

The Prison Library Primer, by Brenda Vogel, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8108-5403-1.

reviewed by Kathleen de la Peña McCook

“Prison libraries at the nexus of exile and enlightenment must endure.” (Vogel, vii)

In a compelling 2007 essay about public library outreach to ex-offenders Brendan Dowling sought the counsel of Brenda Vogel, retired Coordinator of Maryland Correctional Libraries from 1974-2000. It is good news for librarians that Brenda Vogel, 1989 *LJ* Librarian of the Year, has written a new book, *The Prison Library Primer*, which provides instruction and guidance to working with prisoners in an era that no longer favors prison reform. It is a revision and up date of her classic *Down for the Count*.

There are nearly 3 million people in correctional institutions in the United States at the time I am writing this review. In 2009 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that state and federal correctional authorities had jurisdiction or legal authority over 1,610,584 prisoners and 785,556 inmates were held in custody in local jails. (USBJS, 2009) In 1979, there were 855 state and federal adult correctional prisons. By 2000, the number of prisons had almost doubled to 1,668. (Useem and Piehl)

What Vogel makes very clear is that this population affects *every single librarian* in the United States. Most offenders are eventually released from institutions. On re-entry to the general population these offenders become a part of the public. They should then be encouraged and supported in the use of public libraries. Families of offenders may need specialized services during the incarceration and after. Think of families traveling many miles to visit someone in prison or jail. Librarians in the general population can assist people when they get out of jail or prison; they can help the families of people in jail. By extension we are all prison librarians.

If we assume a general recognition that library service to incarcerated people and their extended families is the responsibility of all librarians, then we engage *The Prison Library Primer* with a resolution to incorporate its tenets in our work. Of course the book is aimed primarily at people who actually work in correctional institutions, but the lessons and guidance are of great importance to all librarians who care about social justice and human rights. Vogel credits Bruce Jensen’s “The Cárcel and the Biblioteca” for insight on serving Spanish-Speaking prisoners.

The book begins with a chapter on the history of prisons and libraries (starting in 1798) that was co-written with Larry E. Sullivan. A highlight is a discussion of the Supreme Court decision *Bounds v. Smith* (1977) that found that all state prisons must provide access to the courts through people

trained in the law or through law library collections. After *Bounds* general prison library programs were often overshadowed or neglected (p.11).

The quality of library service to the prison community is discussed in chapter 2 and Vogel views prison service as not different in motive from general library service. She states that a committed librarian will speak on behalf of the silent constituency to protect the promise of the library as a place where powers of the law and the written word bring relief. In chapter 3 the physical library and access are discussed and described...

The “eternal debate” (p.43) between books the incarcerated want to read and those that are rehabilitating is discussed in chapter 4. Vogel is keenly sensitive to the need for prison librarians to be tuned to the current mode of management and to work within that sensitivity to provide service that ideally would parallel service to the public at large.

In chapter 5 Brenda Vogel bears witness Lewis v. Casey arguments and it will break your heart. In this chapter she extends her discussion on the role of the law library in prisons. There is an excellent summary of the Library Assistance to State Institutions (LASI) project, a cooperative library networking service funded by LSCA funds in 1978 and based at the University of Maryland School of Law Library. The project was “librarian-managed, holistic, flexible and evolving (p. 63). It provides librarians with a model of expansive service and access to the courts. She analyzes the issues surrounding prisoner use of computers. But the heart of the chapter comes when Brenda Vogel details the effects of Lewis v. Casey as a major defeat for prisoners seeking to petition the courts for the redress of grievances and sees the decision as one of return of control of the prison to the state. She was present in the courtroom and points out that *no library association had filed a brief of amicus curiae on behalf of the prisoners* (p.65).

“Fahrenheit 451 on Cell Block D,” a reprint of a *Yale Law & Policy Review* article by Evan R. Seamone comprises chapter 6. It is a history of the prisoner and the law and examines the role of jailhouse lawyers. The 346 notes to this chapter are extensive and informative. The importance of networking to the often solo prison librarian is the topic of chapter 7 with suggestions for advocacy for prison libraries within the larger library community (pp. 151-152). Lack of access to the Internet and technology is addressed in chapter 8. Vogel provides options for technology planning and digital literacy. Contraband is the focus of chapter 9 and Vogel explores the demeanor needed to navigate in a prison environment.

“Making a Difference” in the lives of prisoners is the focus on chapter 10 and this short chapter is inspiring and pragmatic. Chapter 11 assesses the library as a force in human reclamation during reentry to the larger society. Chapter 12 advises those who decide to work in correctional settings. Chapter 13 is a list of FAQ such as “Will the Correctional Library Ever Be Recognized as a Service Essential to the Incarcerated?”

The book concludes with “Recommended Readings,” “Sources for Advocacy,” an “Information Skills Training Curriculum,” “Library Assistance to State Institutions: Legal Information Packets,” Colorado Department of Corrections Administrative Regulations on Offender Reading Material and Library Services and “Criteria for Evaluation Corrections Libraries” from the Illinois Department of Corrections.

Caleb Smith’s 2009 book, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, shows how alienation and self-reliance, social death and spiritual rebirth, torture and penitence came together in the prison. Brenda Vogel shows how lives can be reclaimed. If you work in a correctional institution or are considering a job switch, *The Prison Library Primer* should be in your backpack. If you work in a public library this book will give you the motivation to commit to extend services either through supporting prisoner’s families, organizing resources to enhance prison collections, or working as an advocate to increase support for prison library services.

References

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