Books Unlocked

Exploring ‘Pigeon English’ with Prison and Community Reading Groups in Staffordshire.

‘That is one deep pigeon!’

Young Offender, HMYOI Brinsford
‘It is easy to see why ‘Pigeon English’ was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2011. I feel very proud to have had the chance to read it and to be able to say that I have now read a Man Booker author.’

Young Offender, HMYOI Brinsford

Report by Alan G. Smith; Staffordshire Prison Library Service.
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Introduction

Books Unlocked is a reading initiative involving prison and community reading groups. It was delivered by Staffordshire County Council’s Prison Library Service with support from The National Literacy Trust.

Staffordshire County Council Prison Library Service delivers library services in the six public sector prisons and one of the private prisons located in the County. The service is part of Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service.

The National Literacy Trust is a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK.

Aims and Objectives

- To distribute a copy of ‘Pigeon English’ by Stephen Kellman to a significant number of Young Offenders at HMYOI Brinsford
- To form a focus reading group in the prison library to discuss and evaluate the book and for Young Offenders studying English to read the book in class
- To engage an adult male prison, three schools and a public library reading group in reading the novel
- To share opinions of the novel between the prison reading groups and community reading groups
- Break down barriers so Young Offenders feel part of the wider community
- Build confidence and self-esteem
- Enhance basic skills to enable access to future learning opportunities and employability
- Build on partnerships within both the prison and public library services
- Raise the profile of the prison library

Partners

Staffordshire Prison Library Service
The National Literacy Trust
The Booker Foundation: Working to promote the art of literature for the public benefit.
HMYOI Brinsford: Unconvicted & Convicted 18 – 21 years Young Offenders Prison
HMP Featherstone: Adult Male Cat C Closed Training Establishment.
Codsall Community High School: Specialist Maths & Computing College

Ounsdale High School: 11 – 18 Mixed Comprehensive Secondary School

Heath Park School: 11 – 18 Mixed Comprehensive Secondary School

Kinver Public Library: Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service.

Background

The project had originally been proposed in 2012 by Diana Stewart, Project Manager for The National Literacy Trust (NLT). At that time a number of prisons were going to be involved with ‘Books Unlocked’ including HMYOI Brinsford represented by Staffordshire County Council’s Prison Library Service (PLS). However it was quickly realised that because Brinsford was a Young Offender institution it would be much better to delay their involvement until the second phase of the project in Autumn 2013. This would enable more funding to be secured and also allow HMYOI Brinsford to be the focus of the second phase of the project. HMYOI Brinsford Library Supervisor Alan Smith remained onboard during this transitional period establishing a link between the NLT and National Prison Radio. This has led to the broadcast of ‘Pigeon English’ in a significant number of prisons in England, enabling emergent readers to be supported reading the novel.

From October 2013 Staffordshire Prison Library Service has worked closely with the National Literacy Trust, particularly Diana Stewart and Penne Wallis who have both project managed ‘Books Unlocked’ to ensure its success in HMYOI Brinsford.

The project was originally intended to focus solely on the young offenders at HMYOI Brinsford reading a Man Booker nominated title with support from teaching resources provided by the NLT. However, building on the success of a previous project called ‘The Inside-Outside Reading Group’ Alan proposed that the impact of reading ‘Pigeon English’ would be greatly enhanced if the comments and opinions of the young offenders could be shared with other reading groups from the wider community, including both teenage and adult readers.

It was decided that Staffordshire PLS would contact schools, public libraries and adult offenders, through the Over 50’s reading group at HMP Featherstone, to see if they would be willing to take part.

The decision to incorporate several other reading groups would demonstrate that the young offenders at Brinsford and the adults at HMP Featherstone can be part of a much larger project taking place outside the prison and that their input into the discussions will be of valued importance. This is highlighted
perfectly by Joan Morgan, Deputy Head of Milton Keynes College in HMYOI Brinsford reviewing the library focus group:

‘Discussion between chapters was rich and thought-provoking. Everyone’s view was listened to and considered with interest and politeness. They all listened intently when we referred to parts of the chapters, searching for meaning and they all came up with their own interpretations of the text. Some of their depth of thinking left Alan and I speechless. Some confident members of the group read aloud, and they read well. All listened intently and quietly.’

Joan Morgan, Milton Keynes College, HMYOI Brinsford

Following discussions with public library colleagues it was agreed that Kinver Library, with a well established ‘Tuesday Morning’ adult reading group, should be the public library partner.

Contact was made with three schools: Codsall Community High School, Ounsdale High School and Heath Park School as the age range of pupils, 13 – 18, incorporates the age range of some of the young offenders at HMYOI Brinsford. The head teachers were all very interested in the project and keen for groups of students to be involved in this unique partnership between the prison library, school and public library. It was agreed that a mixed reading group of between 10 – 15 students would be formed in each school.

‘When the school was approached to take part in working with the young offenders from HMYOI Brinsford we said yes immediately. We had worked with Alan the previous year on the ‘Inside-Outside Project’ and we thought his enthusiasm and commitment as a representative of Staffordshire Prison Library Service was second to none. The school and sixth form volunteers saw this as a great opportunity to become involved in another real life project and also the students felt it was a worthwhile and valued use of their time. There was a range of year 12 and 13 students of mixed gender who were studying a wide breadth of subjects at A level and BTEC/OCR Nationals. They were not all studying English/Literature, what they did have in common was a passion for reading and furthering their education.’

Paul Johnson: Assistant Head Teacher Codsall High School

The Over 50’s reading group at HMP Featherstone’s response to the proposal was extremely positive and the group felt that having the chance to share their views and opinions of the book with a large variety of people would be very interesting.

‘The Over 50’s Reading Group at Featherstone is a very popular group and the chance to enhance that groups reading and allow them to contribute to a project that seems to me to be quite unique, was one I simply couldn’t pass up. We had been part of the 2013 ‘Inside-Outside’ reading project with Alan so once again the men were all enthusiastic to take part, and read the novel. They engaged during the evaluation session and appreciated being asked to contribute their thoughts and feelings about the book.’

Adeline Fergus: Library Supervisor: HMP Featherstone
Delivery

Prior to reading ‘Pigeon English’ each group was visited by Alan so that the project could be discussed fully with both staff and participants. This helped to ensure that everyone was clear on the aims and objective of the project and people were still happy to be part of it. Individual’s feelings with regard to how to evaluate the novel were also sounded out during this initial stage. All of the groups expressed a preference for oral rather than written evaluation.

The reading groups began to meet in February with the focus group in HMYOI Brinsford Library (comprising ten young offenders) being the first to read ‘Pigeon English’ over the course of one week (10th February – 18th February). The group met each day arriving promptly at the Prison Library for 9am. Joan Morgan and Alan Smith led the group and refreshments were provided by the prison catering team. Each session lasted two hours (including a ten minute coffee break) and always involved members of the group reading aloud alongside Joan and Alan. Every chapter was discussed in detail using the resources provided by the NLT.

During the week the group was visited by Rachel Arnold from Ounslowdhe High School, Paul Johnson, Susan Freeman and Laura Nicholson from Codhall Community High School and Ministry of Justice Chief Executive Officer Michael Spurr. All of whom joined the group in reading ‘Pigeon English’ and discussing the novel. The group formed a close bond and felt part of something very special. The feeling of community was enhanced by the visitors being prepared to come and meet the group.

Penne Wallis from the National Literacy Trust attended the final day of the reading group to give out certificates and to discuss the impact of the book on the Young Offenders involved.

‘I am extremely proud of the work of the Library and the Young Offenders involved in ‘Books Unlocked’ particularly the mature attitude of each group member in realising they were being given a wonderful opportunity to share their opinion with the wider community. You have to remember these lads will have never done anything like this before so initiatives like this that challenge them are of significant importance in addressing their offending behaviour.’

HMYOI Brinsford Governor: Mr Russell Trent

Each member of the group was given a ‘shout out’ on National Prison Radio for their achievements.

At HMYOI Brinsford copies of ‘Pigeon English’ were also distributed to all the young offenders studying English and also to anyone who was interested in reading the novel. Young Offenders read the book in class with the support of their teachers to ensure that those students, whose literacy skills might have precluded them from reading the novel, were still able to be part of the project. Many wrote written reviews of the book as part of their course work.

Over 80 Young Offenders took part in ‘Books Unlocked’ and completed reading ‘Pigeon English.’
During late February to early March the reading groups at Codsall Community High School, Ounsdale High School, and Heath Park School met and discussed ‘Pigeon English’ on a weekly basis. The students took ownership of the group and decided to expand their oral evaluation of the text by devising a series of questions and creating a feedback form to record their thoughts. At the end of the evaluation session all the students involved were presented with an individual certificate to add to their personal records of achievement.

‘I know Alan through a writers group we both attend and I was thrilled when he asked if my students would like to take part in this project. He was even willing to come in and meet them all before and after the project which I thought was very committed and meant that my students felt fully part of the wider project. They all enjoyed the challenge of reading their first Man Booker title and the debates that we had were really well balanced and great fun to be part of. It made you forget that you were their teacher listening to them all being so enthusiastic and opinionated about the book. We are all very proud of their contribution and very proud to have been part of such a unique project.’

**Stephen Blower, Heath Park School**

The Kinver public library group and Over 50’s group at HMP Featherstone read ‘Pigeon English’ during their March reading group meetings.

‘Our Tuesday morning group were thrilled when Alan asked them to be part of this project. He has already set up a link between them and the reading group at HMP Featherstone; they recommend reads to each other, so Pigeon English felt like a natural next step forward. I think everyone felt proud to be contributing to a wider community project. I’ve never heard of anything like this before and I think it deserves celebrating that someone thought to do this and bring everyone together from all walks of life.’

**Elizabeth Frost: Kinver Library Supervisor**

‘Pigeon English was not the type of book I would have chosen and I didn’t like the language used but I realised that it did add to the contents of the story. It was both funny and sad and I really liked Harri. The ending was unexpected. The author wrote very well as a child and overall I enjoyed it. I would certainly recommend the book to younger readers.’

**Kinver Library ‘Tuesday Morning Group Member’**
'I scored the book 3/5 as I enjoyed it once I got to grips with the language used. Ghanaian slang! It would have benefited from a key or footnotes. It was both funny and shocking at times but Harri came across as a naïve young lad who was trying his best to understand the world around him which was very different from the one he had so recently left. His descriptions of everyday events such as going on the Tube were well observed and hilarious and his interpretations of people’s actions underlined his innocence and vulnerability. The storyline was totally believable considering recent gangland stabbings and murders but the pigeon’s views scattered throughout the book in italics I found both irritating and distracting from the flow of the narrative. Ultimately it was a very sad story of a bright likeable young lad struggling with growing up in a background of poverty, alcoholism, drug dealing, violence, street gangs and crime. It was thought provoking and an insight into an underworld which few of us have little experience, but one I fear our fellow readers in HMYOI Brinsford and HMP Featherstone may have encountered.’

Tuesday Morning Reading Group Member

By the end of March Alan had met with all the separate groups for evaluation sessions and to bring the project to its conclusion.

**Evaluation**

Since all the groups had expressed a preference for oral evaluation it was decided that an informal approach would gain the best response from the groups. It was agreed that each evaluation meeting would take place in the area where that particular reading group had been meeting and also at the time of day that they had been meeting. This would help to ensure that the group felt comfortable and that there would be an element of control to each session. Each evaluation was freely adapted to suit that particular group. Five key themes had been identified for exploration with all five groups so that while discussion would vary from group to group some consistency would be achieved.

The five key themes were:

1. Overall Review of the novel
2. The meaning of the Pigeon
3. Harri & his family
4. The Dell Farm Crew
5. Guessing the opinions of the other reading groups,

Other key influences considered before evaluation included:

- Ensuring that everyone had a chance to comment and that the discussion was not dominated by one or two strong personalities.
- Anxiety of participants i.e. giving answers they feel we would like to hear; speaking out in a group.
- To be certain that participation was voluntary.
- In the case of the two prison groups factors within the prison itself had to be considered i.e. any changes to regime or disturbances on the
Wings would have an influence over the mood of individuals within the group.

Each evaluation was led by Alan Smith (Penne Walls was also present at the Codsall High School Evaluation) and began with a general discussion, often about reading or on a topical subject. This would invariably get people talking and develop a sense of trust between the group members. When it was felt that the discussion was peaking 'Pigeon English' would be introduced into the conversation and each of the five key themes would be explored and debated. Below are examples of reactions from all six groups to the key themes of the novel.

1. Overall Review of the Book

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<td>HMYOI Brinsford</td>
<td>'I honestly think Pigeon English is a fantastic book to read as a teenager. I can easily identify with the gangs on the estate and the situation Harri is in. At times it made us laugh out loud, at other moments we all fell silent and shocked by what was happening. It actually makes you reassess yourself and the things you used to find funny to do with your mates, suddenly don’t seem so funny any more. The moment when Harri knocks over the old man…I would have cheered at that a few years ago. Not now, it made me feel sick.'</td>
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<td>Codsall Community High School</td>
<td>'Pigeon English is an inspiring book. We all really enjoyed reading it. The story was very truthful, and we learnt about the real life death of Damilola Taylor. We all found the ending of the story sad because he gets killed and I think it made us all realise how easily it would be to get caught up with the wrong people. There are members of our group who can slightly relate to the Dell Farm Crew, and I think they will change their ways now they’ve read this and seen the darker side of gangs.'</td>
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<td>Ounsdale High School &amp; Heath Park School</td>
<td>'This was a really well written and shocking book. None of us could believe the level of violence and bad language in a teenage title. The slang was accurate but it did make the flow of the text difficult because anyone who isn’t familiar with modern slang will struggle. Plus I think some of the slang is relevant only to London as there were phrases we couldn’t decipher. We all agreed that it is a Man Booker title because of the paragraphs featuring the Pigeon. We also thought it was the type of book you would have to re-read to get more out of it each time.'</td>
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<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>'This book really divided us. Some felt that it was poorly written and trying too hard to be intellectual, others felt that Stephen Kellman got the mixture just right. We all found the ending shocking, though we found it very difficult to relate to the main character because of his age. There was a strong sense of Urban Social Realism which we all agreed was believable. However, none of us thought it was a Man Booker title.'</td>
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### Kinver Public Library

‘If we’re honest I think this is a title that we wouldn’t have normally read as part of our reading group, but Alan’s very good at persuading even the most reluctant reader to give it ago…and I have to say he was right, we had a really enjoyable debate about the merits of the book. The language and slang were hard to decipher for some of us, but the general theme of alienation, immigration and choosing the right path struck home with all of us. We all agreed that we have been lucky to never experience anything like this in our lives, but we know there are estates like this all over England. Thought-provoking, brave and the Pigeon elevates this to another plane of thinking.’

### 2. The meaning of the Pigeon

**HMYOI Brinsford**

‘This really divided all of us. Some thought it was a Guardian Angel, or the Angel of Death. One of us said it was the soul of the dead boy (because the Pigeon walked through his blood) giving advice to Harri. I thought it was Harri’s conscience. Then — suggested that Harri had a split personality and that blew us all away…he’s the Pigeon talking to himself!’

**Codsall Community High School**

‘It’s the Angel of Death coming to take Harri away. He’s giving him lots of chances to escape but ultimately he is going to claim him and take him to Heaven.’

**Ounsdale High School & Heath Park School**

‘We thought the Pigeon could be a symbol for Urban Society, like it is the voice of the community trying to point out the errors of gangs like the Dell Farm Crew and how they are ruining the estate for decent people.’

**HMP Featherstone**

‘That b***dy Pigeon. We could have spent a whole day just debating what on earth it was meant to be. That’s just Stephen Kellman aiming for the Booker prize (laughter). The story is good, but if you removed the Pigeon it would flow a lot easier and I think the Pigeon will make a lot of readers give up on the plot.’

**Kinver Library Adult Reading Group**

‘We had all begun to think that the Man Booker awards had dumbed down it’s criteria for entries until the Pigeon made an appearance in the story. Incredible, thought-provoking and open to so much interpretation. The Pigeon’s segments could be a small book of philosophy in themselves.’
### 3. Harri and his family

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<td>HMYOI Brinsford</td>
<td>‘There is a theme of superstitions throughout the book. Harri is always considering them, and these come through via the influence of his family and his upbringing in Ghana. We all thought that this is probably the reason the Pigeon’s paragraphs are so meaningful as well. Harri is an innocent little boy trapped between the gulf of his family’s cultural heritage and the new Urban world he is forced to call home. The Dell Farm Crew will become his new family and they start to take on more importance than his Mom and his sister. His separation is made all the harder by the long-distance calls to his Dad and his younger sister.’</td>
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<td>Codsall Community High School</td>
<td>‘Harri’s Sister is a ‘push-over’ easily manipulated and weak. Dean (Harri’s friend) shows real commitment and friendship to Harri (unlike the Dell Farm Crew) Dean helps guide Harri through his experience in the book. Miquita wants to be cool, but she has no loyalty and tries to manipulate Harri in her world.’</td>
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<td>Ounsdale High School &amp; Heath Park School</td>
<td>‘Auntie Sonia is obviously caught in a terrible situation of domestic violence and hiding from immigration officials. As a result she spoils Harri and the children as a way of distracting herself from the awfulness of her own life.’</td>
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<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>‘Harri’s Mother tries to keep him safe and teach him what’s morally right. This is particularly clear in the scene where he is throwing stones at the bus and his Mom gets off and sees him. Unfortunately because his sister is friends with Miquita, the wrong influences start to have access to his life and his morals. There are great cause and effect moments in the text as well. Like the fact that the Dell Farm Crew make Harri fearful but determined and Baby Agnes makes him her protector. Very clever if you read between the lines you are seeing a young boy becoming a man.’</td>
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<td>Kinver Library Adult Reading Group</td>
<td>‘Baby Agnes is the one person in Harri’s life who affects him more than the influence of the Dell Farm Crew. He would give up his life for her if he could, which is prophetic now we know the ending of the book.’</td>
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### 4. The Dell Farm Crew

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<td>HMYOI Brinsford</td>
<td>‘This was hard for us to pass a judgement on them. Most of us can relate to a gang like this, even if we haven’t been part of one, we can see the attraction, the family element. I think what Pigeon English does so well, is to show you the savage side of gangs and make you feel ashamed and even feel like these lads and girls are all very sad being part of something so negative. No one is happy in that gang, and clearly at the end of the book it is only going to get even worse for them or they will end up in prison like us.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Codsall Community High School</td>
<td>‘At the start of the story they are potentially Harri’s new friends and family, but by the end they have become his deadliest enemies.’</td>
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<td>Ounsdale High School &amp; Heath Park School</td>
<td>‘Harri longs to be part of their gang. He can see that through fear they have gained peoples respect and he wants that to be the case for him as well. He also sees them as his protectors in the way that he sees himself protecting Baby Agnes.’</td>
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<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>‘Harri naturally turns to the estate gang because he is too young to realise that they are actually evil people. He just sees them as cool and appearing to be respected and in charge of everyone else. Because he is younger than his sister he sees himself at the bottom of the household (Baby Agnes is many miles away) but because his Dad isn’t with them, he wants to take on the mantle of the man of the house. Sadly he is watching the wrong male models, and thinking that he has to emulate them in order to get on in life.’</td>
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<td>Kinver Library Adult Reading Group</td>
<td>‘When you’ve never encountered peer pressure from gangs, it’s hard to understand how someone could be dragged into this world and think that being in a gang would be a really fabulous thing to be in. We all know that the very best man and woman are those who stand alone, but I guess if you’re a weaker minded person you would think that being in a gang is the best way to get respect from people. It’s all about cowardice really.’</td>
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<td>5. Guessing the Opinions of the Other Groups</td>
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<td>HMYOI Brinsford</td>
<td>‘The teenagers in the three schools will enjoy this far more than the adult reading groups, even the Featherstone group won’t like the story as much as we did. I think you have to be young to get the influence of the gangs and the slang.’</td>
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<td>Codsall Community High School</td>
<td>‘I really want to hear all the other groups’ opinions, it’s such a shame we can’t all meet and have a whole group discussion on this. I want to think that we’ve studied the book and answered it all well…but I have a feeling the Young Offenders will have a better understanding of gangs and slang and life on estates like this, so they will be answering more honestly because they have lived in that world.’</td>
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<td>Ounsdale High School &amp; Heath Park School</td>
<td>‘I think the older groups will hate it because of the slang…and older people think all teenagers are in gangs so this story will just confirm that for them!’</td>
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<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>‘I think every single group will debate the meaning of the Pigeon. I think we’ll all have some really interesting opinions on what those sections actually meant. I don’t think the lads at Brinsford will have gone into as much...’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kinver Library Adult Reading Group</td>
<td>‘The school groups will look at the text academically unfortunately. They will be so indoctrinated by their study of English they won’t be able to separate and just give the book their opinion without thinking what an examiner would be looking for from their answers. I really think the Young Offenders are going to surprise us and have the best quotes and answers to this evaluation. In fact, I’m convinced that’s what’s going to happen. Our group and the Over 50’s group at Featherstone will have a very similar take on it, but that’s generational.’</td>
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### Impact of the project

Participation in the ‘Books Unlocked’ project has had a huge effect on all those involved and positive outcomes are evident for the prisoners, prison libraries, public libraries and staff and students at Codsall Community High School, Ounsdale High School and Heath Park School. The project has helped to break down barriers between the prison community and the local community and has helped to raise the self-esteem of both the young offenders and adult prisoners who took part, as they have made substantial contributions to a wider project.

“Books Unlocked has been a rewarding and enlightening experience. Who would have thought that a group of young offenders, who between them previously had read an amount of books that could be counted on the fingers of one hand, could engage so intently, and with such enjoyment into a project like this?”

**Joan Morgan, Milton Keynes College**

The Over 50’s group at HMP Featherstone felt that it was an important opportunity to communicate their experience to the Young Offenders in the hope that it might help to break the cycle of crime.

‘Any book dealing with the tragic side of gangs should be read by young people, and particularly Young Offenders. We can see how their lives are going to spiral, because there are adults in here who were part of gangs and are now looking at long term sentences. I think giving us the chance to share opinions with others, particularly those who have no experience of prison at all, is really important.’

**Prisoner, HMP Featherstone**

The young offenders at HMYOI Brinsford responded positively to the knowledge that older prisoners as well as teenagers their own age had read the book and passed comment. They also felt the comradeship that had developed between the members of the Prison Library Focus group was something they would never forget.
‘We all signed each others copies of the book at the end of the week, even Alan and Joan signed ours. It was really special, we’d become like a little fellowship and we all said that in years to come, when we are all long away from HMP Brinsford we would get Pigeon English out to read and see all those names and remember. Only we’d know that we were a prison reading group.’

**Young Offender, HMYOI Brinsford**

Codsall Community High School, Ounsdale High School and Heath Park School students felt that the project had helped them to understand more about the background and situations of young offenders and prisoners.

The students gained so much from the experience, ranging from debating and discussing the key issues within the book. Listening carefully to other peoples opinions gave them an insight into new ideas and different perspectives which they may not have previously thought about. The students had to think for themselves and reflect from one meeting to the next and be prepared to share their ideas with their peers as well as outside guests. All students gained in different ways but all commented on what an enjoyable and worthwhile experience it had been and would recommend others becoming involved if the opportunity arose again. They commented on how their confidence had improved but also showed an interest in what the Young Offenders thought of their opinions on the text, despite not being able to meet them face to face.

**Paul Johnson: Assistant Head Teacher**

‘Having always regarded reading as an essential part of my everyday life, I was really excited to get on board with the ‘Books Unlocked’ project. I was lucky enough to be able to visit the reading group at HMYOI Brinsford along with my colleagues. I found it fascinating how effectively this particular book had gripped those who were reading it and they were all eager to know where our group at Codsall High School had gotten up to and what the students thought of it. Despite never meeting, both groups automatically wanted each other’s perspectives to add to their own; I found this remarkable. I myself read the book in only a couple of sittings and fell in love with the witty and inquisitive protagonist, Harrison. Our students at Codsall struggled with the written dialect and to begin with couldn’t understand why a book needed to be written in anything other than perfectly formed English. This led to an interesting and important debate; especially as we told our students how some of the group in HMYOI Brinsford knew the slang words Harrison used and even corrected and challenged the author’s use of them in several places in the novel. Pigeon English was an exceptional choice of book for this project as it took our 6th Formers out of their comfort Zone and into an environment and style they were not entirely comfortable with. I believe everyone, including staff, had something to learn from this experience and for me, it reaffirmed my belief in how important it is for young adults to continue reading books that will challenge their existing perceptions and to more importantly'}
discuss these with others who can add to their knowledge. I found the project a huge success and I hope to involve myself in similar projects in the future.’

Laura Nicholson: Sixth Form Learning Mentor, Codsall Community High School

“We have never done anything like this at Ounsdale before, but we had already worked with Alan on a creative writing project which had been a great success. The chance to work with him again and get a group of students to contribute to ‘Books Unlocked’ was too good an opportunity to miss. We worked hard in putting together a focus group of teenage boys who are often hard to engage. We thought the kudos that they would receive from sharing their opinion with older prisoners and Young Offenders would be the carrot to get them involved; which it was. Once they started reading ‘Pigeon English’ they forgot about that and focused on the joy of reading a challenging book. We certainly hope these lads will now go on to read more.’

Rachel Arnold and Gemma Hand, Ounsdale School, Wombourne

Kinver Public Library adult reading group felt privileged to take part in a project that was so inclusive, that it was good to read a book which they would not normally have read and to be able to give their views on the text.

“This has been something very different for us. We’re certainly not stuck in our ways, but we do like to know what’s upcoming on our reading list, so when Alan turned up and threw in this curveball we were probably a little bit unsure as it really isn’t the type of book many of us would choose to read. Fair play to him though, he sold us on the idea and we’re really glad he did. Great to be involved in something you hope may change lives.’

Member of Kinver Library’s ‘Tuesday Morning Group’

Conclusion

From The ‘Books Unlocked’ project an insight was gained into the varying ways in which a single novel can be interpreted across a broad spectrum of age-ranges and cultural backgrounds. It was also observed that barriers can easily be broken between groups of teenagers within a young offenders’ prison and those who are in formal education within the community as all the opinions of the participants in the reading groups were valued and insightful.

Each group was able to learn from the other and this has improved self-esteem amongst the prison groups and also enhanced the learning of the community groups.
The young offenders at HMYOI Brinsford and the adult prisoners at HMP Featherstone have gained self-confidence and a sense of worth by participating in a project which has reached beyond the walls of the prison and had an impact in the wider community. This will have an impact on their lives after prison when they return to that community.

All the groups have enhanced their listening and social skills by being part of a group and taking other peoples thoughts and opinions on board.

The evaluations have shown that the majority who read ‘Pigeon English’ enjoyed the novel and are looking forward to reading Stephen Kellman’s next novel.

The Focus group in HMYOI Brinsford Library all signed each others copies of ‘Pigeon English’ at the final meeting. It was felt that in the future when their various sentences were complete and they were long away from HMYOI Brinsford they would always be able to re-read the novel and see all their names together. This way they would never forget that they had been part of ‘Books Unlocked.’

‘The Brinsford Prison Library group made new friends; there was no animosity in the group. It was a positive, warm learning environment. For me, having been in teaching for more years than I care to remember, it was a rewarding experience. I entered the profession to ‘Make a Difference’ and I firmly believe that with ‘Books Unlocked’ I have helped to do exactly that’

Joan Morgan, Milton Keynes College

‘Books Unlocked has been a wonderful project to be involved with. It has taken a great deal of planning and a lot of commitment from all our partners and the result has been a success we can all be very proud of. I would like to personally thank Joan Morgan at HMYOI Brinsford who worked with me during the focus group meetings and encouraged and engaged the group with such enthusiasm and professionalism. It has been a joy to work with Codsall Community High School again, and I am thrilled that Ounsdale High School and Heath Park School also came onboard.

Our library reading group is something I will never forget, and one of the many reasons why I love being involved in projects like this.

Alan Smith, Library Supervisor HMYOI Brinsford

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All of the reading groups who took part.

Contact
alanGsmith@staffordshire.gov.uk