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Maria Conti
University of Arizona

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Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail

Edited by David Coogan

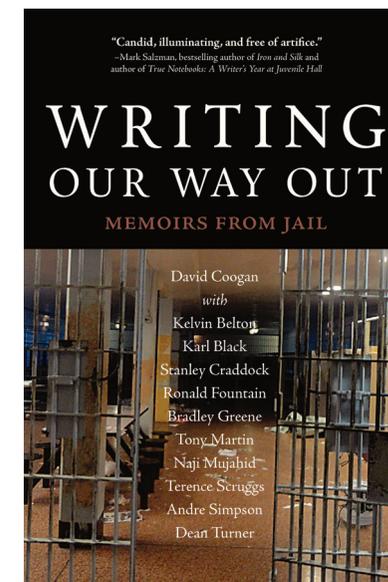
Richmond: Brandylane P, 2016. 243 pp.

Reviewed by Maria Conti

University of Arizona

[Life is] about discovering the beauty that lies dormant inside of your fellow human beings. It's about giving love and then receiving it When you look at me, you won't see any of the above, at least not on the outside of who I appear to be. But x-ray me with your mind. Listen to my words. Look into my eyes. Here, let me help you. You'll need a light, because it's dark in my world You'll see the prison inside me (191).

—Stan, writing workshop participant



Prison writing program facilitators Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi explain that while the public is inundated with fictional depictions of incarcerated people, we are not often able to hear from them directly ("What Words" 68). David Coogan's *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail* offers readers this rare opportunity. As creative nonfiction, the majority of the book is comprised of the intimate reflections of ten incarcerated writers. The epigraph above is a microcosm of the raw, honest exploration of self that echoes throughout the piece. What makes the work even more insightful for both instructors in carceral settings and writing teachers is that Coogan includes his own memoir of teaching at the Richmond City Jail.¹ He begins each chapter with a first-person account of what he is thinking at different stages in the project. Rich in dialogue from the workshop and Coogan's inner monologue, these interludes provide context for the stories to come.

A scholar of rhetoric as social change whose work is familiar to many *CLJ* readers, Coogan makes a connection between this book and community-engaged research and praxis. Notably, he frames the project with Michael Warner's theory of the counterpublic, a term originally coined by Nancy Fraser. Counterpublics provide discursive space for people excluded from the dominant power structure of the

mainstream public sphere. Coogan asks, “Given that prisoners have been effectively sidelined from public life by their incarceration, how are we to hear their voices—that sound of their citizen-selves becoming?” (2). Indeed, incarcerated people usually have restricted access to online participation in the public sphere that would enable this exercise of citizenship. A central feature of Coogan’s epistemological stance is his belief that grassroots projects can affect publics in meaningful ways, “ris[ing] like beanstalks into the hard-to-reach public spheres of empathy, insight, and inclusiveness that were typically obscured by all of the rants, ignorance, and stale air below” (11). In other words, projects emerging from the ground up have the potential to transcend the empty, unproductive rhetoric often present in discussions about incarceration.

The hope of the writing class was “that each man might understand the story of his life, and in so doing, change its course” (xi). Despite his grand vision, the book does not indulge in the self-congratulatory rhetoric of ‘this-is-what-I-did-look-how-great-it-is.’ Rather, Coogan honestly communicates the unique frustrations and administrative stumbling blocks that come with teaching in a jail. At times, he questioned whether the workshop would be able to continue due to the sudden transfer of participants to other facilities. The first eleven chapters take place during the workshop’s first year at the Richmond City Jail. Because many of the original participants were transferred, the project continued via letters. The final eight chapters follow the men in prison and their lives afterwards, between 2008 and 2011.

Chapter 1, “A World You Used to Live In,” details the first meeting at the jail. Coogan delineates four categories that will serve as the “narrative arc” of each man’s story: the *past* (people from your childhood, your neighborhood), the *problem* (when you started to get into trouble), the *punishment* (facts of your crime(s), your emotional reaction), and the *possibilities* (ambitions for the future, what you can offer others) (10–11). Many of the stories blend into each other across individual lives as they discuss experiences with substance abuse, addiction, sexuality, childhood abuse, remorse, police brutality, religion, education, family, and change. These compelling anecdotes moved me and stayed with me long after I finished the book. Strong sensory details place the reader in the scenes, which read like excerpts from a novel. The work as a whole has the feel of a bricolage, as the narrative moves from one writer’s story to another within each chapter.

Even though the workshop focuses on personal, reflective writing, it leaves room for incarcerated participants to move toward critical literacy. Hinshaw and Jacobi point out that programs are often overly focused on individual rehabilitation at the expense of other approaches that the writers might want to engage, such as systemic critique (72–73). Throughout the book, participants describe elements of their environment that contributed to their involvement in criminal activity. One especially poignant story that leads the reader toward systemic critique is Brad’s. He turns himself in to the police, reasoning, “I would rather go and do twenty years in prison than to keep living the way I’m living!” (217). The fact that Brad perceives prison as a safer place than the rest of his world speaks to the lack of options for

many incarcerated people. Others, such as Dean, reflect on the challenges post-incarceration in light of limited access to employment, housing, and transportation: “There have been so many times when I wanted so badly to change the way I lived and my way of thinking. . . . I needed money (no job). I needed a place to stay that I could call my own (not enough money). I needed a better-paying job (no car)” (215). In Chapter 14, “My Story Is Still Being Told,” Ronald also describes the difficulty of breaking free from the cycle of incarceration: “I have no clue how to manifest a change. All I know is that I must find the way to wholeness” (172). Statements such as these help readers to understand the revolving door of incarceration, release, and recidivism.

The workshop participants also employ analogies between the criminal justice system and institutions of U.S. slavery. In Chapter 15, “The Prison Inside Me,” Kelvin names elements of being incarcerated that are similar to the situation of a slave on a plantation. In both slavery and incarceration, people are sold or are being sold out by members of their own community (192). Both groups of people are made to work for little or no pay (193). The most significant comparison in Kelvin’s extended analogy for educators and writing teachers may be his discussion of slaves and incarcerated people as they reenter society. Kelvin explains that, like recently-freed slaves, “most inmates lack the knowledge and understanding it takes to survive” (194). Because participants are given discursive space to move beyond the personal, they have the opportunity to critique the severely flawed systems that govern their daily lives. Readers of this work benefit from these insider perspectives on the types of support that are most needed.

In Chapter 16, “Dreams of Change,” Karl and Naji write about the factors that make it difficult to succeed in carceral settings, such as little or no access to educational programs, computers, library materials, life skills classes, and counselors (200, 207, 210). In light of these issues, Naji began to see his drug addiction in a “much broader context”: “. . . not only am I a perpetrator, but I’m a victim as well. I’m not a victim of a drug culture that fell upon me somehow, leaving me without any choices—I’m more like a victim of a system out of control, one that profits off the unfortunate mistakes and bad decisions I have made” (210). The gaps in programming and resources that participants identify can provide points of entry for educators interested in working with incarcerated writers.

One of the high points of the book, in my view, is that Coogan’s memoir addresses positionality and social location issues for instructors in detention centers, jails, and prisons. He demonstrates how the participants’ worlds are strikingly different than his own in several ways. At one point, Kelvin recalls that Coogan was the first person who asked him when he knew what he really wanted out of life. Coogan reflects, “In a flash I recall how many times I answered that question—what I *wanted* to do—from family and teachers when I was in high school” (56). He goes on to wonder what it would be like not to have that guiding question in his life (56). Despite differences in social location, Coogan was asked by Dean to be his mentor in a program for ex-offenders, and he was subpoenaed as a character witness for Andre’s

trial. These examples illustrate how people from the outside often have comparative social power.

In acknowledgement of this power differential, Coogan engages in a set of ethical best practices throughout the project.² For example, he purposely did not read background information offered to him about the participants' crimes. This distancing allows the writers to reveal this information when they are ready. Secondly, all participants gave final approval for the way their writing appears in the book, and they were given the option of using a pseudonym. In a consent form, Coogan also made it clear that the writers could stop participating at any time. Notably, workshop participation did not obligate them to publish in the book. These measures provide opportunities for agency and indicate a profound respect for participants. Finally, Coogan and the writers made publication decisions together. In opposition to a top-down model in which the program facilitator decides how and when the stories enter the public sphere, publication with an academic press was a collective decision. As more people venture into the uncharted territory of carceral writing, it is clear that we need to think carefully about power and ethical practices. This work offers a crucial step in the right direction.

The writing workshop has been succeeded by Open Minds, a program Coogan founded in 2010, that enables incarcerated people to take courses with college students and faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition, Coogan invites former participants of the project to speak in his prison literature classes. These approaches, along with *Writing Our Way Out*, are critical for countering monolithic conceptions of people who are incarcerated. The stereotypes circulating in the public sphere are counterproductive to the shift in public opinion needed for meaningful intervention in the broken U.S. criminal justice system. As a counterpublic text, this book provides a valuable blueprint for scholars, educators, and activists to become part of the intervention, and ultimately, the solution.

Endnotes

1. While referring to Coogan by his last name and the workshop participants by their first names might suggest a hierarchical relationship, I have chosen to use the participants' first names, as is done throughout the book.
2. For a more detailed discussion of ethical best practices with incarcerated writers, see Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015).

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Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle Edited by Linda A. Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell

New York: Routledge, 2009. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Anthony Dwayne Boynton, II
Georgia College & State University

Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell's anthology of essays is an invitation to literacy activists to stand up for the education of historically marginalized communities and a guide of culturally relevant pedagogy for the teachers fatigued by the monotony of the canon. The teacher-scholars featured in *Toward a Literacy of Promise* not only ask us to consider joining in this culturally responsive pedagogy, a literacy of promise, but offer us a comprehensive look at the challenges marginalized groups have faced in classrooms while bestowing feasible solutions to the archaic demands of historically conservative pedagogy. Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will thoroughly enjoy this text for it is seminal for any teacher engaging with millennial students. The essayists mark this generation as new readers of everything, of texts, images, their lives and society, critically defining literacy as an engagement and the "ability to function in the world" (152). The literacy of promise is a hope toward a more whole and liberal, truly liberating, education and classroom.

This text is organized well, containing a foreword by Lisa Delpit, an introduction by Rebecca Powell, and then three sections that work as a pathway to progressive education in the 21st century. Each of the ten chapters end in discussion questions to reflect on and further the chapter's details and activities that bring theory and practice to the fore.

Powell's introduction, chapter one, defines the literacy of promise as "a literacy that potentially empowers students and teachers and that gives them a voice. A literacy of promise requires students to negotiate meaning and to be actively engaged in discerning relationships of power and repression in society" (xiii). Literacy here is magnified conceptually beyond simply reading the written word; instead, literacy—as a concept—invites learners of all kinds to read their lives and experiences as

