



Prison Reading Groups Annual Review 2015



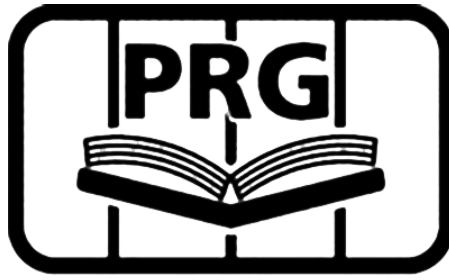
***'It's good to share enthusiasm for a book and
feed off the enthusiasm of others'***

'I've learned to listen to others'

'A rare opportunity for a worthwhile conversation

in prison'





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Director's Welcome

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) continues to flourish despite tough challenges. In 2015 we started ten new groups, bringing our total to forty-two groups in thirty prisons nationwide, from Full Sutton near York to Albany on the Isle of Wight.

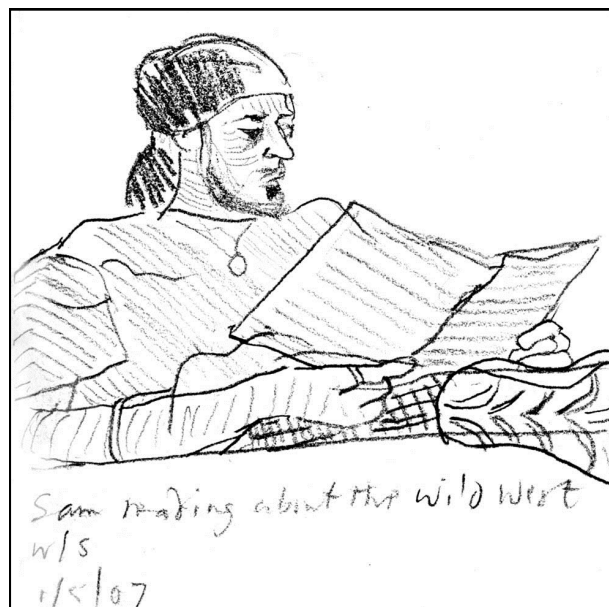
With support from the Siobhan Dowd Trust, PRG also set up a new project in 2015 to support Family Days in twelve prisons. Feedback from children, parents and staff confirmed its success.

'It gave my son the chance to read with his dad. It's the first time they've done that'

In addition, PRG was awarded funding from the Wandsworth Borough Grant Fund to support five additional Family Days in 2015-16 at HMP Wandsworth.

PRG's continued membership of the Prisoner Learning Alliance has enabled us to advocate more effectively for improved prison policy on education and learning. The PLA submitted evidence to the Coates Review of prison education and we are proud to record that thirty-one of the thirty-eight recommendations we made feature in the published report.

Our reputation and reach continue to expand. In 2015 PRG advised prison reading projects as far afield as Chile and Western Australia. PRG was interviewed on Radio 4's Open Book programme and featured in articles in the Guardian and the Financial Times. We are also delighted to report that PRG librarian Neil Barclay was one of the 2015 winners of the prestigious Butler Trust awards.



PRG relies on grants and donations and we are enormously grateful to our funders. Give a Book continues to support us with great generosity and wisdom. Penguin Random House has increased its support and a new partnership with the Booker Prize Foundation will allow us to set up and fund ten new groups in 2016. We also gratefully acknowledge donations from the Wellcome Trust, the Drapers' Charitable Fund, the Mildred Duveen Trust and many individuals, as well as ongoing support from the University of Roehampton.



Thanks are also due to Sam Dodd and Philip Coales. Sam was PRG's administrator throughout 2015 and she worked with skill and commitment to make PRG run smoothly. Philip took over in February 2016 as Co-ordination and Development Officer and he is working hard to develop PRG's systems and social media presence as well as providing invaluable support for PRG prisons.

Our librarians and volunteers are PRG's greatest asset. They bring enormous energy and commitment to the project and working with them is a pleasure.

Above all the success of PRG depends on our prisoner members. Their education and reading experiences vary widely but they share a determination to change their lives and a willingness to explore what books can do behind bars.

'The reading group is the highlight of the week. I thoroughly look forward to new books and discussion. Many of my letters are based around it'

Member, HMP Birmingham

Sarah Turvey

Director, Prison Reading Groups

News from the Groups

Expansion

PRG's expansion in 2015 is especially heartening in the context of tough challenges in prisons. Changing policy priorities, regime re-structuring and prison staff shortages have made it difficult for many voluntary sector organisations to sustain their initiatives. For PRG the problems are compounded by ongoing difficulties with library access, which have been widely criticised in official HM inspection reports. Despite this, we have not only survived but continued to grow for over fifteen years since our beginnings in 1999. Our ten new groups in 2015 brought our total to forty-two groups in thirty prisons nationwide, both male and female, high security and open conditions.

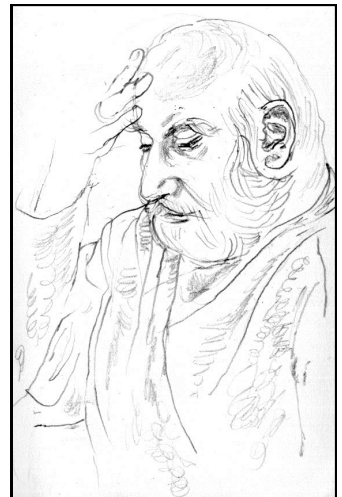
PRG groups have staying power. Many have been going for five years or more, some much longer: Wandsworth for eleven years, Send for thirteen and Bullingdon for fifteen, making it the longest-running prison reading group in the country

Diversity

PRG groups are diverse and aimed at a range of target memberships: emergent readers or very experienced ones; groups on healthcare wings or drug recovery units; for older prisoners or those with special needs. Groups may meet weekly, monthly or something in between, and for anything from an hour to more than two.

'We have two OAP reading groups and some of the members have dementia. Fifty percent of the population of our prison is now classed as older and we have a significant number of prisoners over the age of seventy. We have found that reminiscing and history picture books have started to work really well for these prisoners'

Julie Shannon, Librarian at HMP Albany



'New groups arrive looking very earnest, as each man fears to read too slowly and to 'keep the others waiting'. This changes quickly as their confidence grows and we can joke together as a group about the hard words. I love their courage to keep at it, even if they don't like the story. I love the laughter and the encouragement for each other. I love the discussions about the story. They get a buzz from all of this, and so do I'

Pam Thomas, Volunteer at HMP Grendon

The rewards of informal reading

Flexibility and choice are our watchwords. Membership is voluntary and the groups are informal and ongoing. There is no syllabus, there are no tests and no certificates. Groups choose the books they read and members keep their copies or pass them on to family or other prisoners.

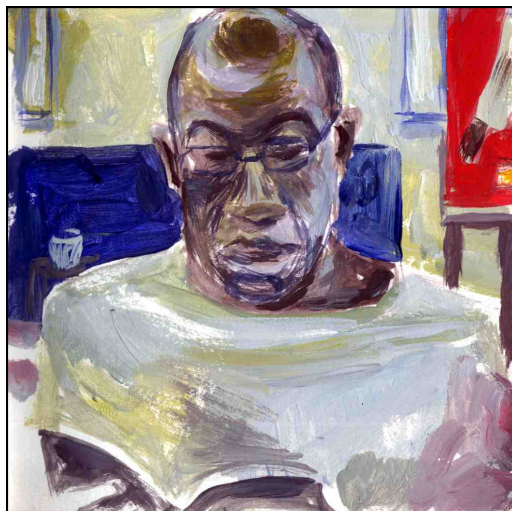
Recent choices in two men's prisons

Gillian Slovo	<i>Ten Days</i>	Ben Aaronovitch	<i>Rivers of London</i>
SJ Parris	<i>Treachery</i>	Philip K Dick	<i>The Man in the High Castle</i>
Philip Ridley	<i>Radiant Vermin</i>	Michael Punke	<i>The Revenant</i>
Åsne Seierstad	<i>The Bookseller of Kabul</i>	Orson Scott Card	<i>Enders Game</i>
J G Ballard	<i>The Empire of the Sun</i>	Marilynne Robinson	<i>Gilead</i>
Yasmina Khadra	<i>The Dictator's Last Night</i>	Charles Portis	<i>True Grit</i>
HMP Wandsworth		HMP Bullingdon	

Discussions are lively and help develop crucial skills for desistance and rehabilitation: empathy, critical reflection and connectedness - within the group, with family, and with the wider culture of books and readers outside.

'What do I enjoy about the reading group? The social experience of being able to talk to other people and have a joint conversation point. Often conversations happen about the book outside of the reading group. The debate allows you to clarify your own thoughts'

Member, HMP Bure



'It's good to share enthusiasm for a book and feed off the enthusiasm of others'

Member, HMP Birmingham

A member survey: What do you like about your reading group?

'Constructive - intellectually stimulating'

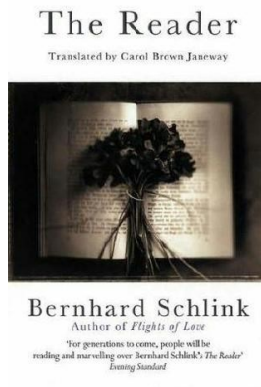
'Meeting different people'

'Talking about same subject, different views'

'Relieve from what is going on around you - a muppet-free zone!'

Feedback

Regular feedback offers vivid snapshots of the groups in action and the benefits they offer. In 2015 we created a new Group Blogs section of the website to showcase this.



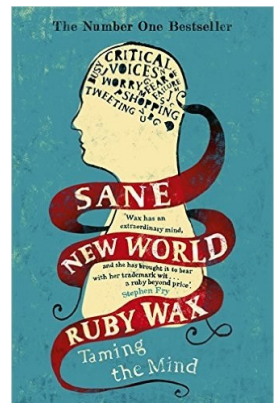
On Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*: 'Our best meeting yet. Full and insightful discussion about so many aspects of this short but multi-layered book. Everyone enjoyed the novel and it was surprising that there were so many opinions and strands to the discussions - everything from relationships, guilt, power, politics and of course the ability to read and what being illiterate can do to a person, especially in prison'

Reader in residence, HMP Warren Hill

On Ruby Wax, *Sane New World*: 'A well-attended and lively session, with the group venturing into new non-fiction territory. Members were encouraged by the idea of 'neuroplasticity'. This really resonated with the men - why did they do the stupidest things in the heat of the moment? One prisoner afterwards said he had to find out more about this aspect of the brain:

"It might just save my life"

Volunteer, HMP Thameside



For more examples of Group Blogs see Appendix One.

Prisoner mentors

Some groups include prisoner mentors who provide support for less confident readers and gain valuable volunteering experience.

'We encourage members to read, we improve their comprehension of what they are reading. Shared reading improves their confidence, this links directly to having more friends as they are better able to communicate. Officers give feedback to the mentors to say that foreign nationals have better communication skills. Responses to books are both positive and negative and this is good as it generates debate'

Reading group mentor at HMP Bure

Librarians and volunteers

'A great deal of our pleasure, enthusiasm and anticipation is due to the judgement and hard work of our librarian. She is also a very skilled ringmaster during our discussions'

Member, HMP Birmingham

Each group is organised by a member of prison staff, usually the librarian, and where possible meetings are facilitated by a volunteer from outside. Logistics can be a challenge. Librarians may need to juggle staff schedules to accommodate the group and it is time-consuming to ensure that members are notified, unlocked and escorted. Groups may start at 8.00 am and volunteers may arrive to discover they are not on the visitors' list at the gate or that the prison is in lockdown. Security clearance can be very slow and it may be weeks or months before a volunteer is able to come regularly.

But PRG librarians and volunteers have plenty of grit and persistence and they make groups happen. They are also very vocal about both the benefits for members and their own sense of satisfaction as facilitators.

'We meet once a month in the library and it feels like we could be a book group in any other public library—we talk about the book, discuss issues arising from it, we normally argue a bit, laugh and try to listen to each other. It is undoubtedly the best part of my job and when I am involved I come away from the group thinking, "Wow, I get paid to do that!"'

Ruth Packwood, Librarian at HMP Wymott



'I started hosting the prison reading group about a year ago. Neil the librarian has made the library the place to be. Perhaps most rewarding is seeing shy prisoners emerge from their shells to talk with passion and understanding about books which have provoked strong reactions in them. It's a great feeling and I usually leave the prison gates on a 'high', hoping that literature has been a high for the guys too'

Maggie Gallagher, Volunteer at HMP Thameside

'Reader, I am smitten! We all loved it!'

A volunteer at HMP High Down, on reading *Jane Eyre* with her group

Author visits

Author visits are a highlight, helping members connect with a wider culture and take pride in themselves as readers. In 2015 groups enjoyed visits from a number of writers including Val McDermid, Ned Beaman, Cathy Rentzenbrink, Stephen Kelman, Dreda Say Mitchell and Russ Litten.



Dreda Say Mitchell with volunteer Graham Coster in a reading group at HMP Thameside

PRG Prisons in 2015

Ongoing

Albany (2 groups)	Leicester
Bullingdon	Lewes
Bure (2 groups)	Pentonville
Eastwood Park	Send
Erlestoke	Springhill
Full Sutton	Stoke Heath
Grendon (5 groups)	Thameside (2 groups)
High Down (2 groups)	Wandsworth (2 groups)
Highpoint (2 groups)	Warren Hill
Holloway	Wymott (2 groups)
Humber	

New in 2015

Birmingham	Isis
Bristol	Kirkham (2 groups)
Coldingley	Parc
East Sutton Park	Wormwood Scrubs
Hewell	

Family Days

In 2015 PRG initiated a new project to support Family Days in prisons. Research confirms that regular contact with families reduces re-offending. It is also a crucial factor in maintaining the emotional wellbeing of prisoners' children.

With generous sponsorship from the Siobhan Dowd Trust and Give a Book, PRG provided specially chosen books and book bags for 478 children visiting a parent across twelve prisons nationwide. The book bag also contained a delightful Phoenix comic donated by the publishers.



The project created a volunteer team of current and former postgraduate students from the University of Roehampton's National Centre for Research into Children's Literature (NCRCL). The team worked together to create a database of books and to liaise with the individual prisons. Where possible they also volunteered on the day to support the prison Family Day staff and to encourage family reading.

Feedback was very positive. The children's comments tended to be brief but enthusiastic:

I Love Jacqueline Wilson
Tracy Beaker is my fave programme and
BOOK.

Prisoners were delighted to have time and space to read with their children and parents saw the books as a lasting reminder of a memorable day.

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

We love it, read them at home for my kids
Brings back good memories we spent with dad.
Thank you

It was lovely for my son to share a book with his Daddy
First time they have been able to do this.

Staff provided detailed and very supportive feedback. The writer in residence at a men's maximum security prison highlighted the benefits of the book as a gift from parent to child.

'One boy approached me to tell me his dad had given him a book and he showed it to me, told me how great the book looked and asked if there was something he could give his dad in return'

The volunteers brought expertise and enthusiasm to the project and their support was invaluable. Their feedback confirmed the pleasure and satisfaction they got from being involved.

'I love combining my love and knowledge of books with doing something that feels worthwhile... So if you are asking if volunteers get anything out of it, for me the answer is a resounding YES!'

A full report on the project is available on the website. We will run Family Days again in 2016 and hope to secure funding to expand it to more prisons in 2017.



Family Days at HMP Wandsworth

PRG was awarded a grant from the Wandsworth Borough Grant Fund to support five further Family Days at HMP Wandsworth in 2015-16. We already support two reading groups at the prison and this will enable us to build a closer partnership and develop new initiatives.



Sponsors and Partnerships

Give a Book

Give a Book's sponsorship of PRG is invaluable and our partnership has become ever closer. Give a Book not only support our reading groups but in 2015 also provided more than 500 book bags, notebooks and pencils for our Family Days project. They have shared with us their knowledge and expertise on everything from book plates to website design and funding applications and we are delighted to be working with them.



Penguin Random House

In 2015 Penguin Random House generously increased its sponsorship so that ten of our groups are now able to choose a paperback title from across the Penguin Random House list every month. The publishers also donated thirty sets of their Little Black Classics collection. Groups loved the chance to sample challenging classic texts and the books were eagerly read and swapped on the wings:

*Absolutely wonderful collection - I wanted to take them all!
Absolute dummies in an abridged form to really whet the appetite*

Comments from a member at HMP Kirkham

'Everyone commented on the format: 'difficult authors but the format makes them look manageable', 'it makes me want to give them a go'; The Communist Manifesto was a hot favourite which several said they had heard of and were curious to read'

Volunteer at HMP Wandsworth



Penguin
Random House
UK

'Our meeting ended with the members present looking through the box, commenting on the Little Black Classics' titles and choosing two or three each. One member couldn't tear herself away: 'Can I have one last blind lucky pick?' Of course! Interestingly, it was the classical authors who attracted and intrigued most. 'Yeah, I'll have a try at this, why not' - Homer. The lucky dip turned out to be Emily Bronte, and as the dipper left the room she was already reading'

Volunteer at HMP Send

Booker Prize Foundation

PRG is very pleased to report generous new funding for the set up and support of ten new reading groups over the next three years. The Booker Prize Foundation is also helping to fund PRG's 2016 Reading in Prison event and we are delighted that Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Chair of Trustees for the Foundation, will be one of the guest speakers.



Methuen plays

After a visit to one of our groups by a senior commissioning editor at Bloomsbury, the publishers generously offered free sets of Methuen modern drama titles. Twelve groups responded and they were sent copies of a play of their choice and in some cases enjoyed a visit from the playwright as well. The project has carried over into 2016 and groups are still reporting. Feedback shows not only how the initiative opened up a new genre but also how the experience brought groups together:

'Book Group One are the high ability group and some of them helped members of Book Group Three who are emergent readers to read and understand the play on the wings'

Librarian at HMP Bure

'I tried reading it to myself and hated it, then when you suggested I read it out loud with someone else, I got it'

Member at HMP Bure

4. Did the group enjoy the experience of reading a play? If you captured any specific comments do include them here.

Very much so. Our Book Club attendance has increased due to the popularity of the play.

Comments "I have never felt so confident" "Joining Book Club is the best thing I have done in prison"

Feedback from the librarian at HMP Stoke Heath

PRG is very grateful to Bloomsbury and we hope the initiative will continue.



Profile Books

We are grateful for Profile's support in 2014 and very pleased that it will be renewed in 2016.



Drapers' Charitable Fund

A generous grant from the Drapers' Charitable Fund will help support PRG's groups in Greater London.



Books Unlocked

PRG worked with the National Literacy Trust in 2015 to deliver Books Unlocked, its partnership project with the Booker Prize Foundation. The project provides sets of Man Booker-shortlisted titles to interested prison reading groups. PRG members responded and wrote enthusiastically about their groups and the experience of reading a book with a prestigious reputation. For many of them it helped cement the sense of being a reader and sharing in the culture of books and reading outside prison.

It is always good to hear the opinion of others. Individuals may well find alternative points of focus. It is also good to share the enthusiasm for a book and to feed off the enthusiasm of others.

Taking part has probably increased my confidence in speaking in a group and has made me less scared to air opinions or sometimes knowledge. I certainly will read a book more carefully and mark certain sentences or passages that I think should be raised to support my opinion whether negative or positive.

Feedback from group members at HMP Birmingham

'What do you enjoy about being in a reading group? We had lots of comments on this. One man said that he hadn't thought that such a thing would exist in a prison. Another hadn't come before and said he was "surprised how good it was". All agreed that it didn't seem like prison but just like being "normal people" sitting down together.'
Librarian at HMP Erlestoke on member views of the pleasures of their reading group



PRG groups were also involved with World Book Night and the London CityRead project in 2015 and enjoyed the titles provided. We are taking part in both initiatives in 2016 and look forward to the books and related author visits.

Advocacy

PRG is a founder member of the Prisoner Learning Alliance, formed in 2012 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'. PRG works actively as part of the Alliance.

In May 2015 Michael Gove became the new Justice Secretary and brought with him a welcome emphasis on rehabilitation. He delivered his first major speech on proposed reforms as a guest of the Prisoner Learning Alliance in July and his words were heartening:

Human beings whose lives have been reckoned so far in costs - to society, to the criminal justice system, to victims and to themselves - can become assets - citizens who can contribute and demonstrate the human capacity for redemption.

Mr Gove spoke of 'liberating prisoners through learning' and commissioned Dame Sally Coates to conduct a review into prison education. The Prisoner Learning Alliance submitted evidence and recommendations including greater Governor autonomy and responsibility, more emphasis on purposive activity, and support for informal learning. Thirty-one of the thirty-eight recommendations we made feature in the report.

The Alliance has also been working hard to produce a theory of change that explores the value of learning in prison, how to promote it and how to support prisoners as learners. The finalised document, *What is education for?: a theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison*, will be given an early launch at PRG's Reading in Prison day on June 17th 2016.

PRG was one of six national organisations invited by prisons minister Andrew Selous to a roundtable discussion at Westminster where we discussed ways to improve prisoner literacy and reading engagement.



Consultancy and Outreach

PRG is part of the advisory group for the Reading Agency's Reading Outcomes Framework project. Due to be published in 2016, the framework will help literacy organisations evaluate reading for pleasure initiatives more effectively.

PRG was also invited to work with Weston College on a project funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Get Reading and See Potential (GRASP) aims to improve prisoner literacy through an integrated strategy involving both formal education provision and the informal initiatives of organisations like PRG.



In July PRG gave a talk about our work at the Governor's seminar at HMP Grendon. We also provided feedback for the Clinks project on volunteering in prisons and we look forward to the report and recommendations, due to be published in July 2016.

International connections

In 2013 Carol Finlay contacted us from Canada for advice on how to set up a prison reading group. Book Clubs for Inmates now supports twenty-six groups in fifteen prisons across seven Canadian provinces. We are delighted that Carol will be speaking at our Reading in Prison day in June 2016. We were also contacted for advice on prison reading projects by the Universidad Catolica in Santiago, Chile and a restorative justice initiative in Western Australia.

PRG in the media

Reading Group Roundup is PRG's regular column in Inside Time, the only national newspaper for prisoners and distributed free to every prison in the country. Every month one of our groups reports on a recent meeting and what members thought of the book they chose. See Appendix Three for sample columns. PRG appeared on Radio 4's Open Book in October and we featured in articles in the Financial Times and more recently in the Guardian.

Plans and Projects for 2016

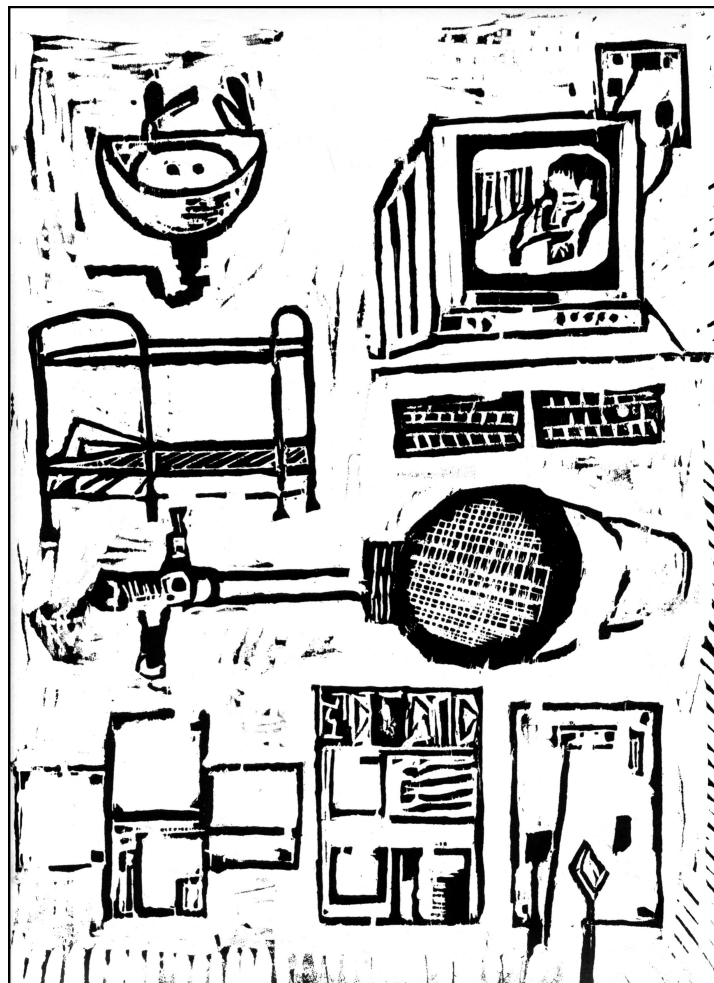
The year ahead

PRG will continue its core work of supporting reading groups in prisons throughout the country. Our new funding from the Booker Prize Foundation will enable us to set up ten new groups and we look forward to recruiting new prisons and volunteers.

In partnership with Give a Book, we aim to support Family Days in up to twelve prisons and to secure funding to expand the project in 2017.

We are in discussion with the Thames Valley Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) about the possibility of new groups in probation settings.

Our Reading in Prison event is scheduled for June 2016. It will be a chance for PRG librarians, volunteers and former members to come together with prison educators, policy makers and voluntary sector organisations to celebrate reading in prison and explore how we can best encourage every prisoner to become a reader.



Appendix One: Group Blogs

December 2015

An emergent readers group where the volunteer's warmth and careful choice of material make their sessions safe and rewarding:



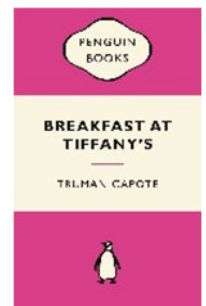
'D was rather quiet - he said he had a lot on his mind lately and had been lying in his cell just 'thinking'. Although he didn't contribute so much during our session, he did seem to perk up towards the end... especially when I read a **Benjamin Zephaniah** poem and he said it sound-

ed like I was trying to rap, clearly hilarious for all concerned.'

Then a little question - 'is laughter the best medicine?' - resulted in some interesting debate about friendly and unfriendly laughter. D was becoming a bit more involved by this point and said it was easier in prison than outside, as you didn't know how people were going to behave on the outside whereas in [his therapeutic prison] it is more structured. A said that you had to be responsible for your own behaviour and be 'a big man' and walk away if people try to wind you up.'

A more experienced group at another prison chose **Breakfast at Tiffany's**:

'Eleven men came though quite a few were new so hadn't a chance to read it. Some wondered what to make of such an elliptical story where so much of the point is what you don't know about Holly Golightly. But at least one member responded to Capote's wit. He picked out the line where Holly says of some prostitutes she knows, "They have the clap-your-hands so often it's almost become applause"!



As we talked the group became more intrigued, and several who hadn't quite finished it said, 'Don't tell us what happens!' The best bit of all was one quiet young guy on his first afternoon at the reading group who had only just been given the book. When we all stood up to leave, he said to everyone, 'I've never read a book before. But now I'm going to read this one.'

October 2015



'Two of the group found Antonio Tabucchi's **Pereira Maintains** fascinating on all sorts of levels - as a study in good versus evil, a very clever historical novel, with beautifully drawn characters and moral dilemmas to explore.

Others found it frustrating and difficult to finish even though the book is quite short. An interesting and very marked divergence of view. The discussion was once again very lively and wide ranging. All are very at ease in each other's company now and everyone contributes enthusiastically and listens attentively. This was particularly pleasing since there had been a break of a few months and seeing everyone come back enthusiastically supporting the group again was excellent news.'

'We continued with Michael Morpurgo's **Shadow**, picking up where we'd left off several weeks ago. T managed to recap on the story very well. He'd remembered a lot and read well. A began well but was shaky on his punctuation and started to read like a robot, without pauses. We stopped for a chat about punctuation, putting examples on the flip chart. 'Half a breath for a comma, and whole breath for a full stop.' His reading was transformed, and he was touchingly excited that it made so much more sense.'



Anthony Burgess, **A Clockwork Orange**

'The group launched straight in with comments about the language. Most found it frustrating to work out what was being said (several had missed the glossary at the end of the story) but after discussion better understood why Burgess had used a teenage lingo. The classical music intrigued them and they felt the power of Beethoven's 9th could match someone's mood after committing violence. Not everyone had read the book but most had seen the film which helped them participate in the discussion. There was a lot of discussion around whether films ever matched the power of a book. I described the context of the book published in 1962 about drugs and violence and asked the men what they thought would or could shock us now? They said child molestation was one thing and some items on the news, e.g. the burning alive of a Jordanian by ISIS. They also acknowledged that we have become desensitised but that injustices, government cover-ups etc did upset us and they quoted whistle blowers like Edward Snowden as people who are important.

To end the session I had brought a poem about autumn, 'Summer for an Instant' by George Orwell. This prompted one member to recite 'Silver' by Walter de la Mare and they all listened. This was quite a magical moment!'

Appendix Two: PRG Voices

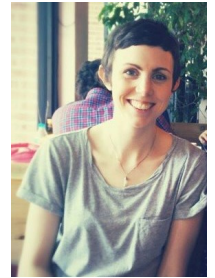


'2015 has been a great year for our reading group The ladies love being given a book of their own when they take part, and they have really stretched themselves on many occasions. It has been a fantastic experience for many of the members. The reading group has been the highlight of my job this year'

Victoria Barnett, Librarian at East Sutton Park

'It is something very different for the guys to do and it encourages all of us to read things we might not have otherwise read and a chance to get together and chat about books. Some of our best discussions have been on books no-one really liked but everyone had an opinion about!'

Sinead Moriarty, Volunteer at HMP Isis



'Considered low literacy and vulnerable, the men in my group make startling observations about what we read together, and equally startling reflections on their own lives and experiences. They love the camaraderie of the group, the stories (less so the poems!) that take them to a different world (hopefully). I love every minute, despite not ever knowing quite where a discussion will lead'

Kate Buchanan, Volunteer at HMP Grendon

'We've been running our reading group at HMP Isis since November last year, and it has been a brilliant experience so far. We have an engaged bunch of keen readers in the group, and new members joining all the time. One of the most rewarding aspects is introducing the guys to writers or genres they wouldn't normally pick out - for example, we read one of Raymond Carver's short stories together, and all admitted they wouldn't have gravitated towards a short story collection before. We've been really well supported by the excellent prison librarians and look forward to every month!'

Sarah Pyke, Volunteer at HMP Isis



Appendix Three



HMP Thameside enjoyed a recent visit from author Cathy Rentzenbrink when she came to discuss her new book, *The Last Act of Love*. The report comes from PRG volunteer Maggie Gallagher, and one of the reading group members



Cathy Rentzenbrink (left) and PRG volunteer Maggie Gallagher

Making the decision to turn off a beloved brother's life support system after eight years of keeping him alive through 'clinically assisted nutrition and hydration' or, in plain language, tube-feeding, is fortunately not one that falls to many people.

However, it is also a rare person that is able to write down the story of that decision, including the circumstances leading up to it and its aftermath, with the clarity, humanity, courage and wit of Cathy Rentzenbrink who recently visited HMP Thameside to discuss her just-published account of those events.

The eagerly anticipated visit was a huge success with a well-attended book club session, most of the participants having finished or almost finished the book and being happy to engage with Ms Rentzenbrink in spirited discussions about life, death and everything in between. One of the book club members was inspired to contribute the following review.

The Last Act of Love

Book Club sessions at HMP Thameside Library are frequently visited by distinguished authors willing to share their passion for literature and discuss their own work. Thanks to Neil's (Library Lead) efforts in reaching out to potential guests, we've had a rare and exclusive opportunity to talk to celebrity calibre personalities such as Andy McNab and Russell Brand. During our last session Thameside Library had the pleasure to host our perhaps most special guest to date - Cathy Rentzenbrink - who recently released her first and very special book - 'The Last Act of Love'.

Since Book Club members receive free copies of the books before they are discussed, everyone had an opportunity to read Cathy's memoir and prepare questions and comments for the author. It was a lovely hardback copy: beautifully designed, printed on high quality paper which made reading it all the more

pleasurable. During the session, each member spoke in turn, expressing his opinion about 'The Last Act of Love' and praising Cathy for the accomplishment of publishing such a successful and moving first book. Next, Cathy talked to us about the struggles of writing such an emotional book and the role it played in the healing process of dealing with the grief and guilt in losing her brother. We talked about the beauty of damaged people, something prisoners could easily relate to, and the Japanese art of fixing broken china in a way which exposes and embraces the damage.

Our lovely morning session concluded with a book-signing (for which Cathy used the trademark purple fountain pen) and photo-taking. It was a remarkable experience, one that HMP Thameside was privileged to have facilitated.

Maggie adds: 'The group also enjoyed the author's descriptions of how she creates characters (she is currently writing a work of fiction) and about the use of creative writing as therapy - something to which many in the group related.'

The next book for our group is Rose Tremain's 2008 novel, 'The Road Home', about an east European immigrant's struggles on arrival in Britain.'

The Thameside groups are part of the Prison Reading Groups (PRG) network, sponsored by the University of Roehampton and generously supported by charities including Give A Book www.giveabook.org.uk

If your prison doesn't have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at the PRG website www.roehampton.ac.uk/prison-reading-groups

PRG also worked with National Prison Radio to set up their book club. If you have access to NPR, listen out for details and ways to take part.

I'm here to visit the prison's weekly book club... led by Maggie, who is a volunteer with Prison Reading Groups...

We are still in full flow when the prison guard asks us to wrap up; the hour has passed in a flash. Errol insists on saying one last thing before we go.

"I've made a connection with books and people," he says. "Oftentimes I pick up a book and think 'oh, this is a waste of time, I really can't be bothered with it'. Only it very rarely is. Thanks to the clubs, I always persevere with books, and I'm so pleased when I get to the end of them.

"But it's the same thing I've got to start doing with people," he continues. "You have to stick with them and then you might really like them. I think I need to start giving people more of a chance, I need to read a few more of their chapters." I leave HMP Thameside feeling that nowhere has the connection between books and people felt so strong as it does in their library.'

Emily Rhodes, 'Inside stories from a prison book group',

Guardian, Wednesday, April 27, 2016

