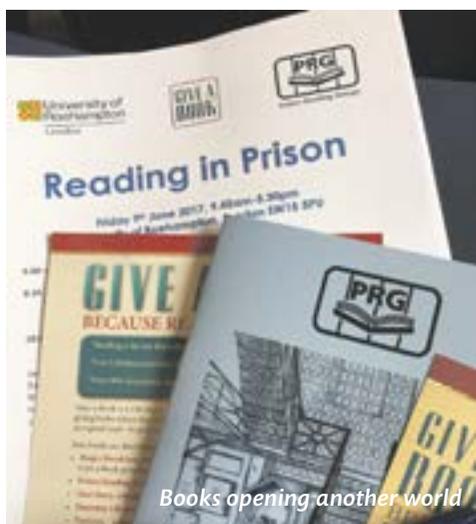




Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons



This month Sarah Turvey reports on PRG's annual Reading in Prison event.

Last month over 120 people came together at the University of Roehampton to celebrate reading in prison. The delegates included prison librarians and PRG volunteers, reading organisations, authors and publishers, and most important ex-prisoners with first-hand experience of what books can do behind bars. The first panel of the day explored putting libraries at the heart of prison life and offered a snapshot of some of the brilliant initiatives around: literary festivals; author visits; book groups; creative writing groups; debating societies; song-writing workshops, and clubs of all kinds from chess to scrabble.



HMP Cake

Library access was a big issue and there were some good ideas about how to get prison managers and officers onside. Above all, speakers encouraged library staff to be 'bloody, bold and resolute' in promoting libraries as places where prisoners can discover the world - and themselves.

As every prisoner knows, family contact is crucial for the wellbeing of prisoners and their children. The 'Reading and families' panel introduced a range of initiatives including FLiP - Family Literacy in Prison - a project that helps

prisoners develop skills to make reading with their kids more meaningful and more fun for everyone.

One of the highlights of the day was the discussion of reading groups in action. PRG librarians and volunteers talked about what the groups provide: pleasurable conversation and debate; the chance to expand reading horizons, and the sense of connectedness with the wider world. In the words of one member:

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

Or as another member put it even more succinctly: 'It's the most grownup discussion I have in prison'.

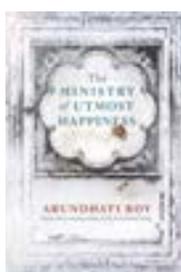
The day ended with tea and the wonderful PRG cake, followed by a poetry workshop. Lots of people in and out of prison are wary of poetry: 'I didn't get it at school and I don't get it now'. So we took the plunge to explore two poems and bring them to life together. One was from Seamus Heaney's collection called Clearances, a sequence about his mother. No-one was quite sure about it at first but as we read and talked different views emerged: 'It's the memory of a rare moment of closeness with his mother'; 'But potatoes like solder weeping off the iron - what's that about?'; 'Is it a happy memory? why cold comforts?' In the end we agreed that what the poem stirred more than anything were our own memories of childhood moments which the workshop let us share or keep private. See what you think:

*When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.*

*So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives-
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.*

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

Book Review



The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

By Arundhati Roy

Review by Inside Time

Publisher: Hamish Hamilton / £9.49 / ISBN: 978-0241303979

Twenty years after her Booker-Prize winning, internationally celebrated debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, startled the literary world Arundhati Roy has published her second: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This book transports us across a subcontinent on a journey of many years. It takes us deep into the lives of its gloriously rendered characters, each of them in search of a place of safety - in search of meaning, and of love.

In a graveyard outside the walls of Old Delhi, a resident unrolls a threadbare Persian carpet. On a concrete sidewalk, a baby suddenly appears, just after midnight. In a snowy valley, a bereaved father writes a letter to his five-year-old daughter about the people who came to her funeral. In a second-floor apartment, a lone woman chain-smokes as she reads through her old notebooks. At the Jannat Guest House, two people who have known each other all their lives sleep with their arms wrapped around each other, as though they have just met.

It is at once a love story and a provocation - a novel as inventive as it is emotionally engaging. It is told with a whisper, in a shout, through joyous tears and sometimes with a bitter laugh. Its heroes, both present and departed, have been broken by the world we live in - and then mended by love. For this reason, they will never surrender.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy dissects life in India in the wake of the partition through the eyes of two characters: Anjum, a transgender woman who comes into her own only to find herself redefined by tragedy, turning to a cemetery in Delhi for refuge; and Tilo, a trained architect who journeys to the Kashmir region to reignite her on-and-off-again love affair with Musa, a freedom fighter.

Anjum is born Aftab Begum. At first only his mother notices "nestling under his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part". Secrecy is anathema to Anjum, whose life is shaped as much by her courage as it is by her body. Aftab moves into Khwabgah - the House of Dreams - home to hijras, an Urdu word adopted into Hindi to refer to intersex people. Undergoing surgery performed by a doctor who makes a living selling "spurious, substandard body parts to desperate people", Aftab becomes Anjum and lives for decades in Khwabgah with her "patched-together body and her partially realised dreams".

"In her bid to 'become everything', the author takes courageous leaps, seemingly confident that readers will be able to fill the gaps and follow her trail"

There is also a dizzying cast of secondary and tertiary characters that each take a stand on the soapbox in turns, from the security guard who goes by the moniker of his hero - Saddam Hussein - to the graveyard's resident dung beetle, Guih Kyom.

Anjum lives in a graveyard outside the walls of Old Delhi "like a tree". At first buffeted and taunted, she learns to let hurt "blow through her branches like a breeze". Traumatized, vagrant and fierce, she is "a ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident spirit, ambushing bereaved families who came to bury their dead with a grief so wild, so untethered, that it clean outstripped theirs". Gradually, her personal Fort of Desolation diminishes to a "dwelling place of managea-

ble proportions". Trauma becomes "home; a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow - awful, but reliable". Brave and creative, she builds a temporary shelter between two graves. As the Fort of Desolation shrinks, the shack expands, room by room growing into a fabulous residence to house some of the lost, wounded and hunted whose lives converge there. Once you have fallen off the edge, Anjum tells one guest, "you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people". This is the Place of Falling People.

Roy takes her readers on a labyrinthine journey as chaotic and lively as the streets of modern-day Delhi. While the tales of both Anjum and Tilo might be framed as the individual love stories of two people who exist on the fringes of society, ultimately, they serve a larger purpose of shining a light on the grave shortcomings of national leadership in India and elsewhere.

A poem tucked into the pages of Roy's novel seems to encapsulate the author's own intentions:

*How to tell a shattered story?
By slowly becoming everybody.
No.
By slowly becoming everything.*

In her bid to "become everything", the author takes courageous leaps, seemingly confident that readers will be able to fill the gaps and follow her trail. For that reason, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* demands a certain degree of attention and reflection in equal parts - but dedicated readers will come away rewarded with a renewed sense of empathy for humanity, despite its shortcomings, and perhaps even a strengthened willingness to persevere. Humane and sensuous, beautifully told, this extraordinary novel demonstrates on every page the miracle of Arundhati Roy's storytelling gifts.