

# PUTTING BOOKS BEHIND BARS

**WHY WE ARE FOCUSING ON LITERACY IN OUR PRISONS**

**By Damian Hinds  
Prisons Minister**

EX-OFFENDERS who get jobs are more likely to stay on the straight and narrow but too many struggle to find work when they leave prison, leading them back to lives of crime. One of the reasons for this is that they simply don't have the skills that make them attractive to potential employers.

Some aren't able to read, write or add up. In fact, when they arrive at prison more than half of inmates have the English and maths skills of a primary school child. Without these basic abilities, it's impossible to teach them the kinds of skills – such as working with bills and invoices or reading and writing reports – they need to find work. It's clear that if we want to cut crime then something has to change.

That's why we promised in our manifesto to establish a Prison Education Service with a new approach and a particular focus on improving maths and literacy.

The charity Give A Book's prison arm, Prison Reading Groups, has set up reading groups in more than 50 prisons around the country and we're also expanding prison libraries.

We're supporting offenders when they leave prison too. This month we launched Turning Pages Digital, an app which teaches basic skills all the way up to advanced literacy with help from trained mentors. This won't only improve their chances of getting jobs – it also means we can fill skills gaps in the economy.

Boosting literacy skills is a win-win situation – it gives offenders a second chance to turn their lives around and that makes our streets safer.



**CHRISTMAS PRESENT:** Simon Callow's rendition of a Charles Dickens classic leaves his HMP Thameside audience rapt

Pictures: JONATHAN BUCKMASTER

## KAT HOPPS joins Four Weddings star Simon Callow on a visit to Thameside Prison to see just how donations from Express readers will help Give A Book change lives from the ground up

**S**IMON Callow's rich, baritone voice switches effortlessly from booming fury to frightened rasp in an instant. He's performing his one-man adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* for inmates at Thameside Prison in London.

Every person in the room is transfixed as the classically-trained actor recounts the moment cantankerous miser Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by his former partner Jacob Marley late on Christmas Eve. You can hear a pin drop.

As he introduced himself earlier, Callow impressed the magic of a powerful tale upon his audience. "The moment you are gripped by a story your life changes. You feel differently – in control of yourself – and things seem to make sense for a minute or two. All actors will tell you the one thing we're looking for is not applause, but silence – to get people listening and wanting to know what comes next."

Scanning the room, I see that quietude observed willingly and wholeheartedly. It's a message that doesn't have to be said aloud: stories, books and reading all transform lives. Speaking to me afterwards, Marc, an

inmate at the all-male, Category B Serco-run jail, says his dyslexia had previously been a barrier to reading. With support, he hopes to become a bookworm.

"When I go back to my cell I will read this," he says, proudly clutching his donated copy of *A Christmas Carol*, signed by Simon.

"My brother always said the book is better than the film. It's more in-depth and you feel the character more because you put yourself in their shoes."

He waves his arm around the room, adding: "And it takes you out of here."

Callow's reading, so soon before Christmas, sits within a wider programme of literary education at the prison.

Luminaries like Sir Ian McKellen, Lenny Henry, Russell Brand and Adam Kay, author of best-selling NHS memoir *This Is Going To*

Hurt, have all led past events. Their presence can have a positive domino effect which, according to HMP Thameside's librarian Neil Barclay "makes a lot of people talk about books and reading. You can plant the seed in someone's brain. If you can help just one person then it makes a difference. It creates a buzz, it excites other people".

Thameside is one of more than 50 prisons nationwide benefiting from Prison Reading Groups (PRG) that has, since 2017, been part of the Give A Book scheme.

The charity – supported this Christmas by the Daily Express – promotes reading in hard-to-reach places, mother and baby units, schools and for disadvantaged children. But arguably, they don't come much harder than inside the walled confines of a prison.

Neil has heard the weekly book club, run by PRG volunteer Maggie Gallagher, referred to as "an ideas factory".

"The groups provide a sense of community," he explains.

"Prisoners feel their voice is listened to – and it's a respite from the turmoil." The

library, he says, forms the heart of HMP Thameside and its 1,230 residents.

"It gets the prisoners away from the clanging chains and the constant noise. The library provides a relaxed ambience."

**P**ERHAPS unsurprisingly, the most popular genres are crime and true crime – "there is a big debate around this [in prison circles] but there is a belief we don't hide people away from aspects of life", says Neil – plus biographies, self-help books and business titles. There are 8,000 books in all and the prison is heavily reliant on donations from charities like Give A Book, businesses and individuals.

The library reopened Mondays to Fridays in July after the end of most Covid restrictions, and should resume a seven-day service in the near future.

I ask what help is available to people who cannot read or who have dyslexia, like Marc.

Neil tells me every inmate receives an assessment on arrival and low literacy is flagged. Prisoners are then helped with programmes, mentorship and diction services.

More recently, Ministers have recognised that reading for pleasure can significantly improve a prisoner's quality of life, as well as improving their job prospects after release.

PRG director Sarah Turvey says: "Becoming a reader is about choice and every PRG group chooses for itself. The result is books that are ambitious and varied, from George Orwell's 1984 to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. They really change people.

"Donations mean readers receive brand new copies of the chosen titles, to keep and display proudly in their cell or to pass on to family or other prisoners. The books become visible signs of people turning their lives around and a great example of the power of what Give A Book does."

Neil tells me of one prison leaver now working as an engineer for a major technology company. "He participated in everything, he is a changed person," he says. Another inmate told him the library and support services saved his life. It's why he rebuffs any suggestion access to books is an unfair privilege.

"Your liberty has been taken away from you and that's enough," he insists.

"Prison is about serving your time and becoming a better person. A library helps you to rehabilitate." It's a view that echoes

Charles Dickens, whose father was imprisoned for debt when the author was 12.

Born in Portsmouth in 1812, Dickens grew up in extreme poverty and enjoyed only two years of formal education. After nearly falling by the wayside in his youth, he championed the poor and oppressed in works like *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* as well as in his deeds. "He was really fascinated about social justice, about how people lived together," Simon tells attendees.

"Whenever he visited a new town – and he was then the most famous person in the world – the first thing he asked to do was to go to the prison for he recognised it would tell him everything he needed to know about the society." Dickens was "very connected to

his fellow human beings" and saw everyone in the pyramid of life, top and bottom, as equal, continues Simon.

He is himself an anti-poverty campaigner who has also directed inmates at Wormwood Scrubs in London in their version of a Christmas Carol, called *Scrooge in the Scrubs*.

After a flurry of book signings, Simon tells me he hoped attendees would recognise Dickens for the brilliant writer he was. "And that it is possible for ingrained habits to change," he adds. "For people who have lost hope to rediscover it. It's a story of redemption."

As the session ends, I speak with 40-something Gavin who I'd seen laughing heartily during Simon's renditions. He recalls a Christmas Carol from his childhood, but says the reading has brought it back to life. "I am already an avid reader but this has inspired me to read more Dickens," he smiles.

"Next time I go to the library, I'm going to look him up. Today, I found out how good the man was!"

Find a better example of inspiration than that... if you can.



### HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT OUR CHRISTMAS CAUSE

GIVE A Book puts books into the hands of those who need them most. A £5 donation will provide one book; £10 will add a book bag; while £25 will give a whole book bundle. To support the Daily Express Christmas Campaign, please send donations (cheques only, payable to Give A Book) to:

**DX Give A Book Campaign,  
112-114 Holland Park Avenue,  
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**SUPPORT:** Prison librarian Neil Barclay and reading volunteer Maggie Gallagher

