



**BOOK
CLUBS FOR
INMATES**



BCFI NEWSLETTER

December 4, 2023

- Updates – Making Spirits Brighter
- Watershed Magazine, Life In Northumberland, Prince Edward County and Quinte

Making Spirits Bright

Thank you for your generous support of Book Clubs for Inmates (BCFI) this year. Your donations have helped us to organize over 45 book clubs across Canada, reaching hundreds of inmates who benefit from reading and discussing books with our volunteers. You have also enabled us to host author visits, provide parolee support, and distribute books not just to inmates but their families.

We are proud to share with you some of our accomplishments this year:

- We launched 11 new Children of Inmates Reading Programs (CHIRP) with support from TD Bank's "The Ready Commitment".
- We expanded our French-language book clubs and added new book clubs in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia.
- We have arranged for 16 author visits to Book Clubs this year.
- We shipped over 65,000 brand-new, relevant books to Federal Penitentiary Libraries. Thanks to our friends at Penguin Random House Canada for their support year-round.
- We have now shipped over 3,000 brand-new children's books (everything from activity books to YA novels) for Visitation and Correspondence locations within prisons for families visiting incarcerated family members to use while visiting and to take home. We are especially grateful to Kids Can Press who donated so many wonderful children's books in celebration of their 50th anniversary.
- Most importantly, we now have over one hundred volunteer leaders who reliably show up every month to lead the discussion for the new book and drop off the next one or help inmates read a book to their child at home, record it, and send the recording and the book home to the family.

We are grateful for your continued support and interest in our work. Together, we are making a difference in the lives of inmates and their communities. Reading changes lives!

The holiday season is a time of joy and celebration for many people, but it can also be a time of loneliness and isolation for those who are incarcerated and their families. We know that social isolation and loneliness can have negative impacts on the health, well-being, and behavior of incarcerated people and their loved ones. Therefore, it is important to recognize and address the needs of this vulnerable population during this festive period.

Tom has been travelling
this year:



Bath Institution, October 2023
with author Heather O'Neil



Volunteers from Bowden
Institution, October 2023



Cowansville Institution with author
Heather O'Neill, November 2023



Volunteers from Mission,
Mountain, Pacific, and Fraser
Valley Institution. November 2023

Our way to do so is to promote and facilitate reading activities that can foster connection, communication, and education between incarcerated people and their families. Books can play a role in “making spirits bright” during this time of year. Reading can help incarcerated people cope with stress, boredom, and anxiety, and stimulate their imagination and creativity. Reading can enable incarcerated parents to bond with their children and maintain a positive relationship through recorded readings, mailed directly to the child, and discussed on phone calls. This can also benefit the children by enhancing their vocabulary, listening skills, and attention span. We know reading can expose incarcerated people and their families to different perspectives, cultures, and experiences, and inspire them to learn new things and pursue their goals.

In conclusion, reading is a valuable and meaningful activity that can help reduce the loneliness and isolation of incarcerated Canadians and their families during the holiday season. By supporting reading programs and initiatives that cater to this population, we can help them experience the joy and hope of the holidays.

Below is a wonderful article in Watershed Magazine about the Book Club at Warkworth Institution in Ontario and our two volunteer leaders Erin and Judy. It's a wonderful reminder about the spirit of giving back at this time of year.

WATERSHED

LIFE IN NORTHUMBERLAND, PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY AND QUINTE

Story by:

Janet Davies

From libraries to bookstores to prisons, book clubs take on a wide range of social and literary configurations, bringing together readers of all ages and walks of life.

I have never belonged to a book club, yet as I embarked on this story I realized I had a preconception: an image of Jane Fonda and Diane Keaton clutching books, wearing tortoiseshell specs and sipping Chardonnay. I blame The Book Club movie trailers.

When I met Judy Kaufmann and Erin O'Sullivan, I rather awkwardly brought up the stereotype, and they just laughed, “White-haired ladies and Chardonnay, right?”

They may not look a million miles away from the stereotype, but the truth is, together with a third volunteer, Judy and Erin run a very different kind of book club – inside Warkworth Institution. There are more tattoos than white hair, and definitely no Chardonnay.

BOOK CLUBS FOR INMATES (BCFI)

This Canada-wide organization, administered by a small national team, is celebrating 15 years of bringing a breath of outside air to incarcerated people via books. Margaret Atwood is a patron, and volunteers like Judy and Erin

run the book clubs in prisons across the country. Once a month they pass through prison security, heavy doors clanging shut behind them, carrying nothing but a book and a journal, to bring “book clubs to the big house.”

“Honestly, I get as much out of it as the inmates,” Judy says.

Erin agrees. “Prison social programs have been slashed, so inmates are grateful for anything they get, and we enjoy it, too. We’ve never had any trouble. It’s a book club! We talk about books, share ideas and thoughts and how we feel about a book.”

Sadly, but not surprisingly, she hears disparaging remarks about her efforts. “If someone says I’m wasting my time and taxpayers’ money I point out these guys are all getting out some day. Anything we can do to help them stay connected to the outside world, stay connected to community and mindful living is not a waste. And anyway, it’s not government funded.”

BCFI also runs ChIRP (Children of Inmates Reading Program). “An inmate with a child on the outside, son, daughter, grandchild, whatever, can choose an appropriate book to read and record. Then the book and recording of their voice are sent to the child. Isn’t that a beautiful thing?” Prisoners don’t have Zoom, and ChIRP is a powerful way to stay connected to a child.

For the book clubs, BCFI provides two or three hundred titles submitted by a team of about eight volunteers who read and vet prospective books all year. “We choose about 50 from that list and give it to give it to the inmates with about a month to choose,” says Erin.

“I’m a retired elementary school teacher and this will sound like something straight out of school,” laughs Judy, “but we give them coloured dots to put beside the books they want to read.” Twelve dots for twelve meetings a year. Far from finding that condescending, inmates are happy to be given a choice. They don’t get to make decisions about much else in prison. “Sometimes guys ask if they can put all their dots on one book to bump up its chances,” says Judy. “We say yes they can!”

There are 15 inmates in the book club at any one time, and they take it seriously, making diverse choices, from Rick Mercer’s *Talking to Canadians* to Jo Nesbo’s thriller, *Macbeth*.

Erin recalls when they read *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, “Carol Finlay (founder of BCFI) came to our meeting with a recording of someone playing the cello. Some of the men had never heard a cello,” she says with a catch in her voice. “It was a very moving moment. It made the story more real for them.” “We try to make connections, find themes,” she says. “How does this connect to the outside world for you, people in your life? to other books you’ve read? Every man in there has violated an important community rule. We want to help them come back to a community with some ability to interact appropriately. Books can engender compassion, empathy, show how other people deal with life.”

Just like on the outside, book club discussions can get animated. “There are

three rules,” says Erin firmly. “You have to read the book! Otherwise, it’ll be hard finding things to talk about for two hours. There’s no interrupting, which is important because this group tends to attract big talkers. No making fun of anybody. Respect when it’s their turn to talk, respect their opinions, keep it positive.” As with any book club, Erin and Judy sometimes have to draw out reticent members.

BCFI relies on donations, fundraising and grants, but it gives the books to inmates to keep – if they choose. Prisoners can only have a certain number of possessions. “Sometimes if they want to keep the book, rather than give it to the library or another inmate, they’ll have to give up something else,” says Judy. “It’s an interesting way to frame the question ‘How did you feel about this book?’” It made me think about just how much owning a book can mean.

After thirteen years running the Warkworth Prison book club, Judy and Erin have a lot of stories to tell. They recall asking the group, “Who would you recommend this book to?” and hearing, “Someone going into The Hole.” Judy shakes her head and smiles. “We might say it’s a good beach read; they give it a thumbs-up for reading in Solitary.”



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