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Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison

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Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison

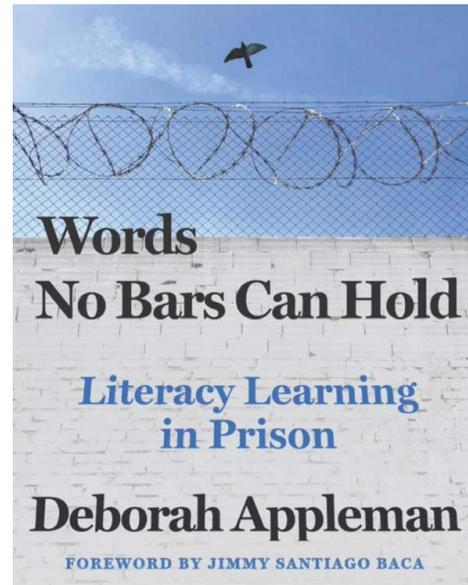
Deborah Appleman

W.W. Norton and Company, 2019, pp.160

Reviewed by Walter Lucken IV

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In my time facilitating a creative writing workshop at a state prison outside Detroit, I have often questioned the function of my work. Especially given my own commitments to abolitionist politics, the precis of my late-night ponderings is essentially the extent to which I and my work function as an extension of the carceral state. I don't expect to find a hard and fast answer, and I suspect that if I did it would be something along the lines of "both/and." However, I will say for certain that I was glad to see Deborah Appleman interrogate the "what for" of prison literacy education in her recent monograph *Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison*.



Appleman's book takes as its central conceit the notion that the traditional value afforded to a liberal arts education, rather than being inappropriate for incarcerated writers, can in fact find its truest form amongst incarcerated students. In the first chapter, which doubles as the introduction, Appleman sets up this proposal by noting that vocational programs in prisons are much easier to make a case for than liberal arts education or arts programming, in that they prepare returning citizens for gainful employment, often in skilled trades positions. Liberal arts education and arts programming, on the other hand, have little demonstrable value in economic terms. One can make a case that these programs lower recidivism and support incarcerated students in learning the skills and dispositions appropriate for their life after release, and indeed I and many others do. The fatal flaw in this argument, however, is that it leaves out those incarcerated for life, who ostensibly will never leave prison, a not insignificant portion of the incarcerated. For these prospective students, any education they undertake will only benefit them in the context of their lives in prison, leaving few avenues for argumentation in the favor of such an enterprise, at least in the current *doxa*.

Indeed, the value of a liberal arts education has been in question for decades in the United States, including for "traditional" students, even those who enjoy the most privilege. For Appleman and myself, then, this places us in the position of arguing that our society should afford a privilege to its most maligned members which it is increasingly unwilling to grant to its most valued young people. Appleman takes up this challenge with courage and resolve in the following chapters, arguing that to make a case for the value of liberal arts education and literacy learning for those serving

life sentences is to make a case for its value writ large, in that the incarcerated are the only students in a position to seek the true benefits of education for their own sake, as their circumstances obviate the potential for education to be used as a means to any end other than itself.

The second chapter details the environment in which Appleman's prison courses take place, a scene which any prison educator will find immediately familiar. This is to say that Appleman is masterful in her narration of the experience of entering the physical world of the incarcerated as a person who otherwise spends most of their time in the academic environment, and how the experience of physically entering and teaching in prison frames the entire experience. I found this to be the case myself, in that learning how to manage the anxiety I felt in the carceral environment was my greatest challenge at first, much more than managing the workshop itself or even building relationships with my co-participants. In short, Appleman notes that simply being in the prison is sometimes the most important lesson, and to an extent an important precondition for truly understanding the importance of prison education.

The second chapter explores the contradictions of liberal arts learning and critical pedagogy in a carceral environment, and how those contradictions can serve as a helpful opportunity to rethink the ways that we've understood the liberating role of education historically. Beginning with an anecdote in which a student recounts to Appleman how her pedagogical choices reflect, in his estimation, the values professed by Paulo Freire, the chapter goes on to engage the notion that liberal arts education is particularly helpful for incarcerated students insofar as it can assist them in reframing their personal narratives. This is to say that with the new vistas that literacy learning affords them, incarcerated students can begin to understand their self-concept in terms beyond the choices that led them to prison or even the circumstances which fomented those choices. In short, Appleman argues that education as the development of "intelligence plus character", as Martin Luther King Jr. puts it, is not only particularly appropriate, but vital to incarcerated learners.

Next, in "No Hugs for Thugs", Appleman explores how the logics of surveillance and control which underpin the carceral environment present serious impediments to the cultivation of genuine relationships between prison educators and their students, that is, the relationships which many of us rely on as the ultimate condition of possibility for any genuine learning to take place. This chapter particularly resonated with me as well, in that I too do my work in a facility in which any physical contact beyond a handshake is expressly forbidden, and a state in which I am to have no contact with any inmate in the Michigan Department of Corrections for the entirety of my time as a registered volunteer. Thus, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I have relied on secondhand communication for any update on how my collaborators are doing and had extremely limited opportunities to solicit input from them while engaged in the editing and publishing of their work. I know well the dilemmas Appleman recounts in the chapter, and I found this chapter to get closer to the narrative unconscious that I either perceived or projected while working my way through the chapters: abolition. This is to say that, in this chapter especially, but throughout the rest of the book as well, Appleman's account of her experiences points to the carceral

state as a major obstruction to human flourishing and development in the contemporary United States. Thus, to me, Appleman's book underscores that the modern prison system functions as an impediment to the normative goals and commitments of all educators, whether they directly work inside prisons or not.

The next chapter considers the concrete role of literacy education and related enterprises in supporting incarcerated writers in their efforts to be granted parole, seek their own release, ask for re-sentencing, and so on. At the risk of repeating myself, this too was a familiar story for me. As I write this review, the prosecutor's office in Michigan's most populous county (which includes Detroit) continues to stall the re-sentencing of more than one hundred people, mostly men, who were sentenced to life as juveniles prior to such sentences being declared unconstitutional by 2012's *Miller v. Alabama* decision in the United States Supreme Court. This cohort includes a few of my collaborators, namely Yusuf Qualls-El and Stephen Hibbler, the latter of which maintains his innocence. Thus, the role of prison literacy education as a vehicle for students to literally "write their way out of prison", as the chapter's title puts it, is underscored by the extent to which this is a primary objective for many students.

The next chapter, which includes a few beautiful selections of poetry from Appleman's students, considers the role of literacy in helping these incarcerated writers manage their mental health, specifically from the perspective of the state's legal obligations to those it incarcerates. This would likely be a controversial argument if only for the fact that, as noted above, the so-called privileges this scenario would extend to incarcerate people are indeed privileges which our society currently declines to afford universally. Appleman seems to imply, and I will state explicitly, that in fact guaranteeing such rights to the incarcerated can be a vehicle for making a case for the extension of those rights to all, particularly in a society which incarcerates people at the rate that the United States does.

The next chapter examines the relationships that Appleman's students had to schools and education prior to coming to prison, and how in many ways the attitudes and structures of the public school system can fail young people and contribute to their later incarceration. Taking the commonplace notion of the "school to prison pipeline" as her point of departure alongside her simultaneous roles teaching in a public high school as well as the prison, she narrates how she finds herself wondering how many of the young men and women who slip through the cracks of the education system will ultimately end up in prison, and how early interventions in public school students' lives might help them avoid later incarceration. While in earlier chapters I sometimes found myself wondering how Appleman's arguments might be augmented with an abolitionist intervention, it was this chapter where I found myself being most critical, in that Appleman narrates how the benefits of literacy education might prevent incarceration as well as reduce the violence of incarceration, or in rare cases end it for an individual. When we move to the structural level though, it is important to recognize that mass incarceration is the result of an explicit and intentional decision on the part of the United States to utilize incarceration as a means of resolving social problems, as opposed to the outcome of failures in other social systems.

The final chapter includes a few more stunning pieces of writing by Appleman's students and ends on the note that if we are going to keep people in prisons, we must keep them human. In this way, Appleman connects back to her earlier claim, that liberal arts education, rather than being inappropriate for the carceral environment, indeed finds its fullest expression in such a context. Thus, Appleman's ultimate claim is that to incarcerate people without offering them access to the things that make them human in fact runs counter to the normative purpose of incarceration, which is of course rehabilitating incarcerated people and supporting their transition into society upon their release. In this sense, Appleman continues her earlier line of argumentation wherein liberal arts education not only finds its fullest expression in the carceral context but is also vital for the well being of those who reside there, skillfully coming full circle in the transition to the epilogue.

Appleman ends by recounting the recent murder of a corrections officer by an incarcerated person in the facility where she teaches, illuminating another ever-present aspect of prison literacy education, one which we must in some ways ignore to go on about our work. Namely, the unending cycles of violence and brutality which permeate the carceral system. In a sense, this is an especially sobering point to end on, which I for one appreciate. The fact is that the victories and accomplishments we relish so much in prison literacy education are made even more meaningful by the greater context of despair and injustice which surrounds them, which sadly means that the unjust nature of the carceral system is in many ways the condition of possibility for the work which we find so meaningful.

In *Words No Bars Can Hold*, I found a great deal of helpful reflection and insight about prison literacy education, not only by recognizing this work in my own experiences but also seeing the ways in which Appleman's courses and students are different from my own. Prison educators, a small but meaningful community, will greatly benefit from Appleman's book and its courageous efforts to sift through the contradictions of literacy teaching in prison. Advocates for prison reform and abolition who do not teach in prisons will also find important insight here, most notably how incarceration curtails and forecloses on many of the values we hold most important. Also, anyone concerned with literacy education, liberal arts education, and the arts will find Appleman's book to be of great import, not least because of the current emphasis on criminal justice reform and abolitionist politics in those realms, but because Appleman's thoughts have great importance for the future of literacy learning writ large in the twenty-first century.

In this review, I have critiqued *Words No Bars Can Hold* for not going further in its analysis of the purpose of incarceration. Put simply, I suggest that to fully realize the promise of the book, we need to go beyond the liberal reformist framework that Appleman ultimately remains within. This is not to say that I do not understand possible reasons for doing so; I certainly exercise great caution in how I make certain arguments in certain contexts as well, for reasons Appleman makes clear. Namely, the potential consequences for our missteps as prison educators are always most acutely experienced by our incarcerated students and collaborators. In closing, I merely suggest that the costs of waiting for the right moment are now greater than the costs of stepping toward the abolitionist horizon, both in and out of prison literacy classrooms.