

Book Reviews

Marking Time:

Letters from Jean Harris to Shana Alexander

Jean Harris. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991

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I am not sure if this is a review of a book, the system, or myself. I am sure that more than a decade after it was written, Jean Harris' *Marking Time* is still poignantly analogous to my life in prison. As the book makes unerringly clear, the biggest and most prevalent problem in prison is not the violence, but rather, the indifference. The days of physical cruelty may (for the most part) be gone, but the days of emotional cruelty live on.

In truth, the best review of this book has already been done—it is contained in its preface. There, in an explanation of “Shana” (Harris’ friend, to whom the letters in the book are directed), Harris says, “Both of us can find humor even in the midst of tragedy.” As indeed, one must in here, or risk becoming a tragic footnote to the system.

“Shana,” she says, “takes the blows of my anger at the meanness and stupidity that are the constant drip, drip, drip of prison.” That sentence should be enshrined with those few shining examples of *perfect* sentences written by the likes of Welty, Twain, Steinbeck and Ferber.

I, as a fellow prisoner, relate completely with Harris’ assessment of the situation: “Ninety-nine percent of what I think about, ninety-nine percent of what I cry about, has nothing to do with me intimately. It has to do with ideas and principles and other people.... The only thing positive about it for me is the opportunity to read and consider things that might have slipped by me outside while I dusted the piano. It is a reflection, of course, of my character and its flaws as well as the character and flaws of a prison system.”

Her description of the daily grind of illogical rules and the way they are applied, coupled with the sheer meanness of those (few) staff members who truly know better but choose to apply them anyway, mirrors the daily erosion of my soul. Watching a c.o. take two slice of bread from someone, only to throw it in the trash, makes my entire being bristle. They throw out excessive amounts of food every day in here, but would rather throw it out than allow a prisoner to eat it.

Marking Time descriptively captures the everyday happenings in prison and brings the reader inside to experience them for herself—more so than any other book I’ve read on the prison experience. Harris’ *Marking Time* manages to show both sides of the equation—the prisoners’ and the guards’ perspective— with-

out the usual rage of a male's point of view. Not that she doesn't vent her anger. She does! Her anger is tempered, though, and often one can even sympathize with the poor staff member, who, in truth, is also a victim of the system.

Her thesis is summed up thusly: "No one functions fully in prison. No one is required to or even allowed to. Quite the contrary, one is quickly swallowed up by the tiresome, the useless, and the absurd. To function fully is a constant battle between you and the system. To speak the truth is considered arrogance. To speak logic is to be considered a fool or at best a misfit." And therein lies the crux of the problem: to function fully—normally—in prison. Harris seems to have achieved this and written an excellent book in the process.

The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope

Drew Leder, et al. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000. Paperback \$22.95. Hardcover \$23.95.

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The *Soul Knows No Bars*, written by a philosophy professor and a group of inmates at the Maryland Penitentiary, is a book that works on a multitude of levels. If you want to understand what happens in the lives of inmates in a men's maximum-security prison, you are offered the wisdom of its resident sages. If you want to witness effective teaching and engaged learning, connecting profound ideas with deeply personal realities, just read. If you are interested in how service can work without demeaning the "recipients," you can observe it happening on the farthest fringes of social control and neglect. If you want to understand how to make writing lively and stimulating and evocative, Drew Leder's saga of philosophy professor meeting murderers, drug dealers and rapists, can help with that too.

Leder's interactive teaching is rooted in the soil of his eclectic religious perspective and his academic training in philosophy, specifically in phenomenology. Religiously, he says, "I'm a Jewish Quaker with Hindu beliefs in karma and reincarnation; I dabble in Buddhist meditation and teach at Loyola College, a Catholic school. It makes perfect sense to me . . . a believer in utilizing all avenues to the sacred" (4). Phenomenology, he explains, "seeks not so much to explain as to *describe*. . . . We discover the structure of experience when we don't presume to know it in advance" (9). The refusal to be mentally imprisoned is central to Leder's approach.

Beneath and beyond Leder's self-conscious spiritual and intellectual stance are his personal stance and style. Most notable are his willingness to deal open-