

**Maximum Ink**  
*Gregory J. McMaster*

---

**N**ot just anyone can be a writer. Ink slingers are a special breed that adhere to an inner calling; that voice inside their heads that drive and torment them until they capture their thoughts on paper. What is written and how it is expressed usually depends on an individual writer's personal history, experiences and interests. As a prison writer with 20 years of incarceration under my belt I naturally write what I know the most about, prison. It is my sincere hope that what you are about to read captures the true essence of prison writers, the men and women of the steel cages who push the Maximum Ink.

At the best of times prisons are a boring and depressing environment to call home. When there is excitement and action it is usually associated with turbulence, violence and death, Chronic boredom versus eternal death - how do we alleviate one while avoiding the other? Simply stated, some of us use writing as a form of escapism. Whenever we become totally engrossed in writing a story we have perpetrated a mental escape. Where we go in our minds and how long we stay there varies with each writer. We are free to take a journey and travel wherever our imagination desires. Even when prison writers attempt to expound the nuances and intricacies of their caged existence it is as if they are on the outside looking in, narrating the emotions and experiences of someone else.

Writing exercises what can easily become a stagnant thought process. Sensory deprivation and an almost total lack of stimuli are a harsh reality of prison life. Writing stimulates the brain and allows our creative juices to flow. When everything clicks just right our pleasure centres are activated, First Draft, Second Draft, revisions and rewrites. When we hold that final product in our hands a flood of endorphins is released which leaves us feeling euphoric and at peace with our inhumane habitat.

Writing is both therapeutic and rehabilitative. As we write, research and explore, our time is utilized constructively. Without our writing to sustain us we could easily fall into the common trap of tall tales, fantasies and overall criminogenic thinking. Prison obliterates the demarcation point between negative and positive. Unless we make a concerted effort to do something useful with our time, we will get sucked into the fatalistic demeanor of everyday carceral life.

As we struggle to first break the surface and then to keep our heads above the primordial soup of negativity, we gain an incredible self awareness. Through writing we explore our inner souls as only the keeper of that soul can. “Who am I? Why do I do these things? How can I change my physical actions and self destructive thought processes?” Try as they might there is not a single correctional program that can supply the answers to these questions. The truth lays buried deep within us and writing is the tool we use to peel away the layers.

Once we have stripped ourselves bare we need to rebuild and once again writing is the tool of choice. Self esteem, pride and sense of accomplishment can all be gained through the written word. Against all odds we manage to shatter the barriers of our fortified dungeons and proclaim to the world that we are alive. When we see ourselves in print, particularly for the first time, it is a confirmation that we possess a very special gift. Writing offers us the chance to shine, to literally become a beacon in a world of darkness. Learning how to deal with our unforeseen notoriety in an appropriate manner is yet another step in the rebuilding process.

Writing with the intent of being published forces us to expand our knowledge base and learn marketable skills. As we target a particular readership, editor and publisher we learn to be flexible and adjust to their format. We become project orientated, set goals and have deadlines that must be met. Organizational skills are learnt out of necessity.

Somewhere along the way we discover a sense of responsibility and moral character. As writers we suddenly have the ability to influence others and assist in bringing about change. Heady stuff when you stop to think about it, especially when we are cognizant of the fact that we can stabilize or incite. The old adage ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’ finally makes sense to us.

Prison writers can offer a voice and platform to thousands of other prisoners who may be incapable of expressing themselves. Attempting to shatter classic stereotypes by representing our fellow prisoners in a fair, articulate and intelligent manner is an incredible responsibility. As we challenge our intellectual capabilities we must always remember to keep our blossoming egos in check. This can be difficult considering that once we have been published we become a permanent part of history with the potential to influence others long after we are gone. Ideally the messenger does not overshadow the message. Our blunders and mistakes

also become part of the permanent record, never to be denied because it lays before us in black and white.

Only a small fraction of prison writers are financially compensated for their efforts. Although we are usually destitute and struggling to survive on institutional pennies, money cannot be considered a major motivating factor. Instead we see writing as a positive release of pent-up aggression, aggravation, hostility and the ever present cabin fever. Whether we get published or not, the act of expressing ourselves on paper helps to cleanse our souls and keep the demons at bay.

Although money is scarce, some of us are clearly mapping out career possibilities for the future. By building up our bio-sheets and gaining name recognition, we have greatly enhanced our possibility of employment as a writer upon our release from prison. Alternatively, other prison writers resort to stock piling their finished products until after they are paroled in order to receive a fair dollar for their hard work. This technique is used to counter the public's sentiment that prisoners should readily tell their stories without receiving a dime of remuneration.

Writing offers a visible means of tracking our growth and change. This equates into tangible evidence that bolsters our supporters, counters the critics and influences Parole Boards. This paper trail is a unique approach and grabs peoples' attention. It also beats the hell out of saying "I've changed my ways" and expecting everyone to take your word for it.

So far we have covered what can be considered the positive aspects of prison writing. It would be fantastic if that was the complete story and it ended there. It would also be totally unrealistic. Unfortunately there are no free rides in the Penitentiary and prison writers traditionally pay a heavy price.

Chronic cell searches, harassment, censorship and long term segregation are all on the agenda. Without warning, our typewriters, computers, files and resource materials are confiscated. Alternatively if they are not confiscated, we are separated from them by being thrown in the hole on trumped up charges. Two of the well worn excuses for segregation are "your life is in danger" and the all encompassing "threat to the good order of the institution". The ever popular "confidential reliable informant" clause is invoked and you have no recourse because you cannot challenge an unnamed source which in most cases does not exist.

Placing a writer in segregation is probably the most efficient form of censorship employed by corrections. Not only are we separated from our writing tools but also from our fellow prisoners whose situations are often the subject matter and catalyst of our written material. Most segregation units remain in the dark ages with draconian security measures. Ink pens are deemed a security risk and we are instead issued half a pencil and three sheets of writing paper twice a week. Any additional paper is considered to be a fire hazard. The pencils are worn down so small that they can no longer be held. Pencil sharpeners are contraband and the writer is dependent upon the guard to sharpen the pencil. Of course the writer has to wait until the guard makes his next hourly round to get the whittled down stump of a pencil back; assuming the guard brings it back at all. Long ago and far away this writer experienced several years in solitary confinement. I had become so frustrated, enraged and twisted in this horrendous environment that I actually resorted to scratching out letters in my own blood.

Penitentiary censorship takes on many forms with the common goal of suppressing and silencing us. The fact that we cannot seal outgoing mail, and that incoming correspondence is opened and read before being delivered, is the main culprit. Unless we receive notification of receipt, we constantly wonder if our stories reached their destination or sit waylaid on the Warden's desk. In some instances corrections simply refuses to post our mail citing self protective policies to support their position. Of course we have the option of filing complaints, grievances and law suits. That is if we have the time, money and have not experienced a sudden security transfer halfway across the country. As we fight the battle to be heard we are actually losing the battle of being heard. We are forced to lay silent as the wheels of injustice turn ever so slowly. By some miracle should we win in court a mere four years later, it is of no consequence to corrections. Our formerly pressing issues are no longer timely or relevant and it is not as if the Warden pays any fines or penalties out of his own pocket.

Our keepers have the ability to thoroughly dissect whatever we have written days before any prospective editor sees it for the first time. There are countless instances where phone calls are made and the standard correctional public relations campaign goes into effect. Our credibility is questioned through the most basic character assassination. "Who are you going to believe? A convicted and incarcerated felon or

a dedicated public servant of 24 years?" Unless an editor has a personal relationship with the writer or has previously served prison time and knows the name of the game, the character assassination is usually sufficient. If it is not, the Corrections Public Relations Officer simply digs an inch or two deeper into the bottomless pit of resources and propaganda. If the quagmire becomes too hazardous, the considerable political clout of corrections is called upon to make reporters and editors heel.

A common problem for all prison writers is our lack of access to resource material which includes public libraries, university libraries and the internet. Complicating our already dismal access to reading material is the all encompassing correctional power to ban an endless litany of literature under the pretext of 'security'. Furthermore, interviews are practically non-existent because we cannot travel and in most cases the interviewee is denied access to us.

Over time the dedicated prison writer creates personal resources by purchasing selected books and organizing files from clipped newspaper and magazine articles. The minute our writings aggravate a high ranking corrections official or some other government bureaucrat, the files and books are deemed to be a fire hazard and confiscated.

'The Man' and His plan. He is never quite done with us and if anyone manages to get this far 'The Man' always has a few more obstacles to hurl. In many jurisdictions correctional policies state that we cannot run a business from prison unless we have specific permission from the Warden. Of course our writing for publication is deemed a business; regardless if we get paid or not. Per self protective policy, the Warden screens everything we try to get published. If a writer sells out and glorifies corrections in general and the Warden in particular, publication doors open upon the regime's propaganda machine and media connections. But if we show journalistic integrity by inscribing the truth, we are silenced and persecuted. The hate motivated 'Son of Sam Laws' round off the tools for muzzling those that would dare shed light on the government's dungeons.

Unbelievably our battles are not over yet. Next in line to take a shot at us are our fellow prisoners, the same men and women that we are trying to help. Penitentiaries contain every personality disorder known to mankind and misguided jealousies continuously surface. We have all experienced unstable and malicious individuals who bear us ill will

simply because we are receiving attention that they are not. Moving along, there is the overly negative segment of the prison population that must be addressed. These characters assert psychological and physical peer pressure in support of their belief that it is taboo to openly discuss any aspect of our hidden society.

In house conflicts may seem ridiculous to a citizen but it can mean life and death in the penitentiary. The debate over convict, prisoner and inmate is a classic example. No self righteous convict wants to be referred to as an inmate and will at times become violent to stress the point. The problem for prison journalists is that 'convict' carries an incredibly negative connotation within society, far more so than 'prisoner' and 'inmate'. The constant dilemma faced by any prison writer is how do we effectively educate and inform the public about the realities of our lives without insulting and alienating the very people we are trying to help? We become tightrope walkers, forever walking the fine line in our attempts to articulate the facts without ostracizing our fellow prisoners.

Plagiarism is a terrible crime, particularly when one incarcerated being steals the works of another. Many prisoners are habitual short cut artists and there is always a maggot or two around who will put their name on someone else's creation. The plagiarist only sees words on paper but what is really being stolen is the author's heart and soul.

Having run the gauntlet of our insane environment we still need to find an editor who believes what we write, has a format we can fit into, and is willing to deal with the negative public sentiment in regards to prisoners. The sad reality is that there is an overabundance of talented prison writers and only a handful of editors that will take a chance on us. The limited market available to us is thoroughly saturated and we are all competing for the same column space.

Finding the 'right' editor can easily turn into a disaster. Editorial liberties, the changing of just a couple of words can intentionally or unwittingly place our personal safety and indeed our lives in jeopardy. Other than the rare exceptions, magazine and newspaper editors have never experienced the realities of prison life and would not have a clue when they were placing us in harms way. Even if they were aware, their number one priority is sales, which equates to sensationalism. Our personal well being is not on their agenda. Every prisoner who has ever

been published, waited with baited breath until they saw the finished product in print.

On an extremely personal note I have a family that is humiliated every time I manage to get published. I am made to feel as if I am the family's dirtiest little secret that refuses to stay in the closet. Siblings that cringe, a mother that weeps and a father that denies my existence. "Why do you have to write these stories, Greg?" "Can't you find something else to do?" "If you insist on writing these God awful stories can't you at least use a pseudonym?" I used to send copies of my published works to my family thinking they would be proud of me, pleased that I achieved something tangible and positive. When two of my award winning stories were received as if they were disease ridden vermin, it hit me hard and brought about some noticeable changes, I no longer share anything that is published with my family. Furthermore, I now include them in my writings when the stories warrant it. Previously I had gone to great lengths to avoid mentioning my family in any manner.

Having covered the numerous negative aspects of being a prison writer you must be asking yourself why we continue to run the maze of harassment, retaliation and torment. The answer is pretty basic. After it is all said and done, we are first and foremost writers. That is what writers do, they write. The fact that we write from a steel and concrete cage instead of a lake front verandah or mountain top retreat has little to no bearing on our need to express ourselves through the written word. We are driven and compelled to write and in most cases we do not have a choice in the matter.