

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

Book Clubs for Inmates

Jaspreet S. Tambar

Established in 2009, *Book Clubs for Inmates* is a national literacy program aimed at improving the social lives of prisoners across the country. This registered charity has its root in an experiment performed by its now executive director, Carol Finlay. This experiment probably would not go by the name of novelty, nor thankfully by pity, but rather by civility, because while there was a precedent for Finlay's project in the form of a book club at a federal institution in Edmonton, that small and underfunded project only provided what is essentially children's literature to its members. Finlay's convictions to respect and moral honesty led her to a challenge, and for her first trial, at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ontario, she assigned her small group to read *Angela's Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt. Since that day in August of 2009, *Book Clubs for Inmates* has grown to be composed of dozens of volunteers, engaging with the lives of many hundreds of prisoners, distributing thousands of books to penitentiaries from British Columbia to Atlantic Canada.

Respect and moral honesty are rarely to pecuniary advantage, and so one of the greatest hurdles to establishing a literacy program in prisons was the matter of funding. Organizations of kindred passions, like the John Howard Society and the Prison Fellowship of Canada, were in spite of their offers themselves in precarious financial situations. After registering as a non-profit organization, *BCFI* looked to private donors and found relief in a host of concerned minds extending generous hands. That the organization is funded entirely by private donors speaks to not only the clarity of Finlay's message, which has drawn such luminaries as the Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson and Brian Greenspan to her board of directors, but also to the deeply fixed assumption of civil discourse for all members of a democratic society, which assumption *BCFI* has comprehended as its principal mission for those members of our society who have not traditionally been granted this dignity.

Because of its particular focus on literacy, *BCFI* is but one response to a disturbing desideratum in both the spiritual and social lives of prisoners, and the efficacy of the correctional facilities that house them. Last year, *BCFI* conducted a survey of its members and of those who responded, 90% reported an improvement in their communication skills, 93% reported that

they felt that the book clubs would help them from reoffending, and 56% reported an improvement of their conflict resolution skills (in Heathcote, 2015, p. 76). These results are consonant with the findings of academic research that has definitively concluded the benefits of literacy to prisoners' health and reintegration. A report published by the Correctional Service of Canada, citing a wealth of research that links literacy with improved social behaviour and mental health, states, "The costs of providing literacy training to adult offenders are far outweighed by the benefits — to prison management, prisoners, and society in general", and that "[i]t is in society's best interest to make the prison population productive. To do so requires making offenders functionally literate" (Ryan, 1991, pp. 17-23). Such efforts are rare in the Canadian penitentiary system and for *BCFI's* endeavours its founder recently received the CSC's prestigious Charles Taylor award.

Literature, after all, is not just an escape from life that induces one to quixotically tilt his or her lance toward windmills, but, following the famous Horatian adage, it does have the power to both "instruct and to please". On the contrary to the notion of escape the humanist principles that define university education, an education that has otherwise never been afforded to the majority of prisoners who populate our prison system, literature is actually a way *into* examining and understanding life. Reading fiction develops not only our semantic vocabularies, but also our terms for comprehending and engaging with a multitude of characters and situations, at the end of which sympathy and understanding are not guaranteed but certainly made possible. Prose literature analysis thus entails problem solving, and both are vital skills of supreme advantage to any prisoner and thus also to the community into which he or she hopes to be released.

REFERENCES

- Heathcote, Isobel W. (ed.) (2015) *Books Clubs at the Big House: The Story of Book Clubs for Inmates: Changing Lives, One Book at a Time*, Bracebridge: Wyndham Research Press.
- Ryan, T.A. (1991) "Literacy Training and Reintegration of Offenders", *FORUM: On Corrections Research*, 3(1): 17-23.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Book Clubs for Inmates
1 Bedford Road, Suite 2704
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M5R 2B5

bookclubsforinmates@gmail.com