



Author's Foreword

Growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, I never imagined the world of women behind bars. Like most Americans, I thought of criminals as people who deserved to be punished and left it at that. Convicts were male, and if I saw a woman on the news who got in trouble with the law, I considered her “damaged goods.”

But from an early age, I was interested in theatre, literature, and writing, and fascinated with the characters I met in books, characters with the power to influence my sense of who I could become. Anouilh's Joan of Arc taught me to take risks in spite of fear; Harper Lee's Atticus Finch guided me to be compassionate and wise in the face of hatred; Emily Webb from *Our Town* allowed me to know the importance of living life in the moment. So it wasn't surprising that when the 1960s came and my midwestern horizons were blown apart as assumptions about America began to crumble, I found myself in the Bay Area, in the audience of former inmate Rick Cluchey's *The Cage*, a play performed by ex-prisoners from San Quentin. I was

taken less by the content of the play—a nightmare of violence that pitted men against guards—than by the incredible talent of the performers. The image of artists in prison as a cage with men struggling to be free stuck in my mind. When my old Volkswagen bug with the “Question authority” bumper sticker edged its way back to the East Coast, I began to think more about freedom and about using my drama major to reach kids who were in trouble with the law or with themselves. I wanted to use theatre as a means of self-expression, as a vehicle for deeper reflection and as a way out of trapped lives.

Teachers do this every day. Without fame or fanfare, they build courage. They reach into their bag of books and out comes a story. Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* touches the little Chicano girl who wants to be a writer and allows her to dream. The short fat girl who longs to be lanky and tall has only to read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to find company in Pecola's struggles. Like Annie Sullivan, a teacher can be a miracle worker.

But I wasn't a teacher, had never been a teacher, had no qualifications to be a teacher, and so I started out with a wing and a prayer.

First I worked in private schools, and years before I landed at Middlesex Community College where I currently teach, I taught high school girls who were not able to function in a regular school setting. Still, as much as I relished the opportunity to affect their thinking, it was difficult spending day in and day out in the dark night of another's soul. These students would come back to school from a weekend away with knives in their laundry bags; they'd hitchhike late at night and pick up strange men who might offer them drugs or sex. Therapists called it “acting out.” Some saw these girls as lost, on the edge of permanent despair.

As a teacher I wanted to give them hope. I sought out texts that pulled them out of themselves but in a strange way more deeply into

themselves. Helen Keller's struggle to learn in *The Miracle Worker* gave them perspective; *Cyrano de Bergerac* made them question love; *The Raisin in the Sun* taught them about racism and fear. Theatre opened them up; it gave them a chance to say things through the safety net of another's words. They enjoyed portraying the uppity wives in *No Time for Comedy* as much as best friends Pooh and Christopher Robin in *Winnie the Pooh*. And then I lucked upon Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

It's not that I had always loved Shakespeare. In fact, the opposite was true. Growing up, I was afraid of Shakespeare. He seemed out of reach, someone I would never understand. I stumbled through *Macbeth* in junior high and *Julius Caesar* a year or so later. Then I met Miss Hutchison.

Miss Hutchison was a teacher my mother fell in love with at Walnut Hills High. Any mention of Miss Hutchison was accompanied by sighs and faraway looks. I imagined Miss Hutchison as some sort of Superwoman, able to leap over dull minds and unlock any negativity in the classroom, and I waited all through high school, hoping I would get put in Advanced English and be assigned to her classroom. When I placed into Advanced Math but not into Advanced English, I moped around the house, sure I'd never get into a good college. Then I got my schedule and found that Miss Hutchison taught one class of seniors besides the advanced group and, lo and behold, I was in it.

I am sitting in the front of the room, first day, first row, staring up at a petite woman who's wearing pearls. Everything about her is tailored, and she has the slimmest ankles and wrists I've ever seen. She speaks in almost hushed tones. I study her body, her lined face surrounded by pearl gray hair; I listen to her well-pronounced words, waiting all the while for some spark, some nugget of wisdom that will send me

into the kind of rapture my mother feels. After class I go up to her and tell her I am "Amy's daughter." She nods and smiles at me, says something about what a good student my mother was, a tasteful acknowledgment, the tiniest sort of recognition, but it's clear that this happens often, meeting the children of those she's taught. I am simply the daughter of Amy, and let's see what that will mean, she seems to say with her distant welcoming smile.

A few weeks later, Miss Hutchison comes from behind the desk and sits on its top, her stockinged legs dangling over the side. I am shocked, seeing this paragon of propriety sitting on top of a school desk. What she talks to us about, I don't remember, but I am in absolute awe at those legs, so casually crossed at the ankles, and at her sense of ease in front of her class. When we study *The Scarlet Letter*, she talks about Hester Prynne with the same sort of admiration in her eyes that I saw in my mother's when I told her what book I was reading. I imagine Miss Hutchison running through woods with her pearls, meeting someone handsome in a cloak. I dream in scarlet. I memorize Chaucer's "When that Aprile with his sure soot hath doused every rain in swiche liquor," and when Miss Hutchison hears me say it aloud, she laughs warmly and says, "Just like your mother." I start getting A's on tests.

Then she assigns *Hamlet* and asks us each to do one of his monologues in front of the class. I spend weeks memorizing "To be or not to be," and I think about what I'd look like if I had to wear a costume. I imagine myself in pantaloons and a crushed velvet vest with a beret. I practice at home, saying the words out loud to myself in the bathroom mirror. When I finally perform in front of the room, I can feel myself gesturing to the ceiling, Hamlet's tortured question going back and forth as I pace from one side of the room to the other. I end, looking out over the classroom, above the heads of all my fellow students, believing I am the confused, undecided Dane. Then I take my seat,

breathless, waiting. Miss Hutchison comes to the front of the room, takes her place on that desk and tells the class I am a “splendid Hamlet.” She says I understand the rhythm of Shakespeare’s language.

It took a teacher to lead me to Shakespeare. Years later, when I teach, I always sit on the top of my desk, my legs dangling over the side.

My students too had no commerce with the Bard. But when I told them the story, they listened. When we read the play aloud, they were anything but voiceless. They thought Petruchio had hunk potential. They thought Bianca had an attitude problem. They liked Kate’s gutsiness. And much like the women I met years later at Framingham, they laughed at every sexual reference, wanted to read aloud, and all raised hands to act out scenes in the classroom. Of course this was after weeks of work, hours of agony on my part worrying about each class. But isn’t that what a teacher does? She delves into her job with everything she has, and in spite of all the obstacles she faces from the school itself and the system that supports it, finds those stories that resonate for her students. *The Taming of the Shrew* resonated. I wanted to put my students’ energy to use, give them a chance to experience their potential, engage their emotions and allow words to make a difference. But Shakespeare had the ideas, the characters, the humor, and the pathos. It was here where I first saw that Shakespeare had the power to engage the disengaged. The text was the teacher.

After a few years, I yearned to teach in a more traditional high school, thinking I’d get some distance from my students’ inner lives, and hoping for what I imagined was teaching the mind. I told myself I was tired of wading around in the mire of the heart. I went back to school while teaching, earned my certification, and leapt at the chance to work in a public high school setting. I was surprised. At my first

job, most of the students were less “trouble,” but the ones I was most attracted to, those who stayed after school, often told me about themselves, and had their own brand of pressures. Books touched their lives too. *Romeo and Juliet* spoke to the love they all imagined they might find; Elie Wiesel's *Night* taught them that the opposite of love isn't hatred but indifference; *Of Mice and Men* asked them to question how they might treat their less fortunate brothers.

When the job offer came to work at Framingham in 1986—a chance to teach college classes in writing and literature—I imagined I'd have the best of both worlds: hard-working students from the 'burbs and hard-core criminals. I thought we all might learn from each other. I never imagined how much I needed to move away from my own stereotypes about women behind bars. In *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, I tell the story of how this occurred and I invite you into my discoveries of teaching those who feel that Shakespeare is beyond their grasp.

This book is my personal story of my ten-year journey inside a prison, but I have come to see that many teachers work with students whom others deem unteachable. When my community college students open their Shakespeare texts, I always remind them that they are not alone with their fears. I too felt I'd never understand Shakespeare. But if women in prison, who have every reason to give up on themselves, can break through their fears, then so can they.

What I did in prison can be adapted in classroom after classroom where teachers find students. And when I talk to teachers and students around the world, I find our objectives are not so different. All of us yearn to reach beyond our bars, and language and literature can open the human heart.

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