

# Great support for the #bookwumman and Streetreads

At the relaunch of Streetreads yesterday we met some distinguished authors and readers. That well known booklover, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon told me she is reading the latest Ian Rankin book at the moment.

This is *In a House of Lies* which has just soared to the top of the book charts. I challenged her that she was only saying this because he was also in the room but she was quite adamant she would have said it anyway! Ms Sturgeon had just donated some of her own books to the charity to give away to rough sleepers.



Ian Rankin Photo courtesy of The First Minister of Scotland/Flickr

Ian Rankin himself was keen to point out to me that he is both pleased to see that his new hardback has knocked JK Rowling with her new Robert Galbraith book off the number one position, and sad that it is another Edinburgh author who is being displaced. But he added : "How great that two Edinburgh writers are holding the number one slot in the UK! It is

extraordinary for a wee city like ours,. We really punch above our weight – but we were the first UNESCO City of Literature.”

The pair were at The Scottish Storytelling Centre to support [Streetreads](#), a concept which belongs to #bookwumman Rachel Cowan who realised that books could be beneficial to homeless people.

Streetworks the local homelessness charity will offer literacy classes and outlets will offer free books. The strapline on the Streetreads website says : **“Giving away books to homeless readers because stories connect us all!”** The main part of the project is to offer free books as they can provide space and solace.

These will not necessarily be second hand books. Rachel Cowan explained : “We give away books to homeless people, and by homeless people I don’t just mean people on the streets. I also mean people who are stuck in the most ghastly B&Bs, who are in hostels who are sofa surfing. All of these people like to read.”

But Rachel credits the idea for Streetreads to someone she met, a homeless woman called Stacey. She said : “I wish Stacey had been here today, but I’ve lost touch with her. She is on the street and I befriended her when she used to sit outside my street door. I got talking to her one day about books. I asked if homeless people liked to read books and got her to introduce me to a couple of very scary looking guys. They said they would love to have books. Some of them were pinching books and so they were running the risk of being arrested. I told them I could get them books. It went from there. We operated out of the police box on Leith Walk and Sara Sheridan cut the ribbon for us.

“Teaming up with Streetwork is a huge step forward, and I hope that this will really benefit us. People can help by donating books, but we are very picky about what books we like. We are

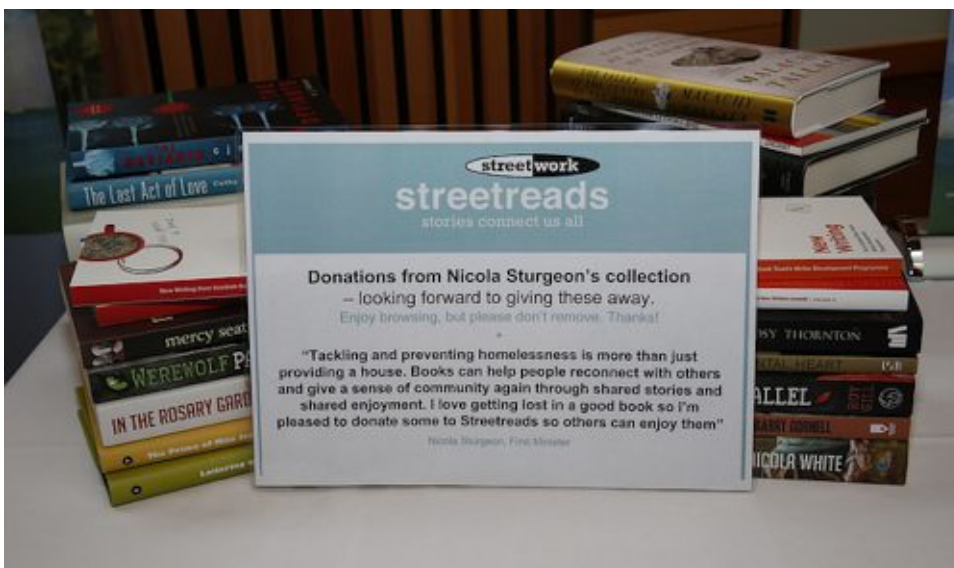
picky about the condition, and they have to be new or nearly new.

“If you give a homeless person a shabby book what does that say about what you think about them? A homeless guy once told me how he felt when I gave him a new book that nobody had read. He said it was a big deal for him.”

Members of the public can help by handing out books, coordinating their collection or doing some fundraising.

Well known Edinburgh author, Sara Sheridan was also at the Streetreads event. She told me how she met the #bookwumman. She said : “I met Rachel like everyone else on Twitter. She was just launching the whole project at the [Leith Walk Police Box](#). She asked me to come down, cut the ribbon and say a few words so that is exactly what I did. I am so proud of her for what she has achieved.

“The whole project has been a massive success and it is just ready to springboard and become huge. This has been a real struggle for her, some days and some weeks. It just shows that you can do it though. All you need to do is give a book, or speak to someone or start a conversation and things are possible.”



Nicola Sturgeon donated books from her own

collection Photo The First Minister of  
Scotland/Flickr

The First Minister told The Edinburgh Reporter that she likes the Streetreads project very much. She said : "It is a fantastic initiative. I am a big supporter of it. I think it is a simple idea but a really powerful one." I suggested that it goes hand in hand with the announcement of £6.5 million to Social Bite earlier in the week to provide housing for homeless people. Ms Sturgeon replied : "We want to eradicate homelessness, but also cater for the human needs of people who are experiencing homelessness as well."

We asked Ian Rankin about his own involvement with Streetreads. He said : "Like the First Minister I first came across this project on Twitter. The #bookwumman was following me and after a few tweets she asked me if I knew how popular my books are with homeless people. She told me she had a charity she was setting up and she needed some books. I told her I have loads of spare copies! She asked me if I had any in foreign languages like Polish or Russian. I did not know there were homeless folk on the streets from these places. So we met up and she moved into the cave at Lighthouse Books. My son did a wee bit of work for her and we did some fundraising. She took me along to one of the sessions she did with Streetworks which is a drop in on a Saturday when everybody comes along for a meal. There's a trestle table with the #bookwumman behind it.

"Homeless folk are just like everybody else – they all love a good story. And a good story helps them pass the time when they are sitting on the street."

I suggested to Ian that perhaps the fact that somebody has a book in their hand makes them more human and perhaps more approachable. He replied : " I think that is a good point. I have seen me passing someone with a book in their hand and then stopping to ask what they are reading and getting into a

discussion about the book itself. Suddenly you start a conversation and you are talking to a human being not a statistic. You're then talking about a shared passion for reading and writing."

His own books appear just as popular as they are anywhere else. Ian continued:"Rachel tells me they are hugely popular, and there are dozens of them out there. But the books get damaged on the streets so we need to keep replenishing the supply. Luckily I have loads of spare copies so I don't think there will be a shortage any time soon!"



The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and author Ian Rankin at the relaunch of Streetreads at The Scottish Storytelling Centre on the Royal Mile Photo The First Minister/Flickr

Lorraine McGrath, Chief Executive of Streetwork and its sister charity, Glasgow-based Simon Community Scotland, said: "At Streetwork, we create connections with people from every background, circumstance and organisation – supporting people into recovery and off the street."

“Stories – our own and those of others – are a great way of connecting with each other and Streetreads is a beautifully engaging way to do this.

“For most people, reading a book is a delightful, everyday pastime. Through Streetreads, this ordinary activity is more easily available to people facing and recovering from homelessness in Edinburgh.

“We have been friends of Streetreads and Rachel for some time, loving the work she’s done in creating this amazing service.

“We are delighted to bring this fabulous initiative to Streetwork, working with Ian Rankin and other supporters to reach further and build new exciting connections and opportunities for those we support.”

Investment management firm, Baillie Gifford, which is headquartered in Edinburgh supports the project.

Sam Pattman, sponsorship manager at Baillie Gifford, said: “By giving away books to homeless readers, Streetreads ensures that – no matter what an individual’s circumstances are – reading is still a possibility. As a firm, Baillie Gifford advocates the importance of literature, which is why we are delighted to support this incredibly worthwhile initiative.”

### **Streetreads outlets include**

Streetwork Holyrood Hub, Holyrood Road

Streetwork on South Bridge

Soul Food at St Paul’s & St George’s Church

Soul Food at Mustard seed St Margaret’s Church

Super Saturday at Old St Paul’s Church hall

Broomhouse COSS One Stop Shop

Edinburgh NW Foodbank

Bethany creative writing group

Edinburgh Access Practice

Cunningham House hostel

Safe Haven Leith

@streetreads

[www.streetwork.org.uk/streetreads/beafriend](http://www.streetwork.org.uk/streetreads/beafriend)



The #Bookwumman Rachel Cowan with Sara Sheridan and The First Minister