

Books Unlocked 2016

A report by Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor for Staffordshire PLS

Exploring *Mister Pip*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* & *Pigeon English*
with adult prisons, young offender institutions and community reading groups across
Staffordshire

‘I was part of the first influx of adult prisoners entering HMP&YOI Brinsford in 2016 (formally HMYOI Brinsford for over 25 years) I was nervous and disorientated having spent such a long time in a purely adult establishment. I didn’t know how I would relate to the young offenders here. Within a week of being at Brinsford I was asked to be part of the Books Unlocked project. I had never heard of this scheme before. The group was a mixture of young offenders and adult prisoners and this helped us all to acclimatise to our new lives together. We bonded through a love of discussing books.’

**Participant at HMYOI Brinsford discussing
*Books Unlocked 2016***



'I was part of Books Unlocked at HMP Featherstone in 2015, I feel very privileged to take part again. This year there are three titles to read which will mean even greater discussion amongst the internal prison groups and the wider community.'

Participant at HMP Featherstone Reading Group

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Introduction

Books Unlocked is a reading initiative involving prison and community reading groups. It was delivered by Staffordshire County Council's Prison Library Service with support from Staffordshire County Council's Public Library Service and the National Literacy Trust (NLT).

Staffordshire County Council Prison Library Service delivers library services in the six public sector prisons and one of the private prisons located in the County. The service is part of Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service.

The National Literacy Trust is a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK.

Aims and Objectives

- Distribute copies of *Mister Pip*, *Pigeon English* and *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* to a significant number of young offenders and adult prisoners across seven prisons in Staffordshire
- Form a focus reading group in each of the prison libraries to discuss and evaluate the book(s) and for young offenders and prisoners studying English to read the book(s) in class
- Engage two local schools and four public library reading groups in reading the novel(s)
- Share opinions on the novel(s) anonymously between the prison reading groups and the school/community reading groups

- Break down barriers so young offenders and prisoners feel part of the wider community
- Build confidence and self-esteem
- Enhance basic skills to enable access to future learning opportunities and employability
- Build on partnerships within prison and public library services
- Raise the profile of the prison libraries

Partners

Staffordshire Prison Library Service

Staffordshire Public Library Service

The National Literacy Trust

The Booker Prize Foundation

HMP&YOI Brinsford: unconvicted & convicted 18 + years young offenders prison

HMP/YOI Drake Hall: women's closed prison

HMP Featherstone: adult male category C closed training establishment

HMP Oakwood: adult male category C prison operated by G4S

HMP Stafford: adult male category C closed training establishment

HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall: category C prison holding young offenders & young adults

HMYOI Werrington: young offenders institution

Codsall Community High School

Ounsdale High School & Sixth Form

Kinver public library: staffordshire libraries and information service

Codsall public library: staffordshire libraries and information service

Cannock public library: staffordshire libraries and information service

Penkridge public library: staffordshire libraries and information service

Background

Between 2013-15 Staffordshire Prison Library Service has delivered a unique community model of *Books Unlocked* that links several schools and public libraries across the county with a young offender and adult male/female prisons. Building on this success in 2016, Prison Library Service Advisor for Staffordshire Prison Libraries, Alan Smith, worked closely with Hannah Howard & Adam Holmes (Project Managers) and Clare Argar (Programme Manager) of the National Literacy Trust to devise a project which would ultimately see involvement across seven Staffordshire prisons, four public libraries and local schools.

The proposal was received enthusiastically and Alan began the lengthy process of contacting and visiting schools, libraries and prisons to discuss the project with teachers, librarians and reading groups to determine how viable it would be.

The decision to incorporate several reading groups would continue to demonstrate that prisoners can be part of a much larger project taking place within a community, and that their input into the discussions is of valued importance. This is highlighted perfectly by Joan Morgan, Deputy Head of Milton Keynes College in HMYOI Brinsford reviewing the library focus group:

'This is the third Man Booker reading group we have run. It is a rewarding experience for the staff involved, to witness men who would not normally read, discover the magic of imagination and reading but for them to take away the book and inform us that they want to read it again.'

Joan Morgan: Head of Milton Keynes College: HMP&YOI Brinsford

Kinver library, with a well-established 'Tuesday Morning' adult reading group, has been a crucial partner in *Books Unlocked* 2013/14/15 and they were keen to take part once again. Codsall library, which had been part of the 'Inside-Outside Reading Group Project' in 2013, were also keen to take part, utilising their Tuesday evening group and also the 'Reading Hacks' a teenage reading group which met regularly at the library. This year Cannock & Penkrige Library joined us and are now keen to take part in future projects too. The groups were keen to challenge themselves with the three titles, and also keen to hear the views of the prison groups involved.

Codsall Community High School, who had already been enthusiastic partners in previous reading projects, including *Books Unlocked* 2013/14/15 were immediately delighted to take part. They determined to use a sixth form group as the age range of pupils, 16 – 18, incorporates the age range of some of the young offenders involved. Codsall High School liaised with another local school who were interested in taking part: Ounsdale High School and Sixth Form. They shared best practice ideas between the schools and came on board with a reading group (mainly teenage boys) who would read Pigeon English.

'This was all new territory for us and the real challenge which ultimately motivated us was to establish a reading group that would mainly consist of teenage boys. We find this a very difficult age group to reach and so Alan's enthusiasm helped a great deal. We shared a lot of ideas with Codsall which also helped to cement our links between the schools. Books Unlocked has really been a joy to be part of in 2016 and we are already signed up to take part again in 2017. It's such a

wonderful way of letting people from all walks of life and in all kinds of situations share opinions and learn about each other and their mutual love of stories.'

Rachel Arnold: Head of English: Ounsdale High School & Sixth Form

At a supervisors meeting for prison librarians, Alan proposed the idea of having involvement from all seven Staffordshire libraries again. Essentially a focus group would be formed in each library using either existing reading groups, or establishing new ones solely for this project. Alongside this, prison education would deliver the project in class. This was met with an enthusiastic response from all, despite the many challenges that delivering such a project was sure to bring.

'The key for me is to not create too much extra work for staff who are already delivering a number of projects within the prisons as well as doing the 'day job' side of prison work. *Books Unlocked* allows for a great deal of flexibility and also for someone to project manage the whole thing to ensure that staff aren't overwhelmed by the task. I like the fact that with the 2016 model we were able to allow extra books to be read by the groups who felt they could manage three titles, but even those who could only read one book, were still an essential part of the project.'

Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor: Staffordshire PLS

Delivery

Prior to reading *Mister Pip*, *Pigeon English* and *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, each group was visited by Alan so that the project could be discussed fully with both staff and participants. This helped to ensure that everyone was clear on the aims and objective of the project and people were still happy to be part of it. Individual's feelings with regard to how to evaluate the novel were also sounded out during this initial stage. Many of the groups expressed a preference for oral rather than written evaluation.

Due to the scale of the project and involvement of so many groups, it was determined that delivery would run from March until October, with October/November/December set aside for evaluating the groups and writing up the results. This also meant that individuals who would be helping to deliver the project could look at their own work commitments and choose a time that suited them best. Alan was prepared to visit each group before, during and after delivery to ensure that everyone was supported throughout.

At HMP&YOI Brinsford Library, the project was delivered throughout May & June in class. A reading group of 10 young adults and three adult male prisoners met in the library for a period of two weeks in early June to read both books. Joan Morgan and Alan Smith led the group and refreshments were provided by the prison catering team. Each session lasted two and a half hours (including a ten minute coffee break) and always involved members of the group reading aloud. Every chapter was discussed in detail using the resources provided by the NLT.

During the week the group was joined by various members of prison staff and visitors who all helped to encourage them with their reading. The group formed a close bond and felt part of something very special. The feeling of community was enhanced by the visitors being prepared to come and meet the group.

'*Books Unlocked* is a superb initiative that has already helped to show the kind of positive partnership work that can be achieved in Brinsford. I am extremely proud of my library team, which is reflected in their outstanding Ofsted comments in 2015. They help us to get through to these lads the importance of reading to better improve their chances of making it outside these walls and not ending up back in here. The involvement this year of Young Offenders interacting with our adult prisoners has been astonishing. I have heard only positive feedback from my Wing Staff about the project. I think sharing this information with other prisons and reading groups is very valuable work.'

Debbie McKay: HMP&YOI Brinsford Deputy Governor

Each member of the group was given a 'shout out' on National Prison Radio for their achievements.

At Brinsford, copies of *Mister Pip* were also distributed to all the young offenders studying English and also to anyone who was interested in reading the novel. Young Offenders read the book in class with the support of their teachers to ensure that those students, whose literacy skills might have precluded them from reading were still able to be part of the project. Many wrote reviews of the book as part of their course work.

'*Mister Pip* is a modern interpretation of Dickens. The values of 1860 are no different to the values of 2016. There are lessons to be learnt from both *Great Expectations* and *Mister Pip*. I've enjoyed this project immensely. Other groups and my fellow prisoners have listened to my opinions and made me feel welcome. It's been a very enriching experience.'

Participant: HMP&YOI Brinsford

During June and July the reading groups at Codsall Community High School, Reading Hacks and Codsall Evening Group met and discussed *Mr Pip*, *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and *Pigeon English*. The students at Codsall Community High School, assisted by Paul Johnson and Louise Howells, took ownership of the group and decided to expand their oral evaluation of the text by devising a series of questions and filling out a feedback form (provided by the NLT) to record their thoughts. At the end of the evaluation session all the students involved were presented with an individual certificate to add to their personal records of achievement.

'This was such a good opportunity to do something different whilst at school. It tested us to read books we wouldn't normally have chosen and to share our opinions with adults and prisoners which is very unique.'

Participant: Codsall Community High School

'For me the highlight was the exchange of views between the groups, particularly the prisons and the schools. I think it's such a great idea to get everyone involved. I don't know of any other project that does something as intriguing as this.'

Participant: Codsall Reading Hacks

The Kinver, Cannock and Penkrudge public library groups, groups in HMP Featherstone, HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall & HMP Oakwood all read *Mister Pip*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and *Pigeon English* during May – September inclusive.

‘A reading group should be part of any prison regime, and where better to hold it than in the library. I think *Books Unlocked* is the highlight of our year because it’s the one time when we know we will be tested by what we are reading and also that our feedback will be a vital part of a much larger project. It gives us all a sense of worth and value again, something which in prison is hard to find.’

Participant: HMP Featherstone

‘This was an outstanding project and one that I had heard about in a previous prison. It really made me feel as though my voice could be heard again beyond the walls and that my opinion counted for something. The people who come up with this project and dedicate their time to it should be commended.’

Participant: HMP Oakwood Library

‘Alan and Rachel really engaged us with the project. We get given so many different projects to do at school, but this one that involved prisons and adults from other reading groups really caught our imagination and made us want to get involved. I’m really glad that we did because we got a lot out of this.’

Participant: Ounsdale High School & Sixth Form

‘*Books Unlocked* has given me an insight into the valuable work that goes on in prisons across Staffordshire. I can now see the importance of prison libraries and why a project like this can help to connect people serving a prison sentence, with their local community again. Ultimately this must help to reduce re-offending.’

Participant: Cannock Library

‘Books Unlocked is a very interesting project. Anything that encourages reading across so many different groups is something which should be commended. It has been an absolute pleasure to take part in this. The discussion between the groups is the part I have enjoyed the most. I think any reading group suffers slightly from being insular, so this project allows us to hear what others think of the books we are all reading.’

Participant: Penkrudge Library

HMP Drake Hall, HMP Stafford and HMYOI Werrington all took part between June and October inclusive. As with the other prisons, reading groups were established in the prison libraries and through partnership working with prison education providers the books were also read in classes. HMYOI Werrington had the opportunity to meet author Stephen Kelman face to face when he visited the reading group in October.

‘*Mister Pip* show’s how literate people can affect your life and the way you act. This has been an outstanding project because it encourages reading and therefore improves literacy. I think the choice of the three titles was really balanced, they all had thought provoking themes which where strangely similar.’

Participant: HMP Stafford

'*Pigeon English* is one of the very best books I've ever read and I still can't believe that Stephen Kelman actually came in to the prison at the end of the project. We were all a bit awestruck and didn't know what to say, but Stephen was brilliant. He made us feel as though he was completely on our wavelength and it was really interesting to hear him talk about the writing of his book.'

Participant: HMYOI Werrington

By the end of October, Alan had met with all the separate groups for evaluation sessions and brought this stage of the project to its conclusion.

'At first I was bewildered by some of the titles, but that made me keen to read them all. I loved *Mister Pip* and *Pigeon English*, those were books that I would genuinely return to time and again. *We are all completely Beside Ourselves* was much more difficult and at times I almost gave up on it all together, but I'm glad I stayed the distance with it. It was certainly the book that provoked the most discussion amongst us all.'

Participant: HMP Drake Hall

'I found *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* the most interesting to discuss, even though it was my least favourite of the three. I found it a very difficult read and I didn't think the author had made any of the characters very likeable. I ended up not really caring what happened to them. When I told the rest of the group this the room erupted with lively discussion. I can't wait to hear what the other groups thought of it.'

Participant: HMP Stafford

Evaluation

Since most of the groups had expressed a preference for oral evaluation it was decided that an informal approach would gain the best response from the groups. It was agreed that each evaluation meeting would take place in the area where that particular reading group had been meeting and also at the time of day that they had been meeting. This would help to ensure that the group felt comfortable and that there would be an element of control to each session.

Two key themes had been identified for exploration with all groups so that while discussion would vary from group to group some consistency would be achieved.

The two key themes were:

1. Overall Review of *Mister Pip*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* & *Pigeon English*
2. How the novels affected the readers.

Other key influences considered before evaluation included:

- Ensuring that everyone had a chance to comment and that the discussion was not dominated by one or two strong personalities.

- Anxiety of participants i.e. feeling they should give answers they felt we would like to hear or anxiety about speaking out in a group
- To be certain that participation was voluntary
- In the case of the seven prison groups, factors within the prison itself had to be considered i.e. any changes to regime or disturbances on the Wings would have an influence over the mood of individuals within the group.

Each evaluation was led by Alan Smith and began with a general discussion, often about reading or on a topical subject. This would invariably get people talking and develop a sense of trust between the group members. When it was felt that the discussion was peaking, the novels would be introduced into the conversation and each of the key themes would be explored and debated (depending on whether each group had read both books). Below are examples of reactions from the groups to the key themes of the novel.

1. Overall Review of the three novels:

HMP&YOI Brinsford	' <i>Mister Pip</i> was outstanding. We watched <i>Great Expectations</i> first and then the Hugh Laurie film of <i>Mister Pip</i> at the end. That gave the book some perspective but it didn't take anything away from the power of the book which was phenomenal. When Mr Watts was killed we were all so shaken. I've had an experience like that before, sharing a story together and therefore sharing the emotions of all the characters together.'
Codsall & Ounsdale High Schools	' <i>Mister Pip</i> was like Estella in <i>Great Expectations</i> . All the children put him on a pedestal and saw him as a flawless, intelligent man, and yet in the final part of the book all his flaws were revealed and we saw the real <i>Mister Pip</i> .'
HMP Stafford	' <i>Mister Pip</i> was better than <i>Great Expectations</i> for me. It had much more resonance and I don't think any of us were expecting Mr Watts to get killed. It was an appalling death made all the more powerful by the swiftness with which the story moved on. Superb writing.'
HMP Featherstone	'For a group of guys to all meet up in a prison library and sit around discussing a book, that's quite a rare experience. Without doubt the best one I've had has been discussing <i>We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves</i> . Never have I heard such calm yet heated discussion. Overall this book wasn't liked, but it certainly kept us talking for a few hours debating what bits we did and didn't agree with.'
Kinver, Cannock, Penkridge & Codsall Public Libraries	' <i>Pigeon English</i> was both funny and tragic at the same time. The seeming indifference of the young boys death at the start and the general acceptance that, that was how things work. Until the young boy decides to do something about it. What could have been a literary disaster turns into a very funny adventure of how life is.'

2. How did the novels affect the reader:

HMPYOI Swinfen Hall	' <i>We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves</i> through us completely when the sister was revealed to be a monkey! But, strangely, after that we all started talking about animal cruelty, zoo's and the use of animals in experiments. It really got everyone very passionate.'
Public Libraries & Reading Hacks	'We are all haunted by some of the gruesome scenes in <i>Mister Pip</i> . It's hard to say whether they spoil the book or enhanced the experience. <i>Pigeon English</i> has one of the most shocking and powerful endings to a novel I've ever read. I had the joy to see this performed on stage in London this year and the ending was as powerful as I'd hoped.'
HMP Oakwood	'Three utterly captivating texts, none of which any of us had encountered before and I'm sure we never would have done without <i>Books Unlocked</i> . Capturing an audience in a setting like a prison library is very difficult, these authors managed it and we will be talking about these books for a long time to come.'
HMP Drake Hall	'As <i>We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves</i> unfolds in the middle of the book I became drawn to the relationship between Rosemary & Fern. I began finally to understand the first half's dynamics. Three quarters in and I was completely gripped with the aftermath. By the end I was shaking. I've never read something so highly charged and emotional.'
Codsall & Ounsdale Community High School	' <i>Mister Pip</i> and <i>Pigeon English</i> were just incredible books to read. A lot of us have dreams of becoming writers and these really are the authors to inspire that. The intelligence of the writers is clear as they both perfectly capture the voices of young children, which could be done to far less affect by another author.'

Impact of the project

Participation in the *Books Unlocked* project has had a huge effect on all those involved and positive outcomes are evident for the prisoners, prison libraries, public libraries and staff and students at Ounsdale & Codsall Community High Schools. The project has helped to break down barriers between the prison community and the local community and has helped to raise the self-esteem of both the young offenders and adult prisoners who took part, as they have made substantial contributions to a wider project.

"What a joy to be asked to take part in a project that reaches the local community. I can't put in to words how important that is for us inside."

Participant: HMP Drake Hall

The prisoners at HMP Stafford, HMP Oakwood & HMP Featherstone felt that it was an important opportunity to communicate their experience to the young offenders in the hope that it might help to break the cycle of crime.

‘This project wouldn’t have half the interest or the affect if it was just run within prisons, particularly adult prisons. It would feel no different to all the reading challenges we get asked to be part of.’

Participants: HMP Stafford, HMP Oakwood, HMP Featherstone

The young offenders at HMP&YOI Brinsford, HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall & HMYOI Werrington responded positively to the knowledge that older prisoners as well as teenagers their own age had read the book and passed comment. They also felt the comradeship that had developed between the members of the Prison Library Focus groups was something they would never forget.

‘There is very little opportunity to talk to other prisoners in places like this, only when you’re on association or at the gym, and in those settings you don’t really talk about anything of real importance. There are a lot of prisoners who like to read or want to learn to read and the prison library and schemes like *Books Unlocked* give like-minded prisoners the chance to do that in a peaceful setting. I think the fact that we then know that our thoughts are being shared with other groups in the wider community is fantastic.’

Participants: HMP&YOI Brinsford/ HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall/ HMYOI Werrington

Codsall & Ounsdale Community High School students felt that the project had helped them to understand more about young offenders and prisoners.

‘This is a subject which really struck home with our students. A lot of them were shocked to learn that you could go to prison so young. It made them realise how lucky they have been with their friendship groups and their support, and perhaps has even made them reflect on the environment we try to create in school to help them to excel. I think the work of people like Alan and *Books Unlocked* should be shouted about. It makes such a difference and to take it out to schools and the wider community is really good thinking.’

Paul Johnson: Assistant Head Teacher: Codsall Community High School

Codsall public library and Codsall Reading Hacks felt privileged to take part in a project that was so inclusive. They thought it was good to read a book that they would not normally have read and to be able to give their views on the text.

Kinver and Cannock public library reading group welcomed the chance to be involved in such a large project that would reach so many different people at all stages of their reading journeys.

‘I really wish there was a way of meeting the groups face to face. We would be very happy to make that happen. However, the fact that you have someone like Alan travelling around from group to group gives the project a strong sense of consistency and he is able to share the views along the way, before we get to read a little more about it in the final report. Sign us up for next year without a doubt.’

Participants: Kinver & Cannock library

Conclusion

Through Books Unlocked an insight was gained into the varying ways in which *Pigeon English*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and *Mister Pip* can be interpreted across a broad spectrum of age-ranges and cultural backgrounds. It was also observed that barriers can easily be broken between groups of teenagers within a young offenders' prison and those who are in formal education within the community by running a project such as Books Unlocked in which the opinions of all of the participants are valued and seen as insightful.

Each group was able to learn from the other and this has improved self-esteem amongst the prison groups and also enhanced the learning of the community groups.

The young offenders and the adult prisoners across seven Staffordshire prisons have gained self-confidence and a sense of worth by participating in a project which has reached far beyond the walls of the prison and had an impact in the wider community. This will have a very positive affect on their lives after prison when they return to their local communities.

All the groups have enhanced their listening and social skills by being part of a group and taking other peoples' thoughts and opinions on board. It has also helped to spark lively debate and enhanced the enjoyment of reading for all those who have taken part.

'Year three for us, and the project remains just as innovative, just as enthusiastic and just as worthwhile as it was when it first arrived. The National Literacy Trust really have got a winner on their hands here and I think Staffordshire has created a model we can all be proud of. Glad to be part of it and very happy to continue to support as long as we can.'

Stephen Quick: English Teacher: HMP&YOI Brinsford

'I am thrilled to be asked to talk about Books Unlocked and manage Books Unlocked through our Staffordshire Prisons. All the really hard work is done by the groups that take part and the dedicated Librarians who help facilitate the groups. My hat is always off to them, Books Unlocked wouldn't work without their help. I can never say enough good things about the work of The National Literacy Trust. In Hannah, Clare and Adam they have outstanding individuals who are as dedicated and passionate about this work as anyone I've met in the reading groups. Stand up and take a bow, you all deserve it. Same time next year?'

Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor: Staffordshire PLS

Acknowledgements

Staffordshire Library and Information Services

Alan Smith: Staffordshire Prison Library Service Advisor: Staffordshire PLS

Scott Whitehouse: Stock Services and Activities Officer: Staffordshire Libraries

Adeline Fergus: Library Supervisor, HMP Featherstone

Sarah Cripps: Library Supervisor, HMP Oakwood

Mi Greenaway: Library Supervisor, HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall

Kay Dolan: Library Supervisor, HMP Stafford

Mel Haywood: Library Supervisor, HMYOI Werrington

Alan Smith: Library Supervisor, HMP&YOI Brinsford

Barbara Lunt: Library Supervisor, HMP Drake Hall

Elizabeth Frost: Library Supervisor, Kinver Public Library

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The National Literacy Trust

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