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Means of Escape

A former Catholic priest teaches Matsqui inmates a way out of the lives that led them to prison

By Todd Parker

Outside in: At one time, Ed Griffin's future lay in the Catholic church. A falling-out with his superiors led him to seek spiritual sustenance elsewhere

Image credit: Brian Howell

OVERHEAD, HARSH FLORESCENT lights shine down on a horseshoe of standard-issue, collapsible tables. High, thin windows show slices of sky, though nothing that might distract a student's attention for long. The cement-block walls are painted a bland beige. There's a big flip chart at the front of the room. This might be a suburban high school, except for the guards outside the door.

At the tables sit a dozen fidgety men in green parkas, faded jeans, once-white T-shirts discoloured and stretched from use. They nurse black coffee and finger cigarettes rolled from loose tobacco. They range in age from early twenties to mid-fifties; some are long-haired, unshaven and tattooed, others as clean-cut and rosy-cheeked as high-school gym teachers. There are drug abusers here, dealers, at least one killer. They're inmates at Matsqui medium-security prison, here for their weekly creative writing class.

Ed Griffin teaches the class every Friday morning. Almost 71 years old, white in the little close-cropped hair that remains on his head, a bit shaky in the neck and fingers, he looks like the grandfather you wish you saw more of. He's driven here from his modest home in Surrey. When he arrives at the facility, he's greeted by guards with shotguns. He passes chain-link fences topped with razor wire and is scanned for metal objects and drugs. At security checkpoints he waits for heavily reinforced doors to be opened. The class is held in an activities center at the heart of the compound; beyond is the yard and then the prison proper—a four-storey concrete bunker with cells for more than 300 inmates. The place induces suppressed panic and claustrophobia in many people, but Griffin looks forward to his Fridays here.

He opens by calling for a volunteer to read something written since last week's class. Chris, who celebrated his thirtieth birthday after arriving at Matsqui in 2005, has been a regular in the class for more than a year. His short black hair is spiked with gel. Before his incarceration he was a business manager, a husband, and a father. Thanks to methamphetamine, he became an addict, a dealer, and a thief. In prison he's become a high-school graduate, an avid reader, a passionate writer. He reads from the first chapter of his manuscript, "Broken Fences", a fictionalized rendition of his battle with crystal meth. He's not worried that he'll be ridiculed here—mutual respect is rule one.

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In the opening scene of the story, the protagonist is outside his own home, which has been left a smoldering ruin: “A cat, owl-eyed and slightly singed, comes wandering out from the safety of a juniper. That’s my cat, Nash recalls, and feels a sliver of gratitude. But he is unable to remember the cat’s name.” Later, asked why he attends the class, Chris replies, “Writing takes me out of here. It’s something other than drugs that I can imagine waiting for me on the outside.”This is the effect Griffin hopes to have on his students, though it’s not why, in 1985, already in his late forties, he first taught in a prison.

His goal then was simply to spread the joy of writing, which he himself had recently discovered, and his hope was that he might provide tonic for a few worried souls. At Waupun, a pre-Civil War maximum security prison in Wisconsin, the dull lighting, high-ceilinged halls with yellowing paint, and foul odours made him question his decision. Witnessing the brusque cavity search of an inmate made the idea seem insane. In the first chapter of his own book-in-progress, “Dystopia,” Griffin expresses the doubts he felt: “Maybe I just wanted to feel good, to tell people, ‘Hey, aren’t I macho?’” But something an inmate said that first day gave him the idea that he could perhaps accomplish something of real significance. When Griffin asked the inmates why writing was important to them, a young man named Brian replied, “It’s something they can’t take away from us.”

Griffin was familiar with the desire to identify something essential to self. As a young man raised in a Catholic family—his father, an electrician, had been to seminary—he thought he’d found it in religion. Ordained a priest in his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of 27, Griffin was assigned to an affluent and conservative parish in a predominantly white suburb. Inspired by the spirit of reformation in the church encouraged by Pope John XXIII, and by the civil rights movement gaining momentum under Martin Luther King Jr., Griffin felt it his duty to respond when King called for volunteers to march at Selma in support of equal rights for minorities. His parishioners did not agree. Griffin was called a nigger-lover and reassigned to an inner-city parish. “That was the beginning of my end with the church,” he says quietly. “It’s a very painful part of my life.”

Man on a mission: The first time Ed Griffin taught creative writing to inmates, at a maximum security prison in Wisconsin, he wondered what difference he could possibly make to their lives. The answer became clear when he asked why writing was important to them and one replied, "It's something they can't take away from us"

Image credit: Brian Howell

In three years Griffin saw lavish new churches built in rich white neighbourhoods while he fought in vain for programs to help the poor in his community. Though popular with his new parishioners, he found himself increasingly at odds with the church. Five years into his service, he left. “My entire life was devoted to God,” he recalls. “One day my identity was Father Ed, the next day I was just Ed. I had no idea what that meant.”

It took years to find out. He remained active in the civil rights movement. In 1970 he married Cathy Cremin, who was also very involved in the movement, and before long they had a daughter and a son. Griffin earned a master’s in social work at the University of Wisconsin and was elected to Milwaukee city council. He and his wife ran a commercial greenhouse on the outskirts of the city. In 1985 he took a continuing education course that gave his life new direction. “When I discovered writing, I found a way to touch the divine,” Griffin says. “And when I entered a prison for the first time, I found men who needed that kind of spirit in their lives.”ed up with the Republican reign in the States, Griffin moved his family to Canada in 1988. Having been told that he was too old (at 52) to be employable, and that he could emigrate only if he started a business, he and Cathy opened a greenhouse in Cloverdale. Soon Griffin began teaching creative writing for the Surrey School Board. He started teaching as a volunteer at Matsqui

in 1993, and was hired in 1997. Aside from his work at the prison, he also helped found the Surrey Writer's Conference, the largest of its kind in Western Canada, and he teaches continuing education courses in English as a second language.

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Griffin wants to do more than encourage artistic freedom in his students: he aims to encourage a shift in prison thinking. By imprisoning convicts, restricting personal freedoms, and processing offenders through anger management and substance abuse programs, the system is theoretically transforming them into law-abiding citizens (as well as punishing them for their crimes). But at no point, Griffin points out, is a prisoner asked what he thinks he needs to accomplish his rehabilitation or encouraged to offer his views on the process. By teaching inmates to think creatively, and by giving them the skills to express themselves, he hopes to involve them in the debate on how prisons work. At least they'll have creative outlets for the frustration of being locked away.

"I'm giving these guys something else to do other than get high, maybe something else to look forward to after they get out," Griffin says. "At the very least, I'm giving them a different way to consider the world."

Griffin has written four novels himself, and published them through Trafford, the Victoria-based print-on-demand house. Prisoners of the Williwaw is about a future prison set on a remote island where the inmates are left to fend for themselves. It grows out of Griffin's belief that what will reform the criminal mind is not deprivation of freedom but rather the assumption of personal responsibility. When Griffin writes, he does not imagine John Grisham-like fame and fortune for himself—he simply articulates his vision of how the world could work. This accessing of one's innermost thoughts and beliefs is what he means by touching the divine.

All of Griffin's other books, though fiction, verge on autobiography. *Beyond the Vows* is set in the 1960s and tells the story of a young Catholic priest who falls in love despite the vows he has taken. "Dystopia" began as a narrative of alternating chapters, written with a prisoner named Mike, that tells the story of his experiences as an outsider entering prison, and Mike's insider impressions of him.

Mike is 30, charismatic, and energetic. He attended Griffin's classes every Friday morning when he was at Matsqui. "I never believed I could ever be anything other than a criminal," he says. "If you told me seven years ago that one day I'd have aspirations to become a writer, I would have tried to sell you drugs." In the story of Mike's life, he is both the villain and the hero. His troubles began almost a decade ago in a Mexican jail. He had a plan: buy cheap drugs, smuggle them back to Canada, make big money. When he and his partner were arrested, the partner fingered Mike. The partner left Mexico; Mike spent years in a horrifying prison. "All I thought about was revenge and dealing more drugs," he says. "I never thought I could ever write a novel."

Transferred to Canada through a treaty arrangement, he met Griffin at Matsqui. He thought little of the old defrocked priest at first. "I figured he was crazy for coming into prison to teach," Mike says. He was baffled by Griffin's inability to see the futility of what he wanted to accomplish. "Convicts have a hard enough time changing their clothes, never mind changing their way of thinking."

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But over time Griffin had a profound effect on Mike. The younger man has developed the means to explore his anger, locate the source of his self-destructive behaviour, and convert those emotions into words on the page. Griffin has shown him the power of self-expression and the divinity at the heart of introspection. “Ed Griffin is a superhero,” Mike says. “Able to overcome any obstacle in a single bound. Able to break down the thickest walls in any penitentiary. He saw right into my heart and helped me understand what I need to be happy.”

Griffin has influenced many prisoners over the years. Rob is known for his starring role in an RCMP bait car video, which shows him high on crystal meth behind the wheel of a stolen pickup. At one time the most successful car thief in the province, he was convicted and sent to Matsqui in 2004. He overcame his addiction in prison. He also met Griffin and was drawn to the idea of writing. Week after week, month after month, he wrote about his life, a therapeutic journey. He’s almost ready to show a nonfiction manuscript about his life, tentatively titled “Oncoming,” to publishers. In the spring Griffin introduced Rob to agents at the Surrey Writer’s Conference (at least one of whom was offended that the ex-priest would inflict an ex-con on her).

Rob’s prose is simple, almost childish. “When I reached the house,” he writes in a chapter about his childhood, “I stood on a tire, climbed up and slid my bedroom window open. I wasn’t supposed to do this. My mother had made it clear to me many times that I was to wait for Charlene to get home and unlock the front door.”

Rob is out of prison now, living with a woman and her two children, seemingly on the straight and narrow. But he’s the exception. Recidivism is rampant at Matsqui, as elsewhere; as many as 80 percent of inmates are repeat offenders. Too many of Griffin’s students return to drug abuse and crime after their release. Still, the prospect of helping even one in five deal with life on the outside is all the motivation Griffin needs. Asked why he’s committed to helping men most people want nothing to do with, Ed Griffin smiles and rubs the back of his neck. “Hard to say. I still don’t know exactly what I hope to accomplish. I guess it’s enough to know that these guys can use my help.”