



# An Evaluation of a Pilot Study of a Literature-Based Intervention with Women in Prison

Short Report

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# INTRODUCTION

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This study investigated whether 'Get Into Reading', a literature-based intervention, which had been established in other custodial contexts (male prisons and young offenders' institutions, Billington, 2011) and non-custodial mental health settings in the UK (Hodge et al, 2007; Robinson, 2008; Davis, 2009; Dowrick et al, 2012; Billington et al, 2013) transposed to a female prison, HMP Low Newton. The study also considered whether any of the benefits identified in custodial and non-custodial contexts elsewhere were reported by women at Low Newton. The study was conducted through a partnership between researchers from the Centre for Research into Reading, Information and Linguistic Systems (CRILS) at the University of Liverpool, HMP Low Newton, Durham, and The Reader Organisation (TRO), a nationally recognised charity which promotes shared reading as a practical way to improve wellbeing, foster social inclusion and extend reading pleasure. The project was funded by the National Personality Disorder Team (Department of Health) and was approved by the Northern and Yorkshire Research Ethics Committee.

## The Study

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### The Intervention: Get Into Reading (GIR)

The Get Into Reading model is the specific literature-based intervention that was evaluated in the present study. It has been nationally lauded as a positive health and social care intervention and was highlighted in the Department of Health's New Horizons consultation document as a non-pharmacological/medical intervention that can help improve quality of life.

The principal feature of Get into Reading is shared reading: people come together weekly in small informal groups and the short stories, poems and novels are read aloud in the session. During regular breaks in the reading, the group facilitator encourages open-ended discussion where thought and experiences are shared in relation to what is happening in the text itself and what may be happening within the group members as individuals.

A key element of the model is the emphasis on serious 'classic' literature and its role in offering a model of human thinking and feeling, allowing people to connect with the text and each other and come to new levels of understanding about themselves and the world around them.

## Aims

The aims of the project were to:

- Assess whether Get Into Reading, a literature-based intervention, would transfer to the context of a women's prison
- Investigate the efficacy of a literature-based intervention with women in prisons and identify areas for further study
- Contribute to the emerging body of research relating to reading as promoting mental health and wellbeing in women in prisons with high levels of need

## Objectives

The objectives of this research were to:

- Assess whether the Get Into Reading model, which has been established in other custodial and non-custodial settings, transposed to HMP Low Newton
- Explore whether any of the benefits of Get into Reading identified in custodial and non-custodial contexts were reported by women at HMP Low Newton
- Report on the degree to which Get Into Reading represents a sustainable form of intervention in HMP Low Newton, and an intervention that would be of benefit for women in other prisons

## Method

The project established two weekly reading groups, in which participation was voluntary: there were no exclusion criteria. As women entered and left the prison over time, the opportunity to take part in the research study was offered to all women who participated in the Get Into Reading programme at any time during the 12-month data collection period. Data were collected through:

- researcher observation of the reading groups; multiple interviews and focus group discussions with women participants over a 12-month period
- interviews and focus groups with staff working at the prison over a 12-month period
- interviews with the Reader-in-Residence leading the reading groups over a 12-month period
- a review of records kept by the Reader-in-Residence of the reading group sessions

Additional data on the participants' age, literacy levels, admission and release date were made available to the research team by HMP Low Newton.

While it was possible to audio-record interviews with the prison staff, we were unable to record the interviews with the women in prison. Hence our findings are unable directly to represent the views of the women imprisoned at HMP Low Newton.

## Notes on Presentation

In the presentation of quotations from the focus group discussions, participants are denoted as P1, indicating the first speaker in that section, with P2 and P3 as the following speakers. However, these designations are temporary, and so only refer to the specific sections of text. P1 in one extract from Focus Group 1, is not necessarily the same speaker as in a later extract of data from the same group discussion. The Reader-in-Residence will be referred to as 'Reader' throughout this section and the term Prison Staff will be used to refer to all staff working at the prison, including custodial staff, library and learning shop staff, to protect the anonymity of the respondents.





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PARADISE LOST

BOOK V

Into the blissful field, through groves of myrrh,  
And flowering odours, Cassia,nard, and balm,  
A wilderness of sweets, classic, hard, and balmy,  
He victim as in her prime, and played at will  
Will show, full face, pouring forth its more sweet,  
Adam, through the spicy forest onward bliss,  
Of the cool breeze, while from the forest onward come,  
Show down direct his crystal way to set  
Earth's sunset, while from the forest onward come,  
And low, within, show at her hour, inveterate  
The dim, sunny, from the mounted sun  
Heir of grapes, and his drench, of taste, to please  
Haste follow, to whom this, from the milky stream  
And low, within, show at her hour, inveterate  
The dim, sunny, from the mounted sun  
Heir of grapes, and his drench, of taste, to please  
Haste follow, to whom this, from the milky stream  
And low, within, show at her hour, inveterate  
The dim, sunny, from the mounted sun  
Heir of grapes, and his drench, of taste, to please  
Haste follow, to whom this, from the milky stream

# OVERALL FINDINGS

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The self-reports elicited in interviews and focus group discussion, and the evidence of the Reader-in-Residence records, attest to the benefits of the reading group intervention on participants' wellbeing. The study found that there were four significant areas of improved wellbeing:

## Social Wellbeing

Prison staff noted that the reading group tended to attract more solitary and less socially engaged women. It also encouraged greater integration of women on the Personality Disorder wing and those who struggled to find acceptance within the larger prison culture. Within the reading groups, participating women reported experiencing a sense of support and inspiration from the experience, as well as feelings of enjoyment (often visible in humour and laughter), and an increase in personal confidence. This was verified by the evidence of the Reader-in-Residence record which demonstrated strengthened ease with and responsiveness to the literature in the course of the study. It was observed that the shared reading and discussion promoted respect for others' views and tolerance of conflict or disagreement, as well as enhancing social and communication skills and encouraging a form of 'conciliatory assertiveness'. A new pattern of social activity was also seen to emerge from the reading groups, since attendance was not based on personal friendship but on preference for the activity and a sense of reading group membership.

## Emotional/Psychological Wellbeing

The activity of shared reading aloud – of listening and of discussing – resulted in a form of 'disciplined relaxation'. A number of the participating women spoke of the reading group as a form of 'escape', in the sense that personal worries recede. Others described the reading experience as a 'bubble' – an atmosphere of complete mutual absorption and concentration, offering protection both from the distraction of the environment or personal anxiety, and from self-consciousness. A crucial element in the creation of this atmosphere was the relative freedom from formal authority or discipline, in an activity not regulated by prison or therapeutic programmes. Participating women regarded the activity as a form of self-expression unique to the prison, and that regard was verified by the voluntariness of the women's attendance, despite competing appointments, and their commitment without expectation of material reward ('getting something out of it without wanting something from it' as a member of the prison staff put it).

The voluntariness of the activity – including the absence of pressure to contribute, read aloud or discuss, except as chosen by the participant – was clearly key also to the motivation to participate: this is something participants 'do for themselves'. Participants also reported that anticipation of the reading group was an important point of reference – keeping them going during long periods of lock-up, or offering a life-line when they were coping with too much time on their hands. The evidence of the Reader-in-Residence record shows strong mental and emotional engagement on the part of the women participants with the fiction and poetry. There were repeated instances of the literature spontaneously eliciting specific and vivid autobiographical memory or moments of recognition, as well as of the reading activity encouraging a capacity (sometimes demonstrably progressive) for understanding personal and imagined experience from a range of viewpoints. These are possible areas for future investigation of the mechanisms by which shared reading might help produce deep-level and lasting psychological wellbeing.

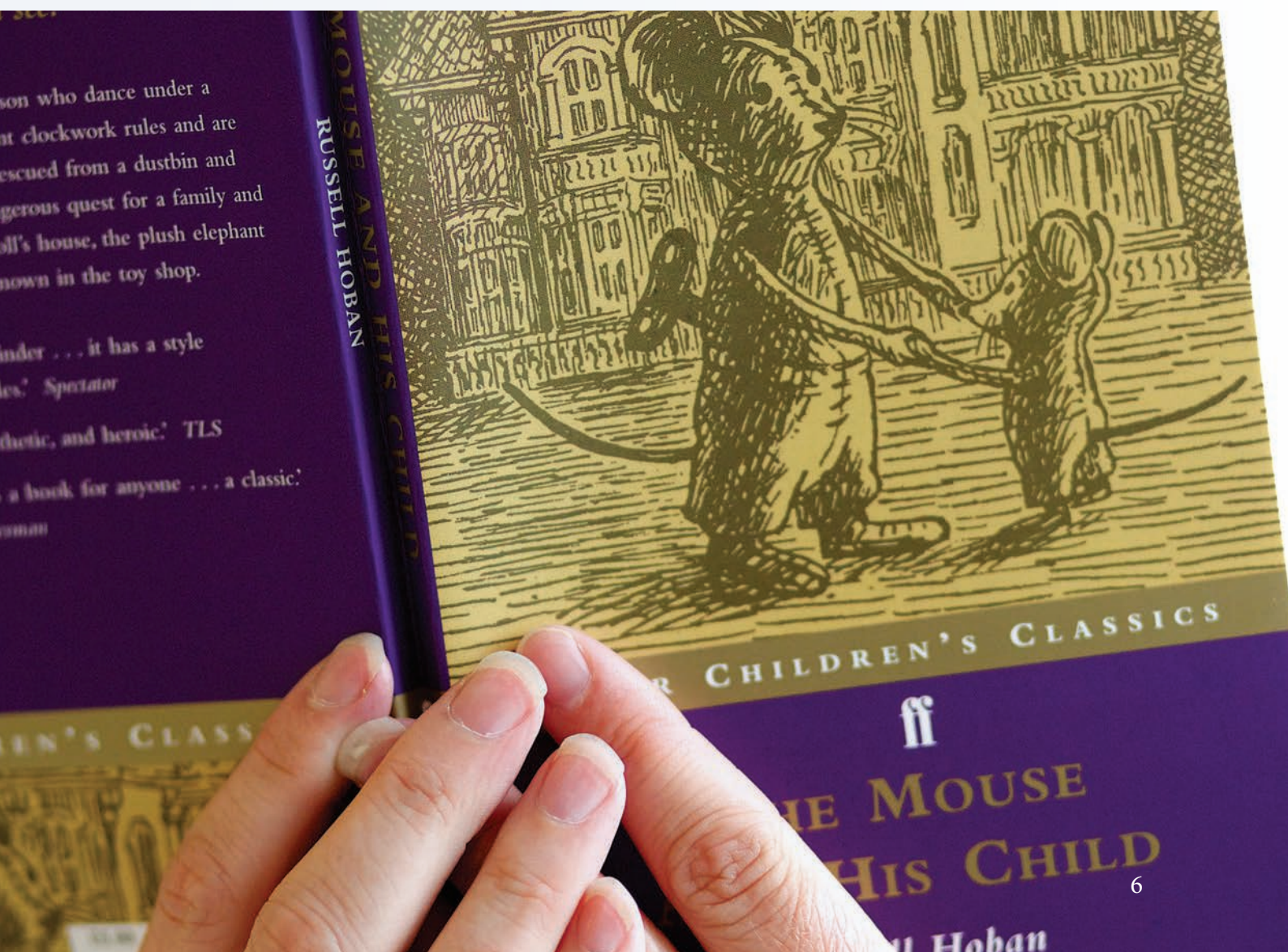


## Educational Wellbeing

The reading group activity attracted women across the range of literacy and educational achievement – high achievers (for whom there is often little provision in prison) as well as low achievers. For some participants reading proved a new form of enjoyment: for others it was a habit pleurably renewed or rediscovered. The comment 'We read books here' was very telling of the level of concentration and attention the reading activity demanded and received. The reading groups were observed by the Library staff to further the prison Library's mission and aims of enhancing the role of reading in participating women's lives. Specifically, the shared reading aloud model helped those who lacked the reading skills for books they were keen to read. More generally, the reading activity extended the scope of women's lives, widening their sense of possibility.

## Organisational Wellbeing

Prison staff noted how participants' responses to the reading group activity – their willingness to tackle 'difficult' books, for instance – challenged some of the staff expectations of prisoners. Staff were particularly appreciative of the voluntariness and motivation of the prisoners in respect of the activity – which freed them from the obligation to 'make prisoners do things'. One important consideration in this context is that the motivation for joining the group was very varied, suggesting that the reading group attracts such commitment from a wide range and meets multiple needs. A further critical element to this motivation and its ancillary effect is the corresponding motivation and commitment of the Reader-in-Residence, who inspired trust and loyalty in the participants and, in his regard for the human material at work in the participants and in the literature, offered a positive model of interpersonal relationship.



# Reader Experience: 'my outcast state'

## Sonnet 29

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When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
(Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

William Shakespeare





One striking feature of the Reader's log was the prevalence of verbalised or otherwise explicit recollection of, or familiarity with, situations, thoughts and feelings, which resonated with personal experience, past or present. Poetry and stories were often a particular stimulus for this.

A reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 created strong personal resonances for the group, with one group member saying of the first movement:

'When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, I all alone bewep my outcast state'

"This is us, this is how we are seen, outcasts"

Thereafter, in response to the poem's affirmative second movement, one group member talked with unwonted honesty of the importance of having love:

'For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings /That then I scorn to change my state with kings'



# FINDINGS FROM THE OBSERVATIONS, INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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## Shared Reading Aloud

Taking part in a Reading Group was described as representing a big step by around half the people interviewed for this study, many of whom had not read for a long time, and some of whom experienced difficulty reading. Not being able to read, or read well, is a common problem for many women in prison. Staff commented that taking part in such a group was outside the previous experience of many of the women, and the few that had taken part in conventional reading groups (where a book was read prior to a group discussion) contrasted this with the GIR model of taking it in turns to read aloud. Some women remembered being read to at school, although for the majority reading aloud in secondary school had been an ordeal and something they often had sought to avoid. While these women still found reading aloud in the Reading Groups a challenge, many had started to read aloud, some weeks or months after attending the groups, and described how they had found this environment both supportive and inspirational. One of the focus groups with staff reflected on how they had observed not only the lack of pressure on the women in the group, but also the participation of one woman in the group who experienced some difficulties in reading, yet had quickly engaged with the group and to their surprise, had started to read aloud:

*P1 Yeah, and I think it's a good thing if somebody isn't a very good reader because like you say they can go along and they can read, like listen to the book and almost, they're being read to without having to say, I can't read, there's just no pressure, is there?*

**P2** No.

*P1 There doesn't seem to be pressure. And we've got a lady who came, and she's come to it right from the very beginning when it was on Primrose itself and she continues to go now really religiously, without being made to, so she hasn't missed any unless there's been a crossover in her timetable, and she's got a really quite a serious speech impediment, and when she first came to us, would not, there is not a hope in hell you would have got her to read out anything, even a sentence in front of anybody else. And yet now, and I think not only the reading group's helped with this, but I think it certainly has helped, she gets up and speaks in front of people, she'll get up and do kind of role play stuff in front of other people... she will read out from books. And I just think that's an immense change in quite a short period of time that I think the reading group undoubtedly has contributed to.*

**JR** So it's supporting other things that you're doing?

**P3** Yeah.

*P4 Yeah, I think the other women as well, they've been supportive of her as well though haven't they, because you'd expect some, you know especially with the group of women that we're working with, that may be they wouldn't be as tolerant but they have been really supportive of her ...*

**P5** You'd expect some kind of giggling but...

**P6** As far as I'm aware that hasn't been a problem?

**P2** No.



**P4** No.

**P5** *There definitely wasn't.*

Hearing other people read, particularly if they sometimes were unable to read fluently, or with expression, and even hearing the Reader falter over an unfamiliar word, gave the women the space they needed to try reading for themselves. One of the other staff working in the Library, who had observed many of the groups that took place there and knew the women who took part, commented on how open the women seemed to be to reading books that they may never have even heard of before, and how they were positive about whatever was suggested:

*"Nobody seems to complain about the books... I've never heard anybody say, oh we're reading this [makes a sad face]... they're just, oh and we're reading this next... You know like, oh right, we'll just try everything, let's just see... And I think that's because to an extent I wonder if the story doesn't matter and it's the telling and it's the tale and you know what the actual title is doesn't matter because they're going on a journey of discovery? So in that sense it doesn't matter what they're discovering as long as they're discovering some thing, I think."*

Other members of the prison staff were also amazed by what they were reading, as they knew that the first group had started by only reading short extracts of text with lots of discussion, but had moved to reading 'whole books' and more than that, works of great literature. They described in the discussion how this challenged their ideas of what could be achieved by the project, and in particular their ideas as to what the women taking part in the project would be able, and prepared, to read:

**P1** *...reading for a few minutes initially, give them something to discuss and then I think what, they read full books and that now don't they...*

**P2** *They are and that's really surprising...*

**P1** *...I think that's really surprised me that, because to sit through a long book sometimes can be a bit tedious yourself when you're reading it can't it, I suppose it's more interesting because other people are reading it, it's different characters, but they've come back and have been reading things like Charles Dickens, and I know it sounds quite stereotypical of me to say but I'm amazed that some of the women that we've got will go and sit and listen and read Charles Dickens.*

**ALL** *Mm.*

**P1** *If they'd gone and picked up, I don't know, Jordan's biography, I wouldn't have been surprised.*

**P4** *Not surprised, yeah.*

**P1** *It surprises me that they're interested in that and actually come back and want to talk to you about it. And I know that does sound really like I'm making big judgements but some of the women that we've had will never, ever have read anything like Charles Dickens or shown any interest in it before, and yet now they want to talk to you about it and they're telling you about what they're reading and why they find it interesting. And it gives them a real broader view about things I think.*

## 'Disciplined Relaxation'

All of the women described their experience of taking part in the reading groups as 'relaxing', variously saying that it was the sound of the Reader's voice when reading, or the story itself, or the fact that they were sitting down in the Library talking about books that helped them forget about any other worries or issues they had and helped their experience of prison life recede for that moment. The staff seemed to be aware of this, and contrasted the women's opportunities for voluntary engagement with poetry and reading with the opportunities they had had outside prison, and how they believed that the women saw these activities as 'totally separate' to other things they were required to do in the prison:

**P1** *I think it's probably very different isn't it?*

**P2** *I think yeah because most of the work that they have to do is behaviour-led, so it's given as a task to them to complete and it's very much a carrot and stick of getting through the sentence, whereas something like that isn't, it is volunteering, it's something that they can find that they're interested in. Women especially tend to not know what they're interested in because they've been so busy outside being ten other things that when they get in here and they find that they've got time and they've got the thought process to sit down and think, what is it that I really want to do with my life and what am I interested in? But it is, yeah, it's not, it's totally separate I think from everything else that they have to do. I don't think there's anything else where they can sit in a room, very small numbers as well, so you haven't got 20 people all vying for somebody's attention you've probably got half a dozen and they love that, they love time, there's nothing better than giving them the time.*

For a few women, listening to a story – being read to – was a reversion to their childhood, but for others it was very much a new form of enjoyment for them as adults. One member of the prison staff reflected on why she believed the Reading Group engaged the women's interest and why they enjoyed it so much:

*"It's almost like narrative therapy because there's just, I mean it is, to be fair, it's just huge, because when you tell somebody a story about your life or whatever, you're telling them a story, it might be a true story but you're telling them a story and I think there is a huge amount of kind of therapy in that. Maybe the magic is because they don't realise that, I don't know... I think, I don't think people realise and I don't realise to be honest, but I do believe that when someone tells a story and there's something about that verbalisation as well, as much as I hate reading out loud, there is something about that verbalisation. Now, I'm tempted to say maybe it takes them subconsciously back to childhood when maybe your parent read a story, but I'm sure there's a lot of women in here who have never had a story read, who have never had that type of parental love. So maybe it just takes them to a place that they didn't even know existed. And that all sounds very romantic but I do believe in the power of story, so you know..."*

These reports of the 'relaxing' dimension of the women's participation in the group discussions and interviews were further evidenced by their behaviour while they were in the group, as participants did not appear to be nervous when sitting down before the start of the group, but instead took their preferred seats in an unhurried and often sociable way, sometimes talking to other people in the groups or elsewhere in the room, sometimes sitting quietly. While some groups were more lively and some participants were clearly distracted and fidgety, in other groups, there was hardly any movement during the entire session.

For the women, notions of relaxation through engagement with the reading group related to having 'left the prison behind', and this was a form of 'escape' for some women. During their interviews the women reflected on the pressures of living in the prison, and how every day there were events and people to endure or negotiate, the possibility of fresh challenges or dangers, hopes and fears about their custodial sentence, and for many women, the constant worry of what was happening to their children. Far from being safe and predictable, for some women prison was a hazardous place, and the strain of living there caused feelings of stress and tension.



For many people, boredom and lack of occupation during the times when they were locked in their room was also a real problem. While, for some, this could be a time where they switched off and relaxed, perhaps by reading, or watching television, or by drawing, for others it was the time when all their problems and worries were heightened and they found it very hard to make the time pass. Two women referred directly to their history of self-harm. Taking part in the Reading Group offered a real distraction for the women, enabling them to forget all of these concerns for the duration. This possibility was recognised by the staff, one of whom reflected in a focus group:

**P1** *I think it's got to be a brilliant distraction because whatever's going on in your mind about the story, about the characters, about the way [Reader]'s reading it, about being in the, takes you away from any of the other rubbish that you'd been thinking about for the rest of the morning. So I suppose they've got, it's something that they've got the time and... it's like real escapism.*

**P3** *And another thing which I think would be a major factor is there's no white shirts in there, there's no discipline staff in there.*

**P1** *The environment, the difference, that's what they liked, it's an escape from the mundane ordeal of prison life isn't it? It's just a bit of escapism...*

## **'Something we do for ourselves'**

The reading group also gave the women something to think about and to talk about sometimes outside the group. One participant described it as 'something the prison couldn't touch' and another participant similarly reflected how the Reading Group was something that the prison didn't 'regulate' in the same way as other activities and so taking part for her was a form of freedom and self-expression. The idea of personal freedom associated with participation seemed a key motivational element. The women did not necessarily go expecting to get anything out of the groups, and the staff reflected that this could be the secret of the success with some women, who participated in a number of therapies that had very specific targets, which made the women less motivated to attend.

**P1** *I get the impression it's, you know like when they go to education and places like that, you'll hear them come out and say they don't, they want to be in the class but they don't want to be in that class because the other people are messing about and they cannot concentrate on what they're doing. And I get the impression when they go to the Library, to go to the reading group, the group of people that's there all want to be there, for the same reasons. So nobody's going to ridicule anybody else and everybody... You know it's like if you go to church, oh she goes to church, this, that or the other...*

**P2** *It's a choice isn't it?*

**P1** *... yeah, it's a choice that they make and they feel comfortable like with the people that are there as well. I think it's... I'm like you, I don't know enough about the other people who go, but from our women I think it's the ones that want to go, they want to learn...*

**All** *Yeah.*

**P1** *...they don't want people messing about, they're quite serious about it, it's quite serious to them. And they enjoy it, they want to listen to the story and they want to have the discussions afterwards.*

The issue of 'choice' was clearly important to the women, as they described their decision to come to the groups as 'my choice', and something they did for themselves. The voluntary nature of their participation was appreciated by staff, who found the women ready to attend the group, instead of needing persuading, and when they returned, they were happy and willing to talk with others and with staff:

**P1** *But you know as they might stand talking on the landing as well, or if they're going off to something that they enjoy, they want to go and they're coming back and they're in good spirits as well. So it's good for us really that they've got things that they want to do, that they enjoy doing, that they're not forced to go to, you know, like where if they've got to go to work.*

**P2** *This is something that they have a choice.*

The staff were also aware that the women did not expect to receive anything from their participation. Many of the other activities that women engaged with were in order to obtain their allowance through their work, and to achieve educational qualifications and certificates, or to work through activities as part of their sentence. Taking part in the Reading Group did not offer them any particular material reward and, for the staff, this indicated that the women were really motivated to go:

**P1** *...they're getting something **out** of it without wanting something **from** it, if you know what I mean, because they're obviously, whatever they get is enough without having to sort of... Because normally they'd attend things for their friends or different...*

**P2** *To get something isn't it?*

**P1** *...other reasons you know...*

**P2** *Yeah, they might get a free cup of tea or a biscuit of something like that.*

**P3** *Yeah, whereas they're attending without wanting... they're getting something without...*

**P1** *And that's not the case here.*

**P3** *They're not getting something material from it.*

**P1** *Yeah, they're getting something, just a self-satisfaction from going and the enjoyment of it rather than...*





# Reader Experience: ‘struggle for change’

## *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens

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At the start of *Great Expectations*, the Reader was ‘impressed by how quickly and how strongly the story gripped the group.’ The drama of the narrative was heightened by the setting of the group. The women really liked the penal references. The prison visit caused quite a few nods of recognition and quiet reflection even if people didn’t dwell on the similarities, and the hints of domestic abuse were discussed, but in ‘a thoughtful and sensitive way.’

### *Great Expectations*, Vol I, Chapter 7

*It was much upon my mind (particularly when I first saw him looking about for his file) that I ought to tell Joe the whole truth. Yet I did not, and for the reason that I mistrusted that if I did, he would think me worse than I was. The fear of losing Joe’s confidence and of thenceforth sitting in the chimney corner at night staring drearily at my for ever lost companion and friend, tied up my tongue. I morbidly represented to myself that if Joe knew it, I never afterwards could see him at the fireside feeling his fair whisker, without thinking that he was meditating on it... In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right and I was too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong.*

This chapter occasioned discussion about ‘consciences and the importance of truth telling. There were lots of non-verbalised nods and sighs when Pip wrestled with the idea of telling Joe about what he had done [stealing food to feed a convict]. One participant declared: “but we all feel better when we tell the truth”.

### *Great Expectations*, Vol II, Chapter 3

*“The day came, but not the bridegroom. He wrote her a letter –”*

*“Which she received,” I struck in, “when she was dressing for her marriage? At twenty minutes to nine?”*

*“At the hour and the minute,” said Herbert, nodding, “at which she afterwards stopped all the clocks. What was in it, further than it most heartless broke the marriage off; I can’t tell you, because I don’t know. When she recovered from a bad illness that she had, she laid the whole place waste, as you have seen it, and she has never since looked upon the light of day.”*

One participant related the character Miss Havisham’s condition to modern understandings of mental illness and trauma. She spoke of ‘how strong the sense of embarrassment and denial can be’, and then another participant disclosed that she ‘had not left the house herself for four years, and movingly talked about a shrinking world and how it gets harder and harder to change’.

### *Great Expectations*, Vol II, Chapter 8

*Let me confess exactly, with what feelings I looked forwards to Joe’s coming.*

*Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money.*

When the newly elevated central character, Pip, receives a visit from his humble, kindly guardian, Joe, there was ‘appreciation from the group for the reintroduction of Joe and much discussion about how things can change when people have moved on. The poignant sadness of the meeting really seemed to hit home for two readers. Pip’s own confusion about whether he should go home or not – and the lies that he told himself seemed to strike chords. One participant made a moving contribution about being embarrassed by family, and asked the group to consider their own families and their reaction to imprisonment. She also read, which is very unusual for her, and was clearly very pleased with herself for having done so.’



## A 'bubble' or 'invisible shield'

In an interview, a member of staff who was present in the Library during the reading group's sessions commented:

*"I can see how it works, I can see them just sat there and relaxing and I think the Reader's voice is very soothing, he's got a lovely voice when he reads it aloud, and he likes doing it, he reads, sometimes he'll say, 'Oh can I read you a poem?', and I love it, it's really nice. But I think just to be in that, that sort of bubble, that gentle, the voice and the language, I can see how, I can definitely see how it works. ... I'm thinking of one woman who goes into like a trance when it's on and just listens and absorbs it all. Mm, it's really nice."*

Other staff commented on the phenomenon of reasoned discussion, with some opposing views, that characterised all of the observed sessions, and contrasted this favourably with what they knew went on in other parts of the prison where people were less tolerant of opposition:

**P1** *The other thing about communication I was thinking of then, not only are they may be better able to explain themselves to us to some degree, but the more they're able to sit and listen to somebody else, because that's something that doesn't happen very often with maybe women in general! That women don't listen to what you have to say, they have something they want to say on top and trying to explain or give advice or reassurance to women, or to do treatment with them if they can't listen to you effectively is torture, quite frankly. So if they're able to listen a lot more and spend time just sitting and taking in what you've got to say or what somebody else has got to say, that can only be beneficial.*

**P2** *And they're actually patient really aren't they?*

**ALL** *(agreement)*

**P2** *They're respectful of each other...*

**P3** *It increases their tolerance doesn't it?*

**ALL** *(agreement)*

**P1** *I think that is really impressive because you see other groups in different places and that doesn't happen. You'll see people have big disagreements and not able to take other people's views on board and not being able to communicate that, again like being really unable to sit for that period of time as well and listen to other people.*

**P4** *So all of the things that are happening in the reading group sound like really beneficial and helpful...*

The act of shared reading did appear to create a special social and emotional space within which the reading and the discussions took place. Reading aloud created an affect between the readers and listeners, resulting in complete mutual absorption and concentration. Here a member of staff who had been present at a number of the discussions described it as a 'bubble' that seemed to envelop the group and set them outside of whatever else was going on in the Library:

*"Yes, I've seen that, I've seen people really concentrating. It's like a bubble isn't it, the lad sat in a bubble? And they're really concentrating. Sometimes the Reader will ask, and they'll say, no I'm just thinking, and you can see you know people are really working hard, listening to what's being said. Yeah it's good. I wish I could have, I just don't get a chance to listen to the Dickens at all, to 'Great Expectations' but ... And I know they weren't, there was a few of the women said they wouldn't watch it over Christmas, because it was on over Christmas and they didn't want to spoil it..."*

Another member of staff also commented on the same phenomenon, calling it an 'invisible shield' that not only appeared to protect the women from the noise of their immediate environment, but also from any feelings of self-consciousness. For this member of staff, it is notable that people do not only sit and concentrate, but also read aloud as if no-one but the other group members can hear them:

*"I'm amazed at the willingness of people to read out loud because I hate reading out loud, it slows me down when I read, apart from anything else, and I like to read you know. But I am quite amazed because nobody makes fun of anybody else, they all just give each other you know that space and that time and... For me, it would be horrendous for me because I'm quite a shy person, is not only are they reading in that little group but when it's taking part, I mean obviously sometimes it's in the association so that's a bit more private, but what you've got it, what I'm trying to say is you've got... so if it was me reading, I'd have like six, seven, eight people listening to us but I would be very aware of the people in the background. And they almost seem to create some kind of invisible shield around them and they just exist in that time and that space, and that's quite fascinating! And quite a talent to create I think."*

This apparent lack of awareness of the other people in the room was discussed with the women. They perhaps found it harder to explain as they had not observed it, but were part of the phenomenon. The unique atmosphere seemed to be created by intense concentration and focus, which is not always associated with relaxation. To the observer it appeared that the women were actually working very hard to regulate their bodies, so to not fiddle, or twitch or walk around; to discipline their minds not to shout out, complain, interrupt or argue; and to concentrate so completely on the text that they could follow the prose and perhaps imagine the story, so they could discuss it. This total embodiment of the reading experience may explain why particular behaviours were observed not only by the researcher but by staff working at the prison.

The women who took part in the Reading Group contrasted the atmosphere in the group and the Library with elsewhere in the prison, and feeling 'safe' was an important dimension to their experience. However, in this environment, safety was more than shutting out the wider prison; it was about regulating behaviours within the group so that no-one felt physically or emotionally vulnerable.

*"I think a lot of it is environment but I think a lot of it is facilitation as well. And I think it's the way, again it's... I see it as a group that has a lot of mutual respect. I know [the Reader's] very, very kind of keen and blatantly obvious, which is positive, that he wants everyone to take part, everyone to be comfortable and he'll not let anybody kind of disrespect anybody else. So I think what you may have is the wider ethos, which at the end of the day is created by women and by the staff, then kind of feeding the smaller ethos, so... I was going to say it's like ripples in a pond but it's kind of like ripples in both ways! You know! One feeds the other, feeds the other I think!"*

The enthusiasm of the Reader was commented on by the women, who said that it helped them engage with some texts that they would have otherwise given up on. The women felt the fact that the Reader really believed that they could understand something made them try harder to understand the meaning of a piece of text in the book or a poem, which added to their enjoyment and sense of achievement.

**P1** *I think he creates a relaxed atmosphere anyway, he's very motivational isn't he?*

**P2** *He does, he's very good.*

**P1** *We've seen him because we've all sat in the reading group in the early days of how motivational...*

**P3** *He's brilliant!*

**P1** *...he is with them, if they don't want to, they don't make them, but he has this tendency to like almost make you want to read, doesn't he?*

**P4** *His enthusiasm.*





THE COMPLETE WORKS OF  
*William Shakespeare*

PENGUIN CLASSICS  
CHARLES DICKENS  
Great Expectations



# Reader Experience: 'time to stop and stare'

## Leisure

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What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

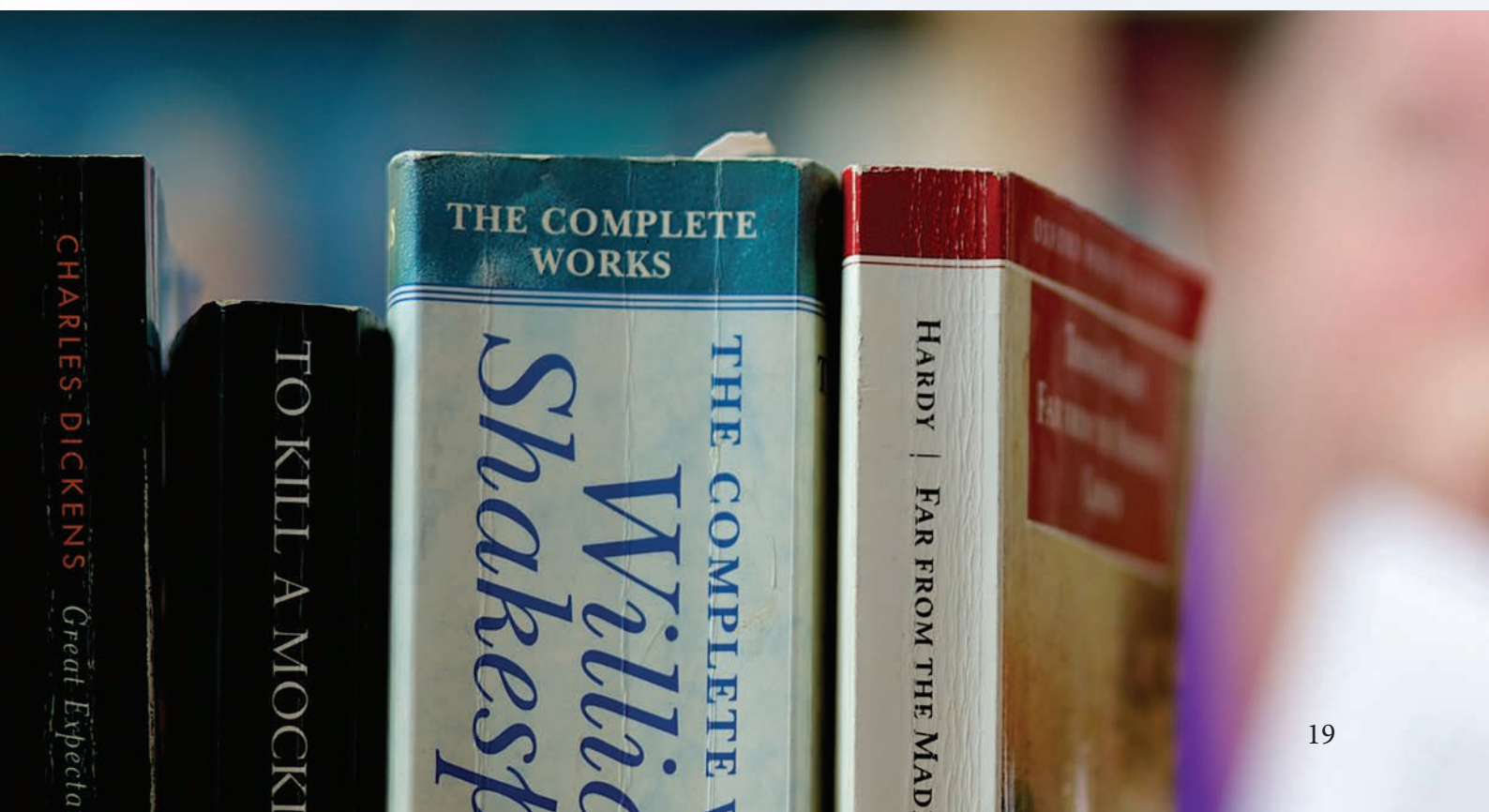
No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.

A poor life this is if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

**William Henry Davies**



A reading of Henry Davies's poem 'Leisure', elicited some really quite moving talk about 'prison time' and using its space to think. One reader talked about a bunch of flowers and how she looked at them with a focus and concentration here that she had never done outside prison. Another reminisced about the 'time to stop and stare' her father had had, and sounded a note of regret that she has not always done this. She also looked forward to an imagined future where she could take more time.



## 'A lifeline... keeping going'

Reading was repeatedly described during conversations and interviews as an activity of pleasure and enjoyment, an important form of meaningful occupation, and the anticipation of the weekly groups was an important point of reference for some people, who described it as 'keeping them going'. Reading was described also as a form of 'release' that led to increased self-esteem.

The staff commented on how important the reading group could be in widening the scope of the women's lives. Attending the Reading Group was still the only reading that some women did. One woman described how she did not have the reading ability to read the books she really wanted to read, and although she was learning to read through the Toe-to-Toe reading scheme, she loved coming to the reading group as she could hear the books read that she wanted to read and loved to hear the expression that the readers brought to the text.

Another woman said that, while she hated the time she spent on her own, she could not settle to read when she was on her own and found herself too distracted by other thoughts. In the group, this woman read fluently and well, and brought real expression to her interpretation of the text and joined in the group discussions, but this was her only reading all week. During her interview she talked about how the thought of the next week's reading group 'kept her going' over the long periods of lock-up over the weekend, a time when she was likely to self-harm. Another woman who also read fluently and well, but was generally more reticent in discussions, said, during an interview, that she tended only to read magazines in her room, preferring to hear and read the books while in the group. However, in a later interview, she said that she had started to read some other, lighter, books in her room, and that the staff in the library were helping her to find the books she liked.

One woman in the group loved reading the poems and even if she did not like or particularly understand a poem, she would take it back to her room and say that she would put it on the wall. Another woman took her photocopy and sent it in a letter to her husband so he could read it too. This same woman also asked her husband to read some of the books and short stories she had read in the reading groups, but this seemed to be harder to sustain, and the advantage of the poem was that it was short and immediately available for re-reading. Some women left the sheets of poetry at the end of the sessions, but most of the women folded them carefully and took them away with them, suggesting that they may be read again, or stored or even passed on within the prison.

One striking aspect of the prison reading groups was participants' use of the literature as a link to that continuing and ongoing life. Writer and journalist, Erwin James, has spoken of how he sent Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 29' from prison to his estranged daughter, to try to reignite his relationship with her. Notably, participants explored this possibility of making the literature a means of renewing connection to loved ones. One participant, attending her final reading group before her release, thanked the group leader, saying that 'it was the only thing that has kept her sane during her time in prison' and said she was going 'to read the book [*Great Expectations*] aloud with her husband'. Participants became increasingly eager to discuss 'ways of sharing our reading with families' and 'creatively widen the group to include families'. One told how 'her 10-year-old daughter has started *Great Expectations* because she wants to be reading the same thing as her mother' and the mother's sister is helping her daughter to work through the book. Another participant often spoke of 'the ways she shares the poems with her husband and writes to him a synopsis of the group and how she tries to read the same books as her daughter'. A Carol Ann Duffy poem reminded one reader of her grandad and she took a copy to send to him. The possibility was enthusiastically discussed 'of holding a reading group during family visit days – all agreed that this would be a great idea'.

At the same time, the books also clearly offered a strong sense of continuity within the prison and between institutions. When *Great Expectations* was well underway, one participant declared 'she wanted to take the book back to her pad and finish it tonight'. One reader took copies of Carol Ann Duffy's 'Big Sue' and 'Now Voyager' to stick on her wall.



Another participant, who was being transferred to another secure establishment, asked about the possibility of joining an equivalent group there. It transpired later that this participant had written to another member of the group to say 'she'd taken *Great Expectations* out of the Library as soon as she'd arrived at her new prison and had since finished it'.

## 'Seeing afresh'

The women were very clear that for them, the reading group was unlike anything else they did in prison, even reading to themselves or visiting the Library. Whether it was being part of a group, reading aloud, or discussing the poems and stories that particularly appealed to them, the women participants said that it had the power to take them away from being themselves and being in the prison, and few things ever did that for them. Some of the staff were also aware that the reading group complemented other activities that the women were engaged in. They could see the potential for the reading group to use literature to discuss issues from a literary, philosophical and humanitarian point of view that they themselves, as staff, could only deal with as issues of discipline, a breach of rules rather than of morality:

*"It has other possibilities as well... The stuff that we, that is very difficult to tackle from a discipline point of view that potentially could be explored during a reading group, for example, I've got something that I'm going to have to look into where there was some racial abuse given by one particular prisoner. And the formal means of trying to put something in place and tackle it and stuff like that is quite draconian really and not likely to succeed, so you just... What [the Reader] was saying was you could probably discuss it in a completely different environment that the person might actually engage with because the person's not going to engage with me, they're just going to see the wing manager, you know and so... So there is possibilities I think there, [the Reader] was interested in that, he could see the possibility of addressing people's offending behaviour through discussion in the reading group... that a perpetrator is more likely to address offending behaviour of that nature in that environment rather than with me."*

While staff pointed out that some of the women who took part in the reading groups were undergoing multiple interventions to support their personal development, not just the reading group, they acknowledged the contribution of the reading group in supporting these initiatives. They highlighted the social and emotional development of the women through taking part in the reading group and through other interventions, and believed that by gaining these new skills, reinforced in different settings in different ways, the women were enabled to deal more effectively with emotions outside the group and to express their feelings to avoid conflict, anger, violence and self-harm.

**P1** *It runs side, like side by side really with what we're encouraging as well. I mean some of the recommendations for them, like some of the work they've done is to attend groups and... they're the ideal situations to use the coping strategies that you know that they've picked up, we've taught you along the way. So again it's they're taking, they're also taking notice of what is being recommended for them and they're actually going to it and not just going for the sake of one or two weeks to say oh well I've been, they're actually going and staying and getting something back from it.*

**P2** *Yeah, I think we've definitely noticed a difference. And I do think you're right when you say it runs alongside other things. I think it's helped massively with confidence, with self-esteem*

**P3** *I agree*

**P2** *... with reading ability, with vocabulary ability, they've been able to explain themselves and communicate with us better, being able to get up and take part in other treatments and other activities that we're putting on that they would never have done before. And I think undoubtedly that's helped and I can't see how it couldn't really.*

**P2** *No definitely.*

The staff were aware of the capacity for the women to learn different ways of behaving not only from taking part in the group, but by learning about human actions and behaviour from the literature. The literature had the potential to enable the women to discuss scenarios of action and reaction, and to trace actions over time; to look at the effects and consequences of behaviours, including the impact on others. The fact that it was fiction made it easier to read and engage with, and one member of staff felt this meant that the women were more likely to respond and internalise the possibilities of alternative patterns of behaviour than if they were simply given scenarios, or asked to reflect on their own actions:

*"I wonder when the women are starting their more in-depth treatment as well, that some of the things that they can recognise from books, once they start to have a bit more insight into things, will like link over as well, so if there's like twists and things aren't always kind of as you think they're going to be or things can change and things can be done differently, do you remember, when we read about this. And actually that can be used in treatment, so like to underline once they've started to realise that things aren't always what they seem or that people deal with things in different ways because they'll see characters doing things differently in different books, so I think that can be quite helpful, especially with people who are really rigid or don't have much insight into their own behaviour."*

The reading group therefore dovetailed with existing therapies and programmes for people within the prison, offering a unique alternative that also enabled women to consider the 'big issues' of life in a non-directive, non-goal-orientated way. The element of self-determination and choice of whether or not to participate in the group was very important to the women, and staff were aware that the success of the reading group in engaging the women's interest was likely to be linked to the fact that that they were not required to take part, and that it was not specifically labelled as a 'therapy':

*"I almost think sometimes if things are classed as kind of therapy almost, that there's that added pressure, even if you feel that you don't have to go, you do attend and then you're thinking am I here for this reason, am I supposed to be doing this, should I be doing that? And I just think it causes, creates problems whereas actually you can get a real therapeutic benefit from going without even having to even think or consider that."*







# Reader Experience: 'master of my fate'

## Invictus

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Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

**William Ernest Henley**

At Low Newton, one group was unable to continue reading John Steinbeck's 'The Pearl', long a tried and tested Get Into Reading favourite, because the subject matter became too upsetting for the participants 'who could not cope with the way events spiral out of control.' Two participants began to cry, finding the writing 'too close, reminding them too much of their own lives and in particular their offending'.

However, the session was 'saved' by the poem – William Henley's 'Invictus', particularly the concluding lines:

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

The Reader recorded that:

*'All nodded in agreement and were visibly moved by the final stanza, saying that for all the darkness they kept their "unconquerable soul". One reader spoke very movingly about six months she had spent in segregation, her self-harm and suicide attempts.*

*She then looked up and smiled and said "you know, through it all, I remained, I'm still here – I'm alive, I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."*

To finish the group, this reader stood up and read the whole poem again, and read it very well indeed. This led to applause from the group. She then announced that she was going immediately to type it out so everyone could have a copy to stick on their walls.'

JOHN MILTON PARADISE LOST AND PARADISE REGAINED

VINTAGE

JOHN MILTON PARADISE LOST AND PARADISE REGAINED

VINTAGE

JOHN MILTON PARADISE LOST AND PARADISE REGAINED

VINTAGE

JOHN MILTON PARADISE LOST AND PARADISE REGAINED



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Get Into Reading transfers to custodial settings and has the capacity to extend from Libraries and units to the wings, association rooms and other parts of the prison: the intervention is flexible, adaptive, and fluid.
- Women engage in Get Into Reading voluntarily. Given creation of the right assurances and support, and provision of appropriate reading material and Reader, the women will engage. Group composition can be challenging, however, and the integration of older women with young woman, and of prisoners with particular backgrounds and histories, needs to be managed to ensure people are able to engage.
- Get Into Reading helps to improve wellbeing for women for whom little else can. It enhances self-esteem, and encourages a sense of achievement and self-worth, and of social participation and even friendship. Get Into Reading gives participants something else to think about, that they can carry with them back to the wings, and many support their participation by starting and/or continuing to engage with the Library in order to read in their rooms, under the momentum and energy provided by the reading groups.
- Get Into Reading could be further rolled out on the basis of this study. Women were concerned that, if they were moved to another prison, Get Into Reading would not be available to them. It was their view that Get Into Reading should be available to them wherever they were, and on their release into their communities.
- Further areas for research are strongly suggested by the findings of this study, in particular: how to engage staff in Get Into Reading; how to engage with younger women, particular those serving shorter sentences; identifying which books and poems 'work' with different groups of women and why; discovering the psychological mechanisms and processes which help to improve wellbeing.

# Related Publications for CRILS and The Reader Organisation

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Billington, J., Dowrick, C., Robinson, J., Hamer, A., Williams, C. (2011) 'An investigation into the therapeutic benefits of reading in relation to depression and wellbeing.' LivHR Research Report [http://www.thereader.org.uk/media/35277/therapeutic\\_benefits\\_of\\_reading\\_final\\_report\\_march\\_2011.pdf](http://www.thereader.org.uk/media/35277/therapeutic_benefits_of_reading_final_report_march_2011.pdf)

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Robinson J. (2008) *Reading and Talking: Exploring the experience of taking part in reading groups at the Vauxhall Health Care Centre*. HaCCRU Research Report 115/08.

# BIOGRAPHIES

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**Professor Jude Robinson** is Professor of the Anthropology of Health and Illness at the University of Liverpool. Her research interests centre on the health of women and children living in poverty and family and community health and wellbeing. Her research on the social determinants in health and illness includes research into smoking, alcohol and other lifestyle issues, and she has published widely on second-hand smoke exposure of children and smoking behaviours of teenagers and adults. She has undertaken collaborative work with colleagues from the Universities of Edinburgh, Nottingham, Bath and UCL for various funders, including the Department of Health, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence, and is currently engaged in research for the Canadian Institute of Health Research with the Universities of British Columbia, Australia National University and the Pacific Institute for Research Evaluation. She also has a strong interest in the field of arts and health, undertaking collaborative work with The Reader Organisation researching people's experience of taking part in shared reading aloud, and new research with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's In Harmony project that will explore the impact of children's participation in playing a musical instrument in an orchestra on family and community life.

**Dr Josie Billington** is Deputy Director of the Centre for Research into Reading, Linguistics and Information Systems at the University of Liverpool. She specialises in Victorian literature and in research on reading and health. Her publications include *Faithful Realism: Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy* (2002), *George Eliot's Middlemarch* (2008), *This is Living Art: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Shakespeare* (2012), and editions of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (2006) and Margaret Oliphant's *Novellas* (2013). She is currently preparing editions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry and of George Eliot's shorter fiction for Oxford University Press. She has published extensively on the power of literary reading to influence mental health and wellbeing, particularly in the areas of depression and dementia, and is currently engaged in interdisciplinary research projects related to chronic pain, reading with children and families, and the psychology of reading, with colleagues in Medicine, Health and Psychological Sciences.

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# PHOTOGRAPHS

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Photographs by David Jones of David Jones Photography. All images are posed by actors.



**“One participant, attending her final reading group before her release, thanked the group leader, saying that ‘it was the only thing that has kept her sane during her time in prison’ and said she was going ‘to read the book (*Great Expectations*) aloud with her husband’.”**