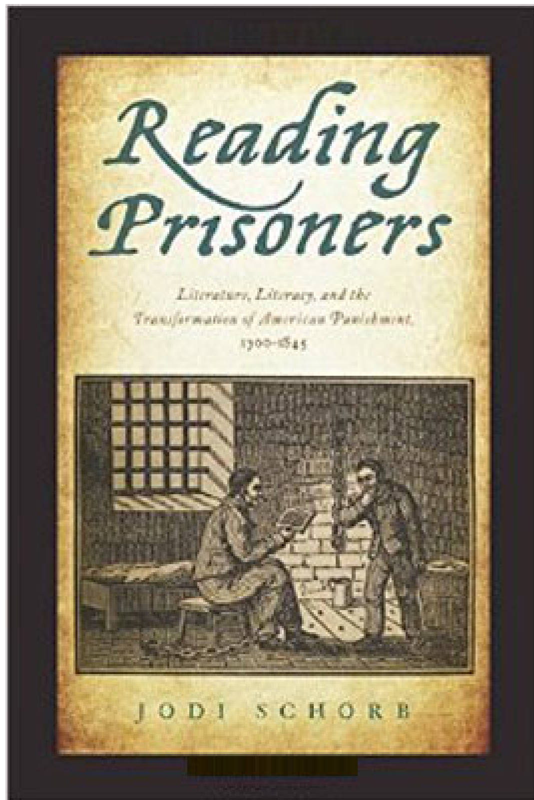
Reading, Writing, and Punishment



In *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845*, Jodi Schorb, an associate professor of English at the University of Florida, extends and revises the historiography of literacy, punishment, and incarceration during the long eighteenth century in British North America and the early United States. Schorb focuses on "the origins, purpose, and development of reading, writing, and education behind bars" to "analyze what kinds of 'literate' prisoners entered print and why." Ultimately, Schorb's goal is to "construct a narrative that has heretofore only been told in fragments: the literacy history of early American jails and the nation's formative penitentiaries" (6). Schorb achieves this goal in two tightly argued chronological parts—"Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century 'Gaol'" and "Literacy in the Early Penitentiary."

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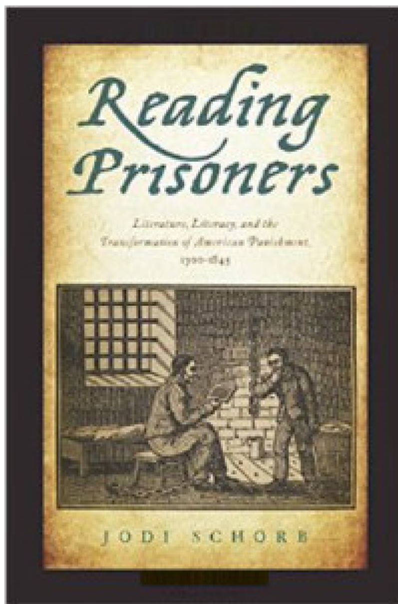
In part one, Schorb analyzes execution narratives and sermons to trace the emergence of the "literate prisoner" in the print sphere of eighteenth-century British North America. Chapter one demonstrates that "prisoner literacy was crucial to the meaning-making power of public punishment in colonial America, particularly but not exclusively in New England" (19-20). "Put bluntly," Schorb

writes, “executing criminals triggered early America’s interest in prisoner literacy,” propelling the “reading prisoner” into print. Schorb deploys the term “reading prisoner” as noun and verb: “the prisoner who reads” and “the act of interpreting the prisoner who reads” (20). Frequently, such as in the narrative of Native American (possibly Monomoyick) Joseph Quasson, prisoners modeled “intensive and reflective reading habits” that led to the possibility of “spiritual redemption” (30). By the mid- to late eighteenth century, as the colonial print sphere expanded, the criminal narrative shifted. Narratives became less spiritual, and more heterogeneous and autobiographical (44).



Jodi Schorb, *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014. 256 pp., $39.95.

By the late eighteenth century, a new prisoner emerged into print: the “writing prisoner.” Unlike the criminal narratives of the colonial period, the criminal narratives of the early Republic no longer relied exclusively on ministers as the arbitrators of truth and authenticity. Prisoners shared their first-person perspectives and experiences as they attempted to authenticate their own narratives. They imagined their audience “as an alternative court of opinion” and hoped that their writings would influence their own fate in a positive manner (49). Schorb analyzes the writing prisoner within the contexts of the spread of “written literacy and writing pedagogy” as well as an “eighteenth-century crisis in authenticity” (50). Schorb’s analytical frame is productive when it comes to interpreting counterfeit notes and narratives penned by counterfeiters such as Owen Syllavan, John Potter, Joseph Bill Packer, and Stephen Burroughs. Although counterfeiters were a diverse bunch, they shared the quality of being masters of written literacy and often worked as schoolmasters or writing instructors at least once in their lives (75). By the end of the eighteenth century, the reading public looked at currency and the writing prisoner who circulated in print with uncertainty. Should Americans

celebrate the writing prisoner as a folk hero? Or condemn the writing prisoner as a deviant, potentially dangerous, other? It was at this historical moment as the writing prisoner rose to prominence, Schorb argues, that reformers such as Benjamin Rush began to argue in favor of removing criminals from public view to behind the walls of a new institution, the penitentiary.

In part two, Schorb follows the criminal into the penitentiary "to explore how the birth of a new form of imprisonment created new logics and rationales for educating prisoners, as well as new justifications for promoting or obstructing prisoners' literacy practices, including their writing" (95). Chapter three focuses on the literary practices of prisoners confined inside Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison and Eastern State Penitentiary. In Schorb's telling, officials at Walnut Street were ambivalent about the reformative potential of education. Instead, they focused most of their efforts on training prisoners to labor at one of the prison's industries. In 1798, inspector Caleb Lownes established a school inside the prison. The school's curriculum focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic; not religion. The school closed after Lownes departed the prison in 1799. Schorb pulls no punches in her section on Walnut Street: "Pennsylvania's prison defenders, administrators, and philanthropic reformers did little to promote education" (118).

By the 1820s, as Schorb notes, overcrowding and prisoners' resistance to confinement led Philadelphians to replace the Walnut Street Prison with the Eastern State Penitentiary. After seven years of construction, the Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829 (113). Unlike at Walnut Street, where prisoners worked together in workshops and sleep together in apartments, prisoners at Eastern State spent the entirety of their sentences isolated inside solitary cells. The meticulous ledgers of the penitentiary's moral instructor, Thomas Larcombe, indicate that many inmates worked diligently to acquire reading and writing literacy while confined in their solitary cells (126). It was not until 1844, perhaps in response to Charles Dickens's scathing criticism of the Eastern State Penitentiary in his *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) that "inspectors articulated a sudden determination to make reading, writing, and arithmetic instruction a 'prominent ingredient in the discipline of the prison'" (127). Consequently, officials appointed two schoolteachers; and by 1846, the penitentiary's library held approximately 1,600 texts and continued to grow each year (129-130).

In chapter four, Schorb moves north to analyze New York's first three state penitentiaries: Newgate, Auburn, and Sing Sing. Despite being modeled on the Walnut Street Prison, prisoners at Newgate had more educational opportunities than did their Pennsylvania counterparts. In 1799, two years after Newgate opened, inspector Thomas Eddy established a convict-led school inside the institution (147-149). Even after Eddy's departure from Newgate in 1804, inmate-run night schools continued under prison chaplain John Stanford. "Reverend Stanford's reputation," Schorb argues, "sustained, spread, and legitimized Newgate's educational experiments in convict-led education" (155). Just as at the Walnut Street Prison, overcrowding and inmate resistance to

confinement led to the eventual abandonment of Newgate and the construction of two new state penitentiaries: Auburn and Sing Sing.

Unlike at the Eastern State Penitentiary, inmates at Auburn and Sing Sing labored in silence inside large workshops during the day and spent their evenings locked inside individual cells. At these institutions, officials were, for the most part, concerned more with maintaining discipline than promoting inmate education. During the 1820s and 1830s, in a series of published narratives that often referred to one another, New York inmates entered into prison debates to criticize the state's penitentiaries. Schorb calls the process, in which one inmate's writing of a prison exposé inspired another inmate to write a prison exposé, "congregate literacy effects" (146). Schorb illustrates the profitability of this analytical term through analyses of the writings of inmates W.A. Coffey, John Maroney, Levi S. Burr, and James Brice.

Throughout part two of *Reading Prisoners*, Schorb demonstrates that many officials and overseers in the nation's two premier penitentiary systems, Pennsylvania and New York, viewed inmate reading, writing, and education with ambivalence. They were much more concerned with establishing and maintaining strict discipline over inmates. Inmates, on the other hand, avidly pursued prison educational opportunities when available. According to Schorb, "Inmates most often assessed opportunities for reading, writing, and education as signs of the institution's recognition of their humanity" (184).

Schorb positions imprisoned authors' perspectives at the center of *Reading Prisoners*. This helps readers understand the crucial roles that reading and writing prisoners played in the development of American literature and American penitentiary systems. Besides the notable exception of Austin Reed's 1858 *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, Schorb's sources of prisoner writing are primarily published accounts. Schorb's claims about inmate writing, especially by men and women confined within Pennsylvania's first two penitentiaries, might have been strengthened by incorporating unpublished writings. For instance, during the 1820s, prisoners confined in the Walnut Street Prison wrote Philadelphia Mayor Joseph Watson to complain about poor treatment and to request pardons. James Morton, an inmate at the Eastern State Penitentiary, kept a diary during his final year of a seven-year sentence for forgery during the early 1850s. In the diary, Morton chronicled the history of Christianity, identified numerous conspiracy theories, commented on the Eastern State Penitentiary, and wrote brief letters to penitentiary officials. Likewise, in an 1862 series of letters and poems addressed to fellow Eastern State inmate Albert Jackson Green, Elizabeth Velora Elwell discussed love, life, and the loneliness of solitary confinement. A greater attention to prisoners' unpublished writings would complement Schorb's small archive of prisoners' published writings and shed further light on prisoners' perspectives on incarceration and literacy behind bars.

Reading Prisoners engages with multiple historiographies and deserves a wide readership. Scholars who study literacy, the history of the book, gallows

literature, crime, punishment, and incarceration in eighteenth-century British North America and the early United States will profit from reading Schorb's text. *Reading Prisoners* also speaks to our present historical moment. As Americans reassess their nation's mammoth, costly, and deadly carceral state, Schorb's arguments provide a useful historical primer on the alleged goals of incarceration, the meaning of "reform," and the benefits of prison educational programs.

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