
I Work in a Prison

Michael Childress

I work in a prison. Some people refer to it as a "correctional facility." A hundred years ago the progressive leaders of an enlightened populace referred to a correctional facility as a penitentiary. Today that sounds harsh. In the 1930's big gangsters and big matinee idols called a correctional facility the "big house," inmates were called "cons," and doing time was "in stir." "Stir" was done under the considerate care of a correctional officer called a "bull." I don't know what librarians were called if they existed. Sometimes I wonder if we have a name now. I hear a few now and then, but I am not allowed to print them. Being a librarian in a prison requires ego control. Before everyone earned a degree, ego control was called "thick skin." If you work anywhere in a prison, at any job, you need thick skin. I'll tell you why.

I arrive at work at 7:00 a.m. I go to the office 30 minutes early to beat the traffic and enjoy a quiet cup of coffee. I take it black. It's really quiet at 7:00 in the morning at this prison. Breakfast is just being served to 540 close custody, gun-controlled murderers, rapists, child molesters, professional thieves, and drug pushers—all library patrons. In spite of the quiet murmurings of a slowly heating architecture being warmed up in the clear gold of a beautiful Carolina sunrise, I must not fail to remind myself that the peace is illusive. This place is dangerous. Professional trainers have informed me, nagged me, pleaded to me, and demonstrated to me many different ways that my job could get me killed or permanently injured. I have standard security procedures to obey. If I'm not careful in following them my family may end up very sad. If that sounds overdramatic, then prison work is not for you.

At precisely eight o'clock inmates begin entering the library. My inmate clerk checks out the books so I can observe as much as possible. Aside from my inmate clerk and the guidance counselor who shares office space with me in the library, I am on my own. Often my colleague is out of the library for long stretches of time. At that time, I

am absolutely alone with sixty criminals who, if they wanted, could take me hostage at the merest whim. Technically, I am helpless to prevent this from happening if they actually ever decide to do it. Unprofessionally speaking, I must be nuts. Either that, or foxholes and prison libraries have no atheists.

Inmates including the murderers from breakfast surround me. They are listening to music on headphones, reading magazines, looking through the 7,000 paperbacks, and reading the newspapers. The scene looks pretty tame, but I don't know what they are thinking. No one is talking. I had to stop all talking. Once a large homosexual ring infiltrated the library for several days. They decided that this would be their place to raise institutional hell. They disturbed everyone so much, something had to be done. It was. No talking. No whispering. No murmuring. No clucking. No nothing.

As well as being a librarian, I am a certified correctional officer just like a policeman. As a correctional officer, I often have the uncomfortable responsibility of confronting a 6'4" 290 lbs. iron pumper with muscles like Conan the Barbarian with the news that he must leave the library—now. Another danger of being a prison librarian is emotional stress. See above. Anyone who says he is not nervous in such situations is either stupid, a liar, or all three. I've lost count.

It's my personal practice to keep open doors deadlocked at the knob. This is to ensure that if someone does try to attack me, at least I will have between 10 and 15 seconds to grab the telephone before he breaks through the glass. No kidding. Just to make sure I see him coming, all bookshelves in the library are bolted flush to the wall with any free-standing shelf not more than three feet tall. None of the free-standing shelves are arranged in rows. They run straight end to end. This is done so no one can play jack-in-the-box, thus encouraging staff into asking about the early retirement plan.

Some of my patrons are nuts. Mental health staff have descriptive words of Latin derivation to tell me to be careful (really, really careful) around

Michael Childress is Library Technician I at Piedmont Correctional Center in Salisbury.

these particular inmates. These inmates cannot come to the library because they are locked in little cells upstairs. I take books to them twice a week. In the course of checking out books to these men, I have been cussed, spit on, and attacked. I go home at 4:30 p.m. (on the dot, pal).

What in the world am I doing here? Well, I love ideas, and I respect challenges. This has plenty of both. When I think sometimes that it's all a farce, I remind myself of the old, thin, bald-headed guy who comes almost every day to check out a book. One day he returned a copy of Henry Steele Commager's *History of the American People*. This day, I was working the circulation desk. As it left his hand, his face took on a concentrated appearance and his voice a studious tremor. He said, "I've read two books in my whole life and I'm sixty-one years old. The first one I read was *Tobacco Road* when I was sixteen. It wasn't nothin'. But everybody in American ought to read this book. Do you have anything on Thomas Jefferson? He was one of the smartest men who ever lived in the world." Before he stepped into this library, this old man had read only one book. Since then this old fellow has read nearly everything in the 900's on American history. I often hear him in the hallways around the prison talking to other inmates about Thomas Jefferson, the Civil War, and the Constitution of the United States. B.F. Skinner might say that this was one piece of corn that dropped down and supplied just enough reinforcement to keep me from struggling against a sea of troubles. No matter. Anyway you look at it, somehow, through all this mess, a human mind was unlocked.



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 - a. Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings* New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.
 - Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1979): 498.
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