

# Review:

## *Don't Shake the Spoon*

By Exchange for Change (Ben Bogart, editor)

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In her essay “All I Have, a Lament and a Boast: Why Prisoners Write,” Bell Gale Chevigny (2005) laments, “neither they [the prisoners] nor society were as susceptible to change as I’d dreamed” (246). Yet, like the PEN Prison Writing Program, other programs have also begun to reach out a hand, with notebook and pencil, to those inside prison walls and encourage them to write. *Don't Shake the Spoon* is the product of one such program, Exchange for Change, conducted within the Miami-Dade county prison system. “We wanted to create a theme for this first volume that would center our writers on the notion of transformation that was important to our program,” recalls editor Ben Bogart (2018) in his introduction, “So our first call went out for works that addressed, simply enough, ‘change’” (4). Some writers focused on changes within themselves, while others aimed to change the society outside their walls. Some writers detailed how their experiences have changed their perceptions, and some wrote with the

hope to change the prison system itself. Such change is a visible thread stitching each story within the collection into a community of voices. This community building is the goal of *Exchange for Change*, and this collection of stories demonstrates the way in which writing has the ability to bring people inside and outside the prison system together in pursuit of enacting change.

In “The Me Who Is Change,” Roderick Richardson explores the arduous process of personal transformation. “Change starts as a seed,” he writes; from an impoverished youth to “a fully-devoted oak tree,” Richardson acknowledges the constant evolution of life (19). Throughout the piece, he grapples with a variety of concepts that one must embrace during the process of change. Still, he recognizes the struggle to remain intact during intense waves of change. By highlighting how change can manifest through forgiveness, love, hope, compassion, endurance, and personal reflection, Richardson evokes the relatable struggle of facilitating change in one’s life. However, he warns, “without change, a person can die and still be alive—a walking zombie with no emotional feelings on the inside.” Overall, he embodies and craves change. For him, “change is wishing for change” (21).

The authors of the selected texts employ evocative personal narratives that bring serious attention to the social injustice, loss, discrimination, and rejection that incarcerated people suffer in our societies. In “Change: The Power of its Momentum,” Waldo Hewitt calls for societies and cultures to open up to all peoples and be dynamic by promoting the spirit of togetherness, equality, love, and peace that foster positive development of humanity. He sees change to be contingent on the society’s ability to rid of cultural and societal norms that breed hate and war (50). The theme of society as an agent of change is heightened in Luis Aracena’s “The Show.” As he reflects on the essence of the “5000 Role Models” program, Aracena calls on the reader to witness how the younger generation that lacks guidance and counselling—“redemptive H.O.P.E.”—from elders end up making “poor choices” (81) that lead them to prison. He further reminds the reader that the society is responsible for molding the younger generation into useful members, but they seem to have reneged on their duty. Aracena uses biblical allusion and irony to

satirize the society that demonizes the incarcerated and to motivate himself and others in his situation to embrace change by taking up the responsibility that the adults in the society have failed to perform. He finds it self-fulfilling to be one of “the demons that are giving advice to angels in how to avoid coming to hell .... cheating Satan by depopulating Hades” (82).

Aracena’s work appears several times throughout the collection, and each piece maintains a similar theme even as he shifts focus from societal change to personal change to change within the criminal justice system. In “Greater,” he discusses prisoners’ pursuit of positive changes with the limited means and opportunities behind bars, promoting the creative instruction and support provided by Exchange for Change workshops. Aracena describes changes in his own perspective on fellow inmates following his participation in the writing program, seeing creative potential rather than threat potential, and also suggests that these workshops allow prisoners to “enlighten and educate the public, and at the same time introduce positive change into the penal system” (94), demonstrating just some of the potential benefits of this type of prisoner education (for inmates themselves and for the outside world).

In Francois Richardson’s “The Parallels of Change,” education again comes into play; using an extended analogy of President Barack Obama as “Mr. Change,” leader of a politician superhero team, he notes Obama’s influence on the popularity and connotations of the word “change” and outlines several accomplishments of the administration, comparing detractors’ refusal to acknowledge the evidence of these victories to “the disbelief that most of society holds about change in prisoners” (29). Noting the inevitability of change and the necessity of making it progressive, Richardson calls directly upon departments of corrections to help prisoners make positive personal changes by making the systemic change of compulsory prisoner education. Together, these pieces shed light on how certain changes in the criminal justice system—namely, educational opportunities of some type—can help inmates develop as individuals, thereby shifting societal expectations of prisoners and their ability to be rehabilitated.

This overarching theme also appears in Christopher Malec's "Sandwich Crusts." Malec weaves a nonlinear narrative between his time in prison, his youth, his negotiation of young adulthood, and the liminal places where navigating a systematic tightrope with no net beneath renders him. The nonlinear structure deftly transitions a reader between a larger cultural narrative and Malec's personal experience moving through the injustices of incarceration systems. He evokes the ability of language and narrative to offer migration to a person's perspectives across borders, to pull a person into the lived details of reprieve, distrust, somnambulance, and the systems that work to position a person there.

Like the title piece, "Don't Shake the Spoon," Malec's narrative arcs around the sustaining force of having food amid questions of whether its presence is secure or tenuous. When Malec is five or six, he discerns that biting around each side of a sandwich will incentivize other kids not to ask him to share his lunch. As he grows older, the habit remains, but the reason behind it alters; biting the crusts becomes "an homage to a reprieve once savored in the midst of a bitter experience; the one part of the memory's palette that remained numb as you chewed the present into a swallowed past" (68). Biting the outer edges of sandwich crusts links the dimensions of Malec's past and present transformations of perspective. Through immersive, often prose-like imagery, he seems to offer readers perspective into what it means to have the respite of food among such insecurity and what it means to want to share a bite of a sandwich with another. In doing so, he poses a larger question about whether change might be enacted to offer a net—or a bite—to those marginalized by U.S. systematic structures of oppression.

The stories contained within *Don't Shake the Spoon* speak to both the change the authors have witnessed in their own lives and change they hope to create. In the introduction, we, as the audience, are called to consider what role we play, and this question permeates nearly every piece in the text in the hope that, much like the workshops these authors participate in, the pieces will "enlighten and educate the public" (94). These authors do not allow us to simply observe their writing; we are asked to become part of the change that they discuss. This engagement is exactly why the collection is so powerful. Though

each piece may be read individually, reading the pieces together is valuable because these authors are writing to bridge a gap between their community and the non-incarcerated. Exchange for Change exists to foster relationships between two very different communities, and this collection allows an opportunity to look through different lenses and think about how one might position themselves.

*Don't Shake the Spoon* carves out space for new voices to add to the ongoing conversation about prison literature and writing, allowing those with experience in prison to directly involve their ideas. Exchange for Change has carefully selected and organized their initial publication with pieces that reflection their mission. *Don't Shake the Spoon* is a testament to the creativity and endurance of the human spirit.

## WORKS CITED

- Bogart, Ben, ed. 2018. *Don't Shake the Spoon*, vol 1. Exchange for Change.
- Chevigny, Bell. 2005. "All I have, a Lament and a Boast: Why Prisoners Write." In *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*, edited by D. Quentin Miller, 246-271. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.