

Books Unlocked

Evaluation findings

Clem Pabion and Adam Holmes
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Key findings

In 2016/17 Books Unlocked reached 43 settings, approximately 660 participants and distributed 1,250 books to reading groups in prisons, young offender institutions (YOIs), schools and libraries as well as to National Prison Radio (NPR) listeners. We had three prisons participating in our first year and have grown the project year on year to the current total of 43 prisons, YOIs, school and library reading groups.

In 2016/17, our evaluation revealed that:

- Over half the participants read a Man Booker Prize shortlisted novel for the first time
- Almost one in two participants say they read more than they used to before the project
- Over two in five participants say they now enjoy reading more and that they are now more confident about their reading
- Close to three in five participants say they talk more about what they read than before Books Unlocked
- Finally, almost half of prison participants say they visit the prison library more than they used to.

'Books Unlocked is very good. It's helped with my reading skills, my confidence in reading, speaking and writing' (HMP Swansea)

Introduction

Books Unlocked supports those in prisons and young offender institutions, as well as others in community settings such as schools and libraries, to read for enjoyment. Thanks to the generosity of publishers and the Booker Prize Foundation which has supported the programme since 2012, Books Unlocked is able to provide free copies of Man Booker Prize-shortlisted titles for participants to read, discuss and keep. The authors of these titles visit prison and community reading groups as part of the programme.

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T: 020 7587 1842 W: www.literacytrust.org.uk Twitter: @Literacy_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

The books offered to participating reading groups in the 2016/17 project year were:

- *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes
- *Harvest* by Jim Crace
- *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson
- *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman
- *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel
- *In the Country of Men* by Hisham Matar
- *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell
- *The Lives of Others* by Neel Mukherjee
- *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith
- *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick deWitt

In 2017, visits to prison reading groups were made by Jim Crace, Stephen Kelman and David Mitchell. Stephen also visited a community reading group that was taking part in the programme.

A key part of the Books Unlocked programme is our work with National Prison Radio. National Prison Radio is a free radio service broadcasting directly into almost 80,000 cells in prisons and young offender institutions across England and Wales. We work with them to serialise audiobooks of the Man Booker Prize-shortlisted titles we feature, as well as broadcasting author interviews. This enables us to reach more prisoners including those with lower levels of literacy. This year, interviews were recorded with Jim Crace, Howard Jacobson, Yann Martel and Patrick deWitt.

In 2017, we also expanded the community model of the project, focusing on five key areas: Teeside and Durham, Cambridgeshire, West Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Greater London, whilst still working with prisons and young offender institutions across the country. Delivery of the Books Unlocked community model was supported by Alan Smith from Staffordshire Prison Library Service and by National Literacy Trust Hub managers in the remaining areas, barring London which was supported centrally.

In 2016/17 the project reached 43 settings, approximately 660 participants and distributed 1,250 books to reading groups in prisons, YOIs, schools and libraries as well as to NPR listeners. Since the programme began in 2012 we have distributed nearly 5,000 books to participating reading groups and NPR listeners. We have received approximately half of these books free from publishers and have broadcast 19 audio serialisations of Man Booker Prize-shortlisted titles through our partnership with NPR. We have worked with 84 unique settings in this time.

We had three prisons participating in our first year and have grown the project year on year to the current total of 43 prisons, YOIs, school and library reading groups. In total, over the five years of the project, approximately 1,700 individuals have taken part in Books Unlocked. Books Unlocked is a truly unique project, where partners across the criminal justice sector, as well as from the world of literature, come together to make a crucial difference to the lives of prisoners, young offenders and members communities across the UK.

Evaluation methodology

Books Unlocked aims to positively impact wellbeing, attitudes around reading and to increase discussion. To capture the participants' experience of the programme thoroughly and to suit the constraints of data collection in prisons this evaluation uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative questions were open-ended, such as "How does reading make you feel?" or "What did you think of Books Unlocked?". The surveys in prisons were done on paper.

We also gathered some quantitative data, with closed and directive questions using tick boxes in order to compare responses from one respondent to another. In schools, we conducted both a pre-survey and a post-survey to assess the effects of Books Unlocked on students' reading enjoyment and attitudes.

The sample in prisons was 72 respondents, and in schools, we only obtained 23 matched pre and post responses. From the community reading groups, we only received four responses, and therefore decided to exclude them from the quantitative analysis.

Findings

The 2017 qualitative data from the Books Unlocked surveys shows the positive impact that the programme has on participants. Testimonies from participants in prisons in particular, explicitly show the difference Books Unlocked is making in their lives. The table below shows a list of all the themes mentioned by respondents in the surveys, whether they were prompted or not, and the number of occurrences for each, desegregated by respondent group. The surveys also asked for direct feedback about the novels read by the groups, and these will be presented separately. The findings section of this report is organised based on the themes listed below, from most to least frequent occurrence.

Theme	Prompted or unprompted	Prisoners inc. young offenders (72)	Students (25)
Feedback about the project as a whole	Prompted	42	2
The value of book talk and the book groups	Prompted	33	0
Reading for escapism and relaxation	Unprompted	30	4
Discovering new books, authors, or genres	Prompted	30	3
Book ownership (positive)	Prompted	28	0
Celebrating a love of reading	Unprompted	18	1
Coping with life in prison	Unprompted	17	0
Technical feedback, suggestions, and requests	Prompted	16	3
Intellectual challenge and skills improvement	Unprompted	14	2
Wellbeing and self-confidence	Unprompted	3	1
Increased empathy, being in touch with emotions	Unprompted	2	7

Feedback about Books Unlocked

Participants were asked "What did you think of Books Unlocked?" as one of the first questions in the survey. The responses are universally extremely positive, varying in nature and length depending on the respondents' engagement with the programme, their literacy levels and personal eloquence.

'A great and inspired idea – really glad to have them here. I really really appreciate it. Thank you very much' (HMP Foston Hall)

'I think that this is a very interesting and useful programme. It disseminates the latest books and ideas within an environment where it is badly needed. Long may it continue' (HMP Birmingham)

‘It makes a massive difference being able to read and discuss books. Prison restricts freedom and this initiative allows people to read books you normally wouldn’t’
(HMP Birmingham)

‘Books Unlocked opened my eyes to the conversation staple “the book’s better than the film”. We get time in [the] libr[ar]y. And [it] is nice there’ (HMP Foston Hall)

Some respondents also volunteered feedback about specific aspects of the programme. For instance, three prison respondents said they wish the audio part of Books Unlocked, delivered by National Prison Radio (NPR), could be earlier in the evening rather than at 11pm.

Several also suggested that Books Unlocked could benefit from more publicity as they had not heard of the scheme previously despite a keen interest in reading. Some were taking part in reading groups, but did not know about the NPR show. Others were members of reading groups, but had not heard the name of the programme.

A few students said they wished they could have taken part in the programme earlier in the school year rather than in the summer term as it conflicted with their revision for exams (Year 10).

Finally, both prisoners and students said they would appreciate a broader range of books, including some more accessible for lower level readers:

‘Please add more books to [the] selection!!’ (HMP Swansea)

‘Keep up the good work and try and use more basic books to help people who may not be able to read books of the calib[re] of the [Man] Booker Prize. So it could be used as a stepping stone or as an introduction to people who may not read or would like to read at a higher level’
(HMP Birmingham)

It appears these are minor suggested improvements to an already excellent programme, which has been enjoyed thoroughly by all the respondents.

‘It’s a good thing to be a part of’ (HMP Foston Hall)

‘Keep it up! It makes a major difference to prisoners’ (HMP Birmingham)

‘You are a very great way to help people read books’ (University Academy Keighley)

Reading groups and the value of discussing books

Interestingly, the survey respondents revealed that they enjoyed taking part in the book group even more so than reading the books themselves, or the opportunity to keep the books for free. Two thirds of respondents said the reading group was the most important aspect of the programme for them. This was illustrated in more details in the free text responses.

‘[The most important aspect of Books Unlocked is] being sociable with other readers. Listening to alternative opinions and views of others’ (HMP Foston Hall)

‘I enjoy listening to other opinions. I learn more through listening’ (HMP Isle of Wight)

‘Since taking part in the project I have talked a lot more about what I have read, especially when I have read something that I really liked when I thought I wouldn’t’
(HMP Isle of Wight: Albany)

‘The reading group IS the highlight of the week. Firstly there is the excitement, anticipation of reading something new. Then there is the discussion whose focus is on a book which can lead in itself [to] . . . opinions, dissensions and agreements. This is so different (and valuable) from everyday prison gossip which is tedious and can be divisive. I have gained confidence to express an opinion. Soon I hope to become more articulate’
(HMP Birmingham)

This suggests that Books Unlocked may affect the social interactions and social networks in prison settings: it enables participants to get to know other prisoners, and improve interactions through listening and exchange of opinions. Books Unlocked participants gain the experience of listening and being listened to respectfully, exchanging varied opinions in a group in a polite and non-confrontational manner.

Reading for escapism and relaxation – coping with life in prison

Unsurprisingly, Books Unlocked participants (including prisoners, young offenders and students), as readers in a vast number of contexts, find reading relaxing and a way to take their mind off other challenges they may be facing.

‘Reading takes me away from the situation I'm in. It provides relaxation, food for thought and escape’ (HMP Styal)

‘It helps me submerge myself in another life, another world. It helps me shut out what is happening around me. I like adventure and emotion, mischief and melodrama’
(HMP New Hall)

‘I love a book I can disappear into, become part of it, a book that takes me away – transports me into the magical text for that time (when I'm reading) I forget, I escape. I "feel" what I am reading’ (HMP New Hall)

Participants in prison often comment on how valuable reading is to them in their specific circumstances.

‘I feel like it's a release from the prison life!’ (HMP Foston Hall)

‘Reading is the one legal way in here to escape. I guess TV is the other. In the pages of a book I can be miles away, a different person, a different time, living a different existence. That is why reading i[n] here is so important. I work with others and their reading to help them escape into books too’ (HMP Isle of Wight)

‘Being incarcerated, reading has had a huge impact. I am not very imaginative or creative but some of the fiction books that I have read have taken me to other places, I find it relaxing to read now instead of a chore for exams etc. They have the ability to make time speed up by reading for hours without even noticing it and by the end . . . any stress[e] or worries seem greatly reduced. Some books have made me laugh out loud whilst others have made me think more about the underlying subject matter in a way that TV dramas tend not to’
(HMP Isle of Wight: Albany)

In this respect, Books Unlocked provides a much needed respite to participants in prison settings.

Discovering new books, authors, or genres

Almost two thirds of respondents in prisons (63.9%) said the most important aspect of Books Unlocked for them was discovering new authors. Meanwhile, 59.7% and 45.8% respectively said what mattered to them was finding new genres and new authors. Books Unlocked seems to increase the breadth and depth of reading materials participants' access.

'Made me accept and read genres I would not normally do . . . I do not find television entertaining most of the time but prefer to read and listen to music – all types of genres. The reading group has tried out new authors and genres I would not normally choose. I read all books, some I enjoyed immensely, some not so much' (HMP Isle of Wight)

'The most important aspect of Books Unlocked for me has been the variety of books that they supplied. Prior to the book group I read mainly non-fiction and had a very limited range of authors and genres within the fiction area. By having the exposure to authors and genres that I had previously never considered has meant I have found I enjoy other books and it has opened up a whole new section of books for me to try in the future' (HMP Isle of Wight: Albany)

For some participants, the success of Books Unlocked is not even in discovering new genres, but in discovering the enjoyment of reading itself.

'I never read a book before coming to prison' (HMP Kirkham)

'The book given to me was alright, it was about cowboys and has change[d] my mind into reading more' (HMP Swansea)

'Yes I grew up without books and could not speak properly as a kid so discovering the gift of [a] book has opened up new possibilities' (HMP Kirkham)

Book ownership

As part of the Books Unlocked project, each reading group participant receives a free copy of the novels their group has chosen to keep. Book ownership is "very important" to 41.1% of survey respondents in prisons, and it is "somewhat important" to another 35.6%. Furthermore, 34.7% of respondents thought receiving a free book they were able to keep was an important and valuable aspect of Books Unlocked. Interestingly, students were less likely to say that the book ownership element of the programme was "very important" for them. This may be a reflection of differing environments, with books being less readily available in prisons. Indeed, some of the comments on book ownership show that it is highly valued by a number of prison participants:

'I feel comfort with books around me. I like the feeling of accomplishment'
(HMP New Hall)

'[Owning books] makes me feel happy and [I] like to reread a book or sections of a book at times' (HMP Frankland)

'Receiving a book from [Books Unlocked] to keep was nothing short of joyous'
(HMP Usk)

‘When you have nothing the smallest things mean a great deal more and books I've always enjoyed. Books and owning my own are a massive improvement to my situation’ (HMP Usk)

As well as increasing book ownership amongst the prison population, the programme has also encouraged participants to visit the library with around half of respondents (47.9%) reporting that they visited the library more often after taking part in Books Unlocked than before.

Intellectual and emotional development

Some of the participant testimonies show that Books Unlocked provides a welcome intellectual challenge on the one hand, and an opportunity to develop emotionally on the other, with participants reporting increased levels of empathy and self-awareness.

It is evident that Books Unlocked impacts on learning with participants reporting improved reading skills and confidence after taking part in the programme; 42.5% of participants in prisons said they felt more confident about their reading thanks to Books Unlocked.

‘I [am] not . . . good [at] reading but I [am] getting better because of [B]ooks [U]nlocked’
(HMYOI Deerbolt)

‘[Reading makes me feel] Like I can get to be clever and find out things and learn stuff I didn't know’ (HMP Foston Hall)

‘[Reading makes me feel] Good. Feel that I'm learning and bettering myself. I feel more intelligent and more knowledgeable. Reading and learning is everything to me. I love gaining knowledge and insights. I find it enriching and life affirming (I really do)’ (HMP Swansea)

Research suggests that readers of fiction tend to have better empathy¹, social connectedness², and emotional wellbeing³. Some of the Books Unlocked participants seem to have noticed these effects on themselves. Students taking part in the programme in particular brought up how reading helped them develop more emotional intelligence.

‘[Reading makes me feel] Like I can escape into another world and understand myself and others better’ (Ounsdale High School)

‘It's nice to be immersed in the thoughts [of] many authors and their ability to convey a crafted universe, through what seems like “mere words”, is admirable to read. Sometimes one is left feeling very raw after reading a hard-hitting book, other times it leaves a trail of adrenaline within, hours after the adventure has ended: reading evokes emotions that I otherwise wouldn't feel in my day-to-day life and that is cherishable’ (University Academy Keighley)

¹MAR R., OATLEY K. and PETERSON J.B., *Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes*, published in *Communications*, 2009

² Billington, J. *Reading between the Lines: the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure*, Quick Reads, University of Liverpool, 2015

³ Billington, *Ibid.*, 2015

‘It makes me feel like there's still hope in the world, and the universe, no matter what's happening politically or economically, and it makes me feel like I can go anywhere and do anything when I have a good book in my hand; my mind is limitless, and my body is invincible, and my imagination has no boundaries’
(Macmillan Academy)

This is echoed by some of the prison participants who also make a link with their mental wellbeing and their sense of self which appears to have been strengthened by the books and the book group.

‘[Reading makes me feel] More human. Books ground me in the reality and lives of others. They offer invaluable access to humanity – to its hearts and cultures’
(HMP Frankland)

‘I like the sessions in the library very much and the lady running them listens to us and when I go then I feel like I'm me again and what I have to say is something worth listening to so I like it very much. Thank you for the books you sent us’ (HMP Foston Hall)

‘I really enjoy reading my books. I can read approx 2-3 books per week. I feel it acts as an escape for me. That is a “healthy” escape, this has been something [that] gives me the confidence and determination for the future. I now feel I have a greater purpose’
(HMP Styal)

Conclusion

The findings in this report, composed mostly of testimonies from participants, show that Books Unlocked is achieving its aim of making a positive difference in the lives of prisoners and young offenders. Participants are reading more often and there is an increase among those taking part in reading for enjoyment. That increased wellbeing and enhanced self-esteem are among the consequences of an increase in reading for pleasure is supported by the feedback we have received from those taking part. It is our belief that these benefits will improve the life chances of our participants both inside prison and once they are released.

Many of this year's participants expressed a hope that Books Unlocked would continue and we believe that there is an ongoing need for the programme. Whilst provision exists both within prison education and through third-sector organisations, such as the Shannon Trust, to support those with lower levels of literacy and emergent readers in prisons, current data shows that over 70% of prisoners have literacy at entry level 3 or above⁴. Books Unlocked is therefore in a position to support this largest group of prisoners who have mid to higher levels of literacy but for whom access and encouragement are key. We look forward to taking Books Unlocked forward into the 2017/18 programme year and hopefully beyond.

⁴ Skills Funding Agency, (2015) *OLASS English and maths assessments: participation 2014/15*

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