

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

Change your story

# Books Unlocked

Final report 2022/23

**“When I first came to prison  
7 years ago and knew  
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[The] most important  
aspect is the ability to  
unlock some mind space for  
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headlights’ new prisoner.”**

## Key achievements

In the 2022/23 project year, we donated a total of **2,401** books to reading groups, prison libraries, individuals in prison and community settings. This is the highest number of books ever donated as part of the project.

We have seen brilliant author and celebrity engagement, involving **Dua Lipa, Sarah Waters, Max Porter, Esi Edugyan** and **Colum McCann** in the project.

We have been approached directly by approximately **30** new prisons asking to be involved in Books Unlocked.

## Project overview

Since 2012, Books Unlocked has supported people in prisons and young offender institutions to read for enjoyment, to read more often, and to engage with literature. The programme is made possible thanks to funding from the Booker Prize Foundation and builds on its history of celebrating the best in contemporary literature by increasing disadvantaged communities' access to high-quality writing. We support prisons across the country by:

- Donating copies of shortlisted and longlisted Booker Prize titles to reading groups and individuals in prison
- Serialising audio books via the Books Unlocked show on National Prison Radio
- Arranging inspirational author visits to prison reading groups

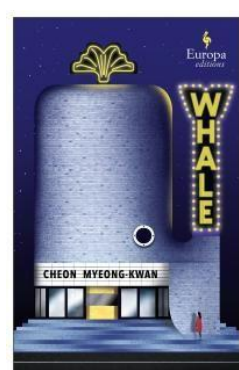
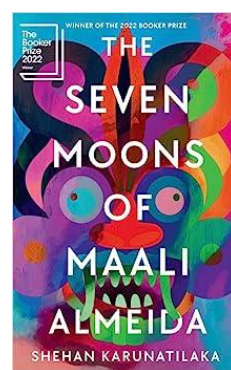
## Book donations

We have circulated two books lists in 2022/23, and also distributed International Booker Prize titles which were kindly donated by the Booker Prize Foundation. Titles available for request via the book lists and National Prison Radio were:

- *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart
- *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro
- *The Mars Room* by Rachel Kushner
- *Snap* by Belinda Bauer

- *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley
- *Glory* by NoViolet Bulawayo
- *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel
- *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood
- *The Promise* by Damon Galgut
- *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan
- *Whale* by Cheon Myeong-Kwan (trans. Kim Chi Young)
- *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead
- *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon
- *Light Perpetual* by Francis Spufford
- *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan
- *Lanny* by Max Porter
- *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann
- *Such A Fun Age* by Kiley Reid
- *Great Circle* by Maggie Shipstead

**“Reading books is very good for my mental health and takes my mind off bad things that have happened in my life. Thank you for the books you have sent me. I cannot wait for my next book.” (Participant in HMP Brixton)**



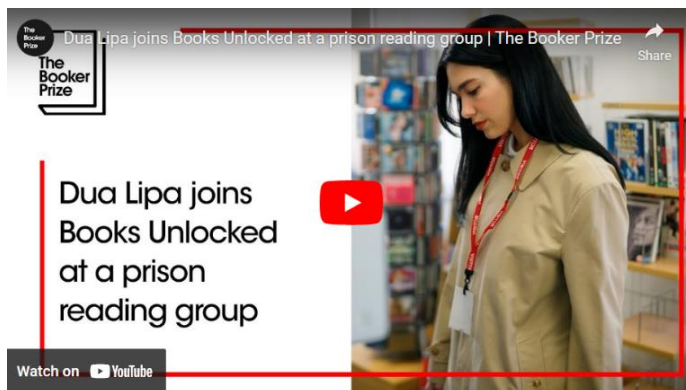
International Booker Prize titles donated to prison reading groups were:

- *A System So Magnificent is Blinding* by Amanda Svensson
- *Boulder* by Eva Baltasar
- *Is Mother Dead* by Vigdis Hjorth
- *Jimi Hendrix Live in Lviv* by Andrey Kurkov

- *Ninth Building* by Zou Jongzhi
- *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan
- *Standing Heavy* by GauZ'
- *Still Born* by Guadalupe Nettel
- *The Birthday Party* Laurent Mauvignier
- *The Gospel According To The New World* by Maryse Conde
- *Time Shelter* by Georgi Gospodinov
- *While We Were Dreaming* by Clemens Meyer

## Author and celebrity engagement

The 2022/23 year has seen strong engagement from Booker authors, as well as **Dua Lipa**, whose visit to meet the reading group at HMP Downview was a particular highlight, generating incredible awareness of the project with the public and prisons and offering the women in the prison the opportunity to attend a spectacular event. Dua gathered questions from attendees about *Shuggie Bain*, which were then put to Douglas Stuart during their event at Hay Festival. We worked closely with the Booker Prize editorial team to coordinate the creation of a short film, a web article and social media content which was viewed widely.



We were also delighted to host **Sarah Waters** at HMP Downview in March 2023, where she spoke to the reading group about her book *The Nightwatch*. **Max Porter** also visited groups at HMP Grendon and HMP Springhill, and **Colum McCann** gave an interview on National Prison Radio to coincide with the first broadcast of the *Apeirogon* audiobook. We were also thrilled that **Esi Edugyan**, author of *Washington Black* and this year's chair of judges, was interviewed on National Prison Radio by Ali Abdi in September.



***“Freedom to ask and discuss, being treated as intelligent women with valued opinions and observations.” (Response from participant at Sarah Waters’ event in HMP Downview when asked what she most valued about the session)***

### Participating settings

The table below presents the headline data for the settings recruited for the 2022/23 programme and compares it to the previous six years of the project. Settings included under ‘prisons’ include adult men’s and women’s prisons, Young Offender Institutions and Secure Training Centres, ‘Community’ settings include community reading groups, resettlement services, schools and universities.

Type of setting	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17
Prison	101	94	95	85	65	55	28
Community	14	11	9	6	10	8	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>44</b>

We continue to expand our reach year-on-year and we are delighted that we are now able to support 82% of the prison estate across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.



## Audiobooks on National Prison Radio

**“It allows me to read new authors, hear new voices, go on new journeys and experiences. Reading books that are slightly more challenging has been a joy to push me out of my comfort zone and fall in love with books that, before prison, were not on my radar. Thank you for *Light Perpetual* – a wonderful a thought-provoking story.” (Participant in HMP Dartmoor)**

Our strong relationship with National Prison Radio has continued and we were delighted to be able to broadcast more original audio content this year than ever before. The schedule of titles for 2022/23 was as follows:

- *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan
- *Oh William!* by Elizabeth Strout
- *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka
- *Washington Black* by Edi Edugyan
- *The Colony* by Audrey Magee
- *Such A Fun Age* by Kiley Reid
- *Light Perpetual* by Francis Spufford
- *Lanny* by Max Porter

A total of 95 requests, sent in either via post or the National Prison Radio freephone number, came to us this project year. Each person receives a copy of the book they have requested, and often a bonus book!

## The ongoing need for Books Unlocked

**“Discovering my new found love of reading – knowing the book is shortlisted (or more) is huge for me as I am still finding myself in books; getting to know which authors and genres I like. The free books are amazing as I didn't have a life where that was possible.”**

The Books Unlocked programme continues to be a cultural lifeline for so many people in custody. Prison regimes remain unpredictable and, in the wake of COVID-19 and the subsequent staffing crisis across the prison estate and, in some cases, libraries, have yet to return to business as usual. We are therefore delighted that – thanks to support from the Booker Prize Foundation – we have been able to ensure that 2,401 books have been placed in the hands of people who need them most, audiobooks have been a source of joy and comfort for people unable to leave their cells, and author visits have been a source of huge enjoyment and inspiration.

Central to the huge success of Books Unlocked is our enduring partnership with the Booker Prize Foundation. The excellent reputation of the prize and what it stands for not only allows us to access fantastic books and garner support from publishers, but also to generate a nation-wide conversation about books in environments where it may not otherwise happen. In short, Books Unlocked embodies the Booker Prize Foundation's aim to make access to great literature as democratic as possible. Books Unlocked is a commitment to the belief that everyone, no matter their circumstances or past, deserves to be able to access books and discuss them. We were delighted that the Booker Prize Foundation facilitated a connection with Dua Lipa which did so much to raise the profile of Books Unlocked and increase awareness of this vital work.

As the lynchpin of our criminal justice work, Books Unlocked has given us the evidence, skills and experience to leverage further support in this area and grow our work significantly in the criminal justice space. We now have a total of five projects up and running which span reading for pleasure, creative writing, audio content production, parent/child storytelling and a national project funded by the Ministry of Justice which aims to build an evidence base around the efficacy of literacy enrichment programmes in prison. Our team has grown to include eight full-time members of staff, increasing from three this time last year. The eleven years of Books Unlocked has made this possible.

## Developments for 2023/24

We have seen a sharp increase in requests for support as a result of the [Reading in Prisons Review](#) published in March 2022, and the requirement for reading to be a priority in all prisons. We are meeting this need as much as we can, but our budget is inevitably delivering more for less each year as we see the knock-on effect of inflation, salary increases due to the cost of living crisis and publishers being under increased pressure to cut costs. As such, we would really appreciate the trustees' consideration for Books Unlocked funding to be increased in 2024/25.

We are incredibly grateful for what the grant has allowed us to achieve so far in this project year.



# Books Unlocked

Impact report 2022/23



## Books Unlocked: Impact Report 2022/23

Books Unlocked supports people in prisons and young offender institutions, as well as others in community settings such as schools and libraries, to read for enjoyment. The project provides free copies of Booker Prize longlisted and shortlisted titles for participants to read, discuss and keep. The authors of these titles regularly visit prison and community reading groups as part of the programme, and audiobooks are broadcast across the custodial estate via National Prison Radio.

Books Unlocked uses a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the impact of the programme in their settings. This includes participant surveys, together with feedback from librarians. For this report we received participant surveys from 16 prisons and 15 surveys from librarians.

### Key findings

Analysis of the data collected identified the following key findings:

- Improved attitudes towards reading
- Improved literacy skills
- Improved reading behaviours
- Increased sense of wellbeing
- Increased focus on literacy within institutions

### Improved attitudes and confidence

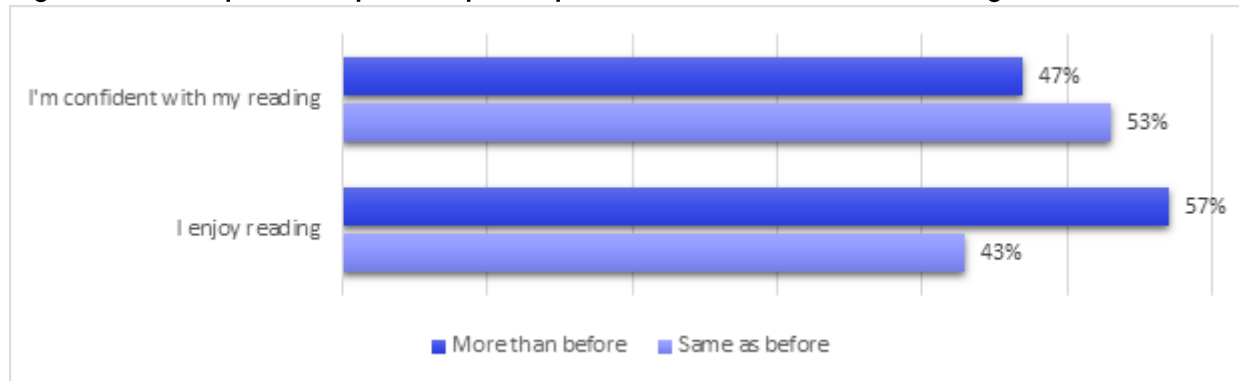
Books Unlocked positively impacted on participants' enjoyment and confidence in reading. This is reflected in the feedback from participants.

“I have always enjoyed the book group (since 2016). I have read many books, that on first glance I would not have read. However, the group has expanded my horizons towards 12 novels a year that I did not choose which I have found helpful.”

“It has given me more interest in reading and talking about the subjects.”

Figure 1 shows that 58% enjoy reading more than before the programme and almost half (47%) felt more confident about their reading.

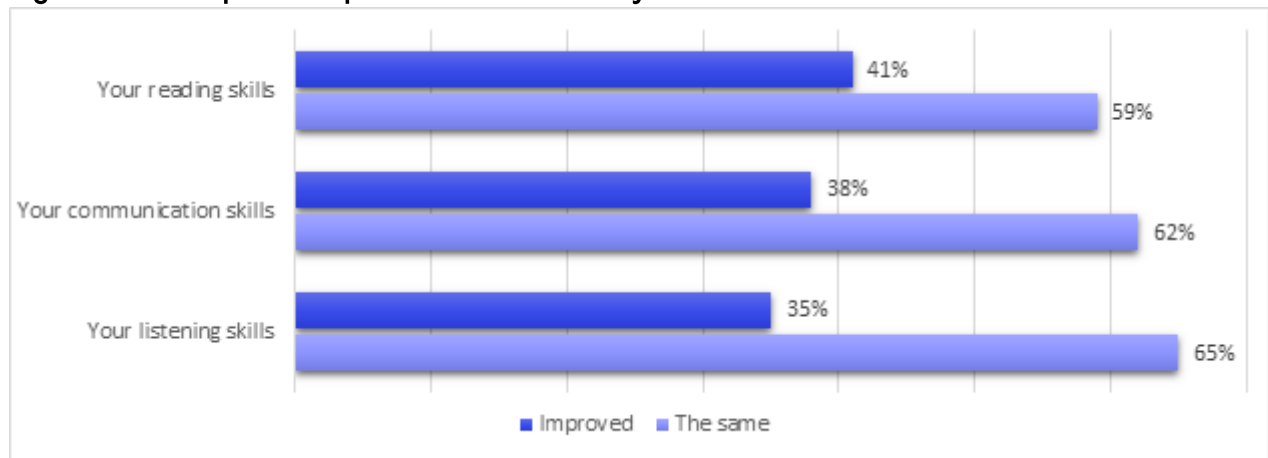
**Figure 1. Self-reported impact on participants' attitudes towards reading**



### Improved literacy skills

The programme improved the literacy skills of many participants. 2 in 5 (40%) of participants recorded improvements in their reading skills, with almost as many citing improved communication and listening skills (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Participants' improvements in literacy and communication skills**



Qualitative evidence supports the view that the programme improves reading skills. It also suggests that the choice of Booker Prize books have an impact on the development of reading skills.

“Discovering my new found love of reading - knowing the book is shortlisted (or more) is huge for me as I am still finding myself in books; getting to know which authors and genres I like. The free books are amazing as I didn't have a life where that was possible.”

“For me it allows me to read new authors, hear new voices, go on new journeys and experiences. Reading books that are slightly more challenging has been a joy to

push outside out of my comfort zones and fell in love with books and authors that, before prison, was not on my radar.”

The qualitative data revealed that reading with others led to better literacy abilities and reading behaviours, and that the chance to find new books, authors, and genres was a powerful motivator for continued reading.

“I like to discover new authors and even read other books they may have written. Reading improved my reading skills and understanding various words authors use. I enjoy having the chance to explore books I wouldn't buy and read on the outside.”

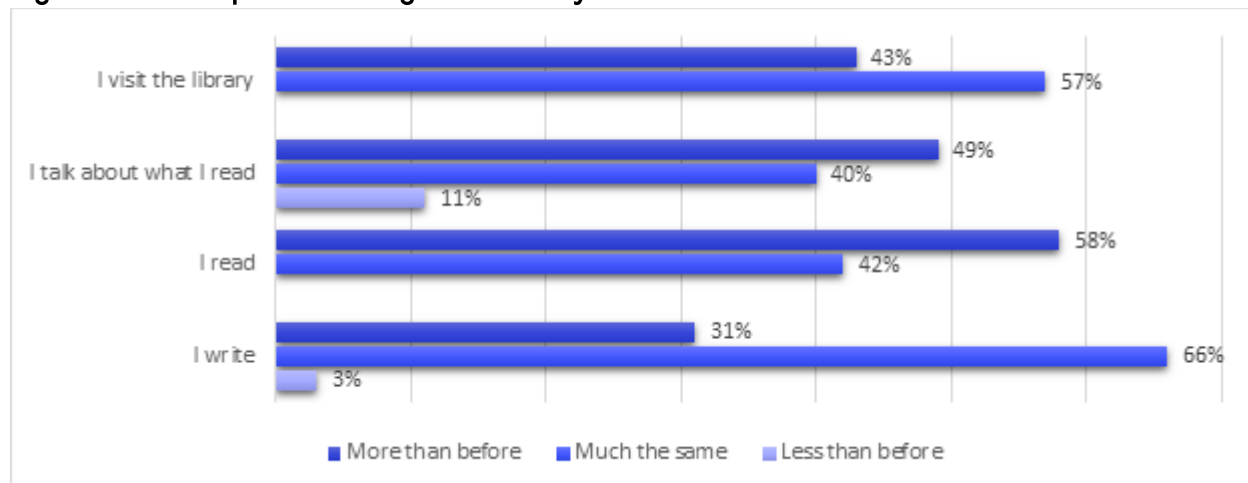
“I have LOVED being part of a reading group to discuss and read a book that I would, probably, have never picked up or heard of.”

“Gathering in a group and discussing makes me more eager to read book club books. Also finding new books I wouldn't read”

### Improved reading behaviours

Following the programme, participants engage more in behaviours that promote literacy. Figure 3 shows that 58% now read more than before they participated. More than 2 in 5 participants now visit the library more often (42%) and almost half (48%) talk more about what they are reading. 3 in 10 (30%) also report writing more as a result of taking part in Books Unlocked.

**Figure 3. Self-reported changes in literacy behaviours**



Qualitative feedback from participants highlighted the enjoyment of receiving books that they would not otherwise have engaged with and the impact this has on their reading behaviours.

“I’m 32 and I never read a book before coming to prison 9 months ago. I’ve read 77 books so far and can’t believe how much I’ve missed out on my whole life. I can spend 6–8 hours reading a day now and get lost in the books I read.”

“I enjoy getting free books so that I can explore the different kinds of genre. I like to discover new authors and even read other books they may have written. I enjoy having the chance to explore books I wouldn’t buy and read on the outside.”

### Increased sense of wellbeing

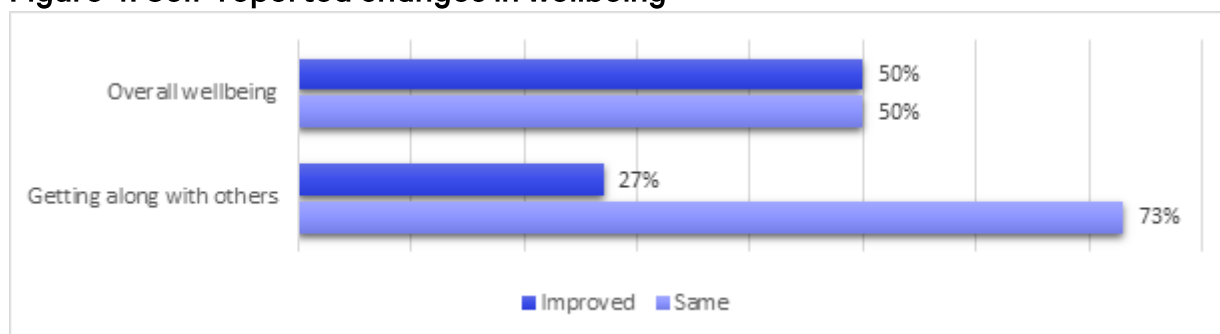
Participants also identified a positive impact on their wellbeing and the important role of Books Unlocked in helping new prisoners.

“Reading books is very good for my mental health and takes my mind off bad things that have happened in my life. Thank you for the following books you have sent me. I cannot wait for my next books.”

“When I first came to prison 7 years ago & knew nothing and no-one, Books Unlocked was a saviour. Most important aspect is the ability to unlock some mind space for the ‘rabbit in the headlights’ new prisoner.”

Half of all participants (50%) reported an increased sense of wellbeing after participating in the programme, and over a quarter (27%) stated that how they get along with others in the setting improved as a result of Books Unlocked (see Figure 4).

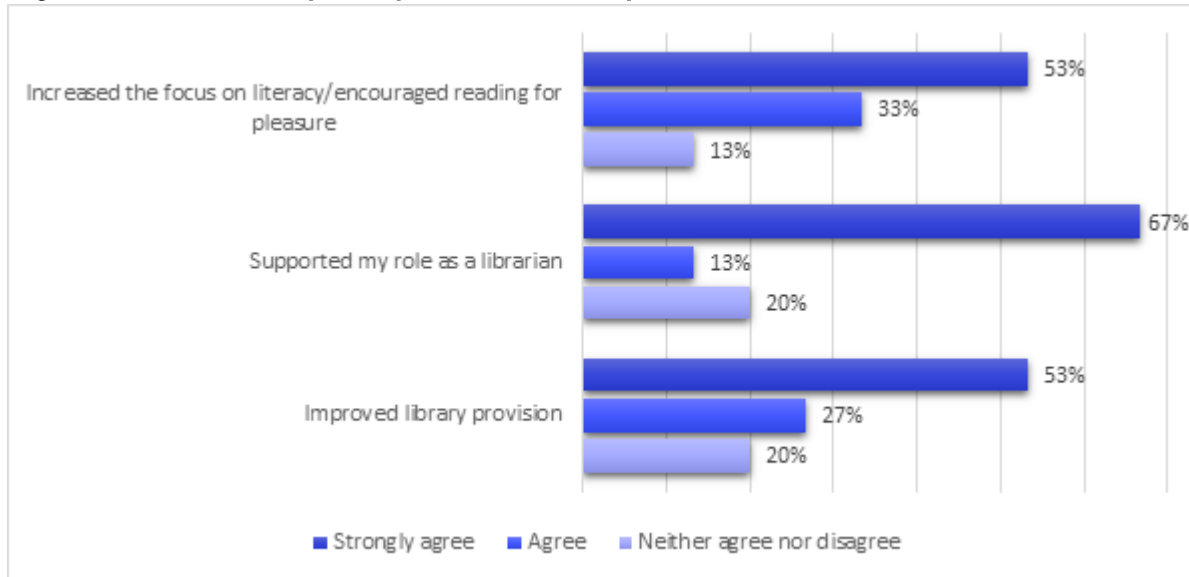
**Figure 4. Self-reported changes in wellbeing**



### Institutional impact

All the librarians who completed a survey rated Books Unlocked as either excellent (80%) or good (20%). 80% of librarians thought that the programme had improved their library provision and supported their role as a librarian. Most librarians also thought that Books Unlocked increased the focus on literacy and encouraged reading for pleasure in the institution (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Librarian’s perceptions of the impact of Books Unlocked**



**Conclusion**

Books Unlocked continues to provide a much needed programme within the prison estate, supporting librarians and empowering participants to improve their literacy skills, as well as bringing enjoyment to many people.

The data collected shows the range of benefits of Books Unlocked, improving attitudes, skills and behaviours around reading and literacy more broadly, as well as contributing to improved wellbeing. We will therefore continue to reach as many people in secure settings as possible in the coming year.