

Trending

Building Communities through Bookbanks: The Power of Literature in Challenging Times

By Nadia Kabir Barb

Growing up, reading was a must in our household. It did not take much persuasion as I was a voracious reader from an early age. My mother, having been the principal of 'Dhaka English Preparatory School', believed that learning was a top priority. She often reminded us that 'education was a gift no one could take away from you' and part of that education was through reading.

Books became my constant companion through the upheaval of new schools and new friends as our family moved from Bangladesh to Ireland, and to England. The words on the pages allowed me to travel through time, past, present and future, explore places I had never seen and step into the shoes of the characters whose lives were vastly different to mine. Whether I was sleuthing with Enid Blyton's Famous Five, finding a 'kindred spirit' in Anne of Green



Gables by L.M. Montgomery or being captivated by the time slip in Ronald Welch's historical novel, The Gauntlet, each book enriched my world and my childhood. As I grew older, I devoured the classics that filled our bookshelves. I fell in love with Shakespeare and discovered the beauty of short stories

through Rabindranath Tagore's Golpo Guccio.

One of my most cherished memories is being issued a library card for The British Council Library in Dhaka granting me access to their extensive collection of books and my weekly visits where I would disappear inside for hours and emerge, arms laden with books. Therefore, it was with great dismay that I learnt that the physical library had been dismantled and digitised during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Closer to home, since 2016, the closure or transfer to volunteers of over 180 libraries in the UK has resulted in job losses for almost 2,000 library professionals. In addition, approximately a third of the remaining 950 libraries have had to curtail their operating times. This trend is particularly concerning as it reduces access to books and community spaces, thereby adversely affecting local

communities, especially considering that one in ten children in the UK do not have a book of their own.

In 2022, writer and journalist Emily Rhodes started volunteering at her local food bank in Newington Green and introduced the idea of distributing books to their guests. Having spent her childhood immersed in books and her adult life working in various book-related roles, including bookseller, running Emily's Walking Book Club, and as a literary critic, Emily felt that books would bring something special to the food bank space. She remarked, "I know from experience that books can not only be a powerful means of escape, but they can also serve as brilliant ways to build communities." Driven by this belief, she set up a trestle table and began distributing books at the food bank, initially providing her own books along with others sourced from the local community. On the first day, Emily gave out fifty books to around thirty people. This positive response encouraged her to continue the effort, week after week, gradually shaping the vision of what a book bank could become.

Going forward, she was able to secure donations from bookshops, publishers, individuals including food bank guests. Then, in 2023, Emily formed the charity, Bookbanks, where the objective was to distribute free books to individuals and families experiencing financial difficulties through collaboration with food banks across the country. Putting this in perspective, approximately 2,500 food



banks operate nationwide, assisting 3% of the population (2.3 million people).

By 2024, Bookbanks UK was operating in the Newington Green food bank, and the second opened in June, at the Wymondham Community Outreach Project, Norfolk. Supported by two teams of volunteers, Emily, alongside her co-director Hattie Garlick, officially launched the initiative. In an interview with the Guardian, Emily stated, "Nobody should have to choose whether to feed or read," and added, "By enabling the books industry to work closely with food banks, we can change this. Books are a powerful tool not just to improve literacy, but also to build relationships and create communities."

By transforming food bank areas into centres of literacy and community engagement, Bookbanks has aimed to make books available to individuals who may find them financially inaccessible.

My introduction to Bookbanks came in May 2024, when I was invited by Emily to the first author event held at St. Jude and St. Paul's Church, Newington Green. I was relieved and delighted when Emily emailed to let us know that all twenty-five copies of my collection of short stories *Truth or Dare*—supplied by my publisher Renard Press, with Arts Council Funding organised by the Republic of Consciousness Prize, had been picked up by the guests, with many attendees immediately diving into the first story

and sharing their thoughts.

She remarked, "It was quite amazing to see the food bank turned into a giant reading group, with so many people reading and discussing the same book," and how the stories related to their own life stories. As an author, it was a hurrah moment for me.

It was a significant privilege to be the first author to speak at the Bookbanks event, and in my excitement, I arrived far too early. To avoid getting underfoot with the volunteers of the food bank, I offered to assist in setting up the Bookbanks table, which featured an extensive selection of both fiction and non-fiction literature. As we waited for all the guests to arrive, I had the opportunity to speak to a few of the attendees. We shared life experiences, discussed our favourite literature, including works by Jane Austen and Toni Morrison, and even had an obligatory moan about the dreary May weather. One conversation I had with a guest was inspiring. He had already finished reading the book and mentioned that the stories reminded him of his travels to Bangladesh in the eighties and how they had resonated with him.

Once everyone had gathered, we formed a circle where I read from my collection, followed by a lively Q&A session, book signing, and even posing for selfies with the attendees.

Subsequently, the author events have become a feature of Bookbanks. Currently, Bookbanks hosts 'Matthew's Talks', a new programme of quarterly events held at Bookbanks' sites inside

London, Norfolk and Manchester food banks. These events are named in memory of Matthew McFadden and supported by his family and friends, acknowledging his appreciation for books and his commitment to valuing and respecting others.

Since its inception, Bookbanks has expanded to multiple locations across the UK, including Dalston, Norwich, Wymondham, Fulham and Hammersmith, Euston and more recently, Manchester. The charity has successfully distributed over 7,000 books, with many recipients indicating increased reading habits and improved literacy skills. The feedback received indicates a positive impact on well-being, with one guest describing their experience stating, 'I came for food, and I left with food for the soul.' Yousuf, another guest, said, 'If you haven't got money, but you have a book, the book is knowledge, and knowledge is good'.

When chatting to Emily about the challenges faced by Bookbanks, she noted that while they have been fortunate in securing numerous book donations and enthusiastic volunteers, logistical issues persist. "We have been really fortunate in getting masses of books donated and plenty of wonderful volunteers with a background in books stepping forward to look after the weekly Bookbanks stalls," she said. However, the primary challenges involved were ensuring a reliable supply of suitable books without overwhelming the food banks' storage capabilities. Each location had its unique

preferences, young adult books were highly popular in Norwich, cookbooks in Dalston, and Learning English books at the new Euston site. Therefore, ensuring that the appropriate books were being delivered to the correct location presented logistical difficulties. "We are working hard to develop robust systems to manage the flow of books, and before we start on our next leg of expansion, we have to ensure that the right systems and framework are in place" she emphasised.

This strategic planning is essential as Bookbanks strives to sustain its growth and extend its influence, with the objective of promoting a passion for reading and strengthening communities through its innovative methods.

From my early years surrounded by books to witnessing the transformative work of Bookbanks, one thing is evident, literature has the power to connect people, create empathy, and build communities. Books are more than words on a page – they can provide support, particularly for those navigating hardship. Arnie McConnell, founder of Wymondham Community Outreach Project food bank states that "Bookbanks' mission has had a transformational effect on our visitors' self-esteem." In a profound way, they offer understanding, inspiration, and a sense of connection that transcends circumstance.

The success of Bookbanks reminds us that access to books should not be a privilege but a right. To find out more about Bookbanks, please visit www.bookbanks.uk