



THE SMARTEST YARD

BOOKS THROUGH BARS SEEKS TO KEEP PRISONERS STOCKED WITH QUALITY READING MATERIAL



The Justice Bureau reports that there are now more than two million people in U.S. prisons. And while the numbers keep growing, educational funding and resources for prisoners keep going down. This is where Books Through Bars comes into play.

The organization is part of ABC No Rio, a collective for art and activism founded in 1980 by artists committed to political and social engagement. Run out of Bluestockings Bookstore in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, BTB-NYC "is an informal collective of volun-

teers," says Melissa Morrone, who oversees the nonprofit. "We send approximately 250 packages to prisoners each month. A package generally contains one to three books, so we send an average of 500 books a month to state and federal prisons."

Books Through Bars gets dona-

tions from people who drop books off, from publishers with copies to spare and from scrounging the streets and shopping in used bookstores. But the copies BTB comes up with are often not enough to meet the considerable demand. "We receive more than 400 requests a month," Morrone says. "Requests range from dictionaries, thesauruses and other reference materials, to books on politics and economics, to fiction and poetry, to African-American and Latino history." The NYC-BTB website asks specifically

for donations of books on Malcolm X, Spanish-English dictionaries, racial politics and Native American, Chicano, Mayan and Aztec history.

"Most of us feel that sending books into prisons is a concrete and direct form of activism," says Morrone. "Books also make prisoners' time more bearable. The enormous appreciation and desperation expressed in the letters reminds us that life in prison is stark. Sending someone a book is like sending them a lifeline."

—SETH FERRANTI

Family and friends of prisoners, as well as potential donors, can get more information at www.abcnorio.org/affiliated/btb.html. Prisoners who want to request books should write to Bluestockings Bookstore at 172 Allen Street, New York, NY 10009