

WRITING INSIDE – LOIS J PETERSON

What do you say to the guy who sidles into writing class and says, 'Sorry I'm late. I just got out of my violent offenders group?'

No problem. Grab a seat. And a coffee. Care for a donut with that?'

I thought I knew what to expect when I agreed to teach at Corrections Canada's Matsqui Institution in British Columbia. I knew about prisons; I'd seen *The Shawshank Redemption*. High fences and razor wire? Big guys with tattoos and attitudes? Locks and bars at every turn?

I did find these things, and more, but I could not have anticipated the hassle at the main gate while guards tried to track down a pass for the twelve dozen donuts we'd brought for coffee break. Nor could I have predicted that once they'd unearthed the pass, they'd hardly glance at our ID before waving us through.

On my first time 'inside', I was one of six instructors presenting workshops at a one-day writers' conference. I went at the suggestion of a writing teacher who's been teacher and mentor to hundreds of writers.

He talks with a particular affection and dedication about teaching Matsqui students, and I wanted to see what I was missing.

What do you do when you have a class of male prison students alone for the first time?

Try to hide shaking knees and trembling hands. Get them writing as soon as possible.

My students were a motley bunch in green shirts and bluejeans, some with tattoos, a few with scars, all with hefty sentences. (Matsqui's a medium-maximum facility; inmates include lifers, some inmates on their way into the system, others on the way out, and all kinds in between.)

As with any first class, I first distributed and explained Natalie Goldberg's Writing Practice rules. I didn't bother telling these guys that all new writers need to break through barriers of self-doubt to put their ideas on paper.

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three minutes,' I told them. 'And I want you to write about feeding a baby. Three minutes is nothing,' I repeated, ignoring the jeers and guffaws. 'Come on, let's go.'

Some flicked pens around the room and scabbled for paper. Others lit smokes and tipped their chairs back against the wall to watch the proceedings. One remembered an urgent appointment and left the room. Another tested every pen in the room before he found one he liked. At last the muttering and cursing subsided. Soon, every man was bent over his paper, his pen sneaking or snaking across the page. About two minutes after they were all at work, I told them they had two minutes left. They kept writing. Two minutes later I told them they had one minute to go. More scribbling. A minute later I told them they had thirty-seconds left and should start winding down. They kept writing. After another minute, I told them their time was up. Still they wrote. It took four more minutes for everyone to put down their pens.

Then they read what they'd written.

I learned much from that first exercise. Separated from their families, many prison inmates hold idealized views of mates and children. With limited education, many don't have the language skills to clearly express their ideas and opinions. Humor's important to guys facing years in

jail. Few had ever had anyone listen to them or their ideas. Some, with discipline and focus will make good writers.

What would you do with work that's sexually explicit or graphically violent, or just plain offensive?

Pay attention to text, comment on the craft. Discuss language, syntax and diction, solicit reactions to compelling phrases, evocative expressions. Thank everyone for reading their work.

Classes at Matsqui are based on in-class writing, discussion, and feedback, with time for students to share other work. Occasionally I'm uncomfortable with subjects they write about, but as in any other class, I focus on text and try not to react to content.

These men have had difficult lives, experienced things I could never imagine, acquired attitudes I could never condone. Like all writers, they use them in their work, perhaps sometimes just to see how I'll react. But I base my response on the writing not the subject, the work not the writer.

How do you handle a class the day after the Oklahoma Bombing?

Take in an armful of books of children's poetry, distribute them and read poems aloud.

What happens in the 'free world' inevitably affects life inside. These guys have access to TV and newspapers, and there's always lots of discussion after

coverage of a high profile trial or a major crime. Most have strong opinions about the penal system, the prison environment, and the police. Unless it crops up in written work, I try to quell discussions that send the students off on philosophical or political tangents.

The day we read and wrote children's poetry, we looked at the difference between narrative and lyric poetry. We discussed rhyme, rhythm and detail. We read Robert Louis Stephenson and A.A. Milne, Dennis Lee and Dr. Seuss, Noyes' *The Highwayman* and Browning's *Pied Piper of Hamelin*. At first the guys were reluctant to pick

up the books, but soon they were shuffling them back and forth along the desks, reading to themselves and each other.

One man's face was soft and unguarded as he told me that a poem in Shel Silverstein's *Where The Sidewalk Ends* reminded him of the 'library lady' he'd known as a kid.

When everyone had at last put down the books, they all wrote poems about different ways to break an egg.

What would you do with an eighteen-stone inmate who

loses his temper over a perceived slight?

Step back and allow him his say. Let class dynamics deal with the situation.

In the four years I've been teaching at Matsqui, there's never been a guard or other prison official in the room. The door is usually kept closed. I've rarely felt afraid.

Occasionally I sense an undercurrent of something going on between inmates, but I don't attempt to interpret or diffuse it. I simply try to keep everyone's attention on the writing.

If someone seems particularly volatile--some of these men do

have the potential for great violence or they wouldn't be there--things tend to take care of themselves without my interference. A subtle hierarchy exists here that establishes and maintains relationships in and out of the classroom.

But these men aren't real writers, are they? They're just taking advantage of the system to sign up for whatever's going.

These students write poetry and memoir, novels and short stories. Some save the few dollars they

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make at prison jobs to buy computers, to pay for postage for submissions, to buy books to help them learn more about writing. Many Matsqui students commit time and energy to their writing.

Others just write in class, read their work to fellow students, and earn a little recognition. But this is no small thing for many of these men

In the years we've been offering Creative Writing classes at the prison, I've noticed that many men have changed. Early on, they'd talk to neighbors, read magazines, scribble in their notebooks as they waited for their turn to read their work. But gradually they learned to listen and respond, to support and encourage others in the class.

Now, they cheer and jeer in response to others' work. They slap the table and say, 'Right on, man,' when they hear something they like. They laugh and applaud the humor in others' work. They bully and nag others to read their work aloud; they ask for copies of each others' writing.

My classes have a mix of writers who work hard to learn and improve their skills, while some others who put their thoughts on paper aren't inclined

to accept suggestions for improvements from the instructor or their peers, although they'll happily contribute to class discussions.

How do you handle guys who'd rather chat, laugh, or read bodybuilding magazines than participate in class activities?

Greet them as they come into the room, then leave them alone. Notice, as the class progresses, how they gradually begin to follow the proceedings over the top of their magazines, and end up scrounging paper and pencil,

eventually joining in.

Not all of them care about writing. Some just drop by for coffee. Others come to alleviate the boredom of long days with little to do. Some just want to air a beef about the

prison system, hang out with their buddies, or see what's going on.

My goal is to get them to write, and to listen to each other; to find ways to express themselves and to offer something to other students who have the courage to share their writing with the group.

A prison writing class is not the place to lay down the law about what students must do and how they must do it. I encourage participation by demonstrating

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that everyone's efforts will be recognized. Some come once and never come back. Others drop by for coffee once, then return each week.

What would motivate a 'straight' person to keep going back to prison, if they didn't have to?

Scarves of early morning mist lie across the fields as I drive through the Fraser Valley to Matsqui on Friday mornings. I turn off the freeway, drive onto the prison grounds, see the high fences, razor wire, police cars patrolling the perimeter. Sometimes I wish I could turn around and go home.

The prison atmosphere is oppressive. Posters on classroom walls flaunt the jargon of 'programs' and 'rehabilitation'. Everything seems broken or mismatched or dirty.

Sometimes the students are unruly and restless. At other times they're inattentive and confrontational. Sometimes just a few guys show up, only because they have nothing else to do that day. Occasionally I get there to find the prison 'locked down', so I have to turn around and make the one-hour drive home again. Sometimes I learn that a student I hoped to see is 'in the hole' so

won't be coming to class.

But on other occasions, the room is full, everyone's brought something to read, there's laughter and encouragement, the coffee tastes fine, the words fly. Everyone participates, everyone shares, everyone learns. We all have a good time.

When class is over, I return along fenced walkways, past the native inmates' teepee and sweat lodge, past the stained glass shop and the dusty library. I wait for the first set of doors to be unlocked, then the next. I reach the main gate, sign out, and wait while my bag is searched (hoping they don't find my Swiss Army Knife or Aspirin, neither of which I'm supposed to take in, but always forget to leave at home).

Finally, I'm out through the gates.

Driving away, I'm light with relief as I leave behind fences and razor wire, gate passes and patrolling police cars.

But I keep going back to challenge my own perceptions and preconceptions, to learn more about teaching and writing, to keep learning from my students, and to learn more about myself.

And I'll keep going back as long as they'll let me in.

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