

NOTE FROM THE MANAGING EDITORS

The Prisoners' Pen at the Crossroads

Mike Larsen and Justin Piché

This special issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) celebrates the PEN American Center's Prison Writing Program. Issue editor Bell Gale Chevigny – a dedicated, long-time advocate for and facilitator of prison writing – has compiled a collection of articles that includes past PEN American Center prize-winning narratives and new contributions solicited for this edition of the *JPP*.

Continuing with the themes discussed in Volume 18(1&2), this issue again focuses on the experiences and socio-politics of incarceration in the United States as revealed through the written works of prison writers as well as the accounts of educators, facilitators, and documentary filmmakers who work to foster expression that transcends institutional barriers. This collection is intended to offer a glimpse into the largest penal system in the “free world”, one the Conservative Administration in Canada seems intent on mimicking despite the overwhelming evidence that the “race to incarcerate” has had a negligible impact on ‘crime’, with fiscal and human costs that have shown to not be worth the price of purchase (see Mauer, 1999; Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002).

As Susan Nagelsen, Associate Editor of the *JPP*, notes in her *Response*, this issue represents a welcome collaboration between groups that share a mandate for fostering and providing a vehicle for writing as resistance. The importance of prison writing and an appreciation for the venues that make it possible have been subjects of discussion and analysis in these pages since the inception of the *JPP*, and this issue joins a number of previous editions that have made writing, expression, and the penal press their focus.¹

While this volume focuses on the United States, the articles speak to “carceral universals” (Gaucher, 2008, p. 2) that transcend history and geography. Prisoners the world over will hear echoes of their own experiences in Michael Rothwell's discussion of suicide and self-harm, and William Steed Kelley's account of endemic violence. Christopher J. Best's contribution is in many ways particular to the context of Texas Death Row, but his effort to make sense of institutionalized murder resonates with the literature on prisons as spaces epitomizing the biopolitics of disposability (see Bauman 2004; Byrd 1995; Giroux 2009). And anyone, anywhere,

who has ever attempted to work with, survive, or resist the penal system will identify with Patrica Prewitt's excellent account of the contradictory and Kafkaesque prison bureaucracy. This bureaucracy serves to discipline and micro-regulate life on the inside, while simultaneously managing or prohibiting 'outsider' access to the prison. As noted by filmmaker Susanne Mason (this issue, p. 84), "the walls work both ways".

Thankfully, efforts to transcend and overcome the walls also work both ways, and the written word is a powerful vehicle for this. Prison writing is often a lifeline – a means to resist the dehumanizing and totalizing experience of incarceration through expression and creativity. As Bell Chevigny (1999, p. xxiv) observes in her anthology *Doing Time*, "many prisoners write as if their lives depend on it. Quite often they do". Writing is also a means to counter-inscribe the prison-industrial complex by deconstructing its core narratives and advancing alternative discourses borne of experience (Gaucher, 2002, p. 21). Further, we would argue that the writings of prisoners on prisons contribute to an evolving institutional memory that links persons, places and policies. In other words, it is possible to read the folly of next year's carceral expansion agenda in the decade-old account of a prisoner who has lived through a similar experience.

We, in Canada and in the United States, find ourselves at a crossroads. Faced with the reality that the construction and operation of carceral institutions diverts important funds from vital services such as education and health care, particularly in a time of economic crisis, many American States are considering measures to sharply reduce their reliance on imprisonment as a panacea to social problems. At the same time, the Canadian federal government is conducting a needs assessment to decide whether or not to construct new penitentiaries for men at a rate not seen since the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (see Jackson and Stewart, 2009). At this stage of the carceral game, one where lives and futures are at stake, the *JPP* seeks to contribute to this debate through the prisoners' pen.

We were excited when Bell approached us with the idea for this issue, and we hope that you will find it as engaging as we do.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, for example, Bob Gaucher's *Response* in the first issue of the *JPP*, "The Prisoner as Ethnographer", as well as *JPP* Volume 2(1) (1989), on "The Penal Press and

Selected Articles”, Volume 10(1&2) on “Prison Writing and Prison Writers”, and the *JPP* Anthology “Writing as Resistance” (2002). Prison writing is, of course, a core underlying theme in every issue of the *JPP*, and an issue at the heart of our mandate as a journal.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

PEN Prison Writing: Punishment and Creative Resistance *Bell Gale Chevigny*

Education in prison reduces recidivism more effectively than any other program; the higher the level of education, the more dramatically recidivism rates drop. Less noted is the salutary effect of arts programs in creative writing, painting, and theater. This issue features work by non-fiction writers who have won prizes in the PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors, and Novelists) American Center's Prison Writing Program's (PWP) annual literary contest. This nationwide program for writers in prison is the longest-lived and most eminent of its kind.

Since 1960, PEN's Freedom to Write committee has advocated for writers abroad who are persecuted for their writing.¹ But support for saints of free expression abroad does not usually translate into concern for ordinary domestic sinners. Yet in the early 1970s a few members investigated conditions for people writing in U.S. prisons. Learning that federal prisoners were often denied writing materials or free access to mail, they worked to correct those practices. The Attica rebellion and its barbarous repression in 1971 made them want to know more about life behind the walls. And former prisoners "coming out" and speaking eloquently made them wonder about the strengths of others hidden away.²

One founder of the PWP, Kathrin Perutz wrote: "To be able to say what you mean, to put in words what you perceive as truth, to impose form on the formless – this is a way to reconstruct a life, to restore a sense of meaning, of responsibility to oneself and to others. But the others – at least, some others – must be listening". To create those listeners, PEN launched the first literary competition for writers in prison in 1973. Men and women incarcerated across the nation submitted entries, some of them emboldened to write for the first time.

The seventies created a "prison renaissance", one man wrote. The Attica rebellion had brought reforms in its wake, and rehabilitation was still a respected goal. Many rich programs were brought to prisons, including college education, arts and writing classes, some funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Several little magazines emerged, dedicated to publishing work by prisoners.

In the 1980s, support for prison writing plummeted. Ronald Reagan's administration cut financial aid to fledgling magazines, and state funds for programs behind bars evaporated. In 1981, Norman Mailer fought passionately for the release of Jack Abbott, author of the best-selling *In the Belly of the Beast*. Within a month of his release, Abbott killed a man. The romance between convicts and writers had run its course, and interest in prisoners diminished while the victims' rights movement flourished.

PEN's Prison Writing Program almost died in the late eighties. Reader/jurors, always volunteers, fell away, and PEN executives took little interest. Those who valiantly rescued the program, including the late and beloved Fielding Dawson, held the torch in those dark times. We have always had strong supporters, and in this past decade our prestige has grown. To my knowledge no other center of International PEN does anything like this program.

The PWP receives about a thousand manuscripts yearly – in poetry, drama, fiction, essay and memoir – which are read by about twenty of us volunteers working in generic subcommittees.³ Winners receive modest money awards and our mentor program, initiated by Jackson Taylor, the program's director, offers winners and promising runners-up the opportunity to work with a seasoned writer through correspondence. In these times, prisoners with access to a writing workshop are rare. Incarcerated writers express overwhelming gratitude for the attention the contest represents, and many assert that it has changed their lives.

For PWP members, reading this remarkable work has been at once a privilege and, because of our inability to share it with a larger audience, a burden. Through the years, we have offered public readings of winners' work to enthusiastic, and often astonished, audiences. Writers and actors have done their best to make the winners present, reading in auditoriums, on radio (WBAI and WNYC), and on TV. The video, "Words from the Tiers", produced by Deedee Halleck of Deep Dish TV (www.deepdish.tv) is often shown on the Free Speech channel. We have also participated in PEN American Center's international literary festivals, World Voices.

In recent years, however, issues like mass incarceration in the U.S., the trend toward imprisoning the mentally ill, the increasingly geriatric prison population, torture by solitary confinement, and capital punishment have made more urgent our desire for a wider audience to experience more directly what only those inside can tell.

With the support of a Soros Senior Justice Fellowship in 1998, I compiled and edited an anthology designed to give ears to the hard of hearing as well as voice to the voiceless; not only, that is, to encourage these isolated writers but also to reveal their humanity, their gifts, and their plight to readers shamefully unaware of them. *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, was published by Arcade in 1999 (paperback in 2000) and is still in print. Instructors in several fields have assigned the book to their students, and it supports the argument for treating works by U.S. prisoners (now a population of 2.3 million), as an important branch of our national literature.⁴

Correspondence and friendships with PEN contest winners continue to educate me and compel me to act on, or share, what I learn. The ways they came to put words to paper in prison and how the writing experience has affected them are for me endlessly moving and illuminating questions.⁵ The best prison writing, I have concluded, continues to testify to hidden experience, to critique and resist institutionalization, and it helps writers to find themselves, make themselves whole, forge significant connections with others, make reparations, and meaningfully confront death.⁶

These relationships have drawn me into struggles against the death penalty, for clemency and parole, against cruel and unjust treatment within the walls, for educational help inside and out. The PWP has established an advocacy committee to further these efforts; this committee also helps writers find outlets for their work, through publication and public reading.

The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP) has published articles by many PEN PWP contest winners – among them Eugene Dey, Charles Huckelbury, and Jon Marc Taylor, and the dedicated and multi-talented late Victor Hassine. The authors in this issue are new to the *JPP*. As the nonfiction pieces sent to us often bear unique witness to outrageous practices, we are glad for the chance to make this work more widely known. This issue is a partial sequel to *Doing Time*.

Justin Piché suggested that, since Canadian penal practices are shifting to the right, partly in imitation of the U.S., this issue might include pieces that reflect some of the more egregious prison conditions in the ‘land of the free’. His and Mike Larsen’s introduction show how this issue is in part a cautionary one.

Several articles address the punishment that grossly supplements the loss of liberty. Michael Rothwell testifies to suicide in San Quentin. With absurdist humor, Gary T. Carrillo meditates on California’s infamous Three

Strikes Law and on suicide among the mentally ill at Vacaville.⁷ Christopher Best gives an eyewitness account of Texas' death row at Huntsville. From Vandalia, Missouri, Patricia Prewitt recounts the ironies of contraband rules. A long-termer in Florida's prisons, Charles Norman relates the comic-tragic effects of AIDS behind the walls. William Steed Kelley narrates an example of violence in Texas prisons. These six articles are themselves acts of creative resistance, of course. The next five pieces describe creative resistance directly.

Jorge Renaud's prize-winning essay proposes that outsiders initiate workshops that would help prisoners to think through their lives and learn to give back to their communities. The remaining articles were commissioned for this issue. PEN prize-winning poet Marilyn Buck wrote from federal prison in Dublin, California about the politics of her experience teaching English as a Second Language there. From Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Judy Clark details the positive rehabilitative effects of the community model of prison that prevailed at the institution for twenty years before the conventional punitive model was restored. Buzz Alexander, the founding genius of the Prison Creative Arts Program (PCAP) in Michigan, wrote the piece about the program to accompany the account of Kinnari Jivani, one of the hundreds of beneficiaries of the initiative, now at Huron Valley State.

This issue also breaks new ground for the *JPP* by presenting the triple testimony of three filmmakers who give voice (and image) through documentary film. Susanne Mason, Katy Chevigny, and Edgar Barends – all engaged in criminal justice issues – recall the ticklish task of gaining access to their subjects. The problem of gaining access to the carceral was a central theme discussed in *JPP* volumes 17(1) and 18 (1&2).

The first three pieces of the Prisoners' Struggles section were ones I commissioned, because I admire the authors and hope their leadership in reform efforts will inspire emulation. Experiences inside of two former prisoners, Anthony Papa and Bruce Reilly, kindled their fire to lead battles for legislative reform – against the Rockefeller Drug Laws and Rhode Island's felon disenfranchisement, respectively. Tamar Kraft-Stolar has no less zeal in leading her Coalition for Women Prisoners in multiple ongoing struggles to important victories for women and their families.

The *JPP*, which shares the mission of the PEN Prison Writing Program to introduce the voices and experiences of prisoners into the conversation,

has been very hospitable in dedicating this issue to writers in the PWP. The writers and the committee members are grateful for this opportunity to gain an international audience. We hope that these pieces will stimulate an exchange with people elsewhere who participate in a similar program or are interested in developing one.

ENDNOTES

- * Thanks to my colleagues at PEN, anonymous, hard-working readers of the contest submissions, and to Blue Mountain Center for the Arts for mounting a two and a half-week special issue retreat in May 2009 for artists who are prison activists. This group stimulated ideas for this issue. Old friends – Buzz Alexander, Susanne Mason, Edgar Barens, and Bruce Reilly – gamely supplied essays for it. Jorge Renaud offered editorial assistance.
- ¹ The Writers in Prison program in other countries do the same work.
 - ² In talk-backs after electrifying productions (in 1967) of “Fortune and Men’s Eyes”, a play by John Herbert about brutality in a Canadian boy’s reformatory, ex-convicts came out of the closet to testify to its veracity. Seeing the need for a forum that would give formerly incarcerated people a voice and provide them with the tools they needed to help rebuild their lives. David Rothenberg, the play’s director founded the Fortune Society (see www.fortunesociety.org).
 - ³ See www.pen.org for contest guidelines and for the *Manual for Writers in Prison*. Winning works are also posted on the PEN website.
 - ⁴ In my view, prisoners’ writing is not a genre, but rather the variegated voice of a neglected but significant minority.
 - ⁵ In *Doing Time*, the biographical sketches of the fifty writers include remarks on these questions.
 - ⁶ See my essay “‘All I Have, A Lament and a Boast’: Why Prisoners Write”, in *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, in D. Quentin Miller (2005), Jefferson (NC): McFarland & Company.
 - ⁷ Mental health treatment can help some prisoners recover from their illness, prevent deterioration, and protect them from suicide. It can encourage the development of more effective internal controls. By helping individual prisoners regain health and improve coping skills, mental health treatment promotes safety and order within the prison environment and enhances community safety when prisoners are ultimately released. Unfortunately, prisons are ill-equipped to respond appropriately to the needs of prisoners with mental illness. Prison mental health services are all too frequently crippled by under-staffing, insufficient facilities, and limited programs. Many seriously ill prisoners receive little or no meaningful treatment. See *Human Rights Watch Statement for the Record to the Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law*, September 22, 2009.

ABOUT THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR

Professor Emerita of Literature at SUNY, Purchase College, *Bell Gale Chevigny* has been a member of the PEN Prison Writing Committee since 1993 (Chair from 2002-2005). She also serves on the board of Prison Legal News as well as the Advisory Boards of PEN, Prison Creative Arts Project, and Resist. With Open Society Institute support, she edited *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, A PEN American Center Prize Anthology (Arcade, 1999). She initiated the PWP's Advocacy Committee. Chevigny has taught writing workshops in prisons and among ex-prisoners. She has lectured widely and written frequently about writers in prison. Fifteen writers in *Doing Time* have joined her for shared readings all over the United States. Among her publications are three other books, some short fiction, and many articles on social issues and artists.