

When the cell door slammed shut, all I had were books

Award-winning young adult author Alex Wheatle tells JANE WARREN how reading unlocked his potential during a jail sentence as a youth

ALEX WHEATLE can still remember the “jangling of keys” as the heavy door slammed shut behind him. Sentenced to 18 months in Wormwood Scrubs for assault during the Brixton uprising of April 1981, the 18-year-old clenched tight his eyes as the reality of prison dawned on him.

He opened them to find a Rastafarian cellmate, two decades his senior, offering him a cup of tea. Alex snubbed the overture.

“I wanted to be left to writhe in my own self pity,” he admits today. But his cellmate, Simeon, had other ideas. After several days of tension, Alex – who had grown up in care after being born in London to Jamaican parents – poured out his heart to the older man.

“I’d had a very traumatic young life. Living in fear in a children’s home was my normal,” recalls Alex, now 59. “But even though I had lots of trauma, I was a very competent reader. It was my secret weapon.”

It was then that Simeon handed him a book about black history and encouraged him to read. Having been brought up in a mainly white children’s home, Alex knew little about his heritage. The encounter – and the sense of identity that followed – was to change Alex’s life.

Today, he is an award-winning author and playwright, his books for young adults have inspired generations and he is proud to support the Daily Express Christmas campaign for Give A Book.

“My own experience is an example of how reading can change lives. Reading is a great leveller, especially in this cost-of-living crisis,” he insists. “Anyone can go to a library and raise their expectations. Everyone can build empathy into their lives just through reading. Simeon was a well-educated man whose hunger for knowledge had led him to black US literature.”

Hooked on comics, Alex didn’t have much access to books until he was hospitalised for chronic asthma aged eight and was lent a copy of *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. “I discovered a place I could escape to in my mind,” he recalls. “It was the first novel I’d ever read and, from then on, each time I read a book,

DAILY EXPRESS

GIVE A BOOK THIS CHRISTMAS



NEW CHAPTER: Alex Wheatle's love of books was fostered by a cell mate

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it gave me an escape from my harsh existence,” he recalls today.

Growing up in the notorious Shirley Oaks Children’s Home in Croydon, south London, reading had proved an emotional and intellectual sanctuary from the deprivations and abuse that underscored his daily life.

“Simeon encouraged me to rediscover my love of reading,” he says. “He told me I had so much more to read to discover my own history. Growing up, I was hungry to read about my own experiences but my life was absent. I remember enjoying *Kes*, *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but where was the young black kid living in a home in Brixton, and struggling

to find his identity? It didn’t exist, so I decided to create it myself.”

His first novel, *Brixton Rock*, took five years to write and received 30 rejections before finding a publisher. It won the London Arts Board New Writers Award and was later adapted for the stage.

Alex has now written a stack of titles for teenage readers. In 2008, he was made an MBE for services to literature, having become a passionate spokesperson for the difference that reading can make to a life.

Now he goes into prisons and schools to inspire others – which is how he came across Give A Book, the Express’s Christmas charity partner, whose aim is to promote reading in the hardest to reach places.

“There was a reading group at Wormwood Scrubs and it really enthused me. These guys were trying to prepare for life on the outside.” As for his former mentor, Simeon devoted his final years to introducing more

young people to literature until his death seven years ago.

“He was a champion of reading in primary schools,” says Alex. “I’m still grateful for the opportunities that presented themselves to me while I was in prison.”

“Meeting Simeon accelerated a process that has enabled me to realise my creative potential and having him as my mentor helped me become the man I wanted to be.”

“Reading books can inspire you, and they can also help you discover how to make a worthwhile contribution to society.”

BOOK ME IN: Mary Beard backing Express campaign

SCANNERS
Please cut out.
Thanks.

READING IS ESCAPISM... BUT IT'S ALSO SHARING WINNIE THE POOH WITH MY GRANDDAUGHTER

I GUESS I read books for a living. It’s my job. But I still read for fun and thrills too. For me, libraries are some of the most subversive and exciting places in the world. They’re full of all kinds of ideas – some eye-opening, some dangerous, some reassuring.

They are not quiet, reverential places. They are places where new thoughts happen. There is nothing better, though, than actually owning books yourself – whether you want to treasure them, or (like I tend to) treat them a bit rough: spill

By Dame Mary Beard

your tea over them, squash them under the bedclothes or write in the margins.

I’ve been buried in books for as long as I can remember, but I wasn’t the kind of kid who devoured classic novels aged seven (it was quite a lot longer before I got onto Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë). I was keener on Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five*, Malcolm Saville’s *Lone Pine* series, any kind of encyclopaedia

and *The Guinness Book of Records*. They opened up wonderful new worlds, different experiences, weird facts and strange things to get your head around.

What I love now, with some tiny grandchildren, is to pick off the shelf the books my mum and dad read to me when I was little, and I read to my own kids – and read them to the next generation.

It’s amazing how *Beatrix Potter’s Tale of Tom Kitten* or *Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland* never seem out of date. There’s nothing more fun than sharing

them. If part of the pleasure of books is the escapism of being on your own with them, it’s also getting the three-year-old on your knee and reading *Winnie the Pooh* again, and again!

That’s why I am delighted to support the Daily Express Christmas campaign for Give A Book and I urge you to do the same if you can. It’s a terrific organisation that puts books in the hands of those who need them most.

With our help, they can help a new generation enjoy the wonders of reading.