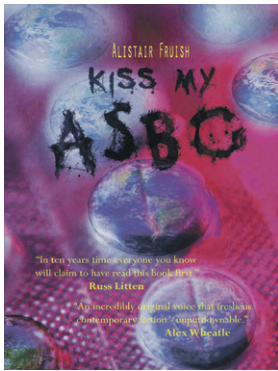




## Reading group round-up

Image courtesy of Matthew Meadows

**The report this month comes from HMP Leicester where a new group managed to lure the author to their first meeting!**



The men waste no time in getting straight to business, firing questions at Alistair Fruish, author of *Kiss My ASBO*, a gritty story with an attention-grabbing title.

The men talk to Alistair about the book's plot, in which a Northampton-based teenage boy is spiked with a blue pill by his own father. The drug has been designed by the military to radically improve the intelligence of those taking it. However, the military do not predict the events that come once the drug is stolen. The nameless narrator uses his new vast intelligence to rob cash machines and go on a rampage - among many other antics!

But the story begins with a section on prison-related themes called 'Double Bubble'. It is also an account of the narrator's misguided attempts to dig up the body of a very well-known princess - just to make himself famous:

- "a step too far" for some;
  - "it's believable within the realms of the character" in the view of others;
- Read it and judge for yourself.

The group also note how the language of the book moves between slang and 'normal language'. Alistair explains that people change their words depending on who they are talking to and their situation. This leads to a discussion about how this is just what happens out on the landings.

When Alistair reads two different sections of text he stuns the group into silence. Hearing the words aloud we realise there is a lot more word play and meaning to those paragraphs than when we first read them. When we hear the deliberate rhythm and choice of words in the text, we begin to appreciate the effort that has gone into the writing.

We wonder if this is really the end of the story for the unnamed narrator? Alistair explains that the book is the first in a projected series of a kind of modern Robin Hood mythology. The group agree that if there is a follow-up, it should focus on other characters in the book. We're looking forward to reading the prequel/sequel to 'Kiss My ASBO' already!

Some of the men were reminded of the film

Limitless when they read the story and wonder what the inspiration for the book was. Alistair insists that the book was written before the film was released but that inspiration came from a variety of sources: his life in Northampton; contemporary neuroscience; the CIA's MK Ultra program (in the 1960s), and his work as a writer-in-residence in prisons. He also encourages the group to try writing themselves.

The group enjoyed *Kiss My ASBO*: it made us laugh and we appreciated the moral dilemmas presented in it. The last question left to ask:

- do we want a blue pill ourselves?

Opinion is divided. Some think it's a great idea, but others would prefer quite the opposite; a pill that turns off our intelligence!

*The Leicester group is part of the Prison Reading Groups project (PRG), sponsored by the University of Roehampton and generously supported by Give a Book [www.giveabook.org.uk](http://www.giveabook.org.uk), Random House Group and Profile Books. 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](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/prison-reading-groups). PRG has also worked with National Prison Radio to start a radio book club. If you have access to NPR, listen out for details and ways to take part.*



**Do you, or anyone you know, struggle with reading?**

**The Shannon Trust Reading Plan (Toe by Toe) is a simple & efficient way of helping people to learn to read. Prisoners who can read teach prisoners who can't.**

**If you would like more information on how to become involved, as either a Mentor or a Learner, contact the Reading Plan Lead in your prison (ask a Shannon Trust Mentor who this is) or write to: Shannon Trust, Freepost RTKY-RUXG-KGYH The Foundry, 17-19 Oval Way, LONDON SE11 5RR**

## Get Into Reading

**Nicola Bennison and the Bookchat Group (funded by the NHSE/NOMS Offender PD Team) in the PIPE, HMP Gartree, discuss a poem by Andrew Marvell.**

### 'A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body'

SOUL

O who shall, from this dungeon, raise  
A soul enslav'd so many ways?  
With bolts of bones, that fetter'd stands  
In feet, and manacled in hands;  
Here blinded with an eye, and there  
Deaf with the drumming of an ear;  
A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains  
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins;  
Tortur'd, besides each other part,  
In a vain head, and double heart.

BODY

O who shall me deliver whole  
From bonds of this tyrannic soul?  
Which, stretch'd upright, impales me so  
That mine own precipice I go;  
And warms and moves this needless frame,  
(A fever could but do the same)  
And, wanting where its spite to try,  
Has made me live to let me die.  
A body that could never rest,  
Since this ill spirit it possesseth.

SOUL

What magic could me thus confine  
Within another's grief to pine?  
Where whatsoever it complain,  
I feel, that cannot feel, the pain;  
And all my care itself employs;  
That to preserve which me destroys;  
Constrain'd not only to endure  
Diseases, but, what's worse, the cure;  
And ready oft the port to gain,  
Am shipwreck'd into health again.

BODY

But physic yet could never reach  
The maladies thou me dost teach;  
Whom first the cramp of hope does tear,  
And then the palsy shakes of fear;  
The pestilence of love does heat,  
Or hatred's hidden ulcer eat;  
Joy's cheerful madness does perplex,  
Or sorrow's other madness vex;  
Which knowledge forces me to know,  
And memory will not forego.  
What but a soul could have the wit  
To build me up for sin so fit?  
So architects do square and hew  
Green trees that in the forest grew.

We are reading Christy Brown's autobiography, 'My Left Foot', feeling every bit of the author's pain as he struggles with cerebral palsy, imprisoned by his body.

There's a baffled pause after the first reading. 'I love the language but I haven't a clue what it's about', says BE. Then, 'all I'm getting from it is some sort of battle'. There you are, I say, that's a start.

We go through it verse by verse, and in smaller

sections it seems clearer, brows start to unfurrow.

'Perhaps it's easier if you think of it as the mind rather than the soul?' suggests EN. They like the image of the body being fettered, it's easy to see.

MT says 'I don't know why, but that bit that the body says about the soul stretch'd upright, impales me so makes me think of the crucifixion.' Yes, we agree, there seems to be a feeling of religion about this, and of punishment too - and there is the word magic, too...

In the third verse, the soul describing how it has to feel the pain of the body makes NF think about how mothers have to feel the pain of their children - like Christy's mother, in the book. Someone else finds it amusing how the soul thinks it's 'got away with it', it's broken free of the body, but then the body gets better - 'sod's law!' Yes, isn't it ironic, that the soul has to work hard to keep alive the very thing which is giving it grief?

Some of the language seems puzzling: 'what's physic, what are maladies?' We work these out, and then, 'what's palsy?' 'That's what Christy has, isn't it, he has cerebral palsy.' Ah, yes.

The list of maladies suffered by the body, caused by the soul, makes us smile - 'they're very vivid, aren't they?' 'I really like hatred's hidden ulcer! I can feel that!' We agree that they can hurt more than bodily aches and pains.

EN says, 'to me it's not a dialogue, it's more of a battle, like BE said'. Who wins then? No one, we decide - it's a stalemate. The human condition!

There is much we haven't got to grips with, but we are out of time. We read it through once more, with feeling. I take the part of the Body, and EN reads the part of the Soul.

*Initials have been changed.*

*The Reader Organisation is an award-winning charitable social enterprise working to connect people with great literature, and each other. Our groups meet weekly to listen to a short story or an extract from a novel and a poem being read aloud by a trained practitioner. No one else has to read aloud, although some choose to do so. There are lots of pauses in which we discuss how we feel about what we've read. Through the literature we discover more about the world, each other and, sometimes, ourselves.*