

# BOOKS

Working in a teen  
correctional facility  
is not for the fainthearted

BY MELISSA

MADENSKI

**I**n 1994, librarian Naomi Angier entered the Donald E. Long Juvenile Correctional Facility in Portland, OR, toting some of her favorite books for teens—titles by Stephen King, R. L. Stine, and Walter Dean Myers. She also brought along a bunch of graphic novels: Superman, Green Lantern, and Batman. Prior to Angier's coming, the library consisted of books that nobody else wanted: discarded titles from the nearby Multnomah County Library (where Angier has worked since 1984), magazines that the postal department had found undeliverable, and old books that

community members felt like donating. But thanks to a two-year grant through the federal Library Services and Technology Act, which Angier had applied for, she was about to begin a new program with hip, teen-friendly titles for incarcerated young men and women.

"I started with the assumption that I could bring in a wide variety of books," she recalls.

At the Long juvenile detention center, she planned to use a tried-and-true strategy for getting kids to read: simply give them the books that they were interested in, the ones that matched their interests. Normal procedure, right?

But the correctional facility staff

informed Angier that she was not dealing with "normal" teens. Although she acknowledges that these are troubled kids doing time for serious crimes ranging from assault to theft to rape, she asserts that there is not as much difference between imprisoned youth and their "outside" peers as one might think. "Kids at the juvenile center," she says, "may be more needy, wanting more attention and adult response. They don't have the same veneer as teens on the outside, but they love the same stories."

That was the problem.

Early on, correctional facility staffers began to criticize the ap-

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appropriateness of the adult thrillers on Angier's circulation cart, page-turners that included novels by Stephen King and Dean Koontz. The staff's thinking, says Angier, was that since some of the kids were serving time for committing violent crimes, stories with violent scenes would only fuel that kind of antisocial behavior.

Angier soon realized that she had made a major professional gaffe. "My greatest mistake was coming in without a written [book-selection] policy," she now says. She also realized that her new patrons didn't have the same First Amendment rights, the same guaranteed broad access to information, that their peers in the outside world enjoyed.

Before Angier began the pro-

gram, she expected that its book-selection and intellectual freedom issues would be similar to those she had encountered working as a public librarian at the Multnomah County Library, where she has specialized in teen literature for more than 15 years. She was wrong. After attending a workshop on juvenile detention center libraries, which was sponsored by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (a division of the American Library Association), Angier realized that the boundaries for book selection and First Amendment rights in correctional facilities were all over the map. "There were no consistent

standards," she remembers. "They changed from place to place"

Diana Reese, chairperson of the Library Services to Prisoner's Forum and regional librarian for the Colorado Department of Corrections, says that when it comes to selecting books, detention centers have their own set of rules. "There's the obvious no's," explains Reese—no books that can aid in escapes, no books that encourage disruption or hatred, no books that are instructive in helping to commit a crime (e.g., Abbie Hoffman's *The Best of*... which contains instructions on how to build a pipe bomb). But beyond those obvious no-brainers, opinions can differ widely on what's appropriate for troubled teens to read.

Just ask Diane Hawks, a facility supervisor at a juvenile correctional fa-

city in Oregon. "There were as many opinions about the kinds of books appropriate for kids as there were staff members," says Hawks, reflecting back on her earliest experiences working with incarcerated teens.

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As for Angier, she continued to struggle along for almost two years without a book-selection policy, doing the jobs of five people—purchasing materials, giving book talks, scheduling volunteers, shelving and checking out books. But policy or no policy, Angier could see that she was making some headway with her captive audience. As she pushed the overflowing book cart to the detention center's 10 "pods," or locked

units, her young patrons began to point out Angier to newcomers: "The librarian, she's really cool," they'd say. And as Angier met once a week with anywhere from 100 to 150 kids—individually or in small groups—kids began listening to her reading recommendations and began giving her requests of their own.

This is all the more impressive considering the fact that many of these 12-through 18-year-olds had never read an entire book. "This [is] very different than [serving] regular teens," says Angier, thinking of the restricted kids she now serves. "They want books. They're in their rooms a lot.... They do not have open access to TVs and computers; they have some, [but] it's very limited, by honor status.

Basically, they have nothing to do. And when you put a teenager in a situation where they have nothing to do, they become readers," she says, with a laugh. "It was just a matter of finding books that they were interested in."

As Angier continued to struggle to satisfy the detention center's administration and put good books into kids' hands, the unexpected happened. One day, when the head of the detention center was looking into a complaint about a novel, a formal book-selection policy that had been buried away in the detention-center's archives suddenly surfaced. The existing policy specified that books should

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contain no explicit sex, no extreme violence, no gang literature, no hate literature. The policy also stated that a library book should be looked at as a whole—and not be judged on the basis of isolated passages.

With this policy in hand, Angier formed a library committee, whose members included the detention center's school custody workers, its teachers, and herself. And she went to work, applying the policy to the existing collection on a book-by-book basis. First off, she removed the Donald Goines titles, tales about violent crime that many staffers thought glorified crime in the inner city. She pulled two Christopher Pike titles that she thought were inappropriate, *Tales of Terror* and *Wicked Heart*, and left the rest alone. She removed Damon Wayons's *Bootleg*, because of the adult nature of its sexual humor. And she yanked the Planetary, Stormwatch, and Nightwing comics because of their violent images and scantily clad women. And she occasionally snipped out offending pictures from books—like the images of the controversial rapper Eminem flipping the bird, or a comic frame of two people having sex. On the other hand, although there were staff complaints about Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (some objected to the swastika on its cover, thinking the book was racist) and Stephen King's ALA-recommended *Rose Madder* (there's a raunchy reference to a male appendage), Angier and the committee decided both books were valuable and should remain in circulation.

"Not everybody was happy about that decision," she remembers.

To satisfy some of the staff's concerns about inappropriate books falling into the hands of younger readers—the 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds—she's also grouped some books, like the Kings and Koontzes, by age appropriateness. Currently, among the favorite selections for the younger group are Walter Dean Myers's *Hoops* and Gary Soto's *Buried Onions*. Conversely, novels by Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Mario Puzo, Mary Higgins Clarke, and James Patterson are limited to readers age 16 and older. In other words, Angier has made a lot of concessions she would never have dreamed of making back in her public library days.

Explains Angier: "In the public library, whenever anybody complains about anything, we say, 'You as a

parent have a right to decide what your child will read.' Well, what are we? In this facility, [the kids] don't have parents. The staff becomes *in loco parentis*, so to speak. So, there are no parents; we can't make that statement. Therefore we have to make some decisions that we don't have to make on the outside. On the outside, we can say to the parent, 'Don't have your teenager check that [book] out if you find it offensive in your family.' But what do we say in juvenile justice [centers]?"

Given the bald fact that Angier works in a center for incarcerated teens—and not in your typical public or school library—means that she routinely deals with challenges most librarians never encounter. As Bill Ptacek, director of King County [WA] Library Services, puts it: "Correctional facilities are a unique situation with responsibilities that call at times for jumping through an extra set of hoops." For Angier, those extra hoops include the special care she takes whenever she visits the sexual offenders' unit. Since research has established that there's a link between exposure to sexually explicit visual and written images and crimes of sexual violence, Angier carefully screens each book before checking it out, making sure it doesn't contain any lascivious content.

Complaints wax and wane, says Angier, but clearly the administration believes in her program. For the past two years, the department that oversees the correctional facility has picked up a

third of the program's current operating budget: \$93,000. And Multnomah County Library, which pays Angier's salary, covers the other two-thirds. In general, says Angier, the detention center staff is now supportive of the library services, even occasionally requesting books themselves.

As for Angier, she's changed, too. "I think when I actually started, I was such a strong, intellectual-freedom, public-librarian type that I had an 'Ahhh-[she feigns a shriek]-you-can't-do-this type of attitude," she says. "What's worked really well—and it's not perfect—but what's worked somewhat well is the fact that I actually went ahead and did take out the most-offending books, did institute the age policy. I showed the people I was listening to them."

*Freelance writer Melissa Madenski lives in Oregon.*

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