

BOOK REVIEWS

From The Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing by Deena Rymhs

Wilfrid Laurier University Press (2008), 146 pp.

Reviewed by Susan Nagelsen

The impact of prison and the residential school on the recent histories of the Aboriginal people is considered by Deena Rymhs as she reviews writing by authors who have been or are incarcerated, and by authors who have written about life in the residential school. The first work of its kind, this volume offers a window into the similarity between the life of the incarcerated and the residential school: they are all too familiar, almost to the point of same. Rymhs reminds us in *From The Iron House* that for many prisoners, writing offers an opportunity to play a more vital, personal role in their representation. Writings by prisoners are often an exposé of the failings of the criminal justice system and an attempt to find the voice that many feel has been silenced by the system. In their writings, which often take the form of apology, the writer has the chance to provide data that would not have been permitted during the trial – the writing becomes an attempt for the author to regain a sense of autonomy. Writings from these institutions have served to shift public attitudes and provide concrete changes in law, giving Aboriginal belief systems a sense of legitimacy in the judicial system.

In *Part One* of the volume, Rymhs explores the use of genre in the prison setting, ranging from autobiography to memoir, poetry and essay, and even considering oral forms of text. She questions the ways in which authors adapt different forms to their specific context and ponders the consideration of audience as an effective tool for the intended message. She also questions how the prison writer's role of self in relation to his or her community helps shape the writing that is produced. Rymhs proves, through her use of *Prison Writings* by Leonard Peltier, *Inside Out: An Autobiography by a Native Canadian* by James Tyman, and *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* by Yvonne Johnson, that the need for a public audience beyond the constraints of law is an underlying theme in much prison writing. The author's need to "structure an alternative hearing, one that resists legal scrutiny and the singular judgment it imparts" (p. 65) is overwhelming.

Another form of prisoner writing, prison collections and periodicals, provide a window into prison life that often takes the form of resistance. These forms incorporate oral traditions from the prison culture, combining them with the Aboriginal mores, providing a unique way for prisoners to react to prison life and “their experience with this institution as one of resistance rather than ‘rehabilitation’” (p. 81).

Part Two of the volume looks at the use of genres by residential school writers, and the tendency for the authors to use their writing to develop a voice that allows for defiance against the school’s control of their identity as well as development as autonomous beings. There was a conscious attempt by authorities to thwart the cultural development of the charges under the control of the residential school in an attempt to marginalize the voices and history of the Aboriginal people. The authors in this section take memoir and the elegy, forms that are rich in the cultural tradition and use them to their own advantage for the telling of their stories. According to Rymhs, residential accounts have provided a venue for “collective healing and affirmation” (p. 126), as evidenced in both Rita Joe and Isabelle Knockwood’s work.

From The Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing demonstrates the need for voices housed behind bars to be set free, even if the bodies that contain them remain isolated from the communities they wish to reach with their words. Deena Rymhs eloquently reminds the audience that these are not just texts, but lives, and the words on the pages require our attention as a matter of social conscious.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Susan Nagelsen is Director of the Writing Program at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, where she has taught for twenty-five years. She is an essayist and a fiction writer as well as the author of two writing manuals. She teaches first-year courses as well as advanced essay writing courses such as the art of the essay and content based writing. She also teaches in the Criminal Justice program where her course focuses on teaching students about prison from the point of view of prisoners. Her most recent published fiction can be found in the fall 2005 edition of the *Henniker Review*, *Tacenda*, *Bleakhouse Review* and in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* Volume 14(2), an issue addressing aging in prison. She

is a frequent contributor to the *JPP* and is currently Associate Editor. She is also the editor of an anthology of work by incarcerated writers entitled *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery* (New England College Press, 2008). The book features 13 incarcerated writers with an introduction to each written by Nagelsen and is being used as a textbook in courses focusing on criminal justice issues.