

Books Through Bars



When a person is sent to prison, he is deprived of many things. He is deprived of his freedom, his ability to earn money, the company of his friends and family, and many of the daily comforts he has enjoyed for most of his life. In many cases, he is also deprived of something less obvious, but, for many people, just as dear: books. While some prisons have libraries, many do not. Those that do exist are generally poorly stocked and have many fewer titles than a typical public library. This means that an inmate may go many years with limited access to reading material. For a person who loves books or who wishes to learn about the world, this can be a harsh sentence indeed.

However, there is a group in Brooklyn that aims to help inmates receive some of the literature they want. As of 2013, the group, called Books Through Bars, gathers three times a week in the basement of a bookstore that overlooks the city's East River. The basement is small and dimly lit, but the walls are stacked high with wooden shelves, each packed to the brim with books. The books are arranged like a library, by sections. Novels are against one wall, history against another, and self-help and reference books against a third. All of the books are donated by people who believe that inmates, regardless of the crime they committed, should not be deprived of literature.

In the middle of the room is a table, piled high with letters. The letters come from prisons and jails all over the country. Books Through Bars advertises itself in magazines and pamphlets read by inmates. In the ads, they ask inmates to send them requests for books. So, the inmates write in, asking either for specific titles or books on a particular topic. The volunteers then try to match the requests to books in the Books Through Bars library. Each inmate receives two or three books. When the volunteer has selected the books, he or she wraps them in paper cut from old grocery bags, writes the address of the jail or prison the inmate lives in on the front in black pen, and adds the package to a stack of packages to be mailed. In one corner of the basement are milk crates filled with brown-paper packages, waiting to be taken to the post office.

Since the library is relatively small—it has only a couple thousand books—matching the inmates' requests can sometimes be difficult. One inmate writes in asking for a book about ancient civilizations, like the Mayans and Aztec.

“To whom it may concern,” the postcard says. “I would please like some books on Aztec culture or Mayan books. I am real interested in the history of my great ancestors. There is a book called ‘Aztec Thought & Culture’ by Juan Portillo Leon. If you could please send me a copy of that paperback book or any related to Aztec culture I would really appreciate this. Thank you, Mario.”

Since the library doesn't have any of these books, the volunteer finds two related books. One is about ancient Greek civilization, while another is about modern Mexico. Neither quite fulfill the inmates' requests, but the volunteers try to get as close as they can.

Requests for books about ancient civilizations, especially from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa are common. Books about psychology, self-help, and radical politics also rank high. In general, though, preferences among inmates vary widely. A man in a low-security jail in Miami wants “Lord of the Flies” and “Who Moved My Cheese?” A man in a maximum security prison in California wants books about meteorites and asteroids. A man serving a triple life sentence in Indiana asks for a copy of Tolstoy's "Master and Man."

In addition to requests for history or science books, other inmates looking towards their release, ask for books about finding jobs or about taking the GED—a test you can take that is the equivalent of a high school diploma. The single most popular request is for a dictionary. While in prison, many inmates are trying to appeal their cases—meaning that they are asking for the verdict to be overturned. When writing their appeals, they need a dictionary to make sure they spell the words correctly. Others just want to improve their vocabulary.

Most of the inmates take a formal, almost meek tone in their letters. “To Whom It May Concern,” begins one. “Firstly, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude for such a program and I would like to thank you in advance for this service, and it should be known that you are making a profound difference in people’s lives who are already in a situation where despair and boredom are constant companions.” The author goes on to request a copy of “A Lawyer’s Life” by Johnnie Cochran.

Among inmates who ask for fiction, fantasy books are the most popular. A man writing from the secure housing unit of Pelican Bay State Prison in California asks for novels by Terry Goodkind and George R.R. Martin. “I spend 23 hours a day in a cell,” he writes, “and to keep the reality of this place in check and to maintain a bit of sanity in this dark place, I submerge myself in a world of books.”

The letters are almost always handwritten, usually in pencil, on leafs of notebook paper or on the backs of prison scrap -- commissary lists, visitation forms, memos from the warden. One man from Phoenix sends a postcard. On the front is a color photograph of a group of men wearing black-and-white striped uniforms, like convicts in old prison movies. They are huddled under a giant tent, behind a wire fence. The printed legend reads, “Hello from Sunny Arizona!” On the back, a caption explains that these men are inmates in the world’s largest tent jail, run by Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Prison officials have the right to deny admittance to books they deem dangerous to their institution or capable of undermining the prisoner’s rehabilitation. In such cases, they send the book back with a form letter explaining the reason for the rejection. This reasoning can sometimes seem unsound. An administrator at Northern Correctional Institution in Somers, Connecticut, rejected the primer “Introduction to Psychology” by Ann L. Weber as a threat to security and safety of the prison. A novel by George Orwell called “Burmese Days,” based on the years the famous author spent living in Burma, was rejected by the state of Texas because of similar concerns that it would cause a riot.

Books Through Bars in New York is only one of many groups in dozens of other cities that send books to inmates. While the group in Brooklyn sends books to inmates all over the country, some concentrate mainly on inmates within their state. Many of the volunteers in Books Through Bars hold different views on prisons and inmates. Some believe that the sentencing of inmates is too harsh, while others believe it is mostly fair. However, what binds the volunteers together is a belief that all of the inmates still have a right to read books.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Why do people in prison have books sent to them?

- A People in prison have books sent to them because stores are looking to get rid of their extra books.
- B People in prison have books sent to them because some prisons have no libraries and others have only poorly stocked ones.
- C People in prison have books sent to them because judges order them to read in prison.
- D People in prison have books sent to them because they have to go to school while they are in prison.

2. The group Books Through Bars was started to address what problem?

- A Books Through Bars had too many books and needed to make space.
- B Books Through Bars needed to find a way to teach inmates the group's political ideas.
- C Prisoners who wanted to read often had no access to books.
- D Prisoners were threatening the security of prisons after reading controversial books.

3. Books Through Bars gets thousands of letters from people in prison around the country requesting books. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be drawn?

- A The wardens make them write letters as part of their sentence.
- B People in prison are bored and will write to anybody.
- C The organization can help people get out of jail.
- D Prisons often don't have enough books for prisoners who want to read.

4. Read the following sentence from the text: "I would like to thank you in advance for this service, and it should be known that you are making a profound difference in people's lives who are already in a situation where despair and boredom are constant companions." Based on the evidence in this sentence, how was the letter writer feeling?

- A grateful
- B annoyed
- C confused
- D surprised

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A Judges should order prisoners to read as part of their sentences.
- B Even people who commit crimes deserve the opportunity to read.
- C People who commit crimes are too dangerous to read books.
- D Books Through Bars does not believe in jailing people when they commit crimes.

6. Read the following sentences: "When a person is sent to prison, he is deprived of many things. He is deprived of his freedom, his ability to earn money, the company of his friends and family, and many of the daily comforts he has enjoyed for most of his life." As used in the passage, what does the word deprived mean?

- A permitted
- B given
- C denied
- D encouraged

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The organization Books Through Bars sends books to prisoners _____ prisons often don't have libraries, or have small libraries.

- A although
- B before
- C yet
- D because

8. Why did a group of people in Brooklyn start the organization Books Through Bars?

9. In the passage, the writer describes that some prisoners request novels, others want self-help books, and still others want books about history. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

10. Explain how Books Through Bars has impacted the lives of prisoners by using information from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1150

1. Why do people in prison have books sent to them?

- A People in prison have books sent to them because stores are looking to get rid of their extra books.
- B People in prison have books sent to them because some prisons have no libraries and others have only poorly stocked ones.**
- C People in prison have books sent to them because judges order them to read in prison.
- D People in prison have books sent to them because they have to go to school while they are in prison.

2. The group Books Through Bars was started to address what problem?

- A Books Through Bars had too many books and needed to make space.
- B Books Through Bars needed to find a way to teach inmates the group's political ideas.
- C Prisoners who wanted to read often had no access to books.**
- D Prisoners were threatening the security of prisons after reading controversial books.

3. Books Through Bars gets thousands of letters from people in prison around the country requesting books. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be drawn?

- A The wardens make them write letters as part of their sentence.
- B People in prison are bored and will write to anybody.
- C The organization can help people get out of jail.
- D Prisons often don't have enough books for prisoners who want to read.**

4. Read the following sentence from the text: "I would like to thank you in advance for this service, and it should be known that you are making a profound difference in people's lives who are already in a situation where despair and boredom are constant companions." Based on the evidence in this sentence, how was the letter writer feeling?

- A grateful**
- B annoyed
- C confused
- D surprised

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A Judges should order prisoners to read as part of their sentences.
- B Even people who commit crimes deserve the opportunity to read.**
- C People who commit crimes are too dangerous to read books.
- D Books Through Bars does not believe in jailing people when they commit crimes.

6. Read the following sentences: "When a person is sent to prison, he is deprived of many things. He is deprived of his freedom, his ability to earn money, the company of his friends and family, and many of the daily comforts he has enjoyed for most of his life." As used in the passage, what does the word deprived mean?

- A permitted
- B given
- C **denied**
- D encouraged

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The organization Books Through Bars sends books to prisoners _____ prisons often don't have libraries, or have small libraries.

- A although
- B before
- C yet
- D **because**

8. Why did a group of people in Brooklyn start the organization Books Through Bars?

Suggested answer: People started Books Through Bars because they believed that even people in prison deserve access to literature and they saw that many prisons did not have any books or enough books to satisfy the prisoners' desire to read. They decided there was something they could do to help and so they began their organization.

9. In the passage, the writer describes that some prisoners request novels, others want self-help books, and still others want books about history. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

Suggested answer: Prisoners have different taste in what they want to read and often cannot find the books they desire in the prison library.

10. Explain how Books Through Bars has impacted the lives of prisoners by using information from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the text. Students may explain that Books Through Bars has given prisoners access to books that were not available to them so that they can learn about different topics, educate themselves, and pass their time in jail in a more pleasant manner. Students may even cite the letter of one of the prisoners who states that the program is making a "profound difference" in the lives of people who are in a situation "where despair and boredom are constant companions."