

EXCLUSIVE
By Victoria Gray
Executive Director
Give A Book



Your generosity will help create a brand new school library

Our Christmas charity partner Give A Book pays tribute to Daily Express readers for supporting its splendid efforts to promote reading in the hardest to reach places

GIVE A Book is a charity dedicated to promoting books and the pleasure of reading in the hardest places. I started it after my husband, Simon Gray, died in 2008. Playwright, novelist and diarist, author of *The Smoking Diaries*, Simon loved to read and to share his reading. Creating the charity with him in mind, our motivation was the belief that reading matters – and we wanted to share it with those hardest to reach.

We realised there was a huge void in certain primary schools in disadvantaged areas. At around the same time, we forged a partnership with Prison Reading Groups (PRG). Like us, PRG seeks to spread the pleasure of reading in challenging places. Combining our work with children and PRG's with prisoners, we developed a number of family reading projects around the UK for prisoners and their children to bond over books.

When the Daily Express got in touch about making Give A Book their Christmas charity, we had no idea where it would lead. They had heard of us through author Anthony Horowitz and strongly shared our ethos that reading matters.

Lady Antonia Fraser kicked off our Christmas Campaign with a simple wish in the Express: "I want everyone to be able to share in the joy of reading," she declared with relish. "Books save the emotional lives of so many people. When I get to Heaven,



which is slightly unlikely, I shall ask, 'Where is the library?'"

Every year we hope to be able to create a library in a school – usually a primary school – that doesn't have one. This is future-changing – not only impacting current pupils, but future readers in the school as well as the wider community. Our most recently-created school library – at Larkspur Primary Academy in Ware, Herts – featured in the campaign.

Without a proper library space, there was little opportunity for books, so we were delighted to help put the pleasure of reading back at the heart of the school.

But our work is not just in schools but prisons and Pupil Referral Units too.

Speaking of the former, Dame Penelope Wilton, another supporter, told this newspaper: "Reading to a child means a prisoner is contributing to a child's life, even though they are not with them all the time. What else do you talk about?"

"You can't just sit there. But if you pop a small person on your knee and read to them, you are contributing in a proper way – doing something together."

WE HAVE created many projects around family reading, including getting prisoner parents to make their own story books for their children, as well as regularly supporting family visits with books and volunteer readers.

Given that so much of our work is about connecting families through reading, dur-



ing lockdown we wondered how we could proceed. With prisons even harder to reach and access to libraries, education and visits limited, we set about sending in books for inmates to share on the wing, or over a phone or video call to families, to keep the connection through reading alive.

So many schools closed, but places for children of key workers remained open and we were able to support them with books. Several schools turned into community hubs – so we sent books to go into food parcels.

We have recently started giving specially chosen books for children in the welfare and criminal justice sectors and the feedback is heartening.

Many have never had a book of their own before. You can't save a life with a book, but it certainly often feels like that. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity of Express readers, and particularly by the wonderful letters

of support people have taken the trouble to write. The stories you've shared about how much reading matters have resonated with everything we strive to do at Give A Book.

Just some of the things you've told us: "I was lucky as a child to be introduced to reading books at an early age by my mother and I have enjoyed reading all my life."

And: "I can't imagine a house with no books in it."

People told us about reading with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, making donations even in this time of real hardship because they just can't imagine life without books. The donations

were sent with love. "There was not a lot of spare money when I was growing up during the war years, but I always had a book at Christmas, I also went to the library even though it was a good mile walk from home," one reader told us.

Another, a pensioner, wrote: "During my life I have travelled the world, seen many wonders, had so many different adventures, even been back in time, and forward into space – all this from the comfort of my chair with a book in my hands."

And yet another told us: "All a child needs is love, a book and a ball."

THEN there was a letter from a serving prisoner, telling us: "I was very fortunate to have entered the prison system with a good level of literacy, however through some of the work I have done mentoring and supporting other prisoners, I have seen first-hand the considerable shortfalls many experience in this area and the benefits therefore of books and reading."

The prisoner included a poem they had written about reading which they invited us to use "in any way to support your work... I would hope it may encourage those in my position to pick up a book... On behalf of prisoners up and down the country, thank you for your support and I look forward to reading about the outcome of your festive campaign."

Authors and actors, too many to thank individually here, kindly supported the campaign. Alex Wheatle wrote how reading was a great leveller, especially in the cost-of-living crisis when anyone can go to a library and raise their expectations. Others remember with pleasure favourite childhood books. Sir Michael Morpurgo said a book can begin the journey of a lifetime.

Today I am delighted to reveal that, thanks to the support of Daily Express readers, we will be able to create a new school library this year in an area of deprivation. We'll be able to share progress with you from the start.

We could not be more grateful for this campaign which we know will have a lasting impact.

"Some of my best friends," one Express reader added. "We have to keep reading!"

● If you know a worthy school, please get in touch via giveabook.org.uk or write to us at 112-114 Holland Park Avenue, London W11 4UA

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LOVER OF LIBRARIES:
Charity patron Lady Antonia Fraser