

## **Prison Literacy: Light in a Dark Place**

*Colin McGregor*

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The world of prison is largely without trees. Doubtless trees pose some sort of security risk, perhaps providing places where people can hide or hide their drugs. But one young maple, thirty feet tall, stands alone in a corner of our gardens, near where the barbed wire fencing meets the world outside our reach. Every week I sit under that tree, at a picnic table, with another prisoner. Marven Cain is 65. He has run companies, was married twice, and fathered several children, some late in life. But he cannot read a word. We sit and we read. He always insists on sitting under that lonely maple. He says it is his lucky tree. It is where he first began to make out words.

Looking for causes of crime? There is no more direct statistical link than that between illiteracy and criminal activity. Calamai (1987) found only one out of twenty-five federal prisoners are functionally illiterate in both of Canada's official languages. Two decades later, prisoners are still "three times as likely as the general population to have literacy problems" (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2003, p. 6). Illiteracy engenders frustration. People cannot achieve what they want or earn what they think they deserve. They lash out. They steal. They hit. They drink and take drugs. *Le décrochage scolaire* and crimes are Siamese twins.

An illiterate prisoner cannot read the judge's decision that sent him to prison or the correctional evaluations that will determine if and when he is ever released. We have long hours to ourselves in a cell. Reading fills time with mental journeys. It is a way to escape mentally. The ancient Romans called the world of writing "The Land of Shadows". For most prisoners, this is a sadly inaccessible place.

My 65-year-old friend wants to read to his kids and his grandkids when he gets out. I have a college education. I was once a writer and a teacher before the system put me here. I am no humanitarian; I am just bored and want to use my training. That is why we sit under his lucky tree. Marven haltingly makes out a sentence. He looks up at the leaves, starting to turn auburn colours and punches at the air. "Thank you, Lord", he says in a whisper. "I didn't think I could ever read". I detect a tear in the corner of his left eye. My day is made.

There is a prison school staffed with teachers who care. But school is scary to people who had trouble with school rules when they were young – and a prison school has lots of rules. There is a prison library. But a library is intimidating to those with limited reading skills. Every shelf is a reminder

of their weakness. Prison is no place to show weakness. We are not allowed to receive books through the mail – they could contain drugs, we are told. There is no Internet, and the few computers here are occupied as soon as one is available. Reading must be struggled for in prison.

A group of volunteer literacy tutors from Cowansville, mostly retired teachers, visit the prison chapel two Fridays a month. They belong to the Yamaska Literacy Council, a band of tutors and tutor trainers. They have been operating as an organization for a full thirty years in this small prison-agricultural supply town an hour east of Montreal. These Yamaska volunteers train prisoner tutors and work with students. The chaplain, once a teacher himself, makes coffee and provides space. He steps back and discretely helps out when he can. Books are brought in. Glittering certificates are given out – it is important to mark and celebrate success. Between these visits, it is up to us.

It is a gray, windy Saturday. The prison factory does not need me today. Marvin is emotional. “When I get out”, he tells me, “I’ll be able to read to my grandchildren, you know. I won’t have to say, ‘I’m busy, go ask your mother’. They’ll be shocked”. A smile creeps across his lips. Illiteracy is something to be hidden if you are a large, muscle-bound man with responsibilities and pride. The secret gnaws at a man’s soul. Historically, the illiteracy rate among senior citizens in Brome Missisquoi County – the half-Anglophone, largely agricultural district where the prison sits – has been very high. For instance, Calamai (1987) estimated the rate to be around two-thirds of that segment of the population. The older you are, the less likely you are to be able to read. My 65-year-old friend is not alone. The Yamaska Literacy Council has its work cut out for it.

We are now under Marvin’s lucky tree when it starts to rain. Tiny watermarks spread across the open pages of our book like ink blots on a Rorschach test. Indoors, recreation rooms are packed with poker players. We have nowhere to go. Marvin shrugs his shoulders. “We can come back tomorrow, right?”, he asks. “Unless my shoulder acts up. Boy I’m in pain a lot”. He raises his arm to show me where it hurts. The pain is not that bad, really. He is just scared that one day the progress he is making will stop, that suddenly he will not be able to read. Nothing I say will calm his fears. The next day, he might come back. If not, I will bring my novel and read alone under the lucky tree with the gentle breeze as my companion. For an hour I will not be in prison. I will be in the Land of Shadows.

The Yamaska Literacy Council has been coming to Cowansville Institution for a decade. For many years, the Council operated under the aegis of a

worldwide literacy program, Laubach Literacy International. It is the world's foremost adult literacy training organization, and has taught over 100 million adults to read and write worldwide. Its beginnings give clues to its success in the prisons. In the 1920s, a young Congregationalist missionary named Dr. Frank C. Laubach found himself sent to the Philippines, specifically, to the island of Mindanao, then as now home to Muslim tribes. Laubach found himself among the Moros, a particularly bellicose tribe whose members lived along or near the water in huts raised on poles. They had an oral language, Maranaw, but no written script (Laubach and Norton, 1990).

Laubach decided to alphabetize their language. Happily, Maranaw is a Polynesian dialect, the simplest language family in the world to alphabetize. A related tongue, Hawaiian, is famous for having only twelve letters. Laubach boiled Maranaw's sounds down to fourteen Roman letters. By trial and error, he discovered the value of using key words to help students identify individual sounds; then, he created a series of charts using a key word and picture for each chart. Illiterate tribesmen were reading within two weeks (ibid).

When the Great Depression hit, Dr. Laubach's church ran out of money. He told the Moros that he had to go home. The tribal chief had another idea: "I'll make everybody who knows how to read teach somebody else", he declared, "*or I'll kill him!*" Oddly, the chief's scheme worked brilliantly. Laubach went home and adopted the system into English, a bird-shaped as the letter B, for example. From the Moro chief's death threat came the Laubach organization's motto: Each One Teach One. The death threat was removed to appeal to a wider audience (ibid). Given Laubach Literacy's rough and tumble beginnings, it was and is ideally suited for prisoners.

The Yamaska Literacy Council was part of a national organization, Laubach Literacy Canada, which did yeoman's work in prisons and in other dark corners of our country. A few years ago, the Harper government, in its infinite wisdom, decided to no longer fund adult literacy programs of any kind. Their rationale: if a person has not learned to read by the time they are eighteen, tough cookies. It is not the government's job. Laubach Literacy Canada folded. The Yamaska Literacy Council was stuck with a funding shortfall, set adrift from their umbrella organization. But they did not disband and they did not forget the prisoners they had worked with for many years.

At the time, I had been volunteering as a tutor here for quite a while. Indeed, in 2004, the locals chose me (unwisely, said some of the prison's

staff) to become Canada's only Laubach-accredited tutor training behind bars. I was put through an intensive course, including a good eight hundred pages of printed material to learn cold for a series of exams. Remarkably, I passed. I went on to help train prisoner tutors, alongside the community volunteers. Things are going very well today. We have seven prisoner tutors and upwards of twenty students. We use the various accredited exercise books, dictionaries, and easy readers provided as part of the program. The prison is laid back and very accommodating as a rule to our activities. It helps a lot that the Yamaska Literacy Council crew are pillars of the local community.

There have been hiccups. Operating in a prison environment can be challenging. Transfers and releases mean a high turnover rate of tutors and students. One of our students stabbed another in a dispute over a poker game, away from tutoring activities. Happily, no one was seriously hurt. Some of our volunteers, who are mostly women, were somewhat disturbed by an prisoner tutor with no lack of self-esteem and stopped coming until the man was transferred to another prison. I myself have been at this prison for over ten years at the time of writing – my case involved CSC and police folk. For some years, because of my refusal to accede to some of the demands of my case management team, it was strongly suggested that preventative security officers did not want me to darken the doors of the chapel while the Yamaska Literacy Council volunteers were present.

I tutored alone inside the cellblocks. My reports read that I thought I was a “Tudor” rather than a “tutor”. All that is now in the past. After twenty years in prison, they stop pressuring you. After twenty years in medium, if you are not yet in a minimum, you are not going to see freedom, ever, they say. I am now ignored, free to tutor at the chapel.

This medium-security facility is not by any means the most dangerous prison in Canada. Still, volunteers should be commended for their bravery. Some of these retired teachers are pretty tough themselves. One elfin lady referred to as the “literacy princess” is not averse to telling hardened prisoners, myself included, to “screw off” when required. And we obey.

Yamaska Literacy Council volunteers, both in the prison and in the community, focus much of their efforts on training tutors who then go on to teach others, always on a one-to-one basis, as this approach has been proven over time to be the most effective way of imparting literacy skills to adult learners (*Basic Literacy*, 2012). They work quite a bit at the local high school, Massey-Vanier, a few hundred yards from the prison chapel, invisible to us beyond our fences and a tall stand of trees. The Laubach

approach is non-confrontational, caring and encouraging, perfectly suited for prisoners who are, as a rule, somewhat resentful of authority. “In a literacy campaign”, wrote Dr. Laubach, “we need faith, hope, love – these three; and the greatest of all love. It has no substitutes. When it fails, everything else fails” (Laubach and Kirk, 1990). This sort of sensitivity to adults struggling with their literacy skills is the hallmark of the Laubach approach.

English is not necessarily an easy tongue to learn. Its vowels can be pronounced a total of eighteen different ways. The nonsense word “ghoti” can conceivably be pronounced as *fish* (think of the “gh” in *tough*; the “o” in *women*; the “ti” in *nation*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* spends seven and a half pages defining the word “round”, and offers 194 separate ways to use the word “set”. An adult learning English has to work at it. To that end, our students are encouraged to write, and some have won awards for their short reviews of specially written, easy-to-read books.

There are several prisoners here with post-secondary educations in English. These are men (and one transgender person) who enjoy imparting their knowledge to prisoners with literacy difficulties or to those from outside Canada struggling with the mysteries of English. Prisoner tutors go through the same twelve-hour training program that literacy trainees complete under the aegis of the Yamaska Literacy Council anywhere else. “It’s one of the few productive, positive things you can take with you when you leave these walls”, says Domingo Lecompte, a tutor who speaks four languages and works with Latinos.

After that, we all improvise. “The challenge here”, says tutor Ed Callery, who attended the University of Florida, “is to use different approaches until you find out how to reach a student. That’s the key to success as a tutor”. A stroke victim, Ed uses his personal situation as a resource, patiently working alongside students with limited literacy skills.

Robert Sargeant, a University of Western Ontario alum who enjoys working with more advanced students, puts it more succinctly: “Experience trumps assumptions”. This statement is also applicable in a general way to this strange bimonthly Yamaska Literacy Council prison phenomenon.

There are other adult literacy programs in prisons and outside prisons too. But overall, adult literacy teaching in Canada has become, in the era of government cutbacks, a decentralized, grassroots entity by necessity. Canada’s Frontier College ([www.frontiercollege.ca](http://www.frontiercollege.ca)) first taught lumbermen to read in logging camps, working by lamplight in tents. It is now nationwide and is particularly active in Ontario’s justice system.

For Francophones, there is a *Fondation québécoise pour l'alphabetisation* ([www.fqa.qc.ca](http://www.fqa.qc.ca)), though no French language outside tutors visit Cowansville Institution (Yamaska Literary Council's initiative is very much a local Eastern Townships English community thing). As a lifelong Quebec Anglophone, I can attest to the liberal, open-minded nature of this region's remaining English-speaking peoples. Indeed, when one of our tutors transferred to another jail, he was counselled not to contact the local adult education organization serving the area in which his new institution was located. "They applaud our efforts", one of the Yamaska co-ordinators told me, "but they want no part of prison literacy". Laubach, as far as anyone knows, is the only group to actually accredit and train prisoner tutors to work one-on-one with other prisoners.

Institutional schools in Canada's corrections systems are staffed as a rule by teachers, employed by a local school board, working on contract. They are trained adult education professionals who happen to come to work in a place like this. One prison educator once told me that there is little difference between working in a jail's school and working at the adult education centre in a major town a few miles away. Students there struggle with the same issues as prisoners – histories of substance abuse, learning disabilities, disadvantaged upbringings, even criminal records. Prisoners in jails across Canada serve as teacher's aides.

Interested citizens wishing to get involved in prison literacy, or in any sort of volunteer capacity within the correctional system, should get in touch with their local institution or regional office. Other websites of possible interest include: The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network ([www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca)), ABC Canada ([www.abclifeliteracy.ca](http://www.abclifeliteracy.ca)), and the National Adult Literacy Database ([www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca)).

With the first snows, the picnic tables disappear from our prison yard. Ed Callery is in Marven's cellblock. I am not and therefore cannot go to his cell. This past winter, several nights a week, Ed would sit with Marven, usually for about half an hour, and read. Alone. Marven would complete long, laborious writing exercises – short, simple words, longhand in discursive script. He completed his *Laubach Way to Reading* Level I text, meriting a certificate for his accomplishment. "He gets excited reading", Ed observes. "It means he won't give up".

Marven turned 66 this spring. He is not fully literate yet, but he knows all the letters of the alphabet and their sounds. He can recognize many dozens of words by spelling them out, pronouncing each piece of the linguistic

puzzle until he can form a whole. And he recognizes many dozens of words on sight, especially those he encountered during his rural youth. Ask him to spell “apple” or “farm” and you will get a rapid response.

April brings clement weather to southern Quebec. The picnic tables return to their places in the jail yard. Easter weekend finds me once again under Marven’s tree. He brings along his brand new *Oxford Picture Dictionary*, a present from the Yamaska Literary Council. Together we turn to the pages on human anatomy and go over the basic parts of the human body. Marven insists on writing each word out, laboriously, in pencil, in his notebook, pronouncing each letter, then each completed word. We turn to the section on farms. He recognizes a silo and a hay bale and writes those words out. He chats animatedly about picking apples for his grandpa for fifty cents a day and having to carry the money all the way home to his mom, or else.

We get to the section on fruits and vegetables. Marven points at the lemon, looks at me, smiles, and says, “C-O-L-I-N. Colin!” He is clearly enjoying the act of reading.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Colin McGregor* was born and raised in Montreal. He attended Marianopolis College, obtained a BA in Philosophy from McGill University and a graduate diploma in Public Administration from Carleton University, where he taught writing to first-year undergraduate students. Mr. McGregor worked as a newspaper reporter and editor, and as a lobbyist and government communications officer. He has been in prison since 1991 and is riddled with remorse for the actions that led to his incarceration.