

Disguised as a Poem

Judith Tannenbaum

Tannenbaum is a writer and teacher who is particularly interested in community arts and issues of cultural democracy. She has received two California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence grants. The first of these allowed her to teach poetry at San Quentin for three years; the second was for a three-year poetry project at the continuation high school in Albany, California, and at one of the town's primary schools. Each of these grant cycles lead to a book, Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin, is a memoir and Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades is a book for young people. Both books were published in the year 2000. She currently serves as training coordinator for San Francisco's WritersCorps program, a project of the San Francisco Arts Commission that places writers in community settings to teach creative writing to youth in need.

Poetry Investigator: Let's start with your book, describe how it came about, the students challenging you to write it. Had you already thought of doing a book?

When I was teaching at San Quentin I wrote poems, as always. Some of that work became a book length sequence that looked at prison from a variety of points of view. A few of the poems were in my voice, but most were in the voices of imagined people: staff, guards, prisoners, and people on the outside.

As a writer, I felt that I had been given a form true to how I see the world: a whole composed of multiple voices and angles of vision. Discovering the form of that sequence was a huge gift to me as a writer, very freeing. I felt I was the closest I had ever been to being able to write as I saw things.

I made rules for myself such as not to use any details from my students' lives, and not to represent any of the actual people I knew. But when I shared the poems with my prisoner students, one or two challenged me. They wanted to know what right I thought I had to write about their world, which was not my world.

The students who challenged me were asking important, intelligent, questions. They raised the precise concerns that mattered most to me. I agreed someone – in this case, me – coming in from the outside was responsible in the exact ways they said I was responsible.

My whole teaching life, I'd fought for my students' right to speak from their deepest vision; now I had to decide if I, too, had this right. Asking this question was very big for me as a writer and as a teacher. To be firm about my own right to speak was much harder than to insist on this same right for my students.

I had to fight – within myself – to claim my own voice and vision in writing these poems. Of course, I acknowledged that I was writing was “about” prison, but most deeply I felt I was writing “about” wholeness.

These poems are what I wrote. I never thought I would write a book about the experience of being at San Quentin. Though I did take a lot of notes, I don't think I had even an unconscious intention of writing that kind of a book.

PI: Was taking notes a technique you would use to write your poems?

I know many poets who carry notebooks, to jot down an image or a line.

Yes, it was that kind of note taking, or perhaps even more unintentional than that. I didn't think, “Oh I am going to use this information for poems.” What I felt was that I was in a world so different from what I'd previously known, and that few people got to see what I was seeing. I felt I had to notice well, remember well, and the note taking was toward that end.

PI: Even a week later you will filter your writing in a different way than if you are writing it down shortly after it happens.

I think I had many encouragements during those years to pay attention. First of all, I experienced those years at Quentin very intensely. And, as you said, writers write to process what our senses encounter. Also, my nature is to be reflective.

Additionally, I was doing a lot of writing for the Arts and Corrections program. During the last year of my grant, I was hired to write a manual for artists working in prison, and to create Arts in Corrections' newsletter.

So I was being asked – by my artistic and emotional nature, as well as by my bosses – to reflect. I was given a variety of opportunities to speak deeply.

PI: They wanted you to document your experience.

They wanted me to document and describe the experience many of us artists had in those years working in California prisons. Those days are so different from these.

PI: It seems like it might be harder to start the programs now.

In January 2003, California's Arts in Corrections was slashed. The program still exists, but in a completely different, and much reduced, form.

The experience I describe in my book isn't possible in California prisons any longer. For the decades of its existence, Arts in Corrections was the largest prison art program in the world.

But other states do have prison art classes and programs. There is a really fantastic program in Michigan, for example, called, "Prison Creative Arts Project" (PCAP). It was begun by Buzz Alexander, an English professor at the University of Michigan. He offers a class at the university in which students go into prison and teach, read about prison and community issues, and write and reflect on what they're learning.

One thing I would like to stress, especially for poets in MFA programs, is that there are many ways to make a living as a poet in addition to teaching in college. There's teaching in prisons, old folk's homes, working with youth. The field Bill Cleveland calls "Arts in Other Places," or, what's more commonly known as "community arts."

Despite budget cuts and public attitudes about prison, good work is always possible. Tory Sammartino is an incredible young woman who grew up in the Bronx. While still in college, Tory created a non-profit called "Voices Unbroken." She is 100% committed to erasing the separation between people on the outside and people in prison. Her passion comes from her own life experience growing up seeing someone on the street one day, and the next day they'd be in prison. Then, months or years later, there they'd be, back on the street.

Tory's a powerhouse. She works at Rikers, at other prisons around New York state, in re-entry and community-based programs. She is committed to training people in the community to do what she does, to lessen the separation between prisoner/free person, teacher/student. I'm so grateful to Tory and others like her who are shaping community arts in profound ways.

One question often asked is: when a poet is doing work in the world that is compelling, what does that mean for his or her own writing? In a way, our work in the world always feeds our writing. At the same time, most of the people who "teach" (share the power of writing) with all their heart and soul, often have less left to put into their own work.

PI: It does seem like you have to have a certain drive to accomplish your own work, then there are these other ways of being a poet, bringing poetry into your life and other people's lives. That can be compelling and consuming. The initial drive is loving poetry and wanting to write poetry. Then you have a shift in your focus.

This raises a huge question, one we talked a lot about when I worked at San Quentin. Bottomline, there is no perfect economic choice for an artist in this world. Any choice we make involves some compromise. Artist/facilitators with Arts in Corrections worked a forty-hour week for the Department of Corrections in exchange for earning enough money to raise a family, to buy a house, to count on some degree of job and retirement security. Those of us working as independent contractors never had enough money for anything most of the rest of the world values. Which continues to be true for me. I am fifty-six and don't have any retirement plan; if I'm going to have health insurance, I'm the one who has to pay for it.

These are personal matters that assume greater importance as I get older. But, as training coordinator with WritersCorp, I also wonder how these realities will affect the field. Many young people want to do this work and are really committed; many come themselves – like Tory – from the communities they want to serve, and have no financial resources to fall back on.

My time was different. In the seventies, when my daughter was born, we could live on next to nothing. There was a lot of social support for living on nothing. But it's hard to live on nothing these days. How is the next generation doing this work going to survive?

PI: If you look at the percentage of your income that has to go to rent as opposed to the percentage of income going to rent in the 1960's and 70's it is a dramatic change.

Exactly. A few years ago, during the dot com boom, I heard so many young people in San Francisco say something like: "Our friends are making mega bucks, what are we doing making 18,000 dollars a year at a non-profit?"

As I say, in the seventies – at least among many middle class whites in northern California! – there was almost a social agreement not to make much money but to be of use in this world. There was a lot more support for that kind of career choice.

Again, that's stating it from a personal point of view. Looking at it from the larger perspective of the work itself, of the field, the question is: will it be possible for people to do this kind of community arts work over the course of a whole life? Or is it going to be work they can only do for a few years before getting a job that will pay more money?

Another important question is the one we were referring to before: what is the cost to one's own writing of doing this work? It is cost and pleasure, both, because the amount of deep creative soul satisfaction there is working in prisons and community settings can, of course, nourish your writing. But it is hard to do both.

In many community arts programs I see, there is a way of perceiving art as what people make together, one's own work isn't separate from what's done with the community. I admire this, and I certainly have devoted most of my work life to community arts, but I hunger for time to write alone at my desk.

PI: Right, let's use that as a segue-way and talk about your book. You talked about the process of getting to the place of writing the book. Please talk about the writing process and how did you get your publisher. What was that process like for you?

I wrote *Disguised* because of Elmo, one of my San Quentin students. He told me on our last night of class, “Now I’m going to give *you* an assignment. Write about these years from your own point of view.”

Elmo’s assignment started me thinking about writing a book, and when I stopped teaching at Quentin, I began writing. At the same time, I got quite ill, and I knew I wouldn’t have the energy to both earn a living and write. I thought perhaps I could sell a book proposal and get an advance that would allow me to write.

I put a lot of energy out toward that end, got an enthusiastic agent and had some interest. Ultimately, though, nothing happened.

PI: What year was this?

1991. At that point, both my savings and I were completely depleted. In some way I felt I’d risked everything for this book, and all the material I’d amassed seemed negative somehow, tinged with danger. I put the proposal, research, notes, and writing in a box and thought: that’s it!

I went back to teaching poetry workshops with kids. Slowly, I began to get healthy again. I began to have more energy. In that condition, one day I opened the box. In reading the material, I realized how much I wanted to write about Quentin.

Although I was healthier, I still didn’t have enough energy to work and write, so I applied for residencies which would give me free room and board while I wrote. I got two residencies, one after the other, which together gave me almost four consecutive months to work on the book.

PI: So you had time to write and a place. Did they also give you a stipend?

No, but I gave everything up. I gave up my apartment and put my things in storage, so I didn’t have many expenses. All I had to do was get myself to the residencies.

PI: That is an interesting thing for people to know, that you didn’t have to get money, because you were willing to reduce your actual living expenses to almost zero.

Yes. If you are willing to live on very little, you have more freedom to do what you want to do. The world makes it harder and harder to make that choice, but it is still possible.

PI: It is strategy in how to use residencies.

It was mostly luck that I got those residencies back to back, but I did apply to many residencies hoping for such an outcome. The four months of residency time allowed me to write an entire first draft. Then I stayed with good friends for another two months, which enabled me to finish the book.

Another important aspect of my writing experience is that once I opened that box and realized I really wanted to do write this book, I was ready. As soon as I got to the first residency, unpacked my suitcase and sat down at the typewriter (it was 1996 and I actually was still writing on a manual typewriter!) the story poured out.

So, as is often the case, in retrospect it was good that I wasn’t given any money to write the book when I first started to write it in the early 90’s. I was too close to the experience at that point, and all the choices I was making about how to write the book were wrong. I can’t fathom it now, but then I felt honoring my students required I leave myself out of the book. I don’t know how I could have even thought that way, but I did think that way. Obviously, the only story I have to tell is my own. But, apparently, to come to that conclusion required the five years of letting the book sit in the box.

Also, when I wrote in 1990 and '91, I felt that I had to tell everything exactly the way it happened. By 1996, I realized that in order to make the story work, it was all right to – for example – combine conversations that happened on two different nights into one conversation.

PI: You had to make it work as writing.

Exactly. Part of making it work as writing involved letting the reader know who I was, whose eyes were doing the seeing, whose voice telling the story. I felt I had to convey my values, so the reader could decide if I was a reliable narrator.

At first, I wrote two introductory chapters describing my life before I came to San Quentin. However, one of the writers at my first residency pointed out the obvious: “No one’s going to pick up a book about San Quentin wanting to spend two chapters before they walk through the gates!”

One writing joy became finding where the San Quentin story – which I told in a linear fashion – needed to be deepened by more information about me. That layering process was a real pleasure.

In terms of writing process, I made a couple of very useful decisions. The first involved Elmo, the student who gave me the assignment. Elmo is really smart, is a good writer, and was also always very quick to educate me when he felt I needed educating. Before I left for the residencies, I asked Elmo if he would be willing to work with me on the manuscript as I was writing. He agreed, and his help was invaluable. Elmo made sure I got the prison stuff right, and also he found the places where in some way I wasn’t going as deep as I needed to be going. Often, his specific suggestions for improvement weren’t ones I took, but he consistently pointed out those places where I needed to work harder. Elmo was what I think of as the perfect editor.

Another helpful part of the process occurred toward the end. When I had a penultimate draft, I sent it to ten people to read, three of whom were former prison students. I hadn’t wanted much input (other than Elmo’s) up until that point, but at that point I was open to everything my wide range of readers had to say.

Then a big New York agent took my book. She called me on a Sunday afternoon and told me how much she loved the manuscript, how it was the best new thing she had read in years, etc. etc. The call was like a dream come true. She was sure she could sell the book in a minute.

But she couldn’t sell it, and the process of working together became very complicated. She was a famous agent, after all, and she kept saying the book would sell. But it wasn’t selling. But she must know what she was doing, right?

Eventually, I went to New York. I thought if I met with the agent in person, we could figure out what to do. On the same trip, I met with Bruce Franklin¹ and we had a really nice conversation. He advised me against a mainstream press, recommending instead that I look for a university press. He said mine was the kind of book unlikely to be an over night success, garnering big attention the first two weeks it was out. Instead, Bruce advised, I should find a publisher who’d keep the book in print a long time.

The agent and I agreed that she would continue to approach the big presses, and I would start to explore university presses. I wrote query letters to twenty-five different presses. Bruce Franklin was my most helpful guide. He recommended the presses he

¹ Editor of, *Prison writing in the 20th Century America* and *THE VICTIM AS CRIMINAL AND ARTIST: LITERATURE FROM THE AMERICAN PRISON*. Professor of English at Rutgers University

thought would be most interested in a book such as mine. And in fact, my book is published by Northeastern, one of the presses Bruce suggested.

PI: That is incredibly important for people to hear. Because when you are first doing the book the idea is to get a great agent, to sell it to a major press, be sent on a book tour and to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Sometimes that happens for people. I interviewed Mary Karr yesterday who wrote, “Lairs Club,” so it does happen and you should have that dream. But it is important for people for to know how in the majority of cases that is not how books get published. In your case you listened to Franklin, then you wrote twenty-five query letters yourself and made it happen. I think that 95% of the time that is the case for how any kind of poetry project gets done.

Yes, I think so, too. Everything about *Disguised* – from writing the book, to finding a publisher, to selling copies – took great perseverance, a quality I hadn’t previously applied to marketing my own work.

Also, I think an important part of the story is that on the surface, we think a big publisher has to be best. But, I’ve been learning, maybe best for some things and not best for others. For example, I doubt I’ll make more than a penny on this book. But working with Northeastern has been a completely positive experience. The press has a very strong list of prison books, and the editors share my values, and they’ve given me a kind of support I really appreciate.

Northeastern has a very small staff, so much of the promotion beyond selling to colleges fell to me. This turned out to be fine. I suppose because of the book’s subject, I had no trouble setting up bookstores readings. Northeastern was consistently great about following up my phone calls with publicity packets and doing their part.

I have talked to authors who feel resentful about all their small press – and even big presses! – doesn’t do, but I haven’t felt that way. I just accepted Northeastern’s inevitable limitations and what they could, and couldn’t, do.

Being my own publicity person has been really interesting. I had never had that experience before: contacting people, getting interviews, setting up readings.

Before the book came out I consulted with a publicist for an hour to get ideas. She asked me a question that surprised me. She said, “Which do you care about most: selling copies of the book, or getting to talk about the subject?” I had thought those two things were the same things, but she said most often they’re not.

My getting to speak about prison’s issues has just been wonderful, and has proved to be the most personally valuable aspect of my published-book experience. I now have conversations about prison issues, not only with people in California, but with people all over the country. I am getting opportunities to speak at colleges and conferences nationally. I meet interesting people, and experience different models for working with prisoners.

Best of all, whenever possible, I’ve gone in to work in prisons in whatever state I’m visiting. I begin by reading poems by my San Quentin students, and then the prisoners share their writing. At this point, when I go into a prison, I have poems by men and women in California, Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas and New York to share.

When you think about how marginalized poets, in general, feel ourselves to be, you can imagine how powerful it is for a prison poet in Kansas to hear what a prison poet from Iowa has to say. So even though my work life has been based on, and *Disguised*

certainly speaks for, the power of poetry, my experiences since the book came out has strengthened my knowledge of this truth. We *are* all part of a community of artists.

The Road Less Traveled: How to Make Your Living as a Poet Gary Glazner,
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