



Tales of a Jailhouse Librarian: Challenging the Juvenile Justice System One Book at a Time

Marybeth Zeman

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Sharing moving anecdotes about a juvenile detention center library, Zeman offers insight into literacy, society, and growing up.

As a librarian at a jail for juvenile offenders, Marybeth Zeman has collected anecdotes from her years of experience working with boys old enough to commit serious crimes but still young enough to discover that reading books can be a transformative experience. *Tales of a Jailhouse Librarian* provides a short glimpse into that experience, showing both the frustration and the inspiration Zeman gets from her interactions with the offenders.

Zeman begins by introducing readers to the kind of boys she meets in the context of her job, and the hard realities of their existence. She describes one boy who asks her for help getting permission to attend the funeral of his brother. Another talks with her about his family losing their home in a hurricane and reaches out to her for help locating them. One, in jail for taking part in a gang-related murder, wants to get his GED and improve his English.

Because she works in a facility for juveniles who will eventually be released or transferred to facilities for adults, Zeman sees her role as doing what she can to help educate her charges in the limited time she has with them. As she puts it, she has the boys “here and now. Maybe for an instant. Maybe a couple of months. The question always persists: What difference can I make?”

She answers this question mostly anecdotally. Later in the book, she does go beyond the stories of the interactions with inmates and provides some perspective on the larger issues facing the juvenile justice system in the United States. She cites statistics about high recidivism rates or the makeup of the system, providing enough general context for readers who are unfamiliar with it. Zeman writes in a first-person journal style and offers simple, relatable content.

This book describes one person’s experiences in a job most readers will know little about, relating stories about what it’s like day to day. Zeman makes it clear that her main challenge is listening to the stories of the jailed boys as they cycle through the system, their lives already disrupted forever, and trying to have a positive impact on those lives while she has the chance.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Summer 2014)

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