

Freedom Reads

Impact Report 2025



Freedom Reads 500th Library Opening

On August 14, 2025, Freedom Reads celebrated a profound milestone: the opening of its 500th Freedom Library. This landmark installation took place at York Correctional Institution, Connecticut's only women's prison, marking a meaningful return to a facility central to our history.

The choice of York is inextricably linked to our past. Early in the organization's journey, after we opened our first Freedom Library, we received a letter from another person incarcerated there asking for a Freedom Library on his cellblock. One Freedom Library per prison was simply not enough. This insight sparked a bold change in approach: the commitment to place a Freedom Library in every cellblock in every prison in this country, ensuring the transformative power of literature reaches everyone in need. In 2022, York Correctional Institution was the very first prison to experience this comprehensive scaling of access.

The 500th library now joins this model of full access. Each library holds a carefully curated selection—a collection spanning fiction, poetry, memoir, philosophy, and more—placed on custom, handcrafted wooden shelves built by formerly incarcerated makers and artisans.



Freedom Library patrons at York Correctional Institution at the 500th Freedom Library opening

Cover photo:
Missouri Department of Corrections



Freedom Reads staff at York Correctional Institution at the 500th Freedom Library opening

The dedication ceremony was charged with joy and hope. Founder and CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts read from his new poetry collection, *Doggerel*, to a standing-room crowd of more than 150 women, each of whom received a signed copy. The dedication was further cemented by a vibrant mural adorning the library, painted by Petra, a woman incarcerated at York and a devoted Freedom Library patron.

Ultimately, the 500th Freedom Library is more than just a number. It is a powerful symbol of a promise kept to those Inside. It is also an urgent reminder of the work still ahead: achieving our goal of opening a library in every single cellblock across America.

“First we wanted the representation of freedom with the cuffs being broken out of books. The butterflies represent transformation, the tree represents growth, bearing fruit and having strong roots... how we are all so different yet we are all such an integral and vital part of the world and we are not forgotten.”

Petra, Freedom Library Patron and mural artist at York Correctional Institution

Changing Prison Culture



Central California Women's Facility, California

“... the kindest, most generous gift I’ve ever witnessed, let alone received.”

Michael, Freedom Library Patron at Fulton Reception and Diagnostic Center in Missouri



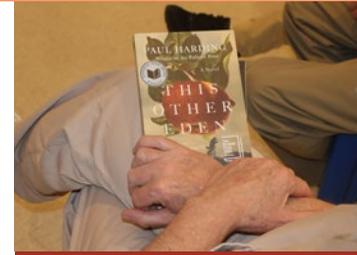
“By bringing Freedom Libraries and the Inside Literary Prize into more facilities, we’re expanding opportunities for the individuals in our care to engage with the transformative power of literature. We’re proud to partner with Freedom Reads to support programs that foster reflection, learning, and critical thinking skills.”

Latoya Hughes, Director, Illinois Department of Corrections

“The women were all really excited that these books were coming..., You guys are giving to us and now maybe we could do a fundraiser to try to give back to you. It’s a fantastic thing. In the future when those books are still here and they are so available, and people can enjoy them, that’s also going to be appreciated.”

Deborah Moore, Unit Manager, Women’s Eastern Reception and Diagnostic Center, Missouri

Reflections from the Inside



Carl Robinson Correctional Institution, Connecticut



“I took my time to observe how your gift of Freedom Libraries was received by the prison... the books are being read and returned to the shelves. I believe that it has something to do with the beautiful nature of the fine wooden shelves that mandate a certain respect and care.”

Arron, Freedom Library Patron at Southeastern Correctional Institution, Ohio

“I wanna say thank you for your organization and your kindness to give books to my fellow youth. This has given us the ability to have more creativity and intelligence for our young minds. I can promise you that your books and bookshelves will be put to good use.”

Damion, Freedom Library Patron at Backbone Mountain Youth Center in Maryland

“Thank you for the Libraries. We are taking pride in them, organizing them, and sometimes we sit right by the library with our chosen books.”

William, Freedom Library Patron at MCI – Norfolk, Massachusetts



Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, New Jersey



Complejo de Rehabilitación para Mujeres, Puerto Rico

March Forth

On March 4, 2025—twenty years to the day of his release from prison—Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts performed his solo show *Felon: An American Washi Tale* at the Perelman Performing Arts Center in New York City. Before a sold-out audience, Dwayne brought to life the stories of friends and brothers who shared the yards with him—those who’ve found freedom and those still waiting for it. Blending poetry, memory, and a fierce hope for justice, the performance explored the deep, human weight of incarceration and the relentless pursuit of liberation.

Bringing *Felon* to the Perelman was a powerful opportunity to share these stories with a broader public, sparking dialogue and awareness far beyond prison walls. But the show also lives where its story first took root: inside prisons, where Dwayne performs for audiences who hear their own lives echoed in his words. By moving between public and prison stages, *Felon* embodies the Freedom Reads vision: a society that fundamentally acknowledges and nurtures the basic dignity and humanity of people in prison.



Reginald Dwayne Betts performs *Felon* at the Perelman Performing Arts Center

Doggerel



Women at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, New Jersey (Photo: New Jersey Department of Corrections)

Published in March 2025, *Doggerel* was praised by the New York Times for its “satisfyingly rich meditations on companionship, loss, and more.” The poems explore the bonds between people, families, and the dogs who journey with us through the hardest and happiest moments of life.

Dwayne read *Doggerel* in venues across the country, including in prisons in Missouri, Connecticut, California, Oklahoma, and Puerto Rico, where it was met with smiles and occasional tears. These readings opened space for feelings of joy and reflections on the relationships we share with the companions in our lives.

Inside Literary Prize

The Inside Literary Prize (ILP) is the first major U.S. literary award judged exclusively by incarcerated readers. This powerful platform has become both a signature cultural initiative and an amplification of Freedom Reads’ belief that those Inside can and should help shape the nation’s literary conversation.

The ILP began in 2024, and Imani Perry’s *South to America* was the inaugural winner. In 2025, we brought the judging process to 15 prisons in California, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, Ohio, and Puerto Rico engaging hundreds of men and women who passionately selected the winner.

The Prize culminated on July 11, 2025, when *Chain-Gang All-Stars* by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah was honored at The New York Public Library. The ceremony featured powerful reflections from the judges, including Lyndie Felsher—an incarcerated judge in 2024 now home from prison—who spoke about literature as a life-saving source of connection and community. As one judge shared, this opportunity “made me feel important... a collective experience in which I was allowed to be passionate about reading.” This is a profound reminder that books don’t just tell stories—they create community, restore dignity, and forge a powerful sense of belonging.



Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, author of *Chain-Gang All-Stars* winner of the 2025 Inside Literary Prize. (Photo: Beowulf Sheehan)

“**I want to thank you for bringing the Inside Literary Prize here. It was both an honor and a privilege to participate. There are so few people who care about prisoners, especially women. I am so grateful to have had a platform to share my thoughts, opinions, and feelings without shame or judgement.”**

Adanna, 2025 Inside Literary Prize judge and Freedom Library Patron at Central California Women’s Facility

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A graphic consisting of three overlapping shapes: a top-left square, a middle-left shape with a curved bottom edge, and a right-pointing arrow shape. The top-left square and the right-pointing arrow are black, while the middle-left shape is orange. The text 'Freedom Reads' is centered in the white space of the arrow shape.

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