

Books Through Bars



When people are sent to prison, they are deprived of many things: their freedom, the company of their friends and family, and many of the daily comforts they have enjoyed for most of their lives. In many cases, they are also deprived of something less obvious, but, for many people, just as dear: books. While some prisons have libraries, many do not. Those that do exist are generally poorly stocked and have many fewer titles than a typical public library. This means that an inmate may go many years with limited access to reading material. For a person who loves books or who wishes to learn about the world, this can be a harsh sentence indeed.

However, there is a group in Brooklyn that aims to help inmates receive some of the literature they want. As of 2013, the group, called Books Through Bars, gathers three times a week in the basement of a bookstore that overlooks the city's East River. The basement is small and dimly lit, but the walls are stacked high with wooden shelves, each packed to the brim with books. The books are arranged like a library, by sections. Novels are against one wall, history against another, and self-help and reference books against a third. All of the books are donated by people who believe that inmates, regardless of the crime they committed, should not be deprived of literature.

In the middle of the room is a table, piled high with letters. The letters come from prisons and jails all over the country. Books Through Bars advertises itself in magazines and pamphlets read by inmates. In the ads, they ask inmates to send them requests for books. So, the inmates write in, asking either for specific titles or books on a particular topic. The volunteers then try to match the requests to books in the Books Through Bars library. Each inmate receives two or three

books. When the volunteer has selected the books, he or she wraps them in paper cut from old grocery bags, writes the address of the jail or prison the inmate lives in on the front in black pen, and adds the package to a stack of packages to be mailed. In one corner of the basement are milk crates filled with brown-paper packages, waiting to be taken to the post office.

Since the library is relatively small—it has only a couple thousand books—matching the inmates' requests can sometimes be difficult. One inmate writes in asking for a book about ancient civilizations, like the Mayans and Aztecs.

"To Whom It May Concern," the postcard says. "I would please like some books on Aztec culture or Mayan books. I am real interested in the history of my great ancestors. There is a book called 'Aztec Thought & Culture' by Juan Portillo Leon. If you could please send me a copy of that paperback book or any related to Aztec culture I would really appreciate this. Thank you, Mario."

Since the library doesn't have any of these books, the volunteers find two related books. One is about ancient Greek civilization, while another is about modern Mexico. Neither quite fulfills the inmate's requests, but the volunteers try to get as close as they can.

Requests for books about ancient civilizations, especially from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa are common. Books about psychology, self-help, and radical politics also rank high. In general, though, preferences among inmates vary widely. A man in a low-security jail in Miami wants *Lord of the Flies* and *Who Moved My Cheese?* A man in a maximum security prison in California wants books about meteorites and asteroids. A man serving a triple life sentence in Indiana asks for a copy of Tolstoy's *Master and Man*.

In addition to requests for history or science books, other inmates looking towards their release, ask for books about finding jobs or about taking the GED—a test you can take that is the equivalent of a high school diploma. The single most popular request is for a dictionary. While in prison, many inmates are trying to appeal their cases—meaning that they are asking for the verdict to be overturned. When writing their appeals, they need a dictionary to make sure they spell the words correctly. Others just want to improve their vocabulary.

Most of the inmates take a formal, almost meek tone in their letters. "To Whom It May Concern," begins one. "Firstly, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude for such a program and I would like to thank you in advance for this service, and it should be known that you are making a profound difference in people's lives who are already in a situation where despair and boredom are constant companions." The author goes on to request a copy of *A Lawyer's Life* by Johnnie Cochran.

Among inmates who ask for fiction, fantasy books are the most popular. A man writing from the secure housing unit of Pelican Bay State Prison in California asks for novels by Terry Goodkind and George R.R. Martin. "I spend 23 hours a day in a cell," he writes, "and to keep the reality of this place in check and to maintain a bit of sanity in this dark place, I submerge myself in a world of books."

The letters are almost always handwritten, usually in pencil, on leafs of notebook paper or on the backs of prison scrap -- commissary lists, visitation forms, memos from the warden. One man from Phoenix sends a postcard. On the front is a color photograph of a group of men wearing black-and-white striped uniforms, like convicts in old prison movies. They are huddled under a giant tent, behind a wire fence. The printed legend reads, "Hello from Sunny Arizona!" On the back, a caption explains that these men are inmates in the world's largest tent jail, run by Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Prison officials have the right to deny admittance to books they deem dangerous to their institution or capable of undermining the prisoner's rehabilitation. In such cases, they send the book back with a form letter explaining the reason for the rejection. This reasoning can sometimes seem unsound. An administrator at Northern Correctional Institution in Somers, Connecticut, rejected the primer *Introduction to Psychology* by Ann L. Weber as a threat to security and safety of the prison. A novel by George Orwell called *Burmese Days*, based on the years the famous author spent living in Burma, was rejected by the state of Texas because of similar concerns that it would cause a riot.

Books Through Bars in New York is only one of many groups in dozens of other cities that send books to inmates. While the group in Brooklyn sends books to inmates all over the country, some concentrate mainly on inmates within their state. The volunteers in Books Through Bars hold various views on prisons and inmates. Some believe that the sentencing of inmates is often too harsh, while others believe it is mostly fair. However, what binds the volunteers together is a belief that all of the inmates still have a right to read books.