiana’s early morning dew
high up in the hills of California
home is just another word for you.

Well I never had a place that I could call my very own
but that’s all right my love
cuz you’re my home.

If I travel all my life
and I never get to stop and settle down
long as I have you by my side
there’s a roof above and good walls all around.
You’re my castle, you’re my cabin
and my instant pleasure dome.
I need you in my house
and you’re my home.

Billy Joel
from Some mangled Dream Songs for Henry
who is twenty-eight years dead and past caring

Shadowed by your father
In his terrible pose, the shotgun crammed
into his mouth, and inside the house
the bewildered little boy who heard
the echo of that shotgun blast
through every dawn that ever rose

far off in the reddening east
as each bright morning rose.
Your lover's face turns briefly
on the crumpled pillow, her cheeks warm,
her sweet, delicious lips, pouting
and closed just like a morning rose.

Yes, you'll ruin her too, tear her root and limb
from the soil that nourished her
and try not to cram her in the glass
that sits clearly on your windowsill,
cursing when her sharp claws scratch you
and crying like a little boy

when night comes and she's gone home.

Tracey Herd

Madeline smiles at the thought

An older woman, 56, has enemies who make her life difficult.

At work, they ridicule her mild stutter, and because she is heavy they fill the
office pantry with donuts and cupcakes. They put exercise diagrams in her
cubicle, and they leave coupons for low-fat food on her chair.

And Madeline, for that is the woman's name, ponders, idly, what she would do to
these persecuting colleagues if she had the chance.

For years, she has assumed that she would use a gun. She would take a small
handgun and press it to the forehead of each offender, and tell them - three
men, two women - that they shouldn't have done what they did. Then she would
pull the trigger.

But tonight she is lying in bed, staring at her grey-blue wall, thinking that she
should use a crossbow. She has just seen a movie, with her teenage son,
featuring a hero adept with a crossbow, and she now wants to use this exotic
weapon, not the simple gun, to vanquish her aggressors.

The crossbow has more personality, seems to be more her, and is quieter, which
would allow her to dispatch more enemies before being detected. The only
downside is that it seems - though she is not sure; she won't be sure until she
goes online tomorrow during lunch - to require more distance to function.

Could she press the crossbow to the forehead or chest of a co-worker, so he or
she could know what they'd done, what brought Madeline to this point? It is
essential that they know.

If she can work that part out, she will be happy, because the crossbow will make
her daydreams much more interesting for a while.

Dave Eggers
Yes

It's like a tap-dance
Or a new pink dress,
A shit-naive feeling
Saying Yes.

Some say Good morning
Some say God bless -
Some say Possibly
Some say Yes.

Some say Never
Some say Unless
It's stupid and lovely
To rush into Yes.

What can it mean?
It's just like life,
One thing to you
One to your wife.

Some go local
Some go express
Some can't wait
To answer Yes.

Some complain
Of strain and stress
The answer may be
No for Yes.

Some like failure
Some like success
Some like Yes Yes
Yes Yes Yes.

Open your eyes,
Dream but don’t guess.
Your biggest surprise
Comes after Yes.

Muriel Rukeyser

from August

If I could step into
your skin, my fingers
into your fingers putting on
gloves, my legs your legs,
a snake zipping up. If I could look
out of your tired eyeholes
brain of my brain,
I might know
why we failed.
(Once we thought the same
thoughts, felt the same things.)

A heavy cloak, I wear
you, an old black wing
I can't shrug off.

O heart of my heart,
come home. O flesh,
come to me, before the
worm, before earth
ate the girl,
before you left without
belongings.

Esta Spalding

Homage to my hips

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in,
they don’t fit into little
petty places, these hips
are free hips.
they don’t like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go.
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

Lucille Clifton

The Broken Field

My soul is a dark ploughed field
In the cold rain;
My soul is a broken field
Ploughed by pain.

Where windy grass and flowers
Were growing,
The field lies broken now
For another sowing.

Great Sower, when you tread
My field again,
Scatter the furrows there
With better grain.

Sara Teasdale
Appendix Four: How to Set Up Your Own Book Club in Prison

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats
Appendix Five: World Book Night in prison

WORLD BOOK NIGHT 2012

Almost all of the 22 PRG libraries were also involved in WBN 2012 and there was some very interesting feedback. Many thanks to all who contributed.

Advance publicity

Everyone commented on what a great initiative WBN is and how much prisoners enjoy being given books. Quite a few people suggested that advance publicity would help create a buzz - colourful posters, bookmarks etc. And many thought leaflets with book covers and a short blurb on each of the titles would be a good way to hook in prisoners.

Linked activities and author visits

Several people said they would welcome ideas for activities centred on the books and there was widespread support for linked author visits: “If WBN could sort out author visits, we’d be thrilled!”

Book requests and delivery

Groups were delighted by WBN’s generosity and the opportunity to choose titles. They were also very pleased to get multiple mixed boxes of all 25 titles:

Being able to have multiple copies of all the titles instead of just lots of copies of the same book creates more options. You can reach more prisoners and staff – people like being able to choose and can almost always find at least one title to their liking.

Several librarians wondered if it might be possible to get the books earlier:

Nothing happens quickly in prison and we really needed the books to be delivered about a month in advance to have any hope of getting them distributed on or close to World Book Night itself. My books took 3 weeks to arrive in the library from the gate.

A few people reported that they couldn’t get the books delivered to their prison, which made things more complicated:

This year, I was unable to arrange delivery directly to the prison. Instead I had to arrange for the library service to collect them from the library and bring them to us. Again, hassle and time.
Book titles
There was lots of enthusiasm for the range of titles and some good suggestions for the future:

In general I thought it was a good selection. In fact, I think my only criticism is that there wasn’t much in the way of non-fiction; Stuart, A Life Backwards was our choice last year and was so popular that I still had people asking for a copy weeks later. It would also be nice to see some poetry as this is hugely popular in prisons and I think can be less daunting to reluctant readers.

Most of the books were quite difficult for those not used to reading novels. Perhaps next time WBN could include a few Quick Reads or other shorter/easier books?

One librarian even sent helpful stats:

- 297 copies of Martina Cole’s The Take were given away to staff and prisoners.
- 16 mixed boxes (a total of 400 books) have been given out to staff and prisoners.
- The four most popular titles:
  - The Take
  - Martina Cole
  - The Alchemist
  - Paolo Coelho
  - Misery
  - Stephen King
  - The Damned United
  - David Pearce

**But this was one of the ‘leftovers’ in another prison. Which just goes to show...

Distributing the books across the prison
There were some good initiatives here. One prison, for example, handed out some of its WBN books at a resettlement fair.
HMP Bulldingdon produced a handout (attached) that included all the titles and an invitation to request one. The handout was delivered to every cell in the prison and copies were available in the library as well. The response has been excellent; to date, about 150 books have been distributed and requests are still coming in.

Prisoner givers
HMP Wandsworth trialled a scheme to allow prisoners themselves to be givers. All 25 titles were arranged on a stand in the library and prisoners were invited to fill in a form (attached) to send a chosen title to someone on the outside. The forms were checked by Security and then forwarded to PRG for posting.

Almost 50 requests have been processed so far and they are still coming in. As the Librarian put it:

Not many prisoners are in a position to give anything to those outside and they really enjoy the chance to send a book out to mothers, fathers, children or friends.

Overall, almost everyone agreed that WBN 2012 has been a real success in PRG prisons and was well worth the extra effort:

World Book Night was a huge success here. The books have been flying off the stand and the chance to have copies sent out to family is proving really popular.

Sarah Turvey on behalf of PRG
September 2012
Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey teach English Literature at the University of Roehampton. Since 1999 they have also been involved in setting up and running prison reading groups. The Prison Reading Groups (PRG) project provides advice and support for new groups, facilitators and volunteers.

For further information visit the website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prison-reading-groups or email s.turvey@roehampton.ac.uk

Prison Reading Groups is generously supported by Give a Book. We also gratefully acknowledge book donations from Random House, Profile Books and Harvard University Press.

*Images courtesy of Matthew Meadows www.matthewmeadows.net*