Judging by its cover – the frontispiece from an 1827 tract, The Prisoner’s Companion – one can expect this book to be about incarceration. Dark stone walls, chains, sunlight through latticed iron: the image marks a contribution to the history of criminal punishment in early America. Indeed, Reading Prisoners is published in Rutgers’s Critical Issues in Crime and Society series and engages with important recent work on prisons and culture by Caleb Smith and Jeannine DeLombard, among others. But a smaller element of the cover image indicates Reading Prisoners’s most important intervention in American literary and cultural studies. At the very center, in a convict’s hand, is a book – probably meant to represent the same Prisoner’s Companion in which the image originally appeared but which, in the context of Jodi Schorb’s study, stands in for manifold written texts that shaped and were shaped by prisoners.

Upon spotting the book, one might, then, expect Reading Prisoners to be about how literacy empowered or solaced prisoners, or how it was imagined to be instrumental in their penitence, or perhaps their subversive uses of it. In fact, Reading Prisoners makes no clear-cut claim along those lines – nor should it. Schorb’s analysis reveals that, in this context as in others, contemporary romanticizations of literacy obscure complicated histories. The discourse surrounding prisoner education programs in our own time, Schorb asserts in her introduction, often reproduces bromides about literacy: “learning to read opens a world of knowledge and possibilities. Learning to write entails finding one’s voice. Becoming literate marks one’s entrance into citizenship and belonging” (1). Well, sometimes. Since the publication of Harvey Graff’s landmark The Literacy Myth (1979), careful scholars have found that, although educated people fervently believe in the liberating potential of literacy, the socially marginalized do not consistently experience it that way.

More than three decades after Graff’s debunking work began, many myths persist, sustained by iconic examples. The prison literacy narrative in Alex Haley’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), for instance, leads modern readers to assume that “literacy acquisition facilitates self-expression and even personal liberation” (2). But Reading Prisoners shows that the literate prisoner in early America was “an ambivalent figure,” and close study of that figure illuminates “the wider promises and perils that accompanied the spread of mass literacy” (6). Reading Prisoners thus not only complicates our understanding of imprisonment and education but also enriches our knowledge of literacy in early America. Its eclectic array of sources offers a literary history that embraces the work of outsiders (to borrow a keyword from Karen Weyler’s work, which Schorb cites).  


The four chapters of *Reading Prisoners* are sorted into two parts—“Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century ‘Gaol’” and “Literacy in the Early Penitentiary”—and this diptych structure is essential to the argument. In Part I, the book focuses on a “diverse genre of sermons, prisoner-penned narratives, as-told-to accounts, and third-party biographies” (25). Incarceration in this period was a temporary prelude to the pillory or the scaffold, and publishers did brisk business in execution narratives—the life stories, confessions, and last words of the condemned. These texts were not just cautionary tales for the public, as one might expect. Published accounts of prisoners’ reading habits, printings of their (previously) private letters to family members, even facsimiles of their signatures, modeled literacy for the mass reading public.

In the nineteenth century, incarceration became a long-term state, and prisons were imagined as places for the rehabilitation of criminals. Yet no real consensus emerged about whether education and books would benefit prisoners or lead them astray, and literacy spread unevenly among the incarcerated. The “archive of the penitentiary,” to which Schorb turns in Part II, is therefore harder to recover than the older “literature of the public scaffold” (95). Publishers could sell a condemned man’s last-minute confession, but “tales by everyday inmates”—the works of people “sentenced to five or ten years for larceny, horse thievery, arson, or other noncapital, nonsensational offenses”—were less marketable and “are strikingly absent from our literary histories” (94). Still, Schorb takes readers through some fascinating examples of this literature, including the 1822 *History of the Celebrated Mrs. Ann Carson*; William Coffey’s 1825 exposé of Newgate prison, *Inside Out*; and the recently discovered 1850s memoir of Austin Reed, an African American inmate at Auburn prison.

By the end of *Reading Prisoners*, the nineteenth century has taken on a sinister cast. As criminal justice began to emphasize reform over punishment, prisoners were marginalized from literate society, even dehumanized. The contrast Schorb paints between an unruly eighteenth century and a more statist nineteenth is largely what Michel Foucault prepared us to expect: punishment became ostensibly more enlightened while in fact innovating inward modes of disciplining subjects. Some readers will be surprised to see literacy, too, following this illiberal trajectory, and this represents Schorb’s most important contribution. Eighteenth-century prisoners had “helped a new nation of writers imagine writing as an instrument of sociability, a possible tool of self-mastery, and an appealing yet unreliable means of establishing credit and credibility” (186), but the “sparser archive” (186) of the penitentiary suggests that, as time went on, mass literacy became “a more mechanized affair, promoting a more unified, homogenized, and compliant citizenry” (100).

*Trinity College (CT)*

CHRISTOPHER HAGER

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