Alert Collector
Matthew Galloway, col. ed.

Looking Inside

What Coloradans Who Are Incarcerated Like to Read

Erin Boyington

A recent episode of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning podcast *Ear Hustle* titled "A Little Streets, a Little Romance, a Little Deception," explores the reading tastes of incarcerated people in San Quentin, a California prison. The episode was so funny and insightful it inspired me to write about what people read in our Colorado prison libraries, with the hope that it will provide collection development guidance about what books this underserved population loves to read. Donations are a lifeblood to so many prison libraries, but unfortunately much of what is sent by well-meaning donors doesn't meet the needs of the readers I serve.

My first library job was at one of Colorado's largest prisons in Sterling, where two libraries serve residents at every custody level. Later, I went to the Colorado State Library's (CSL) Institutional Library Development (ILD) unit. We train institutional library staff statewide, standardize and improve services, and best of all, spend collection development funds for nearly 40 institutional libraries, including the Colorado Department of Corrections' (CDOC) 22 state prison libraries, which serve around 17,000 people (https://cdoc.colorado.gov/about/data-and-reports/statistics). Our goal is to provide high-quality library services and spaces comparable to community libraries.

CDOC's libraries benefit from a shared ILS that allows ILD insights into which items are most used by incarcerated patrons. In 2023, ILD created a form on library computers so residents can submit purchase requests directly to us, and we designated a large part of our regular collection development budget to purchase requests, high-holds, and high-circulating materials. After the first year of this strategy, one grateful and loquacious resident told us, "As a side note I do want to mention that while under incarceration, having been removed from the normality of regular society, the smallest [gestures] mean much to us. With that in mind, when we do receive new literature or media, it is indeed a joyous moment as it helps us ease the time away and slip into the realm of whatever we have our focus vested in and for that, we extend sincere gratitude to whoever cares enough to help use while we're on this journey of correction, rehabilitation, and redemption." Less effusive feedback came from another resident: "I mean, we don't always get what we want. At least we get some say in the matter."

In summer 2024, a University of Denver library school graduate student, Tyler Real, interned with ILD. As part of his project, he worked through CDOC circulation data for titles that were ordered based on patron requests and holds in a previous fiscal year. He cleaned up spreadsheets, crunched numbers, and let us know that on average, we spent an average of $3.78 per checkout for the 5,786 books (1,151 unique titles) we purchased with funds earmarked for patron-driven requests.

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I've used Tyler's research throughout the article. $3.78 is a tiny drop in the bucket when it can cost upward of $40,000 to incarcerate a single person for a year. I've also included quotations from residents that came from focus groups conducted by the Colorado State Library's Library Research Service (https://www.lrs.org/prism-toolkit/).

Our incarcerated patrons, especially those with long sentences, might read their way through huge swaths of a collection, and it's a challenge to keep ahead of them. One reader in my libraries loved westerns and could tear through several in a day. He would start in the fiction with the "As" and read his way through the alphabet, starting over again once he was through. Another devoted series reader once spent a good part of an hour patiently rejecting my suggestions while I desperately wracked my brain for a single romantic fantasy series we owned that this person hadn't already read. It was my first failure as a readers' advisor and is seared into my brain.

Prison library users are best described in one word: insatiable. Time can hang heavily, and everyone copes by filling up their days with as many activities as they can, limited by prison schedules and the availability of authorized programming. Some focus on official jobs or education, some create make-work, and a few choose destructive activities that antagonize correctional authorities and lead to further cycles of punishment and loss. Libraries provide a safe outlet for self-directed activities and the rare opportunity to express individual choice, judgment, and taste.

Some come to reading for the first time in prison, stumbling onto it as an activity only because they can't afford a TV and their cellmate hands them a random book with the instructions "read this." There are many emerging readers who need books for adults that hold their attention and don't have a vocabulary that is too demanding. They might first sharpen their skills on Ashley and Jaquavis' Cartel series or with the ubiquitous James Patterson before branching out into other interest areas that are unpredictably varied. Others are lifelong readers, some holding advanced degrees. As with any population served by a library, there is a diverse range of interests the collection must serve.

Censorship is a daily prison reality, though Colorado is miles ahead of many states in having a detailed policy and a process for appealing decisions. The policy has even relaxed in recent years. Erotica is now allowed, and books containing images considered "sexually explicit" are exempted from censorship for reasons that I remember with the mnemonic LESAH—books with literary, educational, scientific, artistic, and historical value. Still, it's impossible to talk about what's popular without detailing how censorship encroaches and restricts many high-interest books.

Sine Qua Non—Without These, Nothing

Dictionaries

What is the number one most essential book for people who are incarcerated? A dictionary. With no access to texting, emails, or word processors with autocorrect, people are suddenly forced to rely on means of communication that are alien for anyone under 40: handwritten snail mail. They need to be able to check spellings and look up definitions as they wrestle with the complexities of our legal system. Letters are the least costly way to correspond with romantic partners, friends, and family members. If CDOC gave everyone a mass market dictionary along with their prison-issue photo ID, it might finally meet the demand. When I was a librarian at Sterling, dictionaries were never on the shelf, either checked out or stolen. In recent years, ILD decided to "flood the market" for this scarce resource, buying hundreds of low-cost dictionaries and asking library staff to place all of them on

the shelves. For the first time, we seem to have made a dent in the demand—now when I visit one of our libraries, I usually see several dictionaries in good condition, waiting to be checked out.

Urban Fiction and Manga

Two other major interest areas have emerged in our data, and these books never come to us through donation: urban fiction and manga. They are also the most-censored categories of books in many prison libraries (though less so in Colorado because of its policy), which I think is because they are embraced by incarcerated readers but unfamiliar to staff who hold the power of censorship.

Urban fiction, aka street literature, embraces a diverse range of subgenres, with elements of romance, thrillers, crime fiction, and more. In our libraries, the most popular titles are read to tatters by devoted readers. (For the best introduction, check out the 2024 edition of Vanessa Irvin's *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature*.) CDOC's top-read urban fiction writers in 2024 include Ashley Antoinette and JaQuavis Coleman (writing separately or together as Ashley and JaQuavis), Tracy Brown, Duke C, Ca$h, De'nesha Diamond, Treasure Hernandez, India, K'wan, N'Tyse, King Rio, Nisa Santiago, Alexander Gordon Smith, Vickie Stringer, Kiki Swinson, Carl Weber, and Zane.

Manga is another genre that in years past we've neglected to buy in sufficient quantity, though our patron-driven focus means that these have become a new priority. Unfortunately, getting full series can be challenging and expensive for our limited budget, and even when series are still in print, many will be subjected to censorship. Some of the top series in CDOC in 2024 are Reiji Miyajima's charming romance *Rent-A-Girlfriend*, Yukito Kishiro's steampunk classic *Battle Angel Alita*, and Saizou Harawata's spicy zombie horror *Kingdom of Z*. Prison can be a stressful place to try to focus, so highly illustrated books and magazines helped one resident: "But, God, I found out I like comic books a lot. And the magazines we can only check out when we come down here. And I know a quick read in a magazine when you're just trying to get your mind off something helps a lot too, when you don't have time to focus on a whole book. Or your medication or the things going on in your life, don't really let you read a whole book without having other things go on at the moment because of your anxiety or whatever. And sometimes just quick reads like a comic book or magazine would be a lot more helpful to get your mind focused on other things."

I Read Because . . .

Several years ago, I ran some reports that gave me the top 15 titles for each of our 22 libraries and tried to find commonalities in lists that included an astonishingly varied array of books, from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to *The Complete Guide to Crochet Dolls and Animals: Amigurumi Techniques Made Easy* to Ashley Antoinette's *Money Devils 1: A Cartel Novel*. I tried to categorize all the types of books that showed up in those top 15 and found they included: classics, erotica, mystery, thrillers, science fiction, fantasy, urban fiction, art, crafts, music, biography, history, dreams, astrology, exercise, games, graphic novels, manga, language learning, nature, science, paranormal, conspiracy, poetry, religion, self-help, trivia, and true crime.

A truly exhaustive list of what people want would also have to include popular bestsellers (especially those recently adapted into TV or film), which incarcerated people hear about from magazines, television, friends, and one another. Stephen King's latest doorstoppers are always popular, and in 2024 *The Bazaar of Bad Dreams* was the ticket. Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part Two* isn't available to incarcerated people yet, but Frank Herbert's science fiction classic is in high demand. Pierce Brown's *Red Rising* and *Golden Son* both ended up on multiple CDOC libraries' top 15.

When I looked at the same reports again in 2024, the titles may have been different but similar patterns emerged. There are four themes that I think describe appeal factors for the most popular types of reading materials in CDOC. When incarcerated people read, they look for things we all seek in our regular lives and through reading: for distraction or to satisfy curiosity, to gain hidden knowledge and insights, to acquire useful knowledge, and for the excitement of experiencing sheer beauty. Sometimes multiple themes overlap in a single book, but I'll talk about each type in depth, with examples of some of CDOC's best-circulating titles from the past year.

Beauty and Excitement

Books that provide beauty and excitement include the most restricted books in a prison library. They are also, of course, the books that people most gravitate toward. In this category I would put all the gorgeously illustrated nonfiction and art books with heavy, coated paper. Most of the output from Dorling Kindersley goes in this class, like *A History of Magic, Witchcraft, and the Occult* (2020), *The Complete Dog Breed Book* (2014), *Zoology: The Secret World of Animals* (2019), and *Car: The Definitive Visual History of the Automobile* (2022). Beautifully illustrated books are too often jealously "protected" by staff to prevent mutilated pages or outright theft. Unfortunately, that kind of sequestration leads to heavily illustrated books getting less use, though they are some of the most expensive books we buy.

Art books are sought out for their beauty, along with all those wonderful Marvel and DC character encyclopedias. The hugely popular (and frequently censored) Spectrum art series, which collects gorgeous fantasy illustrations by contemporary artists, includes the most circulated book in CDOC: *Spectrum 24: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art* (2017). The single copy at the Limon Correctional Facility has apparently circulated 102 times since 2022, which hardly seems possible even for the best-constructed book.

The reason the Spectrum series are targeted for censorship is simple: lots of sexy women who make up for what they lack in clothing with horns, wings, and an occasional tail. Spectrum volumes 1, 10, 16, 18, 19, and 25 are censored in whole or in part—though volumes 2, 3, 7, 9, 20, 21, 23, and 24 are allowed. Volume 17 is listed as both allowed and denied. That's a common glitch in CDOC's homegrown censorship database since record-keeping of past decisions is not easily searched and not always checked before an item is flagged and re-reviewed when it comes through the mail room. You can imagine the confusion for anyone diligently trying to follow policy, given the volume of titles that enter in any given year. (Not only that, but images of female breasts—real, realistic, or cartoony!—tend to get censored even at women's facilities.)

That brings us to the word I've chosen to describe an aspect of some popular books: *excitement*. I put non-illustrated erotica in this category, including Zane's *The Heat Seekers* (2002) and two volumes of *Best Bondage Erotica of the Year* (2020 and 2021), edited by Rachel Kramer Bussel. I would also include exciting genres like thrillers and horror—books that aim to enthrall to keep readers turning pages. A resident at the Denver Women's Correctional Facility told us why she loved one of J. R. Ward's series: "I liked it because it wasn't just about one specific thing. It was action and love. And then there was the laughing because there was just so much joking in it. And that's what keeps me in the library."[1]

Adults who are in prison probably never dreamed of taking vows of celibacy, but somehow that is an expectation the government imposes upon them when they are locked up—no matter if they have two years ahead of them or the rest of their lives. A federal prison (not CDOC!) in Florence, Colorado, recently made the news for an abusive disciplinary policy of dousing anyone caught masturbating

with pepper spray.[2] Expecting people who are incarcerated to magically turn off their sexuality sets everyone up for failure, and the rampant censorship of "adult content," from nude images to erotica, is a symptom of this greater problem. Patrons have always found workarounds for themselves: spicy passages of novels get underlined or dog-eared, an underground advisory from reader to reader.

Sexually explicit books are not a security risk, nor can they be blamed for sexual harassment of staff. Censoring bestsellers like E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* created a black-market opportunity, since lists of censored books are difficult to check, and facility mail room staff simply can't keep track of the thousands of titles that have been designated as allowed or denied. I've been forced to discard copies of banned books donated by people leaving the facility. There are probably other copies of forbidden books floating around the facility, but a resident who wants to interlibrary loan a book would be denied the opportunity.

Motivated residents find other workarounds to evade censorship. My favorite prison library artifact was handed to me by a savvy clerk who simply said, "That book *isn't* that book." What he handed me proved to be generic thriller cover glued around a volume of Penthouse Letters, which then violated policy as erotica. Censoring erotica created a perverse incentive for smuggling and hoarding certain books.

But sexual expression isn't the only reason people appreciate beauty and excitement in literature. Prisons are noisy, stressful environments constructed of thick security glass, concrete, and painted cinder blocks. There is a dearth of natural features in most prisons—very few animals, trees, or streams to blunt the hard, colorless surfaces. A particularly lovely part of the *Ear Hustle* episode describes how one woman, Ms. Guidry, created a peaceful haven by decorating the walls of her room with books and colorful paper butterflies. There is a deep thirst for beauty in prisons, which beautiful books can slake.

Curiosity and Distraction

This is the second big category, where I put trivia, encyclopedias, games, crafting, drawing, and true crime. "Distraction" could obviously encompass all forms of reading while incarcerated, but I mean the kind of distraction that people on the outside satisfy by scrolling through random memes, news, and images on social media feeds. One resident told us, "I'm old and I'm a nerd. Yeah. And so I read a lot of science books. I have practically infinite curiosity, so I read pretty much anything that comes through."[3]

Curiosity is one of humanity's most appealing features, and people using CDOC Libraries seek out compendiums of facts, trivia books, atlases, encyclopedias, and almanacs as brain candy. The Guinness Book of World Records, Ripley's Believe It or Not books, Pathfinder role-playing guides, *Hoyle's Rules of Games*, and encyclopedias of dogs, myths, serial killers, and tattoo lettering all scratch the itch to learn something new. One resident told us about book that gave him new insights into the world of the birds in the recreation yard: "There was a lot of stuff I didn't know about birds. It's just something to read. I mean, it explained a lot about those black birds that are out there and how they communicate with each other and how they can actually tell humans apart. . . . They can actually tell us apart. We can't tell them apart. They're actually very intelligent, and they actually can communicate and mimic our voices if they are around you enough. I didn't know that. I hear them talking out there, but I didn't know that they were actually talking because they can't actually talk, but they are having a conversation."[4] You can hear the sense of wonder in his words.

This type of high-demand book also provides information about activities and skills that are relatively easy to acquire and sustain when resources are restricted. Language learning, beginning guitar, crochet (but not knitting!), drawing, calligraphy, and role playing manuals are all hobbies that can be cultivated with minimal supplies. An amigurumi, a crocheted stuffed toy, can allow someone with limited financial means to create a handmade gift for a loved one. A drawing can brighten a love letter for Valentine's Day. American Sign Language can aid communication across an exercise yard or noisy day hall, and in Colorado, Spanish is the most common language spoken after English.

An ink pen—in high-security prisons, they are sold without any outer casing and are called "flex pens"—and pieces of scratch paper can be relatively easy to get and keep despite regular, unscheduled searches of personal spaces where anything deemed "contraband" is seized and usually thrown away. People turn to writing and drawing to keep their hands and brains occupied, and the CDOC Libraries never have enough how-to-draw books in stock. Unfortunately, these too may be subjected to arbitrary censorship—a former supervisor, acting contrary to the written policy, had the power to censor most of our library's figure-drawing books because, in a twist of carceral logic, these books taught people to violate policy by drawing nude bodies. Lettering and calligraphy books are often confiscated because they *might* inspire tattooing (illicit tattooing is a real scourge in environments where horrible infections are all too likely). Though books don't cause illegal activity, they are blamed for people's rule-breaking and taken away preemptively.

Hidden Knowledge and Insight

Prisons are slow environments, until the moment things move very fast—which is always terrifying and dangerous. Bereft of options to occupy their time, people who are incarcerated turn inward. The person who finds religion in prison is a well-known stereotype. Many religious groups are eager to provide books and services, which can be a lifeline to the outside world. Joining an established religious group provides companionship, a getaway from the confines of a cell, and a positive activity to show a parole board. Colorado's prison library patrons use books to explore their interests beyond major religious groups: paganism, Santa Muerte, Toltec wisdom, and Native American spiritual practices, to name a few. One resident told us, "I've never believed in witchcraft until I could learn what it was. The book *Witch Life* was about witchcraft. All witchcraft is, it's not magic, it's not doing certain spells to somebody, it's doing spells to better your inner spirit. It uses oils, asparagus, olive oil, and you can do it in a restroom, or in a bathtub, or in a kitchen, or on a altar. Now that I've learned what witchcraft is, it's helped me so much."[5]

Some of the books about hidden knowledge and insight I also include in this category are conspiracy books (government coverups, cryptids, and aliens), dream interpretation dictionaries, astrology, and everything written by Robert Greene.

If you don't know Robert Greene's books, they are some of the most-circulated and in-demand titles in our collections: *The 48 Laws of Power*, *The Art of Seduction*, *Mastery*, *The 33 Strategies of War*, and *The Laws of Human Nature*. There are concise or daily meditation editions that further condense Greene's cynical, often contradictory dictums about how to manipulate others. They are basic self-help with a twist: a get-ahead-by-any-means worldview that correctional staff find unnerving, and often seek to censor. (A library colleague of mine was once investigated after unit staff overheard her discussing *The Art of Seduction* with a patron during a cell-side delivery.) Greene's oeuvre is a hard-edged update of Dale Carnegie's 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—and I've never seen anyone transformed into a master manipulator by reading a book.

The book *Sextrology: The Astrology of Sex and the Sexes* (2003) by Stella Starsky and Quinn Cox has been flying off the CDOC Libraries' shelves in 2024. Astrology puns sell! As does a romantic focus. People seek insight into themselves and their partners to improve relationships. We've only recently started stocking up on enough titles to meet the huge demand for astrology books. Unfortunately, I also spent money on copies of *The Astrology of Sex: A Guide to Cosmic Coupling and the Sensual Secrets Behind Your Sign* by Sarah Bartlett (2022) without realizing it included full-color photographs of some cosmic coupling. It still showed up at the top of our 2023 holds list, though it only circulated three times before being pulled from CDOC library shelves and censored statewide.

The allure of hidden knowledge also leads inevitably to books about conspiracies. David Icke's *Phantom Self: (And How to Find the Real One)* (2016) promises a peek behind the curtain of reality. Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods: The Evidence of Earth's Lost Civilization* (1995) provides a tantalizing claim to illuminate ancient secrets. Leslie Rule's *Ghosts Among Us: True Stories of Spirit Encounters* (2004) raises goosebumps with uncanny stories of hauntings.

As with anything that people who are incarcerated gravitate toward, these books fall under institutional suspicion that often leads to censorship. Greene may merely be cynical, but Icke is notoriously anti-Semitic. When struggling with the censorship of conspiracy books, I often think of a former clerk of mine who loved them. A man in his thirties with a gentle voice and presence, he was in prison because of a mental health crisis that ended with him shooting at police officers who came to his house. Though he hit no one, he initially received the highest possible sentence for each pull of the trigger and each person he endangered. While incarcerated, shouldn't he be "protected" from books that might trigger a violent relapse? My answer is no.

My on-the-job experiences enacting censorship at my prison libraries gave me a firsthand glimpse at the arbitrary and demeaning assumptions censors make about readers' intelligence and capabilities. Censorship should not be implemented based on the most extreme individuals. Hard cases make bad laws. CDOC gave up on individualized censorship plans for sex offenders because they proved to be time-consuming, unworkable, and dangerous, since sex offenders are frequently targeted for violence. Censorship based on the brain chemistry of my clerk would infringe on the rights of every other incarcerated person. Finally, there is no way to draw a straight line from a book or a thought to an illegal action. Concocting disastrous scenarios of what *might* happen if someone reads a certain book is, ironically, just another form of conspiracy thinking.

Useful Knowledge

The final category, which contains nonfiction generally approved of by institutional authorities (though there are exceptions here, too) is that of *useful knowledge*. Design America Inc.'s *The Big Book of Small Home Plans* (2017) appeals to people dreaming of an affordable home when they leave prison. Petersen's *Master the CDL: Commercial Driver's License Exams* (2022) is widely studied, since commercial driving is a career path open to someone with a felony conviction. One resident in a focus group told us, "I'll get it to specifically look at things that I'm interested in for upon release. So for example, I checked out the CSL trucking book twice. That's something I plan on doing when I get home."[6] GED test prep, math practice, books about mastering coding or Windows products, carpentry, and forming a nonprofit—all of these topics are extremely useful for a person preparing for the challenges of reentry. *Systemic Racism 101 : A Visual History of the Impact of Racism in America* by Aminah Pilgrim (2022) quantifies a world that incarcerated readers already know intimately.

Fitness is an important hobby, not just to pass the time but also for personal protection. Fad diet books are less useful than exercise manuals, particularly ones that focus on bodyweight exercises or equipment-free workouts. *Jailhouse Strong* by Josh Bryant and Adam benShea (2013), a self-published book that draws inspiration from prison workouts, is the single most-circulated exercise book in CDOC. The others on the top 15 lists focus on strength training and muscle building.

Obviously, this category overlaps with curiosity and distraction. The difference is that curiosity and distraction may not be applicable to life outside, while "useful knowledge" is intended to be used as preparation for reentry. Though specific titles in these categories don't show up in the 2024 top 15 lists, books about money management, real estate investing, and business planning are also hugely popular.

Some how-tos are frowned on by institutional authorities, who point to security risks to the facility. Camping manuals with instructions on fire-starting, survivalist guides with diagrams of unarmed self-defense, and even Erin Bried's pink-covered adulting manual, *How to Sew a Button: And Other Nifty Things Your Grandmother Knew* (2009) got a few pages formally censored because of instructions on brewing homemade dandelion wine. These are topics that there are specific penological reasons for keeping out of a prison library—though it should be said that many old-timers are deep repositories of practical knowledge and don't need books to know the finer points of crafting a tattoo gun or brewing hooch.

Conclusion

Censorship is an inescapable burden when choosing books for a prison library collection—though as bad as it can be, it is not the biggest problem for prison libraries. The biggest problem is a lack of budgets, which leads to shelves crammed with low-quality donations. Without new materials selected to meet the specific interests and needs of patrons, prison collections tend to be worn-out, outdated, and overstocked with books written for, by, and about white people. Disposing of books that are wrong for the collection is its own challenge, taking staff time and expertise. The books readers are given should never have missing pages, mystery stains, or outdated information.

Outdated books are an urgent problem. You wouldn't hand someone spoiled milk to drink, so why would you hand them expired medical or legal advice? If a book about health doesn't even mention COVID-19, it's probably not a reliable resource for an information-impoverished reader who cannot double-check information against other sources. Libraries are trusted, so it's essential that the materials on their shelves be up to date. Readers in prison deserve better books than they usually get through random donations. (Please note—I am *not* talking about the many books to prisoners organizations, whose volunteers strive to provide materials by request and have to hurdle countless obstacles to get well-chosen books into prisons and jails.)

Not only that, but readers should have access to books that act as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors."[7] It's easy to get donations of *New York Times* bestsellers of the past decade (lists that are historically dominated by white male writers) but not easy to get genre fiction by Black and Hispanic writers, or current nonfiction that contains useful knowledge. Those much-needed books always require designated budgets and professional selection.

Since a library is a growing organism,[8] there must be outflow as well as inflow. Each book that lives on the limited shelf space of a prison library must earn its place. ILD asks CDOC library staff to think "Would you take this book to bed with you?" because incarcerated people don't have many places to read outside of their cells. On the other hand, to reassure readers too often made

anxious by ongoing experiences of having property arbitrarily confiscated, prison libraries must make the process transparent and emphasize that books are only being removed because they are inaccurate or too gross to be used. I used to do my weeding during open hours so curious patrons could inspect the piles of books I was making. "You have a save," I would tell them cheerfully. "Check any book from this stack out, and I won't weed it." No one ever took me up on the offer.

People who are incarcerated should have a selection of physically clean, appealing, diverse, and up-to-date books to engage their curiosity, distract them from their circumstances, prepare for reentry, allow them to pursue insights about themselves, explore the world, and to satisfy the innate human desire to experience beauty. Really, is that any different than readers from any public library anywhere?

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