

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Prison Wisdom

I recently read a book called Prison Wisdom, by Katya Sabaroff Taylor. It is a collection of essays and poems from creative writing classes she taught in prisons along with excerpts from her correspondence with pen pals in prison. Having been in prison quite a while myself, I was curious to read what her students had written in her classes. Each class had a series of weekly prompts which all the participants did together and shared. Katya participated in all the writing prompts along with her students and she quotes both herself and others.

As I read the responses, I was transported to a fairyland, an idyllic place which exists only in the hearts and minds of those authors. The stories showed me another way of being in the world, another view point of what it all means. It opened my heart up to mystery, magic and imagination. There is a continuity of expression, perhaps because everyone was writing based on the same prompts. I prefer to believe it is because inside we are all the same. We have the same basic needs and desires, modified by our life experiences and personalities. Each story is unique and reveals the inner beauty of the writer. It was a joy to read each of the entries, to take a small break from reality and soar on the wings of their creations.

The section on prison pen pals was equally revealing but in a different way. Correspondence over a period of years enables the reader to see into the soul of the other person. What we won't expose to public view in our day to day lives often flows freely in a letter to a friend. Katya shares her soul and the souls of her pen pals with us when she quotes from the letters she exchanged over the years.

This book demonstrates that no matter what we have done in the past, or where we currently are in our lives, we all have goodness inside of us waiting to be shared with others. I hope everyone has an opportunity to read this book and experience their own trip to another place.

Also, for those who are committed to making the world a better place, Katya includes a list of prompts and tips on how to start your own creative writing group. You don't need to be in prison to benefit from getting together with a group of people and doing a little creative writing.