



BOOK CLUB CURRICULUM

GOAL:

Our goal is simple: to introduce young inmates to the transformative power of books and creative writing. We believe that books and creative writing have the incredible ability to teach, build community, inspire individuals and change lives. Once youth have experienced a true connection with a book that resonates with their own lives, they are primed to become life-long readers. Free Minds uses books and writing to motivate incarcerated youth to see their potential and walk a positive new path where they can achieve their educational, career, and life goals.

ACTIVITIES:

Tuesday 11:15AM – 12:15PM: Free Minds Coordinators visit the juvenile unit during the lunch hour to check-in with youth and discuss their perspective on what they are reading and writing and discuss their progress. New arrivals are informed about the program, encouraged to ask questions about it, and invited to participate. New youth's past experience with reading and writing are noted. All youth on the unit are asked to sign up if they intend to participate in that week's book club session. (Participation is voluntary, but signing up is a pre-requisite so that other programs can be aware of which youth have already committed to participate in Book Club on Thursday.)

Thursday 4:30PM – 6:00PM: Free Minds Coordinators meet with all youth who have signed up for the weekly Book Club session. The basic format for each session is as follows:

- Opening Calming Meditation (60-90 seconds of quiet and focus on breath)
- Warm Up Game/Activity – this varies each week, but works to build vocabulary, and encourage teamwork, and creativity
- Book Discussion – members are encouraged to take the lead in the discussion both asking and answering questions. They are challenged to make connections between the events of a book and their own lives, so that even those youth who may be unable to read or fully comprehend the book, can participate actively in discussion (i.e. maybe a character in the book is experiencing peer pressure, or loneliness, or fear of failure, etc. The book can serve as a springboard to discuss the universality of these experiences.)
- Writing Exercise – members are given a writing prompt, often relating to the reading and are given quiet time to write.

- Sharing our Writing – members who choose to do so, read their writing aloud. Sharing their own writing, and listening to others do the same allows members to practice and develop the virtues of honesty, trust, self-confidence and tolerance.
- Closing – each member shares with the group "one thing I learned or made me think from this week's Book Club."

Special Guest Author Assemblies (approximately every 2-3 months):

Free Minds regularly hosts visits by published authors and community activists, to strengthen the bonds members are developing with literature. Recent guests have included: NBA player and poet, Etan Thomas who brought a guest panel of athlete-fathers to discuss his new book Fatherhood: Rising to the Ultimate Challenge, teacher/author Erin Gruwell who discussed her bestseller Freedom Writers Diary and award winning Young Adult author and Library of Congress' Ambassador for Young People's Literature Walter Dean Myers

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

We complete a weekly checklist after each Book Club session in which we measure:

- % of members who complete reading assignment
- % of members who participate actively in the session
- % of members who complete writing assignment
- % of members who read their work aloud
- % of members who state improved attitude toward reading and writing over time
- % of members who complete a book for the first time in their lives

Free Minds continues to serve youth throughout their (potential) incarceration in federal prison through our Continuing Support phase and after their return home to the community through our Reentry Support phase.

ADDENDUM:

As an organization promoting literacy, it is important that a description of our curriculum includes an explanation of how titles are chosen.

Our goal in Free Minds is to introduce incarcerated teens to the truly life-changing power of literature. To that end, we regularly share true stories with the young men of how reading has changed lives throughout history. We ask them about their attitudes toward reading and writing and find that more than half of them have *never before read an entire book*. When we ask those who say they do not like to read, why not, they overwhelmingly answer that they find reading "boring." Our mission then is to turn "non-readers" into "readers." The most important tool we

have to change this is the choice of books themselves. Research regularly shows that children and teens identified as “reluctant readers” need to “see” themselves in what they read. If they cannot relate to the characters and situations in a text, they will have more difficulty staying engaged and consequently will struggle with comprehension. At this point, they are most likely simply to stop reading completely. Alternatively, if the characters and situations resonate with their own lives, they are likely to continue reading and often, in our case, complete a book for the first time. The sense of accomplishment and empowerment that this creates in a young person can be staggering. After completing a book that they can identify with our members ask, “Can you *please* get me another book like this???”

We spend an average of two sessions reading and discussing each title. Approximately every 6-8 weeks, we bring in what we call a “book ballot” with about eight suggested titles, each with a cover photo and description of the book. Members are encouraged to suggest titles for inclusion on the ballot. Best practices among literacy organizations have shown that when students play a role in choosing the books they read, they are much more likely to become engaged with the material.

Our titles are extremely diverse. We cover varied forms (with examples in parentheses) including: **poetry** (*You Hear Me? Poems and Writings by Teenage Boys*, Edited by Betsy Franco, *Paint Me Like I Am*, by the WritersCorps, and *A Rose That Grew From the Concrete*, by Tupac Shakur); **fiction** (*Push*, by Sapphire, *Tears of a Tiger*, by Sharon Draper, and *Black and White*, by Paul Volponi); **fantasy** (*Harry Potter*, by JK Rowling and *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins); **biographies** (*A Question of Freedom*, by Dwayne Betts, *The Color of Water*, by James McBride, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, by Claude Brown, and *Life in Prison*, by Tookie Williams); **nonfiction** (*They Broke the Law: You Be The Judge*, by Thomas Jacobs, *Letters to a Young Brother*, by Hill Harper and *Freedom Writers Diary*, edited by Erin Gruwell); **mysteries** (whole collections by Walter Mosley and George Pelecanos); **plays** (*A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansbury); short stories (*Big City Cool: Short Stories About Urban Youth*, edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss, *DC Noir*, edited by George Pelecanos and *Six Easy Pieces*, by Walter Mosley); **essays** (*Chicken Soup for the Prisoner’s Soul*, edited by Jack Canfield); historic fiction (*Fallen Angels*, by Walter Dean Myers (about the Vietnam War) and *Standing at the Scratch Line*, by Guy Johnson) and **graphic novels** (*Sentences: The Life of M.F. Grimm*, by Percy Carey). The main characters are often either African America or Latino, and they are set in many different time periods and places. From Standing at the Scratch Line, which takes place in early 1900’s Louisiana, to Down These Mean Streets, a look at Spanish Harlem in the 1950’s and 60’s, to War Child, the biography of a child soldier in the Sudan’s civil war, many of these titles introduce our readers to unfamiliar periods in history and locations throughout the world. They do so while at the same time demonstrating the universality of some of the issues that so many of these young men face, including poverty, incarceration, racism and violence. In so doing, they remain extremely accessible to the readers.

As an example, the young men on the unit read a book called Boy Kills Man, by British author Matt Whyman. It tells the story of a 12 year-old fatherless Colombian boy named Sonny who is recruited into the drug war in Colombia motivated by desperate need to escape his violent home life, to belong and to survive crushing poverty. The book illustrates the many levels of personal, social, and political costs of the violence created and perpetuated by the largely U.S.-driven international drug trade. While the setting of Medellin and the Latin flavor of the novel are not something with which most of them are familiar, Sonny's predicament is. Our book club discussion center around the idea that we sometimes do things that we know are wrong, but for reasons that we might believe are "right." This raised the idea of unintended consequences for our actions. Discussions like these are valuable even for the young men who have either not been able to read the book (because of reading level) or initially have chosen not to read a book.

Free Minds' uses a two-step model. Our first aim is to create a love of reading, and we have achieved enormous success by using books that in some way mirror the experiences of the young men. Once this love for books has been firmly established, and the young men gain some maturity as readers, we find we are then able to challenge them to expand their reading material to include characters whose lives and experiences may be less like their own. Free Minds continues to serve our members throughout their incarceration in federal prison, by writing to them and sending them one new book each month. The model's success is evident in the diverse types of books that these young men request once they move on to the Continuing Support phase of our program in federal prison. Following are just a handful of titles that the young men have requested and received that demonstrate the breadth of their current reading:

The Other Wes Moore by Wes Moore; *Long Walk to Freedom*, by Nelson Mandela; *Bailout Nation: How Greed and Easy Money Corrupted Wall Street and Shook the World Economy*, by Barry Ritholtz; *That Bird Has My Wings* by Jarvis Jay Masters; *Letter to a Young Man*, by Rainer Maria Wilke; *Soledad Brother: The Prison Writings of George Jackson*; *Native Son* by Richard Wright; *Rich Dad Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki; *The Jesus I Never Knew*, by Philip Yancy; *The Noble Quran*; *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander; *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest Gaines; and *What is the What* by Dave Eggers.