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## The Poetry of Prison

by Kenneth E Hartman

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In the early 19th century, the most astute observer of the nascent United States, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented on the startling divide between the promised freedoms of this country and the "despotisms" of its prisons. I'm sure he'd be disappointed to learn how little has changed inside the walls, still run by despots, still designed to break human beings.

But this system of institutionalized suffering, mighty though it surely is, doesn't always succeed in crushing those souls consigned to its dark holds. And some who bear light manage to slip in and challenge the shadows.

*By Heart: Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives*, (New Village Press: Oakland, California 2010) a dual memoir by Spoon Jackson, a man serving life without the possibility of parole, and Judith Tannenbaum, a teacher of poetry and humanity to prisoners, tells a heartwarming and heartbreaking story of two unique spirits brought together and forever separated by the prison system.

It's not the standard fare of good-hearted freewoman falls for reformed convict, either. These two are lovers, yes, but lovers of words, of growth and "realness" found in unlikely places, and of that most ethereal and powerful of forms – poetry.

Jackson and I share an attenuated prison connection even beyond our common predicament of being sentenced to a long and slow death in prison. One of the named characters in *By Heart* was at Folsom State Prison in 1982. When this fellow was stabbed in the neck some of his blood sprayed onto my shirt. I was surprised and pleased to learn he was doing better at San Quentin several years later.

Tannenbaum and I have never crossed paths, and we don't share a uniquely prison connection. Nevertheless, I recognized her in the many kind and decent folks I've met over my 30 years of incarceration. Her struggles to walk the unnatural line erected by the system's insistence on no genuine human connection and her heart's insistence on just that are the common lament of all who come into these places determined to do good.

This is a well-written memoir that skillfully interweaves two lives touched by trauma and dislocation, and it manages to paint a clear picture of the arcane world of prison, with all the warts and blemishes right out there, easy to see.

However, that's not why you should read this book, and read this book you most certainly should.


Between the covers of *By Heart*, you'll discover a chronicle of the degeneration of the prison system, the terrible transformation of what had been merely bad into something terrifying and destructive. The by-product of decades of political pandering and demagoguery, of the empowering of the prison-industrial complex, and of media fascination with violent crime, the prisons are now literal warehouses and nothing else. They are now places implacably opposed to the Judith Tannenbaums of the world, so much so that the program that brought her into San Quentin is now gone. There will not be another prisoner rescued by a teacher of poetry in the joint.

Between the lines of *By Heart*, another story fundamental to understanding prison comes to the fore; the story of a man's transformation. Even though we've never met, and come to this experience from radically different places, we know each other well. Spoon Jackson is one of the thousands and thousands of long-term lifers who've grown up, moved on, transformed, become rehabilitated, whatever label you prefer. Be it through education, religion, service, or finding a calling in the arts, these men (and women) no longer belong in prison. It's just that simple.

When you finish *By Heart* you'll have two overriding questions. Why isn't Ms. Tannenbaum inside a prison looking for ways to rescue other souls? And why isn't Mr. Jackson teaching poetry to kids who would listen to him more than most anyone else?

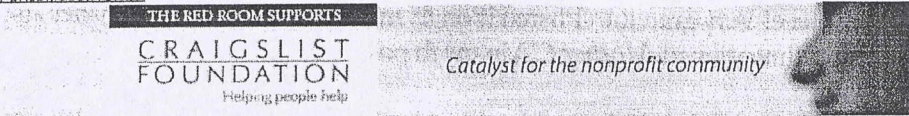
Read this book and relearn what we all know in our hearts, that love, in all its

delirious forms, can do wondrous things. Then, demand of the prison system, your prison system, the kind of reforms that will allow for more stories like *By Heart*.

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