

At tables in the middle of the prison library, men sit reading newspapers. But look closely: some of them aren't actually reading. They're thumbing the pages, trying to look absorbed, glancing around the room every few minutes to see if anyone is watching. The truth is they're not reading the words because they don't know how.

Will any of them admit it? Not likely, the prisoner who is helping to run the library thinks to himself. An admission like that takes more trust than most of these guys have seen in their whole lives. As assistant librarian, he's an avid reader now, but he remembers how he used to practice when he was in segregation, away from anyone else's eyes. He'd look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary, making himself use those words in a sentence. He wants these other guys to have a chance at loving books too, but he figures it's going to take a new kind of thinking to get them there.

"We need to get some easy books," he says to the prison's staff librarian. "Books a guy who can't really read can still figure out. And we need to put them on the low shelves so they're easy to steal."

The librarian wants to help the guys who can't read, too. It's one of the reasons she likes working in a prison library rather than, say, a graduate research center: the chance to help the unlikeliest readers discover new joys and capacities. But the need to make it possible to steal the books – library books, which are free to patrons in prison just as they are to library patrons anywhere – requires a leap of imagination she can't immediately make.

"Why do they need to steal them?" she asks. "Why can't they just check them out?"

He tries to explain it to her: how people cling to pride when they have so little else to hold on to. How these guys would rather stare blankly at the newsprint than admit anything to anybody. How stealing is what they know how to do, and how much easier it is than asking, than believing they have the right. "Don't make them strip naked for you," is what he wants to say to the librarian. "Give them some cover, some way to slip those books back to their cells without letting anyone else see how easy the words are and how much they want to read them. You'll see. They'll do it."

The librarian believes him. She knows this is something he understands better than she can ever hope to. She realizes her best shot at serving these prisoners well is to take advice from someone who is capable of opening the door to their particular reality for a moment, allowing her a glimpse inside.

They order easy readers and set them out on the low shelves without making any kind of big announcement about it. Soon enough, the books start to disappear. One day a prisoner comes up to the desk with one of them in his hand. A really easy book, a really big, tough guy.

"Is this the first book you ever read yourself?" the librarian asks, taking a chance.

"Yeah," the prisoner replies, and neither of them can keep from smiling.

Susannah Sheffer

Originally published in *Adbusters*, July 2005