

A day in the life of a prison librarian



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Now working as Prison Librarian, Rachel was one of UKSG's sponsored students who joined delegates in Edinburgh in 2010. Her interesting career since then prompted your Eds to invite her to write about her typical day

My day always starts early. Arriving at the prison gate by 8am, I give a key tally to the gate staff and receive a large bunch of keys which I attach to a belt. The journey from the gate is quite a long one and involves opening and locking about 15 doors and gates, collecting the daily newspapers along the way. Today this takes even longer, since staff are required to be searched by members of security, including a four-legged hairy member who goes by the name of Tye. Setting up the library with my library assistant is very similar to opening a public library and generally involves setting up the computers, changing the date stamps and making sure everything is where it should be. The main difference is probably checking that the pair of scissors we own is still locked away, and signing a security form!

The other difference from public libraries is that we have a set timetable for who can come into the library. The prison is an all-male category B institution (the second highest security grade there is) so it is important that we know who is in the library and that they are capable of mixing with the general population. Each morning I must print off library lists which will tell me who is going to be coming into the library for the morning and

afternoon sessions. Prison officers will collect this list and make sure only those on it are allowed in. Before the library opens, I check e-mails from prison staff and other library staff in the county, and deal with any urgent enquiries straight away.

At 8.30am, what is called 'free flow' commences and, for anyone who has not experienced this before, it can be quite an intimidating experience! Any prisoners who are due to be attending work or education are unlocked and are given a 15-minute slot to get to where they need to go. As the library sits within the education department, it is open during this time to anyone who is passing through and this usually entails anything from 15 to 40 prisoners charging in at once, all wanting to swap their books and DVDs, read the newspaper, get a printed TV guide, or get headphones to watch a film on one of the computers. Although this is a very stressful period of the day, it is very short and, after 15 minutes, those who need to be elsewhere leave and only those that are spending the morning in the library remain. Once everyone is settled with a film, newspaper or book, the library is a lot calmer! I then spend some time catching up on e-mails in the office, processing paperwork and supervising the library. This is also the time that I

delegate jobs to the library orderly, a prisoner who works in the library with us every day and helps out with shelving and cleaning. Each session I deal with prisoner enquiries, which can range dramatically from someone trying to locate a book, to somebody wanting help with choosing a love poem to write to his girlfriend and, on many occasions, looking through legal books to help with an upcoming court case.

Some mornings we have 'closed sessions', which means that the general population cannot come in but certain wings, which must be kept separate, are able to come to the library. These wings, such as the drug detox wing, health care or the vulnerable prisoners' wing will be brought over by an officer for a set time to use the library. For security purposes it is essential that prisoners from these wings do not mix with the general population.

Most days the library is a very calm place and is a bit of a haven for many during their prison life; it is a chance to sit quietly and watch a film, read books and newspapers and for many it is an opportunity to have a good natter with their peers and/or us! One of the things I enjoy most about the job is the sense of humour most prisoners share; a lot of banter takes place and having a good sense of humour yourself has proven to be a bit of a necessity! There are times, however, when the library is not as calm or quiet as I would like and a lot of my day does entail keeping the prisoners happy but peaceful. Prison can be a very tough environment for many and emotions can vary dramatically. Part of the job is judging what mood prisoners will be in; they may come in on some days very depressed or angry, and dealing with that can sometimes be difficult.

At the end of the morning session, lunch-time free flow begins and once again the library is very busy; we need to make sure that we have all of our headphones and reference books before anyone leaves the library, whilst at the same time issuing books and DVDs to those who are on their way back to the wing from education.

On a Thursday morning, I am upstairs in education running a course called Family Time. I created this course to help strengthen family relationships for prisoners with children. Every six weeks, the prison hosts a family day where fathers get to spend a whole day with their children in a relaxed and fun environment. The Family Time course is a library-run project which allows fathers

to make a personalized book for their children. Most weeks a guest tutor or speaker will come in to help deliver the course: this has included children's librarians who have come in to do story-telling with the dads, creative writing tutors to enable the prisoners to write poetry and stories, a play expert, and a local children's author who gave a very inspiring talk and workshop on writing children's stories. The books created have been fantastic and although it has been very difficult trying to organize all the guests and making sure enough prisoners attend (as it is a local prison many of the prisoners are not there for very long so, as with all programmes, you will never finish with the same number as when you started), it has been a very enjoyable project. The books have included poems, stories, memories, pictures and photos which are all individual to each child and are given out at the next family day as a present – a very touching moment. We also provide story-time at the family days, which is great fun!

Another programme which aims to strengthen family ties is Storybook Dads, which was set up by Dartmoor prison. Fathers come into the library and record a children's story onto a CD which is then sent home. This enables children who have fathers in prison to be able to listen to their father's voice any time they want to, and is enjoyed and appreciated so much by both the prisoners and their families.

Lunch is a good time to catch up with paperwork, which always involves processing applications from prisoners who want to visit the library, responding to e-mails and any other admin work that needs doing as well as having a cup of tea with colleagues and reading the newspaper.

The afternoon session works much the same as the morning, with prisoners coming in the library to read and watch films. As it is not too busy today, it is also a good time for me to go onto the wings to keep up to date with Toe by Toe, which is a literacy programme funded by the Shannon Trust. This scheme allows good readers to mentor those who have difficulty with their reading. As facilitator of this programme, it is up to me to identify the mentees who need help, seek out and train the mentors (which also involves getting them security-checked to be allowed to do the programme), pair up the prisoners and liaise with officers to make sure they know who on the wing is working. This programme takes a lot of work as all the mentoring is done on the wing, so monitoring this and

making sure that they are getting the support they need is essential. Literacy levels are incredibly low in prisons, most with a reading age of 11, so offering this programme is the most rewarding part of the job. I have only been doing this job for a year but already I have seen great changes in many of the prisoners who have been doing Toe by Toe and their achievements have been astounding; we recently had a celebration afternoon for all Toe by Toe participants where the governor presented them with certificates. This was a really positive part of prison life and fantastic to be a part of.

Once a month, I will spend an afternoon session running a reading group on the vulnerable prisoners' wing. I usually have a volunteer with



me and we meet with a group of about four or five prisoners to discuss a book we have all been reading. I wanted to make the group as relaxed and informal as possible so I never set any homework for the men; all I ask is that they give the book a go (even if it was not their first choice), and come to the group with lots of ideas about the book and an open mind. These afternoons can sometimes be very difficult; trying to keep the men on track is challenging as a lot of them are just very keen to talk about their lives. Choosing books can also be very difficult with this group as the majority of the members are sex offenders so it is really important to make sure that we avoid reading books which can result in unsuitable conversations! Although this is a challenging programme to run, it is one that I really enjoy as it allows me to indulge in my passion of reading and creates great homework of getting through a novel each month.

The afternoon session finishes at 4pm and after a quick tidy up of the library and shutting down all the systems, it is time once again to make our way through the 15 gates and doors to the main gate where we hand in our keys until another day. Living in Hove on the south coast, I am lucky enough to spend summer evenings after work strolling along the sea front or having a drink on the beach. As such a large part of my job is recommending books to prisoners to try and encourage them to read, a book at bedtime is essential ... but I have to say, it's one of the easier parts of the job and I can't really call it work!

After a day spent behind 15 locked doors, Rachel appreciates escaping to the beach