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Reading In Prison: Ten Books; No Hard Covers

People send me books all the time. They read articles I've published and assume I would enjoy something else to read. In this age of instantaneous, one-click online shopping, it's easy. And fun, I suppose.

What folks don't know is I'm restricted to ten books, no hard covers.

"Okay Hartman, you've got three books in this order, and I'm going to have to cut the covers off all of them." The property guard looks unhappy about his duties. I'm a regular customer, and he seems genuinely relieved when the latest Amazon box turns out to be soft backs only.

"What's the count now?," he asks, already knowing I'm maxed out. I rustle up the necessary turn-in volumes, one for one, so I ostensibly have only ten, total.

Back when I first came to prison there were no such limitations on books. I can remember one old convict with a complete set of the Encyclopedia Britannica in his cell. He told me he was reading his way through every volume. And those foot-thick unabridged dictionaries found in libraries held a place of honor on a lot of handmade shelves, easily seen through cell bars.

But the Age of Restrictions came into the prison systems in the late '80s. College programs were de-funded to the applause of "get tough" pundits and politicians across the country. The race to show how tough things could get picked up steam quickly. Striped uniforms returned, as bizarre as that still seems. Chain gangs reappeared on the sides of rural highways.

In an atmosphere as poisoned as the criminal justice world, the restrictions that made any sense at all ran out fast.

Somewhere along the way, hardcover books were deemed potentially dangerous. A prisoner could hide a shank in the spine of the binding, or the book itself could be used as a club to bash someone on the head. This was the first restriction applied to books.

It should come as no surprise that some prisoners are well versed in the law, usually learned studying enormously expensive, very thick, and invariably hardbound law books. A flurry of lawsuits and injunctions later

and the courts elected to defer to the wisdom of prison officials, the new doctrine of the times, and allowed the banishing of hard covered books.

The result of this is the dumbing down of prisoners. Fewer in here are making a life study of any arcane intellectual subjects. Those books are always hard covered. Plus, the new warders don't appreciate "intellectual" prisoners to a degree hard to overstate.

Restrictions easily morph into arbitrary numbers, so someone in the vast prison nomenclatura decided that ten books was the right number. I think it had something to do with the obsession to limit everything we can own. The latest "Authorized Personal Property Schedule" is multiple pages long and details how many envelopes I may order per quarter. (It's 40, for the record.) Several states are now implementing rules that will allow prisoners to only send and receive postcards.

Ten books, no hard covers, is a manifestation of the peculiar mania that overcomes otherwise rational people when they are imbued with deity-like powers over a disempowered, disfavored group of "others." It's not a new phenomenon. In fact, it's as old as civilization.

The reason I know this unpleasant truth about my fellow humans is that I came to prison before the irrational restrictions, before the dismantling of college, and before the War on Prisoners' Rights was declared, fought, and ended in a rout of commonsense. In prison libraries back then could be found the collected works of William Shakespeare alongside the other classics of literature. (I had to get on a waiting list to enjoy the great bard back at Folsom State Prison.) A respectable prisoner was expected to read several books, good books, a month. Prison libraries, what's left of them now, are rows and rows of juvenile fantasies, romances, and genre-fiction of the lowest common denominator. History and philosophy are rarely discussed on the yard these days.

Ten books, no hard covers, is emblematic of the bigger problems in prison -- problems generated by a full quarter of a century of ever more punitive, and ultimately pointless, restrictions, which purchased the worst recidivism rates in modern history and higher incarceration rates than anywhere else in the world.

I think society would want to encourage that prisoner reading his way through a set of encyclopedias, even if they have hard covers, even if there's more than ten of them.

If you're interested in reading more about the realities of living in maximum-security prisons, inside hard covers no less, read my new memoir "Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars", published by Atlas & Co.