

CONDUIT FOR RESTORATION: THE PRISON LIBRARY

by

D. Jarvis London

At first glance, the collection of beige sandstone cottages assembled neatly in a pristine meadow seems like a unique hide-a-way college campus, or perhaps an exclusive retirement community. Every morning you can hear the sound of wild geese escaping the nearby game reserve as they soar in sorties that collide in the sky in disarray and look like tealeaves swirling against an invisible spoon. What provokes this early morning aeronautical protest? When the birds quiet down, and if you listen, you may detect the hum of an electrical fence. It stands in close proximity to a perimeter road, a road where state cars routinely prowl under the steely eyes of white and blue shirted officers, watching, observing, and guarding. Here, the birds are free, and as in any prison experience, this is a place where men struggle to control the stress created by time, dislocation, apathy, and a lifestyle of careless decision making.

This new penitentiary offers no parole, and here the library remains the last bastion of redemption. In March of 2000, the prison allowed me the opportunity to interview career writing hopeful, Louis Jenkins, an inmate who had recently been published. I arrived at the library early and congratulated Mr. Jenkins. I explained to this middle-aged gentleman that I really hoped he would let me exploit some of his insights. Lou revealed that this was not his first incarceration. He had worked in this very same library some fifteen years prior.

"The library service offers many diverse opportunities. In another library I took care of handing out the newspapers." He pointed to a large section of the library, places where patrons poured over papers from various communities.

"Most people look at the local crime section first, then the obits, or the sports section, to find out who got busted, who died, and who won. This is a very large group of light readers who often feel the need to stay contemporary with what's going on in their communities. They often read the various ethnic periodicals and the library is very supportive of multicultural interests and the need for the individual to defeat the dislocation of being separated from their culture of origin."

I noted to Lou that this is a minimum-security facility, yet it seemed that security or corrections is a priority here. Why is that?

"Like me, most people here are returnees, and before we get out, we will know the rules," he replied.

I asked him what job he had when he worked at this library.

"I was taught how to use the computer to order books from the interlibrary loan service. At the time we were allowed to watch videos. This library had a wonderful storehouse of videos. The governor banned videos in 1994," he said.

"With more than 10,000 books on the shelves, why in the world would anybody need to go outside the institution via interlibrary loan to find a book?" I asked.

"Many people read many things," Lou replied. "The fact is that any real library provides a resource for the individual to fully research a project. Or, if you happen to be experiencing a very long sentence and you have read every book on the shelves by Denis Johnson, or you need an issue of *The New Yorker* to read what he has done lately ... we are disconnected beings who need to find the conduit. Before you ask me to explain that comment, I want you to take a look at a friend of mine."

He pointed to the law library; another section separate but enclosed in the same general area as the library.

"That's Jake Mansell, one of the convicts I know intimately from our days of violating the drug code. We used to call him Ziggy, the leader of a gang of aging junkies who shot heroin and worked false covers every day until they either died or overdosed and ended up in this penitentiary. I never knew he was a diabetic, or that he has an esoteric knowledge of the law concerning SSI entitlements. He has fully researched an intricate discrimination claim. As we say, hope springs eternal in the law library."

I asked him what he meant by this.

"I've worked in the law library, but before I worked as a clerk, I wanted to know about my crime, why I was an offender, the depth of my victimization, and the defenses I could have employed. What I really discovered was the vastness of the system. Learning law was hard. I began to feel like I could identify my problem and become part of a solution. Finally, working in the law library was not for the purpose of introspection. The demands of helping others, encouraging and directing at times, brought me out of my self-imposed isolation."

"Is that where you began to write?" I asked.

"A lot of things influenced me, mostly good librarians, and yes, the law library made me adhere to the type of discipline I needed, the challenge of sitting and working within a highly structured framework, looking up words, and researching dull case law gave me a greater sense of an objective perspective."

"You ever win any litigation?"

"Well, I doubt if I'd still be here if I had that sort of success. But what I learned is like what the author Jane Smiley says.... the real center of your existence is within your work... What you do, you will do. I learned how to take my time and use it to build a bridge back to the real world. The library has been a safety valve for my sanity. From the first time I had a letter to the editor published and I realized I still had a First Amendment Right to speak my mind, I knew I was still alive."

"Tell me a little bit about the other services that bring people into the library," I asked.

"A number of our clientele are not literary types. Many aren't even literate. Yet the library is a place they can come to relax. I'm not talking about leisure time relaxation. We don't do that, but it

is important to realize that this is not idle time. If you're not busy doing something, you're busy being institutionalized. The library offers telephone numbers, addresses, catalogs, and magazines in order to assist in finding out things you need to know. Sometimes offenders find it difficult to submit to programs that are assessed as an institutional need (an evaluation that might denote an educational or vocational need) and thus he may be reluctant to expose his weakness in that area. Without incentives like parole, it may become easier for a convicted felon to believe he can fall back on the base nature of characters who have been the not-so-successful manipulators or strong arm artists who end up back here time and time again. As the world outside moves ahead in technological and culturally diverse advances, the more archaic and obsolete those beast of burden talents become. There is a gap in our lives and the library can be the conduit to establish a sense of continuity we need to stay current."

D. Jarvis London wrote this article while at Oakhill Correctional Institution, Oregon, Wisconsin. He has since been transferred to Thompson Correctional Center where he continues to write short stories. He has worked as a volunteer in the "Books on Tape" program which helped him do what his first librarian suggested—that he read a book before trying to write one.