

BOOKS OPEN UP NEW WORLDS

Experiences of prison life

Thank you letter by Johannes J., Prison Social Therapeutic Institution Bochum, Germany

'Why do these cons need books in the first place anyway?'

'They don't even read!'

'You'd be better off giving the money to an animal shelter!'

The radio station is fielding a storm of heated comments. A caller has just won a 500-Euro jackpot; when asked what she plans to do with it, her response is as follows:

'I'm a prison counsellor and I'm going to donate the money to our prison library'. During the next music break, the presenter has to explain again just why books are so important to prison inmates. He does so with refreshing candour.

And he's right. Let me start by saying hello. I'm doing time myself. I don't like to think how I'd get by in here without books. I'm here for good reason; I deserved to be punished. But one day, I'll rejoin society, and when that time comes, it should get the best version of me that I can offer. It's important not to return to normal life all broken, frustrated and unstable. Books help.

My home is a rectangular room with a toilet right by the bed. Grey, grubby, timeworn walls; a door missing a handle; a bleak vista of concrete from behind a barred window. It's the smallest of all possible worlds. You're allowed a TV. The images it shows are odourless, one-dimensional, airless. And then I read a book. Whole worlds are born inside my head, my mind takes flight, memories trigger physical sensations in me, life returns. A description of the sea: I can sense it. Love stories: I can feel them. Meals: I can taste them. Page-long descriptions of nature: I can almost reach out and touch it. Hope, that most powerful of impulses, stirs: hope that I can change. I've experienced so many things while working in the prison library. There's so much to borrow. From 'The Sorrows of Young Werther' to 'The Lord of the Rings'. From Wallander to Jack Reacher. From Michelle Obama to Ferdinand Schirach.

But sometimes it all starts from the humblest of beginnings. One day, an officer came to the library with a special request: 'We've got a prisoner on remand from eastern Europe and he can't speak a word of German.'

He never leaves his chair, and we think he's a suicide risk. Do you have anything that could help?' We gave the matter some thought, then put together a selection of picture books. '1000 Animals', 'An Arctic Journey', 'The Capitals of Europe'. We wanted to bring the wider world to his cell. After a while, the officer returned. 'You've worked wonders. His mood's improved and he keeps telling us the names of the animals he's learned. It's giving him hope. More, please!'

I often watch reports about people on a one-week mobile phone detox, and how hard it is for them. Here, we spend years detoxing from mobile phones, streaming services, computers, Wikipedia, the internet, love, relationships, alcohol, cars, walks, laptops, family and freedom. You'd be hard-pressed to find a lonelier existence. Even if I moved to the wilds to live as a hermit, I'd be freer. In here, books open up new worlds. They dispel the notion that we're just numbers. Because numbers can't read, write, dream or hope. The things that preserve our human dignity while we're on the inside. We're human beings, and we're grateful to all the people, men and women, who support prison libraries. Thank you.

Thank you.