

The Book Saga
Eric Pepke 25 February 2019

My efforts to make contact with the outside world have not been very successful. Not one letter I sent the press has elicited a response, though one relatively obscure newsletter did publish my press release (more or less). I have received responses from only one author and only one academic. Organizations have been somewhat better; about 10% respond, and nearly 5% do so in such a way as to indicate that they read my letter. Organizations that offer free subscriptions tend to do so maybe 75% of the time. (All seem to be left of center, curious considering the preponderance of those on the right in prison. The Cato Institute did send me a nice pocket constitution I use to settle arguments in the mess hall.) But the best of all are programs that offer free books to prisoners.

I have written about a dozen of these, all the ones who cover my prison whose addresses I have been able to find. All are excellent.

There are some variations, but in main, they send donated books to prisoners based on requests by subject. Very occasionally, they might be able to send books by a particular author. I usually list books and authors anyway to give some idea of what I like. Some of these programs have shown paranormal-seeming perspicacity, choosing books for me that are better than I could have possibly chosen myself.

Many of these programs ask for letters, explaining what we recipients find valuable. This is something I like, but it also scares me.

I have done a fair amount of volunteer work and have engaged in various attempts to do what I can to improve the world, the thing Jews call "tikkun olam." I think I can get into the mind of someone who volunteers for such a job. I know how depressing it is to feel that one's effort is utterly pointless. In fact, I may know it too well, for reasons I describe in other sagas.

Every time I receive a shipment of books, though, it pushes against this ponderously oppressive and depressing force. The books are nice, sure, but more important by far is that it give me a feeling that somebody, in choosing a book for me, has thought of me as a human being. This does not quite make me feel human, but it does remind me that I once believed that I was. Absurd though it may be, I need that feeling in order to continue to work and fight, to maintain the illusion that it matters.

I especially enjoy the two or three lines the volunteers write whenever there is a receipt (which is not always, and there have been a couple of shipments the origin of which I cannot even guess). One recently even wrote that my letter was "inspiring." I cannot believe it was, as I think that everything I write is necessarily grim and depressing, but it is valuable to hear this. It does have a positive effect, and it is all the more precious because it happens so seldom.

It is only right that I try to return the favor as well as I can.

What scares me is that then they say they can show the letters to donors. How can I possibly know what donors want to see? I imagine that donors want to feel good about donating, something I

have always mistrusted. I think that there are lots of people giving money to organizations that spend most of it on administration, internal politics, or ads that don't do a lot but encourage more donation. People say, "put your money where your mouth is," but I think that sometimes reality calls for putting your effort into the problem, and money too easily becomes a substitute.

I also don't know if I am the kind of person donors want to encourage. Often I feel that people want and are willing to pay for stories from and about prisoners that serve their imaginings and not the needs of prisoners or a just world. I think people want to feel safe, and the kinds of things I have to say will make them feel extremely unsafe indeed. I have to tell stories of a system that is dangerously out of control and works for the most part against justice. That is extremely discomfiting, and I think that a lot of people spend money to avoid discomfiture, believing that what they don't know can't hurt them, whereas of course that is the way to be hurt the most.

At the same time, what these book programs do is very good. The center of the activity is distributing books, and that takes money. Sure, what I value is the human contact more than the dead trees smeared with dirt, but the latter appears to be a necessary factor, at least until I can get out of here and meet new people, or a miracle happens and some people decide to write me. So maybe publishing here might encourage some people with little risk of perturbing others.

It also occurs to me that putting this information out on the APWA to an audience of scholars and the general public might serve a purpose of increasing awareness of what it is like to be a (political) prisoner, which may have value beyond one or two particular book programs' search for funding. It also might raise awareness that these good people are out there. I was pretty conscientious when I was a political writer, but I was completely unaware that these programs existed, let alone that they could provide such a vital human contact.

As a result, in this saga I am going to write about several of the books I have received in prison from these wonderful people, what they have meant to me, and how they have influenced my thinking. If they inspire someone to give money to one of these programs or, far better, volunteer for or especially start new ones, so much the better.

The Origins of Totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt

I had been studying a copy of this belonging to "Coop," a friend and fellow prisoner. Then a book program, showing their characteristic serendipity, sent me a copy out of the blue. It is about the Nazi and Soviet forms of totalitarianism, pre-eminent when it was written. I find the later chapters, about totalitarian mind-control and various gulags and camps, most interesting and useful, as they apply so staggeringly well here.

People are often criticized for comparing Nazi Germany to the present-day United States. This includes President Obama. In late 2018, I saw snippets of a speech of his trying to get out the vote using an object lesson. CNN talking heads immediately said he was being unreasonable, and aren't they the experts?

Nevertheless, the parallels are obvious, including that defensive denial. It Can't Happen Here®, so it does. I don't know what comparison people used to call undreasonable. It was eclipsed and forgotten when Hitler overachieved and made the Holocaust the new archetype.

Although the federal system is so political and removed from any need to solve actual crimes than any state's, and Petersburg seems to be where they send people who do not belong in prison, most prisoners--perhaps as many as 80%--are, in fact, guilty. I deeply envy them. As Arendt wrote,

The amalgamation of criminals with all other categories has moreover the advantage of making it shockingly evident to all other arrivals, that they have landed on the lowest level of society. It soon turns out, to be sure, that they have every reason to envy the lowest thief and murderer.... The criminals, everywhere, constitute the aristocracy of the camps.

The guilty usually have plenty of support and money from the outside, probably from those afraid of being ratted out. The criminals have drugs and cell phones imported, and they run the gambling rings that define the inside economy. They even have a pseudo-manly pride in admitting their guilt. Moreover, they have a security and equanimity that political prisoners do not:

Criminals do not properly belong in the concentration camps if only because it is harder to kill the juridical person in a man who is guilty of some crime than in a totally innocent person.

Criminals can believe in justice. They may feel punishment is excessive, but qualitatively, they can accept it as just.

I desperately want to believe in justice, but I cannot. I know there is no justice, nor just intent. As another prisoner once said in the Resource Room, once the feds target you, it's over, for the rest of your life. They'll make something up if they have to. Nobody wants even to slow them down, not the courts or the legislature or the press.

No statistics can possibly negate this fundamental defect. If most convicts are guilty, then it is little more than luck (combined with vague and overbroad laws), not due to due process or a sense of justice, which does not exist at any level.

Rise of the Warrior Cop by Radley Balko

This is one of the three essential books to read to understand the wholesale abnegation of justice in the United States. The other two are Three Felonies a Day: How the Feds Target the Innocent by Harvey A. Silverglate and The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander.

Balko's book is a perfect example of the nearly paranormal perspicacity these book programs seem to exhibit. It has been perhaps more helpful to me, both in terms of information and inspiration, than any other book I have read.

It is just jam-packed with history and citations to cases. There are eleven law library computers, slightly fewer than one per hundred prisoner. Yet I have only once seen every one of them in use. As I sit here only two are in use, one by the law clerk. Only a tiny minority of prisoners ever even consider reading law, but I spend a lot of time, and case law is about all I can look up. I have learned a lot thanks to Balko.

It inspired an outline for a book to be called The Fall and Rise of the American Police State. It's essentially a history of the past half century told through Supreme Court cases. I probably won't write it until much later, if I survive.

This book even informed my case. Although I was convicted at the federal level, I was arrested by Gardner and Cary cops. There are a lot of aspects that cannot easily be explained without the hypothesis that the original decision to target me was political at the federal level, and North Carolina was used as a proxy. The Cary cops are particularly hard to explain, as Cary was a bit distant. But Balko wrote

In March 2007, a small army of local cops, ATF agents, National Guard troops, and a helicopter raided a poker game in Cary, North Carolina. They issued forty-one citations, all of the misdemeanors. A columnist at the Fayetteville Observer remarked, "They were there to play cards, not to foment rebellion.... [I] wonder... what other minutiae, personal vices and petty crimes are occupying [the National Guard's] time, and where they're occupying it.... Until we get this sorted out, better not jaywalk. There could be a military helicopter overhead."

This suggests an incestuously close relationship between the federal government and Cary that could explain a lot of otherwise inexplicable aspects of my case.

Of course, I wrote The Fayetteville Observer requesting a reprint or more information. Also of course, they completely ignored me, as have all mainstream newspapers.

This is how things have gotten as bad as Balko describes, and as I have directly experienced. Nobody cares about justice.

Still, I photocopied pages 282 and 283 and submitted them as exhibits with my \$2255. There is not a high probability my case will turn on it, but I wanted to get it into court and the public record.

Without prison book programs, I wouldn't even have that much. But how could they have known?

Hogfather by Terry Pratchett

I guess I must have mentioned Terry Pratchett in one of my letters, because my favorite book program sent me a mass market paperback edition of Hogfather, a Discworld novel by him.

This prison is a Pratchett-deprived zone. The "leisure" library has a few of his books, but not many. Most of them are his early works, which I find less multifaceted. His later books have more of the deep seriousness that underlies the best humor.

There is a small inter-library program here. It involves, according to what the staff has said, seven regional libraries. It has only been active about half the time I have been in prison. Like everything else, it depends on who, if anybody, runs it. At present it is run by one of the three or four helpful staff, but it still is not very good.

The prison library does not stock any Virginia law books. This is a problem, as the most common way to sue the government for prison conditions is under the FTCA, based on the laws of the location of the prison. It is difficult to impossible to prosecute such a lawsuit without the relevant laws.

Although case law says prisoners have a right to obtain law books from local libraries, they are not available. Nor, of course, is there any way to look books up. The only way to obtain a book is to submit the title and author and wait a month.

I have tried to get Pratchett's Small Gods, the last word on dogmatic religions. It seems none of the local libraries has it. So, Hogfather was a real treat; I inhaled it one afternoon.

Besides the fun, Pratchett is always good for some serious mythology and psychology. This time the gem was about Susan Sto-Helit, daughter of Death's adopted daughter, who as a governess solves the problem of monsters under the bed and in the closet by whacking them with a fireplace poker:

And Susan was bright enough to know that the phrase "someone ought to do something" was not, by itself, a helpful one. People who used it never added the rider "and that someone is me." But someone ought to do something, and right now the whole pool of someones consisted of her, and no one else.

That is how I feel pretty much of the time. Someone ought to do something about the wholesale abnegation of any kind or sense of justice in the United States. I am the only someone here.

I do not know how to do it. My attempts to do anything in the past only got me targeted and destroyed. Nothing I can do can ever help or heal me at all; there can be no redemption story. Nor do I have any reason to believe anybody of any significance wants liberty or justice to exist in the United States.

I know something ought to be done. I know people have tried, and it hasn't worked. I feel I have to try if it kills what little is left of me.

I do not think I am so special, but none of the many books by prisoners I have read brings the detail, data, and analysis I think I can, if I survive. It may be futile, but I must try.

I hate feeling this way, but I see no choice.

Pocket and Compact German Dictionaries by Langenscheidt

When I first got to prison, I met a guy who spoke German. He had learned while in the military in Germany. I had learned German back in the 1980s, then taught it, and then spent a few decades forgetting it.

We decided that it would be a good idea to meet regularly to practice. I thought it might be nice to start a group that anyone could join, a kind of Stammtisch. I asked one of the education staff if we could advertise. She said not, explaining that it would be considered a gang activity. I couldn't figure out just what kind of gang a Jew and an African-American speaking German would make, but never mind. We met every Saturday at the picnic table nestled in the corner behind the gym.

We wanted to have a German/English dictionary for the words neither of us could remember, but neither of us had the wherewithal to order one. The prison "leisure" library does have a seven-language dictionary, and one of the languages is German. However, it counts as a reference book and cannot be borrowed.

After I became aware of book programs, I wrote one, asking for a German/English dictionary and stating that Langenscheidt's were good. Sure enough, I soon received a package containing a pocket dictionary with the famous yellow plastic cover.

Then I looked closer and noticed that, inside the covers, it was all English. It was, in fact, a Webster's pocket dictionary. I still have no idea why Langenscheidt put out a Webster's English dictionary with a Langenscheidt cover, but again, never mind.

I already had several English dictionaries. One is an 8½ by 11 by 4 tome discarded from the library, which has some missing pages but is mostly good. At the other end is something called A Student's Dictionary. I don't really need that to look up words, but it has a minimal conversationally sufficient subset I wanted to use for cognitive linguistic analysis. Unfortunately, it was sent to me by an ex-friend who then betrayed me, so it carries painful memories I find difficult to overcome.

In any event, I did not need another English dictionary, but it's not as if I could return it, and I thought it would be rude to write pointing out the error. I had to wait several months before requesting new books anyway. In the mean time, my friend disappeared one day. I hope his lawyer-fu managed to get him released, but I guess I'll never know. One unpleasant fact of prison is that people just disappear, never to be heard from again.

I forgot about this for a couple of years, but I kept running across text in German that I couldn't quite translate. So, a few months ago, I wrote two of the book programs asking for German/English dictionaries. I received two, both Langenscheidt's.

One is a pocket dictionary, with the plastic cover, and the other a compact, with a paper yellow cover. The sets of words seemed to be very different. So now I have the ability to look up German words almost as well as I can look up English words. If anyone else who speaks German shows up, I'll be ready.

(As I was typing this, my friend "Coop" asked me what "Tischgesellschaft" meant. Now I can be sure!)

We the People Legal Primer by David Furlani

Most book programs only send donated books. The Lucy Parsons Bookstore also publishes one of its own. This 80-page booklet is an excellent introduction to American law and more. It starts with the Constitution, but the real value is in the rest.

The history sections can only barely scratch the surface, but although brief, they told me things I did not know.

The Dictionaries (Legal Words and Phrases, Abbreviations and Symbols, and Latin Words and Phrases) are extremely useful. We have legal dictionaries, of course, but the Black's is often locked up, and the one on the computer is nearly unusable. There is a delicate sweet spot for definitions, neither too complex nor too simple to be useful. Few dictionaries hit it as well.

The quotations are excellent. It has some case law I didn't know, but it is more useful for writers looking for pith such as me. Here are a couple of doozies:

A strict observance of the written laws is doubtless one of the highest duties of a good citizen, but it is not the highest. The laws of necessity, of self preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of a higher obligation.... To lose a country by a scrupulous adherence to written law would be to lose the law itself, with life, liberty, property and all those who are enjoying them with us; thus absurdly sacrificing the ends to the meant.--Thomas Jefferson

The more you explain it, the more I don't understand it.--
Mark Twain

The most surprisingly useful for me has been the section on Forms of Address and Salutations. I had seen many of these and had been mostly just amused by them.

As prisoners, we often have to write people like senators and judges who demand honorifics in inverse relation to their honor. Now that I really needed such a guide, I could not find one. None of the librarians or law clerks were able to help me. It was even a struggle to explain that by "form of address" I didn't mean a house or box number but whom to call "Lord God King Bufu." The primer at least showed me that I had guessed right and will ensure that I make no mistakes in the future.

The Lucy Parsons Prison Book Program would be at the top of the heap for its book selections only. Also publishing something so useful catapults them into the top echelon of all organizations, right up there with the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Lawyers Guild.

Despite my obviously having been interested in justice enough to incur the wrath of the government, I never knew these splendid organizations existed before my imprisonment. I only knew of organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International, which I have found unhelpful. I cannot console myself by saying I was probably like most Americans in my ignorance. As archy (Don Marquis) wrote, that is only an explanation; it is not an excuse.

Now I know better, and I hope others can learn from me.

We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families by Philip Gourevitch

This oddly titled book is about the Rwandan genocide(s) of the 1990s. I asked for books critical of the United States, and they sent this (and others). It has plenty of criticisms, but it is not as if the 1990s were lacking in reasons (COPS, AEDPA, PLRA, etc.) Better are insights into atrocity, aversion, and apathy.

My friend "Coop" said it must be horrifying. It is, but probably not how people think. The genocide seems to have been wholly pointless. The ethnic differences were hardly visible even to Rwandans. Calipers on nose justified ID stamps, which could be changed with a bribe. There were no major differences in religion, language, or culture, nor obvious material incentive. Nor was it a mad mechanized horror:

It has become a commonplace in the past fifty years to say that the industrialized killing of the Holocaust calls into question the notion of human progress, since art and science can lead straight through the famous gate--stamped with the words "Work Makes you Free"--to Auschwitz. Without all that technology, the argument goes, the Germans couldn't have killed all those Jews. Yet it was the Germans, not the machinery, who did the killing. Rwanda's Hutu Power leaders understood this perfectly. If you could swing the people who would swing the machetes, technological underdevelopment was no obstacle to genocide. The people were the weapon, and that meant everybody: the entire Hutu population had to kill the entire Tutsi population.

And so they did. Who knows who the Hutu leaders exactly were in the decapitated state? The radio station said to cut down the "tall trees," and people obliged, at three times the Nazi rate.

"But what if this system of communal obligation is turned on its head, so that murder and rape become the rule? What if innocence becomes a crime and the person who protects his neighbor is counted an 'accomplice'?"

Why do Americans seem not at all concerned with what their government is becoming? They could restore justice if a significant minority were to use the tools of democracy and speak out in numbers. Yet my experience with trying to reach the press is that nobody can or will even write a letter back.

There must have been a first time a Rwandan hacked another to death with a machete, or a Nazi tortured someone like me into pleading guilty to a bogus charge. Nobody thought it was important enough for comment, so why take even a tiny risk? Thus it grew, and when it became obvious, it was too big to fight.

I cannot fault the press for fear being tortured into prison, as I was. Yet they don't admit to such fear.

Perhaps they use apathy and aversion to distract from fear. Yet it is still successful intimidation, leading to an increase in arbitrary and lawless state action without limit. This is far more important than anything that happens to me.

I do not know how to fight this, but I have to try.