

Book Title: True Notebooks

Author: Mark Salzman

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Reviewer: Robert Zabel, Kansas State University

Mark Salzman is the author of acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction, including, *Lying Awake*, a Pulitzer Prize nominated novel. *Lying Awake* is the story of a nun who has visions of Christ only to discover that a brain tumor may be the catalyst for her visions. While Salzman was struggling to write *Lying Awake*, a friend invited him to visit a creative writing program at Central Juvenile Hall, a facility for the most violent juvenile offenders in the Los Angeles County Juvenile Corrections system. After he visited, his friend encouraged him to teach a writing class a couple times each week.

Initially, Salzman was unenthused: he had no prior experience with juvenile offender, questioned his ability to work with these kids, and doubted the value of creative writing, especially for these kids. And, it was too late to prevent or intervene, so what would be the point? He did, however, need an excuse to escape the daily grind of writing - "get out of the house" - and so he agreed to give it a try. *True Notebooks* is his account of the experience, including descriptions of his students, their behavior, their writing, and especially their discussions of one another's writing.

Like Salzman, the students and correctional staff initially were skeptical about the writing program. The students had little history of active engagement in education and had shown little capacity for critical thinking or interest in writing. Participation was voluntary and a privilege available to only a few. Some participants viewed the class simply as an opportunity to temporarily escape from the doldrums of incarceration; others as an opportunity to goof off. Many, at first, actively resisted serious involvement. Most of the correctional staff saw the program as unnecessary, undeserved, and potentially subversive of their authority.

Somewhat to his own surprise, he discovered that he liked his students, despite their violent histories. Some of his students used the opportunity to search for meaning in what they knew best, but had never examined - their life stories. Some were able to express exceptional insights, some expressed humor, some found a voice that no one, least of all themselves, realized they had. Some continued to goof off.

One student wrote, "Since I joined Mark's writing group I've noticed a lot of changes in my life. Writing has helped me open up to other people and have an open mind to their opinions. Writing has taught me a lot about myself that I never knew I had bottled up inside. Everybody thinks I'm a 'hardened criminal' because of the charges against me, but they don't know the real me. For most of my life I didn't even know the real me until writing helped me dig deep down inside and extract my true self...I'm glad to have been fortunate enough to be in this class. I believe it's been one of my most cherished experiences" (p. 275). That same student was later tried as an adult for murder and sentenced to life in prison.

As one who has spent my professional life thinking about children with

emotional/behavioral disorders and the people who teach them, I believe the greatest value of True Notebooks is Salzman's consideration of his motives for sharing his time, talents, and energy with these youth that most people prefer to punish, banish, and forget. As part of his self-examination, he recounts a conversation with his own father, who asked, "You say they're all bound for prison? Doesn't that depress you, knowing what's going to happen to them once they leave your class?" Salzman answered, " It sounds depressing if you think about it...but that's just it - I don't think about it. The boys keep me too busy to think. And I always leave the place feeling good, because I know we've done something worthwhile."

His father pressed him further: "Can you really do that? And not expect some kind of result, or feel that it has to lead to something else?" Salzman thought about that: "...wasn't there something to be said for teaching for the love of it? My favorite teachers as far as I could tell, had expected only that I learn. What I did with the knowledge after that was my own business, and then answered his father's question, 'Enjoyment is its own result...'" (pp. 227-228)

Special education teachers and others who work with students who have emotional/behavioral disorders operate on a low frequency, intermittent schedule of reinforcement. Salzman captures some of the central motives of people who choose to work with "bad kids" - the ability to see some worth in their lives, the challenge of daily uncertainties and surprises, an appreciation for even the smallest student gains, and a sheer enjoyment of the process.