

Jail librarian gives inmates the key to understanding the world

Carol Cook uses books to help readers connect with the people they admire

BY JANE SALISBURY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If the stereotype of a jail librarian involves a stern woman trundling her cart down a narrow catwalk as hands reach through bars for tattered Westerns, then Carol Cook breaks the mold.

Carol is a library outreach specialist for Multnomah County Library who works with the inmates in Multnomah County jails. She

is a small, fast-talking, fast-walking woman from Hawaii, proud of her roots, with an island sensibility and modesty about her accomplishments. Carol selects books for the Multnomah County Detention Center and Inverness Jail. She spends many hours

each week at Inverness, where she visits the dorms, maintains the book collection, takes reading suggestions, hands out information about anything from operating a food cart to dog training and runs two book discussion groups.

Although Carol has introduced many inmates to a wider world in the eight years she has worked in this position for Multnomah County Library, she is more eager to talk about their accomplishments than hers. You can hear it in her voice as she admits to gently scolding people to finish their books, or encouraging them in their modest post-release dreams. She believes strongly in community and family and brings that Hawaiian sense of interdependence and deep caring to her work at Inverness.

Once a month, Carol hands out a new title for her book group to read, along with some history and background to consider as they tackle it. Choosing the title is not always easy. Contrary to the intellectual freedom principles of public libraries, books are restricted in the jails: no true crime, no hardbacks and no sensational covers. She considers carefully what titles are likely to be both appealing and challenging. Time is on her side, however; inmates, probably more often than the average library patron,

finish reading their books.

For nearly all the participants, being in a book group is an unfamiliar experience. Many have not made it through high school, and some have been in and out of the criminal justice system for years; often they don't know what it is like to be taken seriously as a reader or a thinker. The tastes of her participants run from mass-market fiction to serious non-fiction, and Carol makes sure there is a mix of classics and current titles. They are asked to read everything from Oliver Sacks to Alexander Dumas to John Steinbeck.

Every February, when Multnomah County Library selects a book for its Everybody Reads program, engaging the whole community in reading and discussing the same title, Carol invites the Inverness inmates to participate — a way of connecting them to their fellow citizens outside the walls.

Carol calls her book discussions "literacy groups." While the majority of inmates in the United States do not read above a fourth- or fifth-grade level, that is not the kind of literacy that Carol is promoting. Instead, it is literacy about the world, the kind of expansive view unavailable to a kid without the advantage of a stable family and a good education. Using books like "Undaunted Courage" and "My Beloved World," full of interesting ideas and indomitable people, Carol helps readers see the common thread between themselves and the individuals they admire. They learn to find kindred spirits in the most unlikely figures: Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, in her struggles with poverty and an alcoholic father, and Temple Grandin, the autistic animal expert, about whom one inmate wrote, "That lady is awesome." When a young man whose life has been scarred by abuse and failure can catch a glimpse of himself in a Supreme Court justice, something remarkable is happening.

The poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, who was incarcerated in the Arizona State Prison for five years on drug charges and has since become an award-winning teacher and poet, writes about reading: "Not knowing how to read and write leads to not knowing where windows come from, how cars are made, how people pay for cars. Not knowing how to read and write is only the top of the problem, because behind that wall, you don't know anything and how anything operates in society, and that's the nightmare." In this context, literacy means reading to understand the world.

Knowing how things operate in society: That can be a revelation to a man who has

only known generational poverty, a chaotic family life and the revolving door of incarceration, or a woman who has been repeatedly incarcerated for prostitution or drugs and has had her children taken away. Carol does not take any particular interest in the charges that have brought inmates to jail; they may be serving short sentences or awaiting trial for serious crimes. She is more interested in awakening their minds. While the list of reasons that bring people to jail is long, the curiosity of inmates about the world beyond their troubled lives, once ignited, is deep.

The Revolutions of the Heart series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day.

"The greatest challenge of the day is: How to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." (Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement)

A few years ago, Carol welcomed a young woman into the women's book discussion at Inverness. The woman, who was awaiting trial, was enthusiastic and well-spoken and, in fact, had studied to be an engineer. She encouraged other women to join and contribute insights to the discussion.

When she was sentenced to federal prison in another state, she continued to stay in touch with Carol, who has helped her with ideas for starting a book discussion group among her fellow prisoners. Although she finds that books

are much more restricted in her prison, she is finding ways to bring classics and older titles in to share.

Carol's files bulge with passionate letters about the difference reading has made in people's lives, even behind bars. A typical letter reads, in part: "I love it, it has opened my mind, spirit and horizon. ... What we learn here has made me want to be a better man." Part of the mission of this type of jail program is to make a real life inside, because some inmates may be going to prison for a long time. Not everyone is preparing for an eventual return to a life

outside. Some inmates find a childhood they never had when they read Steinbeck or Twain for the first time — the books many of us take for granted.

"Thank you for caring *truly* about all the men and women here," one inmate wrote to Carol. "Some folks do not understand the damage toll suffered beginning as children and how devastating that is."

When Carol brings tales of endurance and survival to her literacy group, her readers love the gripping stories, but they also strike a deep chord. Recently, the group read and discussed "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex," by Nathaniel Philbrick. The Essex was a whaleship out of Nantucket that was attacked by an enormous sperm whale and sank in 1820. (This incident is believed to have inspired Herman Melville in the writing of "Moby Dick.") The shipwrecked sailors set out in small whaleboats and underwent extreme deprivation and starvation in their attempt to reach land over many following months.

As the group talked about the book, the conversation ranged widely over whale biology, pre-Civil War race relations, weather patterns, the geography of the South Pacific and cannibalism. There was a shared sense of wonder, loud laughter about who might have to be eaten first, and there was respectful give and take.

The next book for Carol's group was to be "Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics," by Jeremy Schaap, an account of the unrelenting racism directed against Olympic runner Jesse Owens and his determination in the face of it. While accounts of extraordinary strength and survival are riveting for anyone, they hold special appeal for Carol's book group, as they face their own tests of endurance. There is an unusual freedom, too, in the truly multicultural nature of a typical jail book group. Carol's current group has white, African-American, Asian and Hispanic participants. As she said, "we can talk about racism. We can have a dialogue about race in the confines of a jail group. I assure the participants that what we talk about in the group stays in the group. They appreciate that they all have a safe, equal forum to share their thoughts."

Learning to read deeply and critically will serve these people in whatever awaits them. Losing oneself in a book is freeing for all of us, but perhaps most profoundly for those who are behind bars. As one person put it, speaking for others who have expressed the same feeling, "When I am in book group, I forget that I am in jail."



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