

**Voices Struggle To Escape Our Nations Jails:  
Challenges Face Inmates Crafting Books Behind Bars**

**By  
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**According** to the Supreme Court recently, thirteen million people will pass through our nation's jails and prisons each year. Currently six million bloat our nation's prisons. So what has become of prison writers? Where is the compelling jailhouse literature which should be flowing from these angst ridden places?

Prison has traditionally turned out some of the most formidable works of literary art, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Alexander Solzhenitsyn spring to mind instantly. Today, the United States has under lock and key more people than Stalin; so where is our *Gulag Archipelago*? Where's our *House of the Dead*?

These islands of social welfare seek to warehouse bodies, not permit voices to speak out. Prisons and jails are guarded places on many levels. Remote steel and cinderblock institutions designed to contain and control – voices may not escape. Voices that raise alarms of cruel conditions or reprehensible operations are carefully locked away tightly.

Overcrowded conditions have become an administrative battle cry; a mantra for taking programs and privileges. At the time of this writing, here in the Norfolk County Correctional Center, eight hundred bodies strain an infrastructure designed for half as many. Safety and security concerns trump any hope for rehabilitation opportunities.

There is no law library in this facility. A general library is permitted but once a week – when available – then for only an hour and a half.

Sadly, jailors and prison officials have become emboldened by too many court rulings favoring these autonomous institutions. A recent Supreme Court decision concerning strip searches, for example, has given a pass to correctional facilities: courts may not “second-guess” jail administrators with regard to care and operation of these sprawling behemoths.

Writing from a modern correctional facility is frustrating, yet when allowed it offers a unique opportunity to focus on the essentials of story. Elements of plot, character development and complex themes may develop because there’s little else to do but write. No distractions like rent or making a car payment which many authors must contend with; nothing but urgency exists in prison writing – an urgency to cut to the bone of a story. Writing may be fearless, untamed – wide open – all because it’s done within a pressure cooker. Make no mistake, corrections officials may take away the pen and paper at any time. And so prison writing must be quick, insistent – most of all – well planned.

During my time here in Norfolk County Jail, known simply as Dedham House of Detention or Dedham Jail; I crafted a literary novel called *Run Charlie Run* which has met with some administrative ambivalence. *Run Charlie Run*’s a politically topical psychological thriller. An angry virus of a book that uses prison as a metaphor, its central character’s a fugitive created to develop an idea our nation has become fugitive from its own guiding principles.

As prison officials slowly became aware of my jailhouse project it was initially dismissed as a futile tapping away on a computer in this jails education department. Although, once it became known this inmate could string words into a sentence and pages became chapters and chapters became a book of many thousands of words;

suddenly something sinister occurred: the class became more difficult to get to. The program supervisor began taking many days off. Issues seemed to present themselves that limited or effectively prohibited any participation entirely.

Writing in jail – in gladiator school – is fraught with distractions. These are bleak institutions given to heart wrenching disappointment. Crafting a book in a jail develops intensity, an authentic patina no other place could otherwise provide. Characters pop with rectitude. Attention is focused and profound insights are allowed to moil without distraction – but for the usual jailhouse crisis of living in common.

Planning for a book written behind bars must include an escape plan. Not much has changed from the days when Solzhenitsyn was forced to spirit away bits and pieces of his Nobel Prize winning work.

At Chino Prison, for example, a notoriously poorly run men's penal colony in California I lost a three hundred page handwritten manuscript during a riot. A riot erupted – a fight over a slight – in a cage: a forty man dormitory. Inmates were pepper sprayed. Property was tossed. My manuscript of carefully folded chapters was thrown into the garbage; that memory will forever remain an open wound, a reminder to always mail work out of the institution as soon as possible.

A pen and paper can be as dangerous as a shank in most modern correctional facilities. Benjamin Disraeli said: "desperation is sometimes as powerful an inspirer as genius." And the prison industrial complex in America has become an entrenched special interest of unimagined power and influence.

As I continue writing I can say, for the moment, Massachusetts is a commonwealth which does not muzzle creative writing. There is no Son of Sam law

which prohibits prisoners from publishing and profiting from their works – so far.

Whether my novel Run Charlie Run finds a publisher remains a hopeful dream. Siberia for most jailhouse writers is that cold road from manuscript to press.

Today six million languish in our nation's prisons. A chilling number with strong symbolic associations; a number closely associated with those dead at the hands of fascist Germany's final solution. Even then, voices escaped – voices telling of horror. Are conditions in America's prisons so splendid there are no tales to be told? Perhaps maybe publishers and the public are afraid of what they may hear.

Simply put, when a literary agent or publisher receives any written material from an incarcerated writer it must be their duty to carefully read it. A work desperately sent from a correctional facility – a jail – a prison is essential to read.

Vaclav Havel and Nelson Mandela both wrote and published from their jail cells – both became leaders of their respective nations.

Technology is moving publishing into a whole new business model. It is fundamental agents and publishers remember prisoners behind steel doors do not have e-mail. What incarcerated writers have is an authentic voice: a view from inside.

All material sent from one of these sterile places' is a cry for help from a voice afraid. Afraid for the way things are and the way things are moving in these forbidden isolated institutions in a nation where thirteen million will pass each year.

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