

# Words for wellbeing

Research shows that reading can reduce stress, promote empathy and help prevent dementia. Now, a new charity is working with food banks to give away books so that people can feed their minds as well as their bodies. By **Caroline Roberts**



Emily (left) and Anne at the Bookbank

## THE FINE PRINT

Books covering a wide range of genres are donated by local bookshops, publishers, libraries and the public, and other printed materials such as word searches, Sudoku and colouring sheets are provided too. Unlike libraries, Bookbanks stalls encourage visitors to take home and keep as many books as they choose, and there's no cumbersome sign-up process. 'We spent over a year finessing the things that make Bookbanks so impactful,' says Emily. 'It's the quality and condition of the books as well as the range, and my experience as a bookseller means that I know how to display them. Our volunteers all have a passion for reading, and we provide training on how to use books to connect with people, so I think we're bringing quite a specific package. Just having a box of books on the floor wouldn't be so appealing.'

A key benefit of the stalls is that they enable conversations and personal connection, she adds. 'Recently, we had a collection of war poetry and this elderly gentleman picked it up and immediately began reciting a Siegfried Sassoon poem. He then went on to Wilfred Owen, Keats and Coleridge. It was extraordinary. He said he hadn't recited a poem since he was a child but it was all lodged in there. We began talking about poetry, his childhood and what it was like at school. It opened up into a lovely

Bookbanks: Annabelle Williams

conversation and it was very moving for him to be reconnected with his childhood.'

The children's books are proving popular too. 'I take books home to read with my son,' says Bookbanks guest Yusuf. 'It's the best time as we are quiet together. If you haven't got money, but you have a book, the book is knowledge and knowledge is good.'

All Bookbanks volunteers have some professional experience of working with books, be it as a librarian, teacher, bookseller or in publishing. Some have even authored books themselves. Biographer Anne Sebba loves volunteering at the Hammersmith and Fulham Bookbank. 'People know they can get a free can of spaghetti at the food bank but it's such a joy to see their surprise and delight when they discover the books are free too, and they can take away as many as they like,' she says.

'Some people say they're not a reader but there are still endless ways to engage with them. You can ask them about their interests, and TV programmes and films they've seen. They might not realise a film they love started out as a book. One of the most rewarding things is when they come back and say they really liked the



book you suggested last month and ask if you have any more like it. Books should be everybody's right, not a privilege, and we can help facilitate that.'

## A NEW LEAF

The charity is now starting to branch out into hosting events such as author visits and writing workshops at the food banks. Guests enjoy hearing the author read out some extracts, having their book signed and getting a selfie with them, says Emily. 'The writing workshops have focused on what makes a good character and how you might go about creating a character rather than a lot of pen on paper. It's about adapting to the needs of the guests and what they want, and they all say they want another writing workshop.'



Author Anne Hawk gives a Bookbanks talk

It's still early days for Bookbanks – currently there are two sites in London and two in Norfolk, but there are plans to open two more this spring, one in a large food bank in Euston, London, and another in the north of England. It's an exciting time and the charity hopes to partner with many more food banks and expand throughout the UK, says Emily. She welcomes contact from anyone with food bank connections who'd be interested in setting up a Bookbank. 'To start with, it's helpful to think about the logistics, such as storage and display space. They could then start creating a book network, establishing links with local bookshops, writers, libraries and publishers, and start looking at local funding pots. All that sort of thing saves us a huge amount of time and gives us a springboard.'

'Bookbanks mean people are no longer just a number in the queue but an elderly man who loves poetry or a parent who wants to cook healthy meals for their family so needs a recipe book. Books are a way into people's lives and a way to make them feel seen and understood.'

**For more about Bookbanks visit [www.bookbanks.co.uk](http://www.bookbanks.co.uk). And if you would like to make a donation you can scan this QR code.**



## WHY READING IS GOOD FOR YOU

- Reading is mentally stimulating and boosts cognitive skills so can help protect against dementia.
- Keeping track of characters, plots and subplots helps improve your memory.
- Research at the University of Sussex found that reading for only six minutes reduces stress levels by 68%, making it more effective than listening to music or taking a walk.
- Reading helps develop concentration so is a good antidote to today's constant digital distractions.
- A book at bedtime can help you wind down and prepare for sleep, unlike screens, which emit a blue light that can contribute to insomnia.

