

Reading in the Pig Pen of Repression

Cam, from Regina Books through Bars

My name is Cam and I live in Regina, Saskatchewan. Along with a couple of friends, I helped form Regina Books through Bars (RBTB) in 2007. In the past two years, the group has collected thousands of used books and sent these, plus thousands of dollars worth of newer books to prisoners free of charge.

I got involved with RBTB because I saw first-hand how books can ease the grind of prison life. A couple of years before forming the group I was stuck in an Italian penitentiary for taking part in an “illegal demonstration” against the rise of fascism. I was incarcerated at Bergamo penitentiary, referred to as the “italiano Abu Ghraib” by fellow prisoners. Bergamo penitentiary is a mega-prison that warehouses thousands. I was locked in my cell for 21 hours a day. Like most prisons, it was boring as hell with nothing to do except watch television and chat with homesick cellmates. The majority of the prisoners at Bergamo are migrants from outside of Italy who will be deported to “their country of origin” once they have completed their sentence.

One day I was complaining to my cellmate Vaz about how bored I was. Vaz is serving an 18 year sentence for possession of a quarter pound of hash. He suggested I check out Bergamo’s prison library and told me how it was an oasis in this pig pen of repression. He explained how the books provide him an educational outlet he needs at times. The next day I found the library and went inside. To say I was pleasantly surprised would be an understatement. The library was flush. It had been built up over the years by the local anarchist black cross network and was brimming with books. I borrowed a couple books that day and started to read and read and read some more.

The books helped pass the long days and I soon made a promise to myself: when I got out of there I would start sending books to prisoners and never stop. Once I did get out of Bergamo, I came back to Canada and moved to Regina. I started to research the prison libraries in Saskatchewan. The news was quite grim. The libraries, if they existed at all, were in rough shape. The books that prisoners were given access to were a hodgepodge of westerns, harlequin love novels, readers’ digests from the 1960s and newer faith-based books. So I decided to organize a book drive and write a couple grant proposals. Today, the project is still going strong as our work continues.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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