



Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845 (Critical Issues in Crime and Society)

Jodi Schorb

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Shining new light on early American prison literature—from its origins in last words, dying warnings, and gallows literature to its later works of autobiography, exposé, and imaginative literature—*Reading Prisoners* weaves together insights about the rise of the early American penitentiary, the history of early American literacy instruction, and the transformation of crime writing in the “long” eighteenth century.

Looking first at colonial America—an era often said to devalue jailhouse literacy—Jodi Schorb reveals that in fact this era launched the literate prisoner into public prominence. Criminal confessions published between 1700 and 1740, she shows, were crucial “literacy events” that sparked widespread public fascination with the reading habits of the condemned, consistent with the evangelical revivalism that culminated in the first Great Awakening. By century’s end, narratives by condemned criminals helped an audience of new writers navigate the perils and promises of expanded literacy.

Schorb takes us off the scaffold and inside the private world of the first penitentiaries—such as Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Prison and New York’s Newgate, Auburn, and Sing Sing. She unveils the long and contentious struggle over the value of prisoner education that ultimately led to sporadic efforts to supply prisoners with books and education. Indeed, a new philosophy emerged, one that argued that prisoners were best served by silence and hard labor, not by reading and writing—a stance that a new generation of convict authors vociferously protested.

The staggering rise of mass incarceration in America since the 1970s has brought the issue of prisoner rehabilitation once again to the fore. *Reading Prisoners* offers vital background to the ongoing, crucial debates over the benefits of prisoner education.

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