

***The Funhouse Mirror:  
Reflections on Prison***  
**By Robert Ellis Gordon and Inmates of the  
Washington Corrections System.  
Washington: Washington State  
University Press (2000), 110 pp.  
*Reviewed by Jay Jones***

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*The Funhouse Mirror* is a collection of stories and interludes written by prisoners and their former writing teacher, Robert Ellis Gordon. As a teacher in Washington prisons from 1989 to 1997, Gordon worked with prisoners in minimum, medium, and maximum security prisons across the State. *The Funhouse Mirror* is as much about Gordon's own educational journey through teaching prisoners to write, as it is about the literary expression of prisoners. The works are, sadly in some cases, non-fiction. They run the gamut from brutally candid and matter-of-fact accounts of the violence and inhumanity of prison life to reflections on the little things that make living worthwhile despite the harsh environment. It is often the case, and this collection of stories is no exception, that through the experiences of those who struggle at the edge, we get a glimpse of that timeless problematic, the human condition. *The Funhouse Mirror* promises to affirm the hardships of convicts and others that find themselves on society's underside, and poke a sharp stick of reality in the proverbial eye of those who find themselves a world away from such daily struggles and pain.

In "The Steel Hotel: Survival Tips for Beginners," ex-prisoner T.J. Granack offers fifteen guidelines for making one's stay in prison "less hellish" (p. 6). A careful read of these tips reveals that prison resembles a concentrated microcosm of the "outside," where social norms are distorted and amplified to dangerous proportions. They illustrate a harsh economy and rigid hierarchy, both of which are enforced by threat and violence—not unlike the "outside" sans sugar coating. Rules like "never loan anyone anything," "learn to masturbate quickly," and "never look into another man's cell," bespeak the importance of property and debt, and the forced intimacy of prison life.

Michael Collins tells us of the many occasions on which he was compelled to preserve his "virginity" in the face of potential sexual partners and would-be rapists, and his hatred for and assaults against sex offenders. His ultimate revelation comes by way of a comparison between the armed robbery he

committed and the crime of rape. “[A]s is the case with a rape victim,” admits Collins, “the victim of any violent crime can never again feel that he or she inhabits a safe and secure world” (p. 19).

Duane Eaglestaff provides a view of prison from a “rapo” perspective; a sex offender’s account of prison survival. Information is power, and the truth can get you killed, notes Eaglestaff, whose athletic abilities became a bargaining chip in the ongoing power plays of prison life. Winning is power too, and but for his ability to help the team win, Duane’s stay in prison would have been considerably different and likely more damaging than it was. Gordon’s interlude reveals the contradictions of hatred and forgiveness, of separating act from actor and treatment from punishment. His own near-victim experience in childhood provides a vehicle by which to unearth uncomfortable and insightful emotions toward those who victimize others.

Keith Lansdowne describes the victimizing procedures of the prison itself; of the anal assault perpetrated by guards conducting cavity searches; of the beatings he received for verbally and physically assaulting staff. “[R]age was the only emotion I knew,” recounts Lansdowne. “I taunted, abused and vilified knowing full well it would result in beatings and further sanctions” (p. 42). After spending many months of his twenty-year sentence in solitary confinement, and in the wake of yet another beating by several guards, Lansdowne tells us of an epiphany that posed a fork in the road of life: “I could choose to continue my descent into insanity or climb back up to the realm of reality” (p. 42). Despite isolation and fear, he embarked upon that continuing journey out of the “abyss.”

In “The Shoe Box,” Michael Collins demonstrates his ability to write what one hopes, in the back of one’s mind, is fiction, yet knows is a composite of truths from millions of childhoods around the world, or perhaps just one. It is a gripping metaphor of learning to kill and to die, one puppy at a time; of growing up too quickly in any-town, anywhere.

Gordon’s interlude paints a metaphor of mental maps drawn from prison stories, and our collective desire to erase prisons and prison life from our cultural repertoires as we do from those nifty tourist maps cluttered with comic images and symbols of life in America. Despite the accelerating growth of the prison industry, there is a telling “desire to make prisons (and, by extension, prisoners, violence, poverty, homelessness, the whole prison *gestalt*) disappear—an acute case of denial that permeates the national psyche” (p. 53).

In “Going Native,” Gordon provides a fictionalized account of the dangers of “drifting” emotionally and psychologically toward prisoners; of over-identifying with *them* when you are one of *us*. Gordon’s writing throughout *The Funhouse Mirror* reflect his own drift, one that reveals how similar we all are, despite the acts we may or may not have committed. “Going Native” highlights the potential dangers of prisoner-staff drift when the elements of emotional and sexual desire are added to the mix.

In the final chapter, Gordon offers a potpourri of anecdotes and musings on his career as a prison educator. Some of the pieces are humorous, others morose; all are poignant, personal, and perusable. Robert Ellis Gordon, like the students whose work he compiled for *The Funhouse Mirror*, is a talented writer. The raw material he fashions into prose retains its rawness and is conveyed to the reader in relatively undiluted form.

In his “Postlude,” Gordon explores the role of love in the prison classroom, and how human interaction and caring on a small scale can have considerable effects on those involved. What Gordon has hoped to do more than anything through his teaching is provide the medium and the fuel for choice and for change, so that after their release, prisoners may make “the decision to turn away from violence, to not hurt another human being” (p. 108). He also hopes *The Funhouse Mirror* will reveal that for the most part, prisoners are a lot like the rest of us. They fear, hope, dream, and suffer—perhaps more than most in society. In short, they are humans seeking to live in human ways in an often-inhumane institution. Gordon puts the prison in everyone’s back yard.

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