



# BENEATH THE GUARD TOWER

By Allen Mendenhall

Wardens say that murderers make the best students. That's because, most of the time, murderers kill out of heat-of-passion. Their crimes aren't premeditated. Their minds aren't flawed or evil. But the habitual offenders — they're the ones to worry about. They can manipulate you. They're professionals, even behind bars. I'm not saying their minds are flawed or evil — merely capable of sustained and concerted deception.

**I'm a prison teacher.** I teach literature. In prison, literature is currency. A book is a valuable unit of exchange. It's bought and sold, used as collateral, traded for sex. In the prison where I teach, many if not most prisoners are indigent. They shine shoes, make beds, beat up (or beat down) prisoners for nominal fees.

The books and supplies I give my students are, like drugs or weapons, contraband. Some supplies — pens, for instance — become weapons. I contribute to the system of abuse by providing goods that prisoners fight over. I do so because every class, without fail, I sense that I'm helping someone, because the pens and books usually generate thoughtful and creative essays or poems that the prisoners share with me.

I do so, in other words, because the students seem to learn and reflect when I visit them. Not all of them, but enough.

At least one student, each class, appears to have a text-induced epiphany. I can tell because of what he says and how he says it, or because he thanks me so intensely, as if I might not come back next week. If I can make epiphanies happen, I've succeeded.

The first day I taught in prison I was, as you might expect, anxious. I didn't think I would be. I wasn't anxious when I observed a prison class as part of my mandatory training — maybe because I wasn't alone then.

But I wouldn't be alone on the first day of class, either. Kyes Stevens, director of the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project, was with me. She was to sit in on the first class, provide feedback, then release me from her gracious supervision.

Kyes drove me to the prison that day. When I stepped onto the gravel parking lot, I didn't want to look at the naked buildings. It wasn't that I felt paralyzed under the panoptic gaze of the guard towers, or victimized by the penetrating stares from the other side of the chain-linked, barbed-wire fences. I looked down because my pockets felt empty. They were supposed to be carrying my driver's license.

I patted my front pockets, and then, realizing where I left my wallet — in the glove compartment of my jeep — I pretended to check my back pockets to delay the moment when Kyes would realize my mistake.

It didn't take her long. "You forgot your wallet," she said. "Hang here. I'll talk to the chaplain. But you won't be able to get in. We'll have to drive back." I watched her shuffle into the prison office.

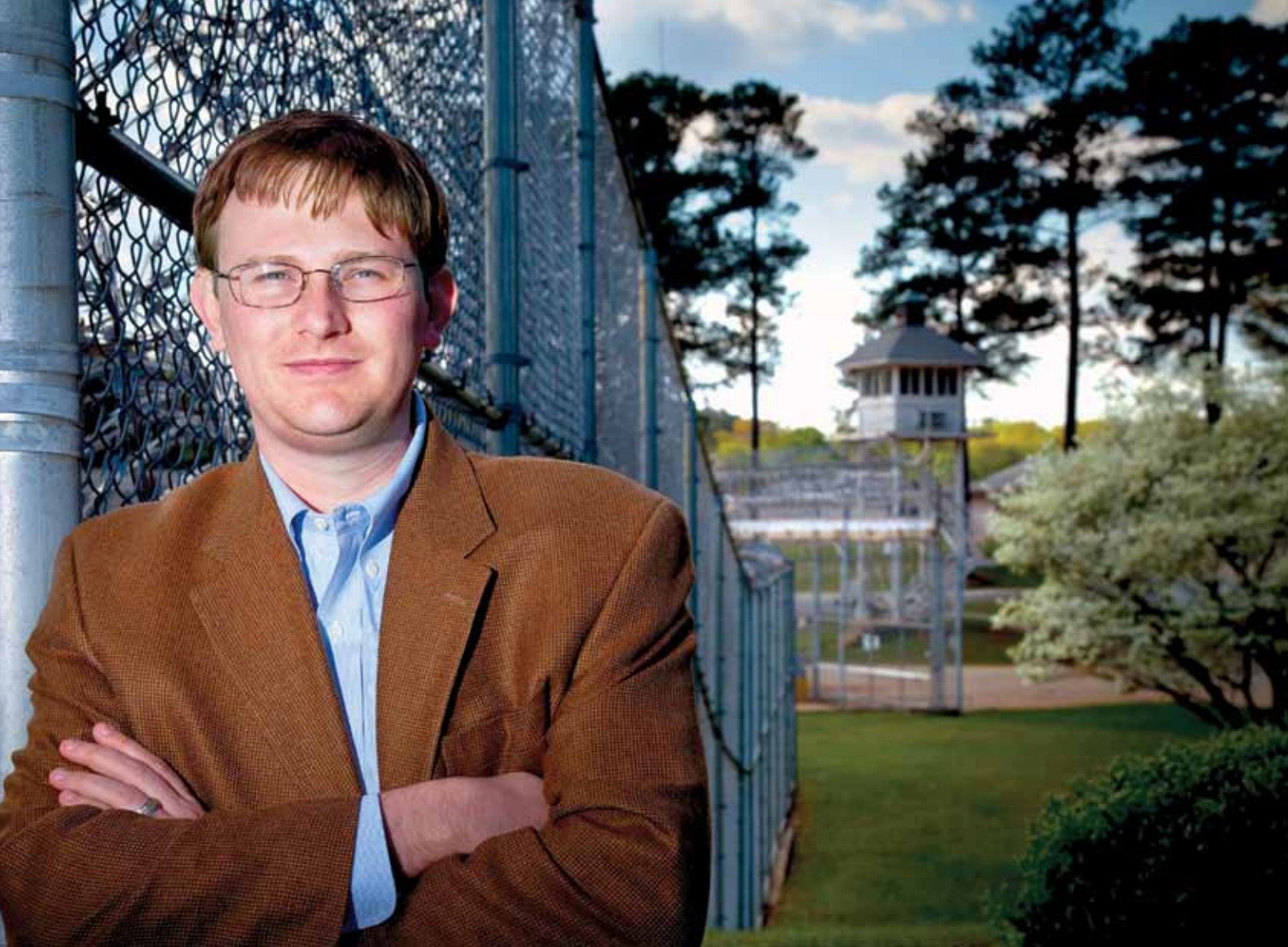
Feeling guilty, I looked down again — and noticed a dead frog on the ground. It hadn't been dead long because its sides were rounded and fleshy and its skin still moist. Its eyes seemed to register my presence even though neither they nor I moved. I half expected a warble to issue from its tubby belly and thick throat, but it lay still, a heart-shaped object on an unattended blanket of rock.

Suddenly Kyes returned. Relieved that my first class wouldn't be today, I was ready to apologize and get back into the car. But she was smiling. My relief turned to worry.

"We're good," she said. "Chaplain says you can come in. Just bring your ID next week."

"Good news," I lied. We went in.

ISTOCK PHOTOS



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**What it meant to be inside, and how the inside was different from the outside, was something I never quite figured out, no matter how many notes I took or how many hours of reflection I went through during my drive home.**

I got patted down, and the guard (officer; we're supposed to call the guards "officers") made a passing remark about a cavity search, perhaps to ease the tension.

Another officer shepherded us into the chapel where we were to wait until the prisoners emerged from lock-down. For some reason, three or four prisoners were with us. One of them, a heavy-set blonde who couldn't have been more than 18 — but who must have been more than 18 to be in there — asked me a series of questions, first about Republicans, then about the Middle East. He said he'd been in prison for two days. He said, "This place is scary as hell," and that he'd been hiding in the chapel as long as he could. Being new myself, I felt for him.

Lock-down is a form of punishment. It hap-

pens when prisoners are caught fighting, stealing, mouthing off, smoking dope. I'm not sure why the prisoners were on lock-down that day, but I soon learned that lock-down was more normal than exceptional — at least on Thursdays around one o'clock, when I was supposed to teach.

Eventually an officer materialized and ushered Kyes and me into a classroom full of prisoners (students; we're supposed to call them "students").

Apparently the course title, "Comedy and Literature," drew a large crowd, but the expectant looks on several faces quickly gave way to disappointment because, I think, I was not what the students had hoped for: a young female graduate student. Worse, I wasn't funny, and the class was about comedy.

### I tried to explain what I meant by comedy

as a genre, and a few students gave their neighbors looks that seemed to mean, "This is not what I signed up for."

The heavy-set young blonde from the chapel seemed to want to show off. He raised his hand and asked if I'd read this or that, then declared that he'd read everything on the syllabus. I knew something wasn't right when a few students exchanged knowing glances. But I let the moment pass without comment.

Because of the lock-down, the first class was abbreviated. I felt as though I finished as soon as I began. Several students lined up to introduce themselves. One asked if I could bring him contact information for a screenwriting company because, he said, he was a professional screenwriter. Another told me about his published poetry and asked whether I wanted to see it. I reservedly said yes. (I never saw his poetry.) Another felt the need to tell me that he was innocent and didn't belong "with these guys." Three or four others simply said, "Thank you."

Thirty-three students came that day. Eleven remained on the last day of class. I never saw the heavy-set blonde again. Kyes said she knew I wouldn't, that after his performance he would "get set straight." That's code for getting the hell kicked out of you.

**My syllabus** discussed comedy as literature, and also the role of comedy in literature.

Comedy can mean many things; humor is only one aspect of the genre. My goal was for the students to learn about various expressions of comedy and how authors use comedy to comment on ethics or morality.

A course on comedy was not just for escape and relief, the syllabus explained, but for critical self-exploration. I hoped the students would develop a greater awareness of the relation of comedy to the human condition — one of those hopes that's contrary to intuition and that humanities professors recite to justify their work. The human condition, I'm afraid, has become a tired defense for any enterprise that doesn't generate, or rarely generates, financial profit.

Anyway, what was the human condition in here?

This was a place where human existence was supervised and controlled, guarded and

mediated. It was cut off from the "outside" world and relegated to a strange, constant "inside." What it meant to be inside, and how the inside was different from the outside, was something I never quite figured out, no matter how many notes I took or how many hours of reflection I went through during my drive home. I live in Atlanta. The prison is west of Montgomery, so my drives home were long.

If anything, I learned that the human condition isn't the same from time to time or place to place, and that what it means to be human, in a space where humanity isn't completely acknowledged, feels different from anything I knew. I was merely a temporary visitor with freedom of entry and exit. I wanted to be inside where "they" lived, to see the place that "they" couldn't leave, to satisfy my own curiosities — even as I wanted to help them learn to better themselves.

I sometimes wonder whether the prisoners' bored lives were a perverse source of pleasure for me. I appreciated my life, and the decisions I had made, more and more each class. For every good motive there is an ulterior one, and sometimes motives are sublimated. And even if I did good things by teaching in prison, even if my motives were, for lack of a better word, pure, I feel, in some ways, guilty for the smugness that I assumed when I left — and that I tried, unsuccessfully, to fight off. During the drives to and from prison, I asked myself why teaching there made me feel good about myself. Was it because I was doing something for others, or for me? Did it matter? What was the difference?

### One day

I distributed copies of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, most of which I never saw again. I expected that. The book opens with sex, and sex recurs throughout. Sex, in a place where it's forbidden, where it's either coerced or a last resort, is a luxury worth hiding and fighting for. It's in high demand and short supply. It's the thing prisoners miss most. I'm not sure what happened to those books, but I'm sure they were put to use, sold, fought over.

I don't give extra supplies. I provide students with what they need and nothing more, because if they get more, they'll harm others and themselves. And if that happens, the guards — officers — will begin to see the teachers

as a problem. And if the teachers become problems, they disappear. Quickly.

I didn't want to disappear.

Murderers make the best students. They didn't want me to disappear, either.

**Most university students** take my course because literature is a requirement, a hurdle over which they must jump if they want to graduate. To get them to read, I threaten them with pop quizzes or bribe them with bonus points. I tell them I'm grading them. Most of them hate literature. They think they know what's important to learn, and it isn't poetry or philosophy or Great Books. They view literature as something like punishment.

But the prisoners, the people whose lives have become punishment, are willing to circulate petitions to have more literature classes and to stake their reputations on literature, which is, in a space of perpetual confinement, the opposite of punishment — the closest thing to sex that isn't sex itself.

My university students complete their writing assignments because they are mandatory and graded. I don't give my prison students writing assignments, but every week the prisoners give me a stack of essays they've written. They like writing, and reading. And they like Shakespeare. And they like me.

Why, I ask again, does teaching in prison make me feel good about myself? Is it because I'm doing something for others, or for me? Does it matter? What's the difference?

**I'm a creature of habit.** I establish routines and stick to them. Each week on my way to the prison I stopped at Dairy Queen, an indulgence that struck me as inappropriate after one of my students told me that a visiting relative had brought him a Burger King hamburger — the first hamburger he'd eaten since being admitted 15 years ago.

Every week that first semester I arrived at the same time, parked in the same spot. Every week I looked down at the frog corpse, which nobody had touched. It decayed a little more each time I studied it. It was like a piece of garbage that no one would throw away. I had a hard time imagining it ever lived.

I thought about the student whose poetry I had agreed to read but never actually read. That student quit coming to class.

I thought I must have offended or disappointed him because of my own fear and false sense of superiority. I tried to justify

my arrogant behavior on the grounds that I was still here in prison, still doing something decent and right, still helping prisoners

to learn. But putting yourself into a situation to do good is not the same as doing good.

One week I wasn't allowed inside. I waited for two hours in the front office before giving up and going home. The next week, I learned there had been a stabbing. Apparently, two prisoners got in a fight, one stabbed the other, the wounded one ducked into a dorm so his pals could stitch him up, and the guards walked in as the stitching was taking place. The prison went on lock-down.

When I saw my students the next week, they apologized. But it wasn't their fault. To my knowledge, no one in the class was involved in the fight. Nevertheless, I let them apologize because I was afraid of what they would say or do if I yielded authority. I couldn't let them know that they were in control.

Moments like this made me wonder what these men were like when I wasn't around. They couldn't be this polite and enthusiastic around other prisoners, could they? Were they special prisoners, the ones whose love for literature had cultivated moral sensitivity?

Perhaps it was a performance. The only people who didn't seem to perform in prison were the guards (officers). We didn't trust each other. To them, I was probably a bleeding heart liberal who thought he could change a bunch of hardened criminals. To me, they were a mob of jocks who made a display of their callousness and cruelty, saying things like, "Our job would be easier if we could kill them all off," or "Which dude are you gonna set straight today?" Never mind that the officers were victims of desensitization and may not have played sports at all. Perspective is a funny thing.

I'm sure the officers were fine men individually, but when they were together they traded crude jokes, mocked the prisoners, and laughed uproariously at either my or the prisoners' expense. One day an officer taunted me with questions about my "comfy" life in the "ivory tower," and about the pointlessness of literature.

I sat there, silent, taking it all in, because I didn't know what else to do, and because, to a certain extent, I was used to it, what with my university students being so disdainful of literature. I even agreed with the officer on some points. I have reservations about the utility of literature, and I have a save-the-world-on-your-own-time mentality in the classroom.

The only bad thing that happened to me in prison was that a guard stole my leather keychain, which my sister had given me as a Christmas present. I wasn't upset because I lost the keychain. It was the principle of the matter. Taxpayers were supporting the officers to protect people like me, but the officers were stealing from me — doing what some prisoners had done to get here in the first place. This wasn't right, but it was routine. And routine is order.

**The students** were clearly disappointed about missing class because of the stabbing. They wanted to talk. They wanted new reading assignments.

Two weeks after the stabbing, they came to me with a proposal. Would I, they asked, take their petition supporting more prison classes and give it to Kyes?

They explained that the only opportunity for intellectual fulfillment was during my class. No other classes were offered, and the students wanted to read more than I could provide. One wanted to learn French, another to study Western political philosophy, still another to translate something from Latin to English. They wanted me to see if Kyes could establish something like a school in prison.

Although I nodded enthusiastically, I realized that they were growing delusional the more they talked about what they wanted, that they were fantasizing about a knowledge exchange that could never happen.

They wanted school to come to them. Most of my university students wanted out of school. What made my prison students different? Was it time or banality? Was it that they had nothing else to do?

Perhaps. But when I think about the sincerity and intensity with which they approached literature, I shudder to think that my university students aren't as willing or appreciative. Then again, my university students, for all their snarky and selfish attitudes, weren't criminals or murderers. And I suppose that not all prison students were in my class for the "right" reasons. Some wanted to mix up the routine, I'm sure, and some wanted to avoid the violence and futility of prison life. My course gave them focus and meaning. If only my university students could realize this potential in texts.

**I taught** *Waiting for Godot* in my prison class. Afterward a balding white man, in prison for cocaine, pulled me aside and said, "Hey, man, I know this is a comedy course and all, but that play was a little too real for the guys in here — because we actually know what it is to wait for Godot."

And here I thought the play was absurd.

It all comes down to futility. If my class provided focus and meaning, what did it mean that I taught a text on meaninglessness? That's a vulgar reading of the play, but try finding meaning in meaninglessness when you're behind bars.

It's easy to forget where you are when you teach in prison. The classroom itself is separate from the quotidian realities of prison life. It's an artificial space. The prisoners attend my class to escape, but the classroom is, architecturally and geographically, right in the middle of the prison. No place besides my class is more central — physically, functionally and metaphorically —

because without my class prisoners would feel confined beyond their tolerance level.

No matter how much I want my classes to be about intellectual fulfillment, self-improvement or aesthetic appreciation, they always serve another function: to keep prisoners from thinking about their confinement. If my class is escapist, what it escapes is not physical reality but habits of thinking. Is it problematic that my class both enables and perpetuates psychological torment at the same time that it provides temporary relief? If my class helps the system run, and run well, isn't it strange that the class is putatively about escape from the system?

Routine is order.

**When I pulled my jeep** into the parking lot for the last day of my first semester, something felt strange. At first I couldn't figure out what. Then I realized that the lot had been paved. No more gravel. The ground was smooth and black and hot.

It was May now, and May in Alabama is like July in other states. You could see steam rising from the asphalt. I looked down where the frog was supposed to be. It wasn't there. For 14 weeks it had been there, undisturbed. Now it was gone.

As I waited to be admitted, I thought back on the semester and all my victories and failures. I thought about one student who'd succeeded in getting his crossword puzzle accepted for publication in *The Los Angeles Times*, and about another whose short story had been published in a prominent literary magazine. Then I thought about the student whose poetry I had agreed to read but never actually read. That student quit coming to class. I thought I must have offended or disappointed him because of my own fear and false sense of superiority. I tried, sitting there, to justify my arrogant behavior on the grounds that I was still here in prison, still doing something



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decent and right, still helping prisoners to learn. But putting yourself into a situation to do good is not the same as doing good.

We watched a film during the last class. I distributed certificates of completion, and after the film I gave my obligatory departure speech. Prison teachers are shuffled from facility to facility to avoid longstanding relationships with students. I knew I wouldn't be back in this prison and that I'd never see these students again, unless they got out one day and thought to look me up. I hadn't planned a speech. I never plan speeches.

"In the outside world," I said, "people don't watch as much news or read as many books as you do. I can't get my freshmen to read anything unless I give them pop quizzes. They complain when I assign something longer than four pages. And I teach at a nationally recognized institution." The speech was degenerating into something about me, not about them, but they didn't seem to mind. I think they understood that, all along, the class, for me, had been partially about me, even as it was about them, too.

The students listened intently as I told them how my university freshmen had bragged about

not reading and had told me, more than once, that they thought poetry was pointless and that literature wasn't worth studying.

I couldn't tell if the prisoners were shocked or mad or sad. Maybe they were pained to learn that the outside world might not care about what they were doing in my classroom. Maybe they resented that others looked down on a thing — literature — that they had come to practice and love. Maybe they couldn't understand why anyone on the outside would neglect something so precious as knowledge or literature.

Or maybe they could understand, and that's what hurt the most: knowing they'd lost the freedom not to care. |F|

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