Reading Together:
the Role of the Reading Group Inside Prison

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Reading groups are a small prison success story. Between us we have sixteen years’ experience of facilitating reading groups in prisons; we are currently running five in three different prisons. In 2007 we conducted a survey of all prison reading groups in the UK, in order to assess their constituency, and reflect upon their value. The survey was publicised through the Prison Libraries Journal; the responses revealed a thriving world, rich in both current benefit and future potential. On this evidence, reading a book together and talking about it can be a powerful resource.

The Prison Reading Group Survey

We designed two questionnaires: one for group members and one for facilitators.1 Seven male groups and one female group responded, with sizes ranging between five and fourteen members. Six groups meet monthly, two meet weekly. Most meet in the evenings during association time; two meet in the day as part of the education provision.

These groups are between one and nine years old. We also heard from a couple more about to start, so this is an expanding field. They all have a leader or a facilitator, and sometimes a prisoner member acts as ‘secretary’. The prison librarian is the all-important gateway. Professional librarians been involved in running prison libraries only since 1986, and some see running a group as a plank in their Reader Development strategy. A volunteer sometimes helps out, either an outsider or perhaps the prison chaplain.

The longest any member has attended a group is five years. Forty-nine percent have been coming for less than six months, and sixteen percent for between six months and a year. But thirty-five percent have been in their groups for over a year, an impressive figure given the transient nature of prison populations. We asked if members had belonged to a library outside prison, and between eighty and a hundred percent of every group said they had: they were probably enrolled as children. But not all are habitual readers. One member said she had only read five books in her life before being persuaded to come by her friend. In terms of age of group members, a YOI group was comprised of seventeen and eighteen year olds; the other groups ranged from early twenties to late sixties, with the majority in the thirty-five plus bracket.

Prison groups recruit members much as reading groups outside do, primarily via word of mouth. Notices in the library and author events raise the profile of the group; librarians talk to prisoners they think might be interested, and for some groups, where room size limits the numbers, there are waiting lists to join. They also operate like outside groups by all reading the same book before the meeting. But, as with outside groups, there is always room for variation. In one group, members bring along what they have been reading to talk about. The YOI teenagers spend their weekly session reading aloud to each other. The leader of this group sees this as ‘providing a platform for the young people to discuss current events that may be concerning them, for example the London shootings. It gives them the chance to think about issues in a different way.’

Choice

How do prison reading groups choose what to read? It is always for the members themselves: this is a major aspect of the whole experience, and can take quite a time. The librarian or facilitator often brings in magazines, reviews and single copies. Some librarians produce short lists, sometimes of library sets, or perhaps of Richard and Judy selections. The weekly group relies on inventive input from the librarian. She has topics ready for discussion — ‘Who reads graphic novels’, ‘What makes a biography interesting’, ‘Has a book ever changed your life’ — and a selection of books on the table, for guessing what they have in common. Recently these were the rejects from a weeding exercise of library books not taken out in the last three years. ‘Most of them were enthusiastically read and given a new lease of life.’

1. These surveys were based on the design of our previous survey of UK reading groups; see Jenny Hartley, Reading Groups, OUP, 2001.
We asked whether groups read mainly fiction or non-fiction. All except one said fiction and the exception reads equal amounts of both. The responses make it clear that some of the men in these groups do not usually read or think they enjoy fiction, and are now reading it for the first time. When one prisoner told his son he was reading fiction, ‘What! You reading books?’ was the incredulous reply. Topping the list of books going well in the groups was a novel: Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveller’s Wife*. As one librarian said, ‘despite me telling the guys it was a love story.’ The novel, which portrays a man waiting faithfully for his beloved, had struck a real chord with male readers, as a range of comments revealed: ‘fantastic book, wonderful, very emotional’.

Below are the lists of books read recently in the groups surveyed. Comparison with the top loans from prison libraries shows how reading groups can encourage more adventurous choices.

**Talking About Books**

We asked group members whether discussing a book in the group had ever made them change their mind about it. We got a lot of one-word ‘No!’s here. Some responses elaborated further: ‘No, I have my own mind and usually stick to it.’ Some answers which thought they were no were really yes:

No, but you can see a book from a different perspective.

**PRISON READING GROUP CHOICES**

**In men’s reading groups**
- Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveller’s Wife*
- Andrea Levy, *Small Island*
- Alexander Masters, *Stuart, A Life Backwards*
- Mo Hayder, *Tokyo*
- John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*
- Xinran, *The Good Women of China*
- Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self*
- Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*
- James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*
- Alex Wheatle, *Brixton Rock*
- Alan Bennett, *Four Stories*

**In the women’s group**
- *The Time Traveller’s Wife*
- Niccolo Ammaniti, *I’m Not Scared*
- Alice Hoffman, *The Ice Queen*
- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Kim Edwards, *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*
- Jodi Picoult, *My Sister’s Keeper*
- Joseph O’Connor, *Star of the Sea*
- *The Kite Runner*
- *A Million Little Pieces*
- James Frey, *My Friend Leonard*
- William Boyd, *Restless*

**TOP LOANS FROM PRISON LIBRARIES**

**At a men’s prison**
- Erwin James, *A Life Inside*
- Wensley Clarkson, *Costa del Crime*
- Howard Marks, *The Howard Marks Book of Dope Stories*
- Martina Cole, *Close*
- J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
- Eddie Richardson, *The Last Word*
- Martina Cole, *The Take*

**At a women’s prison**
- Martina Cole, *Ladykiller*
- Martina Cole, *The Take*
- Linda Goodman, *Linda Goodman’s Relationship Signs*
- Carol Anne Davis, *Children Who Kill*
- Edwin Raphael, *The Complete Book of Dreams*
- James Patterson, *Judge and Jury*
- Sandra Gregory, *Forget You had a Daughter*

Occasionally respondents came out firmly:

Yes, it has made me interested and I gain a lot from discussion.

On a David Icke book:

Another reader shot it down in flames and when I consider the reality I had to agree, it all sounded stupid.

Many responses underlined just how important meeting and talking together in these groups can be to their members. One librarian commented: ‘The group has been especially beneficial to one member, a man who has been in prison for twenty-two 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.’

**Reading Groups and Their Role in Prisons**

In the context of poor literacy levels and the absence of employable skills among many prisoners, it is understandable that basic education and training are seen as the priorities. But the arts, too, are recognized as having an important role to play in rehabilitation,
and initiatives range from creative writing and drama to painting and making music.

The model for many of these activities is one of self-expression, often with a therapeutic aim. The activity — painting or writing or composing music — is seen as a way for prisoners to access the depths of their own identity, in order to better understand themselves and perhaps find ways to resolve individual conflicts that may have led to their criminal behaviour.

In the UK the Writers in Prison Network was established in 1992, and has developed over a hundred residencies in prisons. In the United States the Changing Lives Through Literature program (CLTL) was started in 1991, by Professor of English, Robert Waxler and Judge Robert Kane. Kane sentenced eight men to probation rather than prison, ‘with an important stipulation: they had to complete a Modern American literature seminar run by Waxler and held on campus’. According to Waxler, ‘CLTL is based on the idea that literature has the power to transform’. A judge and a probation officer are always participating members, as well as the instructor, who sets the texts for discussion and runs the session as a class, sometimes with written assignments. It is noteworthy that these UK and US initiatives tend either to spotlight creativity (often with a measurable output such as a story or a poem), or they follow pedagogic paradigms. A CLTL course typically runs for twelve weeks and ends with a ritual graduation ceremony.

Interest in such schemes is timely. This spring the PMLA (The Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, the principal US professional association of scholars of language and literature, with a global membership) devoted a special issue to the place of art, drama, poetry and creative writing in prisons. Among a hundred and fifty pages of analysis and testimony, reading features as an empowering activity, but an individual rather than a collective one. The emphasis here, as in CLTL and other initiatives, tends to be on looking inwards, towards a self that is private and set apart from others. Our prison reading groups take a different inflection.

What reading groups offer is a way to combine this exploration of the private self with the outward-facing, social elements of identity. Reading groups allow readers to share experiences of a book, to test out their personal responses against those of other people. They are dynamic encounters where people negotiate and re-think meaning in the process of talking and listening to one another.

For prisoners especially, these are valuable skills, and ones that the prison service itself recognizes as important, in the ‘Enhanced Thinking Skills’ courses. A central part of this course is learning both to respect and to question one’s own and other people’s points of view. And this is exactly what a reading group does. It creates what we might call an inquiring and critical sociability.

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Personal Response and Critical Distance

Personal responses to books remain central to the prison reading group experience. A survey comment about Stuart, A Life Backwards (an account of childhood abuse, disability, drug addiction and homelessness) sums this up with admirable succinctness: ‘Good but close to home.’ What a reading group does is to enable both a sense of recognition and a degree of critical distance and perspective. This occurs often in the groups we are involved with. For example, another group who also read Stuart identified with many of the abuses recounted but went on to talk about whether an individual’s background ever can or should diminish responsibility for his or her actions, including crimes committed. Another group was reading Ugly, Constance Briscoe’s account of her triumph over a miserable childhood. Much of our discussion (recorded for the prison radio station) focused on the men’s identification with Briscoe’s account of poverty and parental harshness:

I didn’t want to read it for the first 50 pages because it was just me in 1964 . . . I thought I just don’t want to go here again . . . . But then

2. See www.writersinprisonnetwork.org
4. The CLTL model has been used and modified in a UK prison, by Writer in Residence Mary Stephenson in 2000; see Trounstine and Waxler, pp 127-29.
I just wanted her to pull through, no matter what . . . I was angry and upset, you know, till she came through.

However, the men also wanted to analyse the narrative tone of the book, the sense of Briscoe's ongoing anger despite her escape and later success as a barrister and one of the first black women judges in Britain. As one group member said:

She doesn't let us know anything about the personality of her mother, her father, her sisters. They're just on the absolute periphery. The central issue is just her abuse . . . It's not resolved . . . It's cold, it's angry . . . She's getting her own back. She hasn't fleshed out a single one of the characters in that book, even herself. She's a crash-test dummy.

The ensuing discussion used this tension between identification and critical distance to explore not only Constance Briscoe's experiences but their own as well. These are not therapy groups, but in talking about a book, a reader may find a new way to talk about his or her own history.

**Group Discourse**

Discussion is the core of the reading group experience. Some groups start by going round the circle for a brief comment, to kick-start discussion and ensure that everyone's voice is heard at least once. But these are not groups not classes, so the format is to be set by the group itself. There may be a few agreed ground rules, such as 'no interrupting'. Members sometimes comment on the difference between this sort of book-talk and therapy groups, but in talking

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In this forum the 'non-communicative demeanour' observed as characterizing prison behaviour can be discarded. Members learn how to present and argue their points of view, how to listen and respond to the views of others, and how to persuade others to vote for their choice of book. Ongoing research at the Open University's Centre for Language and Communication highlights the frequency of 'Yeah but' moments in reading group talk: moments when members are comfortable in disagreeing with each other. In our observation, learning how to express and manage disagreement is one of the valuable but invisible skills provided by belonging to a prison reading group.

Understood in these ways, reading groups offer a model of the 'community activities' which forensic psychology consultant Jane Ireland advocates in order to promote 'pro-social community-focussed behaviours' and minimize bullying in prisons. They effectively rise to the challenges of 'Reinventing Prisons' articulated in Hans Toch's strategies, such as organizing programmes around face-to-face inmate communities, and involving civilians and outsiders. They can be seen to provide the opportunities which the 2005 Department of Education and Skills Green Paper advocated for 'purposeful activity, for self-improvement and connection to the world beyond the prison walls.' Further, the governors interviewed by Shane Bryans who 'emphasized the need to provide a constructive, purposeful and balanced regime if prisons were to be more than just 'human warehouses' were looking towards exactly what reading groups can do so well, in providing a 'regime which, as far as it can . . . will be varied, interesting, constructive.'

To turn from the general to the specific: some of these benefits were observable in a recent discussion of *Schindler's Ark*, Thomas Keneally's account of the German industrialist's rescue of his Jewish factory workers during the Second World War. Everyone was gripped by it, and by the questions about motive it

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raised: why do people act as they do, from the inhumanity of the Nazis to the heroism of Oskar Schindler? Equally significant were the dynamics of the group itself. When one man broke down as he spoke, he was comforted by those around him while someone else tactfully took up the conversational thread. The group also contained a young man whose behaviour was often unsettled and disruptive. This time, however, he patiently waited his turn, declared the book was ‘brilliant’, and then offered a thoughtful and detailed reading of Schindler’s motives — ‘It went from a game to a passion with him’. Most extraordinary of all was his desire to find out what others had thought about the book. He listened attentively to everyone else and took part in the general discussion with both enthusiasm and sensitivity.

The Ripple Effect

The benefits of talking about books can extend well beyond the group itself. Members often pass the books to other prisoners on their wing, or to visiting family and friends. Several members sent their copies of Philip Pullman’s Northern Lights to their children after the group meeting; they planned to talk with them about it, either at a visit or by letter. Another member sends his reading group books to the 70-year old Quaker correspondent he has never met but with whom he carries on a lively literary debate in writing. A member of a women’s group recruited her mother as a virtual member via phone conversations in the week before the meeting.

Graphic evidence of the ‘family ripple’ of the reading group came when one of us was hailed on the street by a released prisoner. He was keen to tell the story of his partner’s adolescent son and the boy’s fascination with fire. The man was proud that he had been able to persuade the boy to read one of the books he had remembered from his prison reading group: Benjamin Zephaniah’s Face, a young adult novel about a boy badly disfigured in an accident. Our ex-member was convinced that reading it had helped his stepson to understand the dangers of his fire-raising.

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Community with Strangers

Our survey highlights the importance of the choice process. This is about more than just a sense of control.

An important first step towards rehabilitation is fostering a sense of having a stake in society, of feeling ‘community with strangers’. For prisoners, the chance to read and talk about the books being promoted by Richard and Judy, or Oprah, or books their friends or family know about, can lead to a real sense of connection with the world outside.

This was brought home for us by an experience with Marina Lewycka’s A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian. The day one of our men’s groups was due to discuss it, an article by Lewycka appeared in The Guardian, describing her visit to the winners of the 2006 Penguin Orange readers’ group prize.

On the face of it, the article suggested a study in contrasts. The group Lewycka visited is all-women, living and meeting in an idyllic rural setting. There seemed little prospect of connection. What happened was surprising. The prison group was fascinated by the article and wanted to know what the women had thought about the book. Had they felt sorry for Pappa or thought he got what he deserved? Did they like Valentina or think she was a gold digger? Did they think the grown-up daughters had the right to treat their father as they did? Our men were so curious about the other group’s response that we wrote to them. We had an enthusiastic response and the two groups now exchange taped recordings of their meetings.

There is also a community of strangers on the page, to meet and respond to. Fiction — the genre which male readers tend to sidle away from — bears big dividends here. ‘It’s made me realize there’s someone else in the room,’ said a member of a men’s group; ‘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.’ ‘I so wished I could have taken notes’, commented the distinguished novelist who was a guest at the meeting.

Author Visits

Author visits help connect prisoners with a wider culture outside, and are always popular. Writers have come via PEN (the international fellowship of writers), and through initiatives by prison librarians and group facilitators. Boris Johnson took part in a discussion of
his book, *The Dream of Rome*, a comparative account of the Roman Empire and the modern European Union. The group had already read the book and written to Johnson about it before his visit. The enthusiasm of the letter below was shared by almost everyone:

Dear Boris Johnson,

I would first like to say thank you for opening a door that I slammed and kept wedged shut since my boring history lessons at school! I found myself thinking, ‘I don’t want to read this, it’s history.’ Then, after 30-40 pages, feeling guilty for enjoying what was my worst subject at school!

If you are anything like me, you would probably benefit from constructive criticism:

I realise that a lot of upper class people are familiar with Latin but I am not and would have appreciated translations for every word or phrase used. Maybe this was your ulterior motive because now I am not only looking for more books written by you, and [more books] on Roman history, but I have also been looking for a Latin dictionary!

During the visit, the group enjoyed quizzing Johnson, not only about his book, but also about his campaign to become Mayor of London. Later, one of the members wrote it up for the prison magazine under the headline ‘Con MP visits cons at HMP’.

The Way Forward

It is our belief that reading groups have an important part to play in prisons. Our aim is to help grow the provision of groups throughout prisons in the UK, by building and supporting a network of facilitators, and by providing free books as an incentive in order to get groups going. Facilitating a reading group is something which many volunteers would find enjoyable and fruitful; doing it in pairs can work well. Information for potential facilitators can be found on our website.11

Future Developments

We asked group leaders what they might like to develop in the future. Suggestions included: more author visits, more volunteers to help, and the chance to experiment with groups for emergent readers. A small amount of funding would also be useful.

Groups have received funding in the past from a range of charities such as Paul Hamlyn, the Rowntree Foundation, the Millennium Commission and from local education authorities. Our groups have also received support from Roehampton University. Some groups use library book stock, but in our experience being able to give a prisoner a new paperback is a big incentive. Further, these books can then be passed round the prison and sent on to friends and family, creating a network of discussion. Bringing in magazines and single books helps prisoners pick the next read. If provision is to be expanded, more substantial funding will be needed, both for books and to recruit and train volunteers. We are currently exploring possible sources. Recognition from the Prison Service of the work that goes on in reading groups throughout the prison establishment.12

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11. Our website: www.prisonreadinggroups.org Anyone who would like to visit a reading group, with a view to becoming a volunteer facilitator, should contact us via the website.

12. Prison librarians are the key to successful reading groups. Without them the groups could not happen. We would like to thank the groups who participated in this survey, and the librarians from HMPS Bullingdon, High Down, Hull, Send, Wandsworth and The Verne, and HMYOI Huntercombe. We are also grateful to Sue Wilkinson, editor of the *Prison Libraries Journal*.