

Writing in prison isn't the same as writing outside.

I exist beneath an aggravated form of disenfranchisement behind these walls. It's a form of exclusion that's likely unfathomable to an unincarcerated writer.

I don't have a computer. No access to the Internet. Nor the ability to run an online search.

My ability to reach outside prison — in the minimal, monitored, and restricted ways I'm permitted — is limited by how much I have, or don't have, in my prison account. Phone calls cost me more than they cost an unincarcerated person. And I don't have access to a phone directory.

Letters also cost me more to mail than they cost an unincarcerated person. And the pennies I make an hour from my prison job barely keep me in soap, deodorant, and toothpaste.

I'm isolated. That is, I'm separated from society not just by the wall that encloses me within the prison, but the number of decades I've been here. Like the majority of prisoners with a long-term sentence, I was sent here when I was young. I've been in so long now that I can remember a dream I had last month better than what it was like to be outside prison. I don't have even a single unincarcerated adult memory. I know few people on the other side of that wall.

I don't have access to a historical archive. My access to public records virtually doesn't exist because I can neither request nor receive

them in electronic or digital form. The cost of physical copies is beyond my ability to pay - a copy of my own prison file would run me more than a grand. And I'm prohibited from possessing records of any prison official. If I were caught with something like that, I'd be in the Hole longer than if the guards were to catch me with a gun.

I don't often come across a newspaper. And never one less than a week old. Sometimes it's hard to find a dictionary with all its pages.

What I do have, when I budget my expenditures carefully, are a couple writing tablets. A handful of pencils I sharpen sparingly so I don't go through them too quickly. And two ballpoint pens: a black and a blue.

I also have the library which, in here, isn't what an unincarcerated writer would consider a library at all. That is, a single room of mostly beat-up, outdated, and moldering books.

Nevertheless, I've read nearly every book in the room. Like the majority of prisoners with a long-term sentence who were sent here when they were young, I entered prison uneducated. Which means, I struggled to read at first. But I kept at it - I continued to read no matter what happened around me over the years, and no matter what happened to me. In the process, I discovered treasures. That is, works by writers who inspired and motivated me - writers through whose eyes and ideas I learned that the world, and my obligation to it, is more

than I could ever have imagined when I committed my crime as a young person in survival mode on the street.

I found no shortage of books about prison and incarceration in the library. Works written by academics, attorneys, historians, journalists, as well as books and articles by current and former prison officials are all crowded onto three shelves of an outsized section. And more books are squeezed onto the shelves each year. I'm not sure if the number of books related to incarceration is because the library is in a prison, or if it reflects the inordinate role prison has come to play in the world outside the wall.

Either way, I'm conscious that there are no books about prison on the shelves written by any modern-day incarcerated writer. I know it's not the librarian's fault. She makes no secret that she disapproves. Her boss too. I suppose, because librarians know that barring the works of incarcerated writers from the shelves lessens the legitimacy and voice of works that are afforded the privilege of space on a shelf. Unfortunately, librarians aren't the ones who decide which books are allowed, and which aren't, in this library.

When I first felt the impulse to write, I was dissuaded by my lack of formal education and any model or standard of an incarcerated writer to shape my writing after. So I suppressed the urge. That is, I pushed it back down where it came

from, which is that place inside me where I keep everything I've seen and experienced inside these walls.

When the compulsion to write rose into an irrepressible tide and poured over the wall of my resistance, words began to spill out onto paper of their own accord. I couldn't have stopped them if I tried. When I saw my experience, and the experience of those around me, woven into the fabric of words, I quit worrying that I'm not supposed to know how to write. I went with it.

Comparing the words I write with the words of the writers on the shelves, I discovered my edge. An incarcerated writer who writes at any length about the institution in whose belly he exists channels an experience distinct from an unincarcerated writer. That is, I have the ability to express not just what prison looks like, but how it feels [emphasis]. Even when an unincarcerated writer is granted access to enter prison, it isn't the same because his exposure is mitigated and not without respite. He isn't subjugated by the institution in the same way I am.

I know the milieu better than anyone. I know the regimen, chaos, attrition, and every other force the institution exerts on me and those around me. I know how to navigate the underground networks of the prison, as well as the economy. I've developed strategies and relationships that enable me to move between the contentious lines of

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division into which people separate themselves inside the walls. That is, into the categories of race, gang, politics, religion, nationality, and crime — which are really just the same ways that people divide themselves outside.

Most prisoners trust me. I know that every group in the prison is cohered around a culture of oral history preserved and carried forward by the older respected members of the group. I've earned trust by listening to their stories. And because they know that my circumstance has never been any less miserable than theirs.

I take notes in a coded shorthand that only I can read. And I smuggle the notes like contraband — because that's what they are. If I'm caught with them, guards will take me to the Hole and I'll be "Validated" as a gang member in a file I'm neither allowed to see nor dispute. At some point, I might get out of the Hole. But I'll never get out of that file.

I discovered years ago that I'm not free to write what I want about prison. Not when I'm in one.

So I attempt to mask my identity, and the identity of those I write about, by couching the experience behind the facade of fiction. Although that doesn't work.

"Even though the book is fictional it is about real events that had taken place [sic] at Walla Walla."
(Excerpted from WA State DOC publication)

restriction notice of *Zek: An American Prison Story*,
(Gabalfa Press, 2016)

The people who run the prison weren't less
angry when I called the book I wrote a novel.
They know the truth of the work. And they don't
appreciate how I portray their character and
institution. The truth be damned, I guess.

My book isn't on the shelf in their library.

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