Films Unlocked
Prison movie club helps build bridges between prisoners and the community

Alan Smith

An alarm bell sounds at HMP Brinsford. Every radio in the prison echoes the call, including mine. Fourteen heads in the library turn to me, the librarian, with a look of intrigue and excitement. ‘It’s a fight,’ someone says and three teenagers clump the desk with their fists in delight. The rest of the group roll their eyes or fake a yawn and continue browsing their books.

‘Alarm bell upper corridor Education’ - outside the library door we hear the thuddering of a multitude of feet.

‘Did you find that book on Astrology boss?’

I finally turn the radio down. The effects of the alarm have subsided; everyone is back reading.

HMP Brinsford library is crammed floor to ceiling with books. Fourteen men make the place seem full. Newspapers are avidly read; driving theory questions tackled on computers and shelves rife for the elusive book to make time go faster. There’s a murmur of conversation and banter but something is always boiling. In prisons you can never take your eye off the stove for too long.

I first stepped through these gates as a librarian expecting to stay a few years. Although I had no prison library experience, I am an author with a passion for reading, nurtured since childhood. My few years turned into 12 and the job has not proved under the radar. I have appeared on C4’s ‘The Secret Millionaire’, been interviewed by Radio 4, Financial Times and The Bookseller, spoken at conferences across the UK and raised my head above the parapet during the notorious ‘Book ban’. I wrote a blog with publisher Scott Featherstone screened the films and worked with the prisoners to select participants; mostly fathers themselves. Security was assessed and checks carried out. A group of between ten and fifteen participants watched the films and the library provided further reading. Lucy Brett of BBFC, Mark Reid of BFI and Leah Byrne of Picturehouse Cinema selected the films and provided notes for librarians facilitating the discussions afterwards. Fletcher, the director of Wild Bill recorded a podcast played at the screening and Michael Dudok de Wit, the Dutch director of Father and Daughter, visited one prison and the public library.

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As well as the prison libraries, we also screened and discussed a number of films in a variety of venues outside the prisons and the local community. The project certainly succeeded in encouraging this participant to think about a wider range of movies, ‘I absolutely loved this and it has made me start to watch films properly.’ And the theme of fatherhood proved resonant for this participant. ‘This project has given me a lot of pause for thought about being a dad. I’m not sure if I would have thought about all these issues by myself or even just through reading.’

Participants in prison were genuinely moved that their opinion was valued beyond the prison walls. Louise Mason, library supervisor, comments: ‘The young offenders often feel that there is a major barrier between themselves and the wider community. Within the prison they are often asked to be involved in projects that are very much ‘in-house’ projects. Films Inside offered them an opportunity to share ideas with similar groups across the country. The link made with the community proved powerful both ways. This member of the public certainly had their perceptions changed. ‘I was a little sceptical at the start but I have been pleasantly surprised by the reactions of the films by the prisoners and this has helped to change my thinking and give me new perspectives of how I thought they would react.’

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Films Inside doesn’t cost much, just the price of a few DVDs. We hope every prison library will eventually participate. Our next selection of films will be on the theme of long distance relationships. If you are in prison or work in a prison library and would like to receive the materials and support of Films Inside go to www.library Clarence.co.uk for details of how to get involved.

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