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Patrick W. Berry, **Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison,** Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018, 143 pp., $40.00 (paperback).

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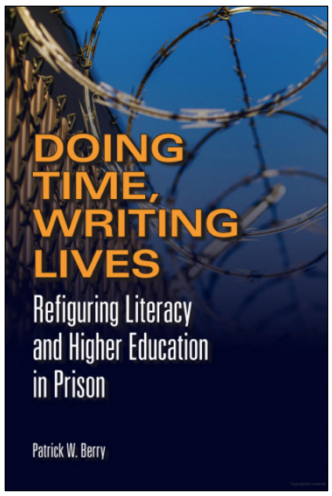

Can higher education in prisons, and particularly courses in literacy and writing, meaningfully change incarcerated people's lives during and beyond time in prison? In ***Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison***, Patrick W. Berry presents a detailed and compelling case for the transformative potential that higher education and literacy courses can have for incarcerated people. By focusing on individuals' narratives of literacy as (former) students and teachers, and centering his analysis around the personal meaning they ascribe to writing and literacy, Berry presents a different facet of the often-debated "value" of higher education behind bars. Instead of taking an economic lens that focuses on recidivism and employment postrelease, Berry's deep dive into literacy narratives of students in a college-in-prison program in the Midwestern United States presents "an understanding of literacy that goes beyond a decontextualized notion of basic skills" (p. 15) and provides an insight into how such programs can be beneficial for both students and teachers beyond financial bottom lines.

The book begins with an introduction on literacy and the context of mass incarceration in the United States. Berry contextualizes *Doing Time, Writing Lives* by giving his readers a critical overview of the U.S. justice system, incarceration numbers, the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic populations in the carceral system, and the increasing number of incarcerated women. The introduction also questions understandings of literacy as a tool for "freedom" or "hope":

> We need to go beyond hope in our understanding of literacy, both in prison and more broadly, to resist the rush to meaning; we need to slow down and, following Krista Ratcliffe (2005), listen rhetorically to better understand students and their circumstances, all the while questioning the way in which prison literacy has been framed. (p. 3)

By providing this context, Berry encourages readers to challenge dominant notions of literacy as a tool to prevent recidivism or to provide an avenue to employment postincarceration, cautioning that literacy is not a simple fix for social inequalities or crime prevention, but that it is also much more to incarcerated students than just a means to a very specific end. Here, the book provides a more nuanced understanding of literacy and a detailed insight into the author's methodology. Building on rich data gained from ethnographic methods, such as his own field notes from classes he taught in the college-in-prison program, written materials from students (including course work, personal reflections, notes, and interviews), and in-depth interviews with teachers, Berry's narrative analysis provides a detailed and informative insight into the meaning of literacy for incarcerated students and those who teach in a prison setting over the following four chapters.

The first chapter begins to connect the value of literacy narratives with overcoming the invisibility that incarcerated people experience. By contrasting his own beliefs and understandings of literacy with those of his students, this chapter reveals the multifaceted nature of literacy and what it means in the context of race, class, gender, and location. In chapter 2, Berry reflects on professional writing classes in the prison context. Here, he expands on the concept of the "contextual now," used throughout the book to situate literacy in the prison context, and the usefulness of such programs for students who will face a plethora of challenges in finding employment postincarceration. Chapter 3 takes on the perspectives of those teaching in prison-in-college programs by providing in-depth reflections on the understanding of education and literacy of various educators. The fourth chapter evaluates how literacy narratives keep developing after incarceration, as well as the value of higher education in prison beyond basic job skills. In this final chapter, Berry also critiques the continuing focus on recidivism statistics in evaluating higher education programs in prisons, as well as the continued threat of reducing funding for such initiatives or eliminating them altogether.

By giving an in-depth analysis of literacy in the context of a college-in-prison program, *Doing Time, Writing Lives* is targeted at readers who are interested in the realities of mass incarceration in the United States, those who are interested in restorative justice, and those who are concerned with literacy and teaching both in general and specifically in prison settings. By providing a case study of incarcerated students and their teachers, the situated nature of literacy—what Berry calls the "contextual now"—is highlighted in a way that is valuable for anyone who is concerned with the potential "promises" of literacy. As such, the main objective of the book, challenging the notion of literacy as "basic skills" that have the power to provide freedom and hope to anyone who just works hard enough on their literacy, is accomplished by contextualizing literacy in a setting that is fraught with power imbalances, erasures of identity, and the removal of freedoms and choices—thereby laying bare the highly contextual nature of what kinds of hope or meaning literacy can offer to those who are most oppressed in society.

Doing Time, Writing Lives is extremely relevant at a time where mass incarceration in the United States and the request for prison reform have become widely debated topics. Despite steadily falling incarceration numbers since 2008, the rate of imprisonment in 2018 was 5.6 times higher for Black men than White men (Carson, 2020), and in 2020, almost 2.3 million people are incarcerated in prisons and jails across the United States (Prison Policy, 2020). In addition, debates on "what works" to reduce recidivism rates have reignited, as two thirds of returning citizens are rearrested (67.8%), and nearly half return to prison (49.7%) three years following release (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). Earning a postsecondary degree while in prison significantly improves incarcerated individuals' chances of securing postrelease employment (Duwe & Clarke, 2014), which is an important component of successful reentry back into the community.

Pell grants, financial aid that is needed for incarcerated people to participate in costly higher education classes, were only reinstated as a pilot in 2015 under the Second Chance Act, after the Clinton administration had discontinued these grants for incarcerated people under the 1994 Crime Bill. At the time of publication of *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, almost 17,000 incarcerated students had benefited from the program (Delaney & Montagnet, 2020), but the future status of Pell grants was in doubt. The pilot was extended and expanded in April 2020, increasing the number of participating schools from 63 located in 26 states to 130 located in 42 states and the District of Columbia (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

However, while there is undoubtedly a positive impact of providing secondary education opportunities to incarcerated people, *Doing Time, Writing Lives*' criticism of simplistic and problematic narratives about literacy as a "fix" to recidivism and guaranteeing employment postrelease is valid and necessary. A focus on literacy and secondary education places the onus of "improvement" on the individual rather than addressing systemic inequalities and a justice system that disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic communities (Alexander, 2010). In addition, the focus on statistics negates the very real, but unmeasurable, outcomes that incarcerated students themselves derive from literacy programs.

Berry's in-depth analysis of literacy narratives of incarcerated students offers a refreshing look on literacy and builds on notions of critical literacy, such as those formulated by Freire (1970). As such, the literacies described by Berry, his fellow teachers in the program, and most important, the students themselves, describe the process of cultivating a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) that enables them to examine the power relations and systems of oppression that shape their lives (Mosley & Tucker-Raymond, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). As such, literacy is not simply seen as a toolkit of basic skills to gain employment, but as a (self-)reflective activity that can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself and the societal structures and inequities that affect our lives.

In the context of criminal justice, *Doing Time, Writing Lives* gives insight into the lived experiences of incarcerated people and joins a number of well-regarded texts that critically examine mass incarceration and its effects in the United States (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Western 2006, 2018). Berry provides a necessary perspective of the meaning of literacy to those affected by the justice system and its relation to correctional institutions as well as incarcerated people's lives beyond the prison walls. In this regard, the presentation of teachers' literacy narratives was insightful, but moved the focus away from the students' experiences that are usually erased from the mainstream narrative on literacy and prisons. Yet, it is those very narratives of incarcerated students that illustrate the value of literacy in their lives and emphasize the importance of such programs. It is in the richness of these literacy narratives that the book delivers its most important message and

> challenges polarizing rhetoric often used to define what literacy can and cannot deliver, suggesting more nuanced and ethical ways of understanding literacy, possibility, and higher education in this age of mass incarceration. (p. 3)

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