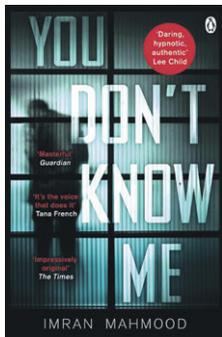




Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading groups in prisons



The report this month comes from HMP Bullingdon where the group discussed Imran Mahmood's *You Don't Know Me*.

The Amazon blurb was a great hook: 'An unnamed defendant stands accused of murder. Just before the closing speeches, the young man sacks his lawyer and decides to give his own defence speech.'

He tells us that his barrister told him to leave some things out. But he thinks if he's going to go down for life, he might as well go down telling the truth.

There are eight pieces of evidence against him. As he talks us through them one by one, his life is in our hands. We, the readers - members of the jury - must keep an open mind until we hear the end of his story. His defence raises many questions ... but at the end of the speeches, only one matters: Did he do it?

You Don't Know Me was one of the books on offer for World Book Night. HMP Bullingdon chose it and received 160 copies. They were advertised in the library together with a hand-out about the book and the author. Imran Mahmood is a criminal barrister with 25 years of court experience. Though he is very different from the young man who tells his story in the novel, Mahmood is a far cry from the public school barrister stereotype. He was born to first-generation immigrants from Pakistan and went to a comprehensive school in Liverpool before going on to university and training for the bar.

There was lots of buzz and book chat around the prison and the reading group was keen to discuss it as well. The meeting was lively and energised from the off and everyone had views. Not surprisingly there was spirited criticism of judges, juries and QCs (prosecution and

defence) and a couple of the men got a bit heated. But others stepped in to bring discussion back to the book and keep us on track.

Everyone was intrigued by the narrator taking over from his QC and most found his voice authentic. 'You believe he's from a tough South London estate and he knows all about the power of the gangs'. One member from a very different background said he wished he had read it when he first came into prison so he'd have had a better sense of the lives of many of those around him.

There was lots of discussion of truth and lies and the ways they are spun into good or bad evidence. 'The author's right, when you walk into that court you'd better have a story and it better be good'.

Most agreed they believed the narrator's story until some wild developments close to the end. So is the narrator a liar, or did the author get carried away with the story he invented? Or as one member suggested: 'Maybe it's there to challenge the reader? After all, the first part of his story is about lives that the jury - and most readers - don't know anything about. Maybe it should make us realise that there are other things we don't know anything about and might be true?'

But there were also those who thought the power of the story about his life was undercut by the ending 'If we don't believe the MI5 stuff maybe we don't believe the gang stuff - and we should because it's true'.

All in all a great discussion that showed just what books can do: open up an unfamiliar world or connect with your own experience but also make you think critically about it. Many thanks to World Book Night and to Penguin Books who publish the novel.

The group at HMP Bullingdon is supported by Prison Reading Groups (PRG), part of Give a Book. If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to look at the Prison Reading Groups website www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk.

Have You Heard George's Podcast On National Prison Radio?



George the Poet



George the Poet is a spoken-word performer whose innovative brand of musical poetry has won him huge critical acclaim as both a recording artist and social commentator. His latest offering is a podcast - like a radio programme that you can download and listen to at any time. It's called 'Have You Heard George's Podcast'. George came in to the National Prison Radio studios in HMP Brixton to meet the team. Peter, who presents the Urban Show, describes the visit.

I'd never heard of George the Poet before - so when I was

told he was coming in I didn't know what to expect. First up I found him polite and very intelligent. We sat round the table in the office we work in and talked briefly. Then we went straight in to listening to one of the episodes of his podcast.

It felt like a film, listening to it! It was part drama, part poetry, giving different perspectives of life from different people. It touched on the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. It had a strong political message and was quite emotional. I've not listened to anything like it before.

Afterwards we discussed what we had heard. We discussed the issue of knife

crime. George has very strong opinions. He's very anti-violence, but talked about how social issues are conditioning young people. And Grenfell came up. I remember watching it on the news with my cellmate. It was a depressing time which could have been avoided.

George did some of his spoken word poetry. He hit so many different topics. I'm not really a political person - we don't really have a say in politics. George does inspire me, but voices like his are not heard enough and I'm not sure if he's reaching a wide enough audience.

We need more artists to be releasing more stuff with a positive message. There's not enough positivity in rap. Wretch is a good example - he can be political too. He's someone people listen to and respect.

George did make me think that anyone can make it, regardless of your upbringing. He came from somewhere in north-west London and now he's an ambassador for one of Prince Harry's charities. And he says he's going to come in again. I can't wait!

George the Poet will be taking over NPR on Wednesday throughout July. Tune in each Wednesday at midday or 6pm - or you can catch the repeat on Sundays at 1pm.



Bessie Smith, the Empress of Blues

Bilal's 'The Best of Blues'

I grew up listening to all kinds of music - including blues and jazz. These are genres that are slowly fading from popular culture. But the majority of what we listen to today has ties to this old music.

On The Best of Blues, I'll be introducing you to ten of the most influential artists you may never have heard of. Among them is Scott Joplin, who was born 150 years ago. His ragtime music set the standard and evolved into blues and jazz. Some of his melodies can be heard in later blues and jazz songs.

I'll be telling you about Robert Johnson - the King of Blues. His unique vocal style and guitar skills had a big influence on a lot of artists that followed. And his music paints a picture of life in America back in the 1930s.

Also on my list is Bessie Smith - nicknamed the Empress of Blues. Her voice was very soulful. She was very outspoken about issues that were frowned upon for women to talk about.

Music for me is an escape mechanism. In particular I find blues and jazz therapeutic. The lyrics are very soothing. Some may say it is an acquired taste - the younger generation have no idea what they are missing out on.

It's a real privilege to be able to make this music documentary. Working for NPR is something I have wanted to do ever since I came inside. Most jobs have that constant reminder that you're still in prison, but everyone at National Prison Radio treats me like a professional. It's great to be part of the family.

You can hear *The Best of Blues with Bilal* on Monday 16th July at 8am and 8pm and Friday 20th at 5pm.

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