

## ***Books Unlocked***

Exploring Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Dead Man Talking* with prison, young offender institution and community reading groups across Staffordshire

*'That's the most twisted ending to a story ever!'*

Young Offender at HMYOI Brinsford discussing  
*Dead Man Talking*



*'I was part of Books Unlocked at HMYOI Brinsford in 2014, I feel very proud to have the chance to read another Man Booker Prize title this year and once again share my opinion with the community.'*

**Young Offender, HMYOI Brinsford 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 the National Literacy Trust.

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 *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Dead Man Talking* by Roddy Doyle 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 and for young offenders and prisoners studying English to read the book in class
- Engage a local school and three public library reading groups in reading the novel
- Share opinions of the novel 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

### The National Literacy Trust

### The Booker Prize Foundation

**HMYOI Brinsford:** Unconvicted & Convicted 18 – 21 years Young Offenders Prison

**HMP/YOI Drake Hall:** Women's Closed Prison

**HMP Featherstone:** Adult Male Cat C Closed Training Establishment

**HMP Oakwood:** Adult Male Cat C prison operated by G4S

**HMP Stafford:** Adult Male Cat C Closed Training Establishment

**HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall:** Cat C prison holding Young Offenders & Young Adults

**HMYOI Werrington:** Young Offenders Institution

**Codsall Community High School:** Specialist Maths & Computing College

**Kinver Public Library:** Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service

**Codsall Public Library:** Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service

**Hednesford Public Library:** Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service

## Background

Between 2013/14 Staffordshire Prison Library Service delivered a unique community model of *Books Unlocked* that linked several schools and public libraries across the county with a young offender's prison and an adult male prison. Building on this success in 2015, Reader Development Advisor for Staffordshire Prison Libraries Alan Smith, worked closely with Hannah Howard (Project Manager) and Clare Argar (Programme Manager) of the National Literacy Trust to devise a larger project which would ultimately see involvement across seven Staffordshire prisons, three public libraries and a local school.

The potential for the project to reach a much wider audience, including young offenders at HMYOI Werrington (15 – 18 year olds) and prisoners with lower literacy levels, came about because of the linking of *Books Unlocked* with the Quick Reads publication of *Dead Man Talking* by Booker Prize winning author, Roddy Doyle.

Roddy Doyle is the first Booker Prize winning author to write a Quick Read novel. His Booker Prize title, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, had already been chosen by Staffordshire Prison Library Service as this years *Books Unlocked* title. However, the addition of *Dead Man Talking* meant that prisoners who would find a lengthy novel inaccessible, could choose the Quick Read and still be involved in the project.

On 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015, Quick Reads held a parliamentary launch of their new titles and Alan attended along with Clare Argar to discuss the potential project with Cathy Rentzenbrink of Quick Reads, and to meet with Roddy Doyle.

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 other 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:

*'When we delivered Books Unlocked in 2014, I can honestly say it was the most moving and memorable two weeks I have had working in this prison. I was delighted at the chance to be involved again, and the challenge of reading two titles this year was very exciting. Two of the original members of our reading group were still in the prison and they signed up to be part of the new project instantly. Their enthusiasm helped to get more lads wanting to join in. They loved the fact that groups outside of the prison walls were all reading these books. It made them feel like citizens again. As before we used the excellent resources from the NLT to deliver the project in class as well. All in all we had nearly 100 lads reading those two books.'*

**Joan Morgan, Milton Keynes College, HMYOI Brinsford**

Kinver Library, with a well-established 'Tuesday Morning' adult reading group, had been a crucial partner in *Books Unlocked* 2013/14 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 'Codsall Writers' group which met regularly at the library. Hednesford Libraries 'Cookie Club' became the third partner in the project. The group, which mainly read romance fiction, were keen to challenge themselves with the two Roddy Doyle titles, and also keen to hear the views of the prison groups involved.

Codsall Community High School, who had already been enthusiastic partners in two previous reading projects, including *Books Unlocked* 2013/14 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.

*'We have worked with Alan on a number of projects in the past and we are always delighted to be asked to be part of something which challenges, motivates and ultimately benefits our pupils. I think the inclusion of prisoners in a project like this is really ground-breaking and has certainly helped to break some preconceptions about what prison life is like. I have been able to visit HMYOI Brinsford along with my colleagues and it was a real eye-opener to see how education is delivered in an institution like that. The school and sixth form volunteers saw this year's project as another great opportunity to become involved in something worthwhile and a valued use of study time. Our only criticism was the timing of the project. We would love to deliver this much earlier in the year, perhaps January/February, before the pressure of exams hit. Other than that, it was an outstanding piece of work to be part of. Roll on the next one.'*

**Paul Johnson: Assistant Head Teacher: Codsall Community High School**

At a Supervisors meeting for prison librarians, Alan proposed the idea of involvement in all seven Staffordshire libraries. 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 to any successful project is for people to feel fully supported. I would never dream of outlining a project in just an email, or through a phone call, I believe that you should talk to people face to face, and that if the response to the project is negative for valid reasons, then that information is just as valuable as a positive reaction, because it gives you clear ideas of where you need to support people or make changes to the delivery of the project.'*

**Alan Smith: Reader Development Advisor & Library Supervisor: HMYOI Brinsford**

## Delivery

Prior to reading *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Dead Man Talking*, 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 June, with July set aside for evaluating the groups and August/September for 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 HMYOI Brinsford Library, the project was delivered throughout May & June in class. A focus group of 10 young adults 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 HMYOI 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. I was very pleased that last year's project has been repeated just as successfully this time round. I will certainly be telling other governors about it.'*

**HMYOI Brinsford Governor: Mr Russell Trent**

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

At HMYOI Brinsford, copies of *Dead Man Talking* 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 *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, were still able to



be part of the project. Many wrote reviews of the book as part of their course work.

*'I think it's fair to say we struggled with Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha. It seemed to take half the book for the story to get going and then the ending was so downbeat and sudden. You were just left thinking 'oh man, the whole book was about his parents splitting up, how has it taken so many pages to tell that story? But, we really did TALK about that book. It made us laugh, it made us think and because we had a couple of travellers in our group, we all gained an insight into Irish life. Dead Man Talking was a great read. We got it immediately and loved the repetition in the story because we could all see how that would help struggling readers to remember what was going on. We think he pitched it just right.'*

**Young Offender, HMYOI Brinsford Reading Group**

During March and April the reading groups at Codsall Community High School, Codsall Writers Group and Codsall Evening Group met and discussed both *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Dead Man Talking*. The students at Codsall Community High School, assisted by 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.

*'I thought the idea that it's a wider ranging group of readers, different ages and all from different backgrounds, uniting to read and discuss a particular author, was something I'd never heard of before. I also think that a 'reading group' carries with it an air that we are all reading to a very high-standard, and that preconception could put a lot of people off joining. It's nice to break those rumours by saying, no, we all enjoy reading a wide variety of books and we can all enjoy something short and punchy like Dead Man Talking as much as we can enjoy a longer novel.'*

**Reading Group Member, Codsall Public Library**

*'I fully support schemes like Books Unlocked, it reinforces the idea of helping and encouraging people to read and discuss books, particularly in places where I would imagine life can be very grim and depressing. I love the idea of sharing our opinions as one huge group, no judgement, just the joy of reading uniting us all. I've never heard of something like this before, it's a credit to those that thought it up and deliver it.'*

**Codsall Writers Group**

The Kinver public library group, HMP Featherstone, HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall & HMP Oakwood all read *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Dead Man Talking* during April/May.

*'I read Dead Man Talking, it was the first book I've ever read. I loved how short and punchy it was, it didn't intimidate me in the way other books have. I liked reading with the others in the group, delving deeper in to the story and discussing many related topics like the different approaches we have to death in other cultures. I've never experienced anything like this before, a group of guys sitting around talking about books. Prisoners Talking Books, there's a title Roddy Doyle can use if he writes another Quick Read.'*

**HMP Featherstone, Reading Group Member**

*'I'm a lifelong reader, so initially I wasn't sure if this was something I would enjoy being part of. But, I liked the idea that this Quick Read had been written by someone who had won the Booker prize. I like the fact that Alan was asking us to read it and think if we could tell it was written by a Booker author. Did he pitch the story to the Quick Read audience or did he try to make it too complicated. That inspired me to re-read Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha which I have to be honest was a book that I struggled to complete the first time I read it. I have to say that this time around, I approached it differently and I got a lot more out of it. Proves that first impressions aren't always right.'*

**HMP Oakwood Library, Reading Group Member**

*'For me it was the sharing of opinions with people in the wider community and those who are in prison. I loved our group discussions and the evaluation we did, it was a great time to discuss and learn about other opinions which I found helpful in developing my own ideas and views. I also think the choice of books are very important as the author wasn't someone we had read before and his work was very challenging.'*

**Codsall Community High School, Reading Group Member**

*'For me it wasn't just about reading the books. It was about being part of a group. I didn't know the other lads until we started this reading group, and I enjoyed the fact that slowly we all learnt to trust each other and many people became friends. There was also a feeling of support amongst the group. No one took the mickey when someone struggled with their reading, we were all in this together and in fairness they were difficult books to read.'*

**HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall, Reading Group Member**

*'We are a long established reading group, and I guess that with that comes the danger that we have all got stuck in our ways. The exciting thing about this project is that we are challenged with a title we haven't all selected ourselves, and we read it with the knowledge that our opinion is going to be shared with a whole range of groups, and visa versa. That makes us think a little more about what we want to say, and also we think of those other groups, who they are, where they meet, what circumstances they are facing when they read these books.'*

**Kinver Library Reading Group Member**

HMP Drake Hall, HMP Stafford, HMYOI Werrington and Hednesford Public Library all took part in June/July. As with the other prisons, focus groups were established in the prison library and through partnership working with prison education providers the books were also read in classes. HMYOI Werrington suffered from a change of regime and the departure of key figures in the education team, meaning that fewer prisoners were able to take part in the project as a result. This is very valuable as it shows how easily a project can fail even with careful planning.

*'Dead Man Talking was a real headache to read. I didn't get it at all at first, in fact I finished the book and couldn't really understand what had happened. That said, I did enjoy it. I liked the relationship the two mates had. It made me think about the many times I've fallen out with my own friends and how stupid arguments can be when they become lifelong feuds.'*

**Young Offender: HMYOI Werrington Reading Group**

*'Being involved in Books Unlocked took us all out of our normal comfort zone. Firstly, because we tend to read modern female fiction. But also because we knew we would be sharing our views with so many different and diverse groups. I can honestly say it has been a very positive experience for all of us. Being part of a project like this gives you confidence to talk about books with others, and it's always good to be tested.'*

**Hednesford Public Library: Reading Group Member**

*'To be honest I would not have read any Man Booker titles out of choice, and that's why I am so grateful to have been able to take part in this because I would have missed out on a great book. I found it really interesting to read, but that experience was enhanced by the chance to talk about the book with the group and hear other people's views. I also loved the idea that my opinion counted with the other groups as well. Participating in Books Unlocked has actually made me read more. I didn't think I'd ever make the time to just sit and read books for hours, but I do now and it really helps you to unwind and forget your problems.'*

**HMP Drake Hall: Reading Group Member**

*'I'm classed as an OAP at Stafford and we have our own group that meets in a classroom near the prison library. We rarely get the chance to be involved with projects so it was great that Alan took the trouble to come and talk to us about Books Unlocked. What a salesman! We all signed up and it's been really good to have this to focus on and discuss with the other fellas around the room. I would say it was about equal, those that liked it or hated it, but those books certainly got us talking and that's what it's all about.'*

**HMP Stafford: Over 50's Reading Group Member**

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

## Evaluation

Since all 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. Each evaluation was freely adapted to suit that particular group.

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

The five key themes were:

1. Overall Review of *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*
2. Paddy & his family
3. Discovering the real story
4. Could you tell that *Dead Man Talking* had been written by a Booker Prize author?
5. Would *Dead Man Talking* encourage you to read more Quick Reads and novels?

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. giving answers they feel we would like to hear; 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 five 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 *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*

HMYOI Brinsford	<i>'If we'd read this alone, I think all of us would have given up, but reading it as part of a group helped us to get through it. It had no chapters and was often very difficult to tell which characters were speaking, so reading aloud and having breaks was a good way to get through it. We discussed the characters in depth and one of our group was from Ireland and was able to tell us a lot about their childhood and how to pronounce certain words. We all liked Paddy and we could all relate to his friends and the situations he was in, even though the book was set a long time before we were born.'</i>
Codsall Community High School	<i>'Very difficult and in places our interest really waned. It was just one long stream of consciousness and it actually felt exhausting to read. There's no denying how clever Roddy Doyle was to capture Paddy's voice so well and get inside his head. It just felt like the real story didn't get going until towards the very end of the book...and then it finished.'</i>
HMP Stafford	<i>'We loved the Vintage cover, very clever. At first you thought it was just a surreal drawing, but as the book moved on you could see how everything on the cover had its place in the book. We are all the right age to remember the 50's so it was very easy for us to relate to the time and enjoy the book from that prospective. A little slow moving, but very enjoyable.'</i>
HMP Featherstone	<i>'We all enjoyed it. Stunningly written, extremely clever and with a real wit and charm all its own. Easy to see why he won the Man Booker prize for this.'</i>
Kinver, Hednesford & Codsall Public Libraries	<i>'Many of us were fans of Roddy Doyle, but not necessarily of this book. We all agreed that Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha is an acquired taste, and you can see why it would divide an audience, and very quickly. Although we all liked the setting and many of us remember the era, we didn't really like Paddy. He was quite an obnoxious little boy, and having him as the main character became very wearing.'</i>

## 2. Paddy and his family

HMPYOI Swinfen Hall	<i>'We thought his father was a nasty piece of work, and that his mom was very brave. Trying to keep everything as normal as possible for Paddy whilst all around her the world was collapsing. You could really feel the fear that Paddy had when his father was in a terrible mood, but you also got the sense that he wanted to impress him all the time.'</i>
Codsall Community High School	<i>'Paddy was really just seeking reassurance and support, especially from his father, and when he couldn't find it in him he was looking for it from his friends instead. We thought his father was a real contradiction. Sometimes really nice and caring, asking Paddy about his day and congratulating him, other times clearly being abusive towards his wife. You got the sense that Paddy and his father would end up growing old as strangers.'</i>
HMP Oakwood	<i>'By far the most interesting character for us was Paddy's brother. He is probably the least written character in the whole book, barely having a few pages dedicated to him, but he is the one that leaves you wondering who he is and what is wrong with him. It's never explained but we felt he had learning difficulties, maybe autism.'</i>
HMP Drake Hall	<i>'Overall the book was well written and you became involved with Paddy and his life, you really wanted the best for him by the end of the book. He could be a real terror but deep down he just wanted to be a boy who was loved by his family and liked by his friends. Most of the book is light-hearted and the escapades of a group of young boys raised many a smile in our group.'</i>
Codsall Reading Group	<i>'Very funny, very moving and very clever. Not your obvious Man Booker winner, and I'm sure Roddy would say that himself. Obvious comparisons to Ulysses and even Catcher in the Rye. The fact that the whole story was told through the thoughts of a fairly unlikable central character made it both a pleasure and a struggle to read in equal measure.'</i>



### 3. Discovering the real story

HMYOI Brinsford	<i>'It certainly took it's time. At the end of each session Alan and Joan would ask us what we thought the story was really all about, and until the penultimate meeting we just kept saying, no idea! We liked the characters, and we laughed aloud at a lot of it, but it never seemed to be going anywhere. When we began to see that it was all about the destruction of the family that made the book more real to us, and gave it some serious heart and soul. But disappointingly it then ended really abruptly, just as we wanted to know more.'</i>
Codsall Community High School	<i>'It took us all by surprise, which is unusual. We had been analysing the story as we would any other novel for English, and yet it had never occurred to us that the actual plot of the novel was missing. Paddy's voice was so clearly defined, it just seemed that you were moving through a period of his life, growing and learning with him and meeting interesting characters along the way. We hadn't thought too much about his parent's relationship, we had solely considered it all from Paddy's point of view. When the issue of domestic violence began to crop up, it painted a darker colour over the book. We really liked the ending as well, the awkwardness and embarrassment of the father confronting his son on the doorstep. It was saying that the tables had turned, and from this point on Paddy's father would be the one seeking approval from his son.'</i>
HMP Stafford	<i>'I think a few of us had begun to see how the ending would pan out, basing some of it on personal experience I guess. It wasn't an obvious way to tell the story of domestic abuse and divorce, and it fools you in to thinking this is just the story of a little boy finding his way in the world. When he hits you with the sledgehammer blow that it's actually about something very painful indeed, that leaves you reeling, and made a few of us not want to read more...'</i>
HMP Drake Hall	<i>'Parts of the book actually made us all feel uncomfortable, particularly as the story would switch from what appeared to be innocent fun one minute to suddenly something that was much darker and crueller. One minute the book would make us laugh and the next feel sad at some of the extreme ways Paddy tried to be liked and the lengths he would go to. The domestic violence, which is the dark heart of the book was very well-written, by which we mean it was hardly alluded to, and that gave it more impact. By the end of the book you felt you knew Paddy and could relate to what he had gone through in one way or another. It was a good book to lose yourself in and get taken to another time and place.'</i>
Kinver Library	<i>'Utterly depressing. You feel so cheated by the end.'</i>

Reading Group	<i>You've had to give this character so much of your time to get through his story and follow his every thought, only to see him wind up in such an awful predicament that has no clear resolution. You do wonder if it was really worth the effort to write such a clever and complex book, to leave your reader with such a 'nothing' ending.'</i>
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**4. Could you tell *Dead Man Talking* had been written by a Man Booker author?**

HMYOI Swinfen Hall	<i>'Yes, because I've never read a Quick Read book that's as clever as this one. The story is as much what you make of it as a reader, than it is what's already down on the page. There are many questions that you have to think about and discuss, and the ending leaves you with a million more. It's very well paced, and the repetition helps you to grasp the concept better.'</i>
Codsall Community High School	<i>'When we first read the book we thought it was going over and over the same events simply because the story wasn't big enough to fill even the Quick Read specifications. However, on a second reading you begin to see just how clever this book is. Not only is it asking some very big questions of its readers, it is also reinforcing the plot for readers who may not pick up on the subtleties first time around. This is being done in such a way that you do not feel patronised by the author..'</i>
HMYOI Brinsford	<i>'As Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha was the first Man Booker title that many of us had read, it's really hard to say whether this reads like that. I would say it's very clever and the repetition of scenes helps to secure it all in your head, I know a lot of lads with really short attention spans, and this kind of device would really help them to grasp the story, without making them feel dumb.'</i>
HMP Featherstone	<i>'I'm not sure you would say it was written by a Man Booker author, but you certainly feel as though someone has really thought long and hard about this one. You would spot that it was a Roddy Doyle book, just by the style of the narrative, but he has really read the brief on this and is writing for the right audience. I would say it is perfectly pitched and superbly executed.'</i>
Hednesford Library Reading Group	<i>'Yes I think you can by the sheer cleverness of the story telling. You think because it's a Quick Read (i.e. large print font, short chapters, under a 100 pages) that you will be reading a very simple story. Of course what Roddy very cleverly does is tell an enormous, lifelong story, ask many questions about life, friendship and death, answer very few of them and leaves you debating all of this for much longer than you actually spent reading the book. Genius.'</i>



**5. Would *Dead Man Talking* encourage you to read more Quick Reads and novels?**

HMYOI Brinsford/Swinfen Hall	<i>'When you're at school you can easily get mocked for reading short books, or easy reads. Kids can be very cruel and if you are struggling with your reading you probably want to hide that from other people. So you avoid certain books, and certain publishers because people know they produce books for people with reading difficulties. In prison it's no different and that's why we all think Quick Reads are so good, Firstly they are aimed at everyone, and there author list is top notch, there are names on there that we all know and want to read. Then the stories themselves are, on the whole, brilliant. They certainly make you want to read more Quick Reads, and the natural progression from that is to track down the rest of that authors work.'</i>
HMP Oakwood	<i>'We already enjoy the Quick Read range so this is a difficult question to answer. I guess if we were pretending that we hadn't read a short story like this before, then yes it would make us want to read more. It's the fact that the writing was so good, and not patronising in anyway, that makes you want to stick with it. No one wants to think they are being laughed at or treated like a fool.'</i>
HMP Stafford	<i>'Dead Man Talking was a difficult book for us, but only because we are all such avid readers and it felt like we were reading something less than our usual standards, That was until Alan explained more about the work of Quick Reads, and that actually made us go back and read it all over again. It's certainly intriguing enough to make you want to try other Quick Reads, I'm not sure it would have made any of us seek out Roddy Doyle though.'</i>
HMP Featherstone	<i>'It's a very good thing that Quick Reads are doing. It's a great idea to have short stories to read that are written by big name authors. They are a lot easier to understand. It's good to have a chance to read different styles and great encouragement to carry on reading. At this early stage it would be very easy to be put off and give up. Roddy Doyle has pitched this novel just right for those of us beginning our reading journey. One day, we will read more of his work.'</i>
HMP Drake Hall	<i>'Dead Man Talking was simultaneously wry yet thought-provoking. Someone called it a snapshot of normality taken through a distorted lens. It would certainly make you want to read more of Roddy's work and more Quick Reads if they were of this standard.'</i>

## 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 Codsall Community High School. 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.

*"It's hard to explain, but when you're in prison you try to forget about the world outside, it's a way of surviving. You don't get asked to be part of it anymore, so your world becomes the boundary of the prison until it's time to go home. Books Unlocked is changing that, in a really positive way. It feels so nice to be asked to give our opinion to all these other groups, and to have people visit us like Alan and the Literacy Trust, people who care about what we are reading and what we have to say. I love the library here at Drake, a place of calm and reflection. Being able to all meet as a group, away from the hustle and bustle of the prison, and just talk about books, you can completely forget about being a prisoner. I love the fact we thought Roddy Doyle was coming in to see us and actually it was a case of miscommunication and it was Alan. Very funny."*

**Prisoners, HMP Drake Hall reading group**

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.

*'I hope they know how old some of us are reading these books, if only to show them that the life we've chosen doesn't have to be the life they lead. We're an over 50's reading group, and I remember when I was 15 thinking someone over 50 was ancient. I hope they learn quicker than us. I'm really pleased they are being challenged with their reading, it's so important and I'm guessing many of them haven't read anything like these books before. They'll relate to Paddy Clarke, even though I'm sure they'll struggle to imagine what life may have been like in the 1950's, I think they'll see that kids have always just been kids. If someone had approached me with a 'Man Booker' title as a young man I would have dismissed it as boring. To find out that the young offenders and the school students have actually sat and read the whole book, and discussed it in such depth makes me feel very proud of them all. I hope they can take that forward and it helps to show them what they can achieve in the future if they keep a clear head.'*

**Prisoners, HMP Stafford, HMP Oakwood, HMP Featherstone**

The young offenders at HMYOI 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.

*'None of us knew one another before Books Unlocked but now we look out for one another on the route around the prison. It feels like we all have a connection that a lot of the other prisoners here don't have, and that's because we shared this time together, and supported each other when we read aloud. Some of the other prisoners would have laughed at us for that, but it's them who are missing out. We've read a Man Booker author, and read to a level that none of us thought we were capable of. We've proved something to ourselves to our families and to the staff, and we each have a certificate to show people on Visits. It's made us feel good, and in prison you don't get to feel that way very often.'*

**Young Offenders, HMYOI Brinsford/HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall/HMYOI Werrington**

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

*'This has been another year in which the sixth formers at Codsall Community High School could become engrossed in reading and discussing selected books. All who took part valued the discussions and viewpoints put forward by their peers and teachers. Various skills were developed during this period, including patience, listening, clarity of expressing ones opinions as well as having to organise their time in order to read the book/s and make the meetings.'*

**Paul Johnson: Assistant Head Teacher**

*'The Books Unlocked project offers a fantastic opportunity for students to re-engage with reading for pleasure, explore different genres of literature and consider the wider significance of fiction. It has been a pleasure to see the students responding to the texts and discussing characters, themes and events with interest and enthusiasm.'*

**Louise Howell – Sixth Form Learning Mentor**

*'I feel like the opportunity to be involved in Books Unlocked was really worthwhile, as it showed me how there is more to books than just reading them; it gave me an insight into the ever-changing writing process and it was also incredibly beneficial to work in a group, discussing and developing our ideas and debating. I feel that this also added to my intellectual development by allowing me to become more self-empowered, improving my respect for others and also developing my own ideas and book writing abilities through engaging new experiences and genres.'*

**Anna Huetson – Year 12 Student**

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

*'We're a very democratic group, it's rare that one person would try to insist that we all read a certain book. The challenging part of Books Unlocked is that that is of course what Alan is asking us to do. Having said that, every one of us is guilty of playing safe sometimes, so to be pushed a little to attempt something different is all to the good. Many of us had read Roddy Doyle before, but it was really interesting to see his approach to the Quick Read title, and also try and think what it would be like reading this book as perhaps your very first novel. We all imagined how the different groups were meeting and the types of discussions that were going on. It was lovely that Alan took the time to tell us all about the other groups and really set the scene for us.'*

**Members of Codsall Writers and Codsall public library reading group**

Kinver and Hednesford 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.

*'Even though we are part of a reading group, essentially you are still all going away to read the book alone. We meet once a month to talk about what we've read, but it's rare to catch up during the reading process so sometimes when you get to the meeting you have forgotten certain aspects of the story. What we all liked about Books Unlocked was the feeling of being part of a bigger project and knowing that we had to give a clear response to the book (positive or negative) that would be useful to the other groups. That's why so many of us kept a diary during the time so that we could share our thoughts not just on the whole book, but how our opinions may have changed as the story progressed. It's been lovely to find out that so many other groups shared similar opinions to our own, and we really thought the younger people in the prisons and in the school would struggle to connect with Paddy Clarke, but we were wrong.'*

**Members of Kinver & Hednesford public library reading groups**

## Conclusion

Through *Books Unlocked* an insight was gained into the varying ways in which a single author 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 as all the opinions of the participants in the reading groups were valued and 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. The use of the Quick Read title, *Dead Man Talking*, has allowed a far greater number of prisoners to take part in *Books Unlocked* this year. It has also helped to spark lively debate and enhanced the enjoyment of those who have also read *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

*'My group this year have very low literacy levels and many have only just completed the Shannon Trust's 'Turning Pages' reading scheme. Last year when Books Unlocked happened at Brinsford I would have been unable to include anyone in this English set. The fact that a Man Booker author has written a Quick Read fills me with joy, not least because my group was able to take part, but also because I know that Quick Reads are a stepping stone to reading novels. That stepping stone is vital for so many people. I know that there are several members of my group who now see reading Roddy Doyle's Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha will be their next milestone along their journey to reading with confidence.'*

**Stephen Quick, Milton Keynes College**

*'There are so many positives to being involved with a project like Books Unlocked. I could fill a report with the many wonderful conversations I have had with all the groups involved discussing the two Roddy Doyle titles. It has united people from all walks of life. Broken barriers and most importantly dismissed many preconceptions. A community project that involves those who are, for a variety of reasons, isolated from their community, helps to rebuild lives. Ultimately it makes a valid contribution to reducing re-offending, increasing peoples self-esteem and showing the importance of libraries and reading within the wider community.'*

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