

Review:

Feeding the Roots of Self-Expression and Freedom

By Jimmy Santiago Baca, with Kym Sheehan and Denise VanBriggle

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As the founder of Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, I go into Indiana correctional facilities each week to facilitate a creative writing workshop. The workshop, I would argue, allows my students to experience a therapeutic avenue for expression. **Writing** can encourage us to explore our emotional states and can cultivate more critical self-awareness and critical thinking. Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Feeding the Roots of Self-Expression and Freedom* is an inspiring curriculum-based collection of lesson plans designed to build confidence. It mirrors my own work with incarcerated students because Baca was once incarcerated and draws upon his own experiences and insights to educate and empower those who are confined. He uses his experience as a foundation for self-awareness and reflection. The approach of using poems from Baca's incarceration as a young man, along with curricular activities that include prompts on new ways of looking at things, are helpful to me as a creative writing instructor.

Specifically, his probing questions, such as “What does the word “home” mean to you?” help students remember fond memories, write from their heart, and provide opportunities for healing. Through leading the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, I’ve witnessed that creative writing is important to self-growth. It is also a positive outlet to allow one’s imagination to roam free.

Feeding the Roots consists of poetry and lesson plans. The book is broken up into four phases, as opposed to chapters, which include: “Dehumanization Process,” “Journeying Inward,” “Illuminating Outward,” and “Rehumanization Process.” Each phase is unique and allows the reader to view life differently. For example, in the “Illuminating Outward” section, there is a poem about what Baca sees in prison. He writes, “In prison the steel doors of my soul crack, crank open, and sunshine floods through down in pin thin light into the darkness of my heart, in over-pouring beauty, across the cement floor of my believes, across the steel screens guarding my dreams.” This passage not only gives the reader a glimpse of what lies beyond the walls of a prison but offers hope for the future. Beyond the sheer and raw beauty of Baca’s poetry, *Feeding the Roots* deftly presents the journey of a writer’s development through a framework that includes these four phases.

Further, the section on “Journeying Inward” is parallel to the ideology of a “hero’s journey,” wherein a hero goes on an adventure and in a decisive crisis, wins a victory and then comes home changed or transformed. This section of the book resonated with me in that it encourages the reader to explore his or her trials and tribulations as I frequently do through assignments provided to incarcerated students in my creative writing workshops. I enjoyed many of Baca’s prompts including “Write your own poem about confusion” and “How does hatred develop?”

My incarcerated students explore, take ownership of, and ultimately destroy the notions of a previous self, or how one was before becoming incarcerated, which are just the elements that Baca delves into. In life, it is important to analyze the “self” to better understand what feeds into the actions that oftentimes lead to imprisonment. Doing

so, I believe, can help those who are incarcerated gain stronger inner-awareness and confidence in their ability to self-express.

Baca's exercises encourage movements of growth and shifts in thinking and reinforce the underlying theme and core of the book, which is centered on rebuilding of a "self." The book uses descriptions, exercises, and sample poetry to assist instructors, like me, and students in the writing process. One of my favorite lines in the book is: "But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest; I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. This resonated with my students as they often describe feeling "free" through storytelling. The book is important to me because it emphasizes what's possible: a new life, hope, and healing. The prompts are designed to build confidence while gaining an appreciation of ideas and sensibilities about the world through literary expression. The unique voices of my students want to be heard, even stories of a trouble past, broken home, or lost childhood. We're all trying to make sense of something.

The book has provided me a wealth of resources—from the richness of the recommended reading lists to the wealth of new ideas for classroom prompts, including a look at what imagery would represent your life and cross-curricular exercises exploring the idea that social justice permeates much of today's young adult literate, contemporary fiction, and nonfiction as well as in graphic novels, varied medias, artwork, lyrics, poetry, and the news. Baca challenges readers to seek out connections that speak to you with an exercise to read a poem aloud titled "Life." Such an exercise would have otherwise taken me years to access or compile on my own. I'm so pleased to apply this new knowledge to my weekly classes at the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, and any educator who is working to help a student find his or her voice through literary expression will benefit greatly from a close review of the resources Baca and his co-authors share.

When reading the book, I could follow along on his personal journey of exploration just as my students in the creative writing workshop did. Students are focused on changing their lives and have found resiliency along the way. Baca and his co-authors delve deep into

aspects rarely addressed in the writing classroom to help students move through a greater sense of discovery through self-expression and into the world of freedom and creativity, similar to the way my students do as they heal through writing. One of my students reflected on the writing class: “We didn’t come to class to be part of a cycle. We came to learn, embrace our plights, and release our pain in a way that allowed us to be free, which was vital to incarcerated men.”

Baca and his co-authors present a strong case for how and why the process of writing can remake the soul and help reset one’s life trajectory, by developing a series of questions designed to take readers on a personal journey. It was wonderful to receive the affirmation that many of my choices and approaches in my work with incarcerated students can and will yield shared results, including an increase in self-esteem and a newfound freedom through writing. This affirmation will prove useful, if not outright inspirational, to others, from the academically trained to the impassioned volunteers who are committed to working with the incarcerated and may be seeking something beyond a set of best practices for the craft of writing and more akin to system for the successful engagement and stewardship of another’s personal growth and development. I recommend this book for anyone looking for raw and emotional experiences relatable not only to those who have been incarcerated but to anyone ready to embrace humanity.