



The Ballad OF READING IN GAOL

This is the 21st century. Imagine a first world library without the internet. Imagine a home without it; a home you can't leave. Sue Lavery has worked in an organisation where this is the norm for six years, and Fiona Blackburn worked in the same organisation for a short period while Sue was on leave. This organisation is a prison. Imagine this and you glimpse the importance of books in a prison library.

Detainees read to escape the boredom and stress of incarceration; to get through the day, to keep in touch with family outside by reading the same books, to get information or engage in self-directed learning.

Some users have difficulty reading, some don't usually use libraries, and others are pursuing tertiary study. Detainees also use the library to socialise, to gain currency and favours, and to mentor other detainees. The collection in this library,

which Sue established, resembles a public library collection; its use resembles your average public library too. This normality in an abnormal environment is integral to its value.

The library contributes to rehabilitation by providing employment and skills that could be pursued outside for a small number of detainees. It creates a situation where detainees have to act as members of a community if they are to gain ongoing benefit – to maintain the reading pool, books must be returned. For some detainees whose lives have consisted of grabbing everything possible and hanging on to it, using a lending library may be the first time they don't keep something for themselves alone.

All the myths about prison are true, but, there is a human face behind every offence; for example, Fiona saw one detainee forego parole to help their child cope with prison. Loss of liberty is a punishment few non-detainees can conceive;

other deprivation without cause is excessive. And the library industry asserts everyone's right to information.

Remember why prisons exist and why people are there, then imagine offering a chance for normal interaction, a small link to outside, a small contribution to easing a large problem as well as books for loan, and you begin to glimpse the complexity, challenge and satisfaction of working in a prison library.

The security and good order of the prison is paramount. Collection development, for example, builds a comprehensive representation of knowledge, accommodates detainees' reading preferences and requests and, importantly, avoids providing information that may contribute to an incident among detainees or between detainees and officers.

In a prison library, you will probably be working as a sole professional or paraprofessional. We need robust strategies for remaining motivated and keeping abreast of industry developments while maintaining an acceptable level of access for patrons.

'... books provide an escape to faraway places, to be part of a bigger story, and to escape the reality that is our current predicament.'

We have to be flexible. Sue expected to create a library that operated in pretty similar ways to those she had worked in for years, albeit without the technology. She learned quickly that due date slips in books are also excellent cigarette papers for detainees without the money to buy any. She instead made lists of who had borrowed what, written out by hand.

She came to rely on the bigger picture. Books would come back, often via amazingly circuitous routes. Books are a currency, shared and circulated outside the official borrowing system (meaning a user-to-population rate that some public libraries would envy).

Ultimately, what matters is that people are reading.

Fiona learned that offering a range of options to a patron's question could be exasperating or confusing – they just want an answer, or a book. Public librarians will recognise the short visits most patrons make, to borrow and leave. Fiona also realised that, initially, detainees preferred to ask the assistant, because he knew the collection well and because he was one of their own.

Sue promoted the library and built relationships with detainees serving long terms – community engagement librarians will recognise the strategy of engaging leaders and key individuals.

During new officers' orientation, we emphasised the difference a detainee who is reading, rather than bored or

making trouble or using drugs, could make to an officer's job. Librarians who meet regularly with stakeholders would recognise the strategy of demonstrating value. Ultimately, you work with your community.

Prisons run on rules, the cooperation of detainees and civility. For the safety of all, you adhere to the rules. Giving out slips of paper listing overdue books can see very prompt returns from people whom you might expect not to care. You follow up your promises. You rarely turn away a customer. You don't call anyone a liar but you don't connive at manipulation. You co-create a community, encouraging detainees to think of the library as theirs.

We learned about prisons and how to work in an alien environment. We witnessed the lives of detainees. We think the skills of a teacher librarian, with their expertise in supporting literacy acquisition, and those of a public librarian, with their experience in dealing with all members of the public, are a good mix. We now talk about the functioning of prisons and the value of libraries in that context. Being greeted in the street by someone who has finished their time is a professional and human pleasure.

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