


July 26, 2010



Are you ready for healing?

SIERRA TUCSON®

View Sierra Tucson Video ▶
Addiction and Depression
Treatment Center

This is the print preview: [Back to normal view »](#)

Kenneth Hartman

Prison Writer

Posted: July 26, 2010 03:20 PM

The Gangs Of Readers In Prison

Prison is a world divided up along a series of arbitrary lines. Different races won't even speak to each other in some places. Men of the same race, but of different geographical locations will shun one another, and occasionally try to kill each other, based on longitude and latitude points. In California prisons, probably the most gang-centric of all the prisons in this country, some groups identify themselves by the telephone area codes of their hometowns.

Amongst the several different groupings of book readers in prison there are also gangs of a sort, of a far less violent but no less exclusive nature.

The largest group has to be the readers of fantasy novels and their related sub-genres of swords and dragons and the like. They're also the easiest to spot due to the enormous size of the average fantasy tome. A substantial number of fantasy devotees also engage in role-playing games of the Dungeons and Dragons type. It seems to me there is a distinct language spoken by fantasy readers, as well. They say things like how they hope to die in battle using the skills they've learned, as if there will be a jousting tournament on the south yard one day.

Readers of religious books are another large group, which is further divided into two mutually exclusive sub-groups.

The larger is the convinced religious readers. In California, this is predominantly Christians. They tend to part of a wider culture of conservative evangelicals, who have very effectively spread their version of things throughout the prisons. To be fair, the more liberal variants of Christianity haven't made much of an effort in here. There are also groups of Muslims and Buddhists, fewer in number but no less certain of their own beliefs and equally well stocked with their own sacred texts.

A smaller and ever-shifting group of guys are part of what I'd call the "religiously curious". For this crew the more obscure the better, and the marketplace of religious persuasions is as wide in here as out there. Almost always, this is one of the expected phases of adjusting to the diminished status of convicted felon and usually passes into one of the traditional monotheistic religions.

A related, but distinct, set of readers are interested in self-help books. Just like everywhere else these career through here in waves, each promising to rectify the wrongs of a life lived poorly, or reprogram a personality deformed by some inexorable external pressure. We are also part of the endless procession of competing diet books that send prisoners into paroxysms of guilt and ecstasy just like everyone else, sadly.

Like every isolated colony of men there's a strong contingent of sports fans in prison. And among the sports fans are the gamblers. Copies of the USA Today sports section are pored over with scientific intensity. Books about sports heroes and scandals are popular across a broad section of every prison yard. One thing a bit different about a prison, due to the irrational limitations imposed during the past decades of "get tough" policies, is the lack of good, up-to-date information. Consequently, three-year old almanacs are considered treasures.

There is a smallish group of serious, literary readers who trade amongst themselves their personal copies of both the classics and newer, highbrow writing. For these guys, not unlike the seriously religious, books have a totemic, magical quality that demands at least a symbolic genuflection. The sacred objects of this cult are passed around in unmarked bags with strict instructions not to dog-ear the pages.

And, of course, perhaps the most fervent grouping is the readers of left-wing political books written by the usual suspects out of the various, mostly under funded institutes in New York and Washington, D.C. Among this group are the racial and ethnic focused, the anti-political establishment types, the modern socialists and communists, and the intellectual lefties. It's not hard to understand how a group thoroughly disempowered and disenfranchised, not to mention routinely vilified in the mainstream media, would turn to the alternative press for succor.

In my 30+ years of imprisonment, I've worked my way through all of these groups, with the exception of the fantasy gang. Like most all prisoners, I set out looking for answers to the "big" questions through all the different sects and philosophies, learning a lot about the world and myself along the way. I read a substantial percentage of the canon of great literature, and I've read more than my share of eviscerations of the ruling class. To this day, I can't write notes inside a book or otherwise deface it because I don't want the experience of it to be diminished for the next guy.

But I don't read a lot of books anymore, either. I've become a magazine reader on account of the oddly busy nature of my life now. Probably a lot like the folks reading this blog, the demands on my time are constant. Consequently, I've traded breadth for depth. It's a choice I regret, but one that has been forced by necessity.

Still, on one corner of my desk, in a prominent spot I can't fail to see every day, is a pile of books I intend to read. In here, like out there I think, what books you've read lately is a kind of cultural Rorschach test that determines what crew you belong to, what you stand for and believe in.

Even though I don't have the time to read all the books I'd like to read, and even though I've settled for magazines, my love and respect for books hasn't diminished. Franz Kafka wrote, "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us." Only a book could have an edge sharp enough and strong enough to be an axe.

Books & More From Kenneth Hartman
