



Hummingbird in Underworld: Teaching in a Men's Prison

Deborah Tobola

She Writes Press (Jul 23, 2019)

Softcover \$16.95 (205pp)

978-1-63152-505-6

Hummingbird in Underworld is a treasure of a book in multiple ways. It flits back and forth over razor-wire fences, twining memories from life on the outside into Deborah Tobola's account of her stretch as facilitator of a creative program at a California men's prison.

A motif of returning to the point of departure casts its spell over the book. On the night of her birth, Tobola's mother's lengthy labor allowed her dad to return to work, helping other prison guards search for an escaped inmate. Decades later, Tobola returned to that same prison to launch a program designed to aid and abet future released prisoners' escapes from incarceration's revolving door.

As if they live elsewhere, inmates refer to life on the outside as the "real world." *Hummingbird* turns this distinction inside out: it's within the prison walls that its real story, in real time, featuring real people, unfolds.

Within prison walls, words, phrases, and anecdotes are meted out like gold. On her first visit to the chief deputy warden's office, Tobola mistakes a guard-tower sculpture as a lighthouse. "What am I doing here?" she asks herself. Suddenly, she knows. "I will build a lighthouse ... shining in the darkness."

Before entering her program, inmates may have been content to pass or waste time, but Tobola's program forbids time to waste or pass prisoners by. Whether they were helping her with administrative tasks, expressing themselves through poetry, writing plays, composing music, or performing, a prisoner's value became apparent. Her memoir recalls prisoner comfort zones expanding, incorporating that taboo realm where hopes and dreams of life beyond prison reside.

While Tobola's beacon shines upon the virtues and vices of those living and working in prisons, *Hummingbird* also ventures into the self-serving politics, businesses, and unions lurking in the darkest corners of the prison system itself.

LINDA THORLAKSON (July/August 2019)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.