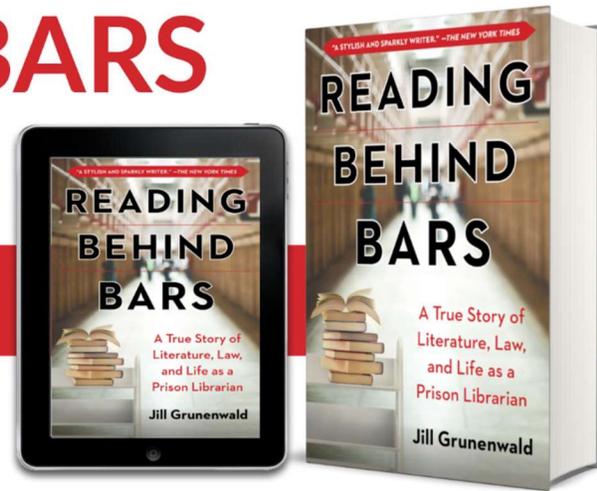


READING BEHIND BARS

Discussion guide



1. Prior to *Reading Behind Bars*, what, if any, assumptions about prison and prisoners did you have? Where do you think these assumptions came from?
2. Each chapter opens with an excerpt from a policy or procedure at the prison. Why do you think the author decided to start each chapter this way? Discuss why you believe she chose to highlight the policies that she did. Were there any specific policies that surprised you?
3. How did Jill's history as a bookworm influence her decision to become a librarian? Discuss the ways in which her beliefs regarding censorship and access to information impacted some of her experiences in the prison.
4. How do you feel about the idea that certain books are not allowed in prison?
5. The men who work in the library seem very protective of Jill. Discuss why you think that is. What does that say about the role of the library—and the librarian—at the prison?
6. How does being a woman complicate Jill's experiences working in an all-male facility? Do you think any of the situations she found herself in would have turned out different if she had been a man?
7. In Chapter 10, two men come up and ask about getting a copy of *Mein Kampf*. Jill decides she knows these men well enough to know they aren't a security risk, and while she doesn't order the book for them she also doesn't inform the investigator they were asking about it. Do you agree with that decision? Why or why not? What would you have done in that situation?
8. Throughout the book, Jill calls certain books and authors that are particularly popular among the prison population including John Grisham, Nora Roberts, and the *Left Behind* series. Were there any that surprised you? Why? What sort of books did you imagine were read in prison?
9. Despite working with nonviolent offenders in a minimum-security prison, staff safety was still always an issue. After breaking her arm, she is told she's not allowed to wear her sling around the inmates because the non-breakaway strap was a choking hazard. Even though she'd never ever had any physical altercations with any of the men, there was still a concern one would try to hurt her. Discuss how that scene made you feel.

10. In Chapter 21, Jill makes a split-second decision when confronted by Gardner, and that decision has repercussions on his ability to utilize the library. Would you have made the same decision? If not, how would you have approached that heated exchange differently?

11. From dealing with masturbation, drugs, suicide attempts and even that bat, Jill discovers that there are some things that all her years working in libraries and even her graduate degree can't prepare her for. If you were in Jill's position, how would you have reacted in these situations?

12. The author acknowledges in the beginning that she comes from a place of privilege, both in terms of race and socioeconomic status. How did this color her interactions with the men inside? Her privilege still exists at the end, but do you think her experience changed how she views prison and the men incarcerated there?

13. Two issues the book doesn't address but ultimately overshadow everything are mass incarceration and the war on drugs. Has reading this book changed the way you view these topics?

14. After reading *Reading Behind Bars*, what do you think would be the most appealing part of working in a prison library? What would be the most unappealing?

15. The book ends with a quote from Andrew Carnegie: "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert." Do you agree with Carnegie? Share your own experiences with libraries and discuss the position libraries play in society today.

16. Think back to those assumptions you may have had about prison prior to reading the book. After finishing, did you find your assumptions had been wrong or right? What did you learn from reading this book?



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