

# SPOTLIGHT



*on the arts*

**OCTOBER 2010**



## **PERFORMANCE**

**Cactus Flower coming to SLT**

## **VISUAL**

- The Hourie's photo focus
- The three styles of Jarnail Singh

## **LITERARY**

- Ed Griffin takes writing over the fence
- 18th Annual Surrey International Writers' Conference





# Prison Sentences

by Ed Griffin

"A safe place? I had no safe place as a kid. If my stepfather wasn't beating me, my mom was yelling at me and hitting me with a stick. My safe place was in the streets with my gang.

"One day when I was fourteen, she was drinking and we had a big fight. She hit me again and I walked out. I spent the night at some girls' apartment and I never really went home after that. I ran with the gang and stole food and other stuff. Now I'm here."

I had just given my class an assignment to write about a safe place they knew as a child, and that's what Curtis wrote. He looked like a college kid, except for the tattoos on his arms. This was his first writing class at Matsqui Institution, a prison in the Fraser Valley.

Curtis came every week. He came at first because his buddy came, but then he came to listen to the stories and articles the guys wrote. He came because guys seemed to respect what other people wrote. They didn't swear and beat on each other, as TV shows like *Oz* seem to indicate. Just the opposite. The men praised things that were read in class and only then made suggestions.

When the assignment was a poem, Curtis wrote a rap thing about how lonely prison was and how he had messed up his life. The poem got everybody talking and the discussion went on until the PA system announced, "Five minutes to count." As he hurried to his cell, I complimented Curtis. "It's a sign of a good poem," I said, "when we spent the whole class talking about it." The lessons learned that day came not from institution staff, but from other cons.

Curtis gained a diploma in creative writing, but more – writing helped him find himself, figure himself out, melt the bars around his soul. He's out today, living in the community, free of crime – and still writing.

There have been a lot of men like Curtis in my life since 1993 when I started teaching at Matsqui. I've volunteered for most of those years, except for a short time when the Surrey School District sponsored the classes.

The first hour of class we get some instruction in. "Show, don't tell. Use strong verbs. Use the active voice. Writers write." The usual things of creative writing. In the second hour, the men read their work. If it looks like there won't be time for the readings and the instruction, we scrap the instruction. Learning comes from doing. If the men spend sixty hours in class, they gain a diploma from the Surrey Writers School.

Art releases unconscious tensions and purges the soul. That's what Aristotle said three hundred years before Christ. Federal prisons in BC stress programs, such as anger management, cognitive skills, and violence prevention. The arts are not excluded from prison, but they aren't stressed. Yet art therapy is well known to provide healing. Not just writing, but theater, music, painting, and the other arts. Art respects the individual and suggests that he or she has talent. That talent just needs to be developed. Programs, on the other hand, seem to indicate that the person is sick and needs curing. Both programs and art are necessary, but right now the score is Programs = 10, Art = 1.

Artists, actors, painters, musicians, directors, sculptors – you name it and prison needs them. It's not easy to volunteer – you have to have a criminal record check and you need special training. You have to leave any attitude that you're better than these men at the door.

Teaching in a prison has its own series of rewards. I feel good that I've done something of value, but it's more than that. For some reason every Friday when I leave prison, I go home and write up a storm. I'm not necessarily writing about prison, I'm just writing.

I've learned who I am teaching here. I'm not some great social reformer, rather I work one-on-one with guys who want to change their lives. I encourage them, work with them in the hope that they will see that they are somebody. Unfortunately, prison tears down a person's self esteem. The PA system blares out "Inmate Jones, report to health care." Over and over, people are referred to as inmate. Many staff convey an attitude that they are better than the inmates. The very cement walls and steel bars say that they are dangerous animals that must be caged.

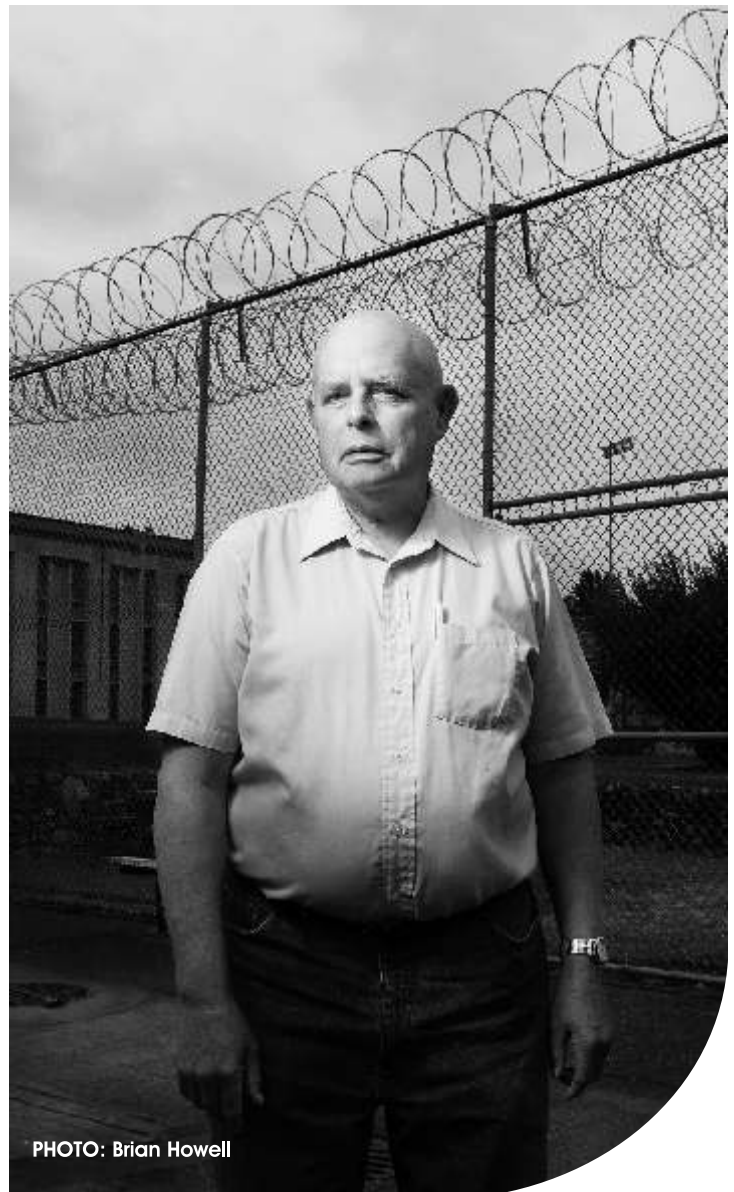


PHOTO: Brian Howell

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I started teaching with the vague idea that I was going to start a revolution. I felt that putting men in cages was a big mistake and prison was little more than a warehouse. If I could teach people to write, then maybe they would tell the world about the dystopia they lived in. I first taught in, the maximum-security prison in Waupun, Wisconsin where I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. A young lifer came to my class and worked intensely on his writing. He began to write articles for a Madison newspaper about prison. He wrote a story about a guard who ignored a man's plea for medical help. The next day the man died. When the article appeared in the paper, my student was sentenced to a year in the hole. That meant twenty-three hours in a special cell, and one hour in a small outdoor cage. The sentence for punching a guard was three months in the hole, but writing about an incompetent guard was a year.

I know the prison system. It's often vicious toward its critics. I begged my student to stop. Some revolutionary I turned out to be. When my student did just what I wanted, I tried to stop him. But he continued. An article about poor health care. Add another year in the hole. And a third article and another year.

My student had killed a man in a bar fight. Perhaps if he had had a good lawyer, it would have been self defense or manslaughter, but it was first-degree murder. After twenty-four years in prison, he's out now, living and working in Wisconsin. He still writes articles about the prison system, even though life means life and he could be put back in prison at the whim of a prison official.

I once had a clever student who wrote a short piece for my class. I praised the story and told him he was a good writer. He stared at me with those intelligent eyes of his and asked, "Griffin, are you trying to blow sunshine up my ass?"

I laughed and said, "No, it was a good story. Keep it up."  
That's what's missing from prison -- sunshine.

*Ed Griffin has taught in prison for nineteen years. He started the Surrey International Writers' Conference and the diploma program in Surrey. Griffin is the author of three novels and, with an inmate, co-wrote a non-fiction book about prison. He lives in Surrey with his wife, Kathy. Ed Griffin, like Aristotle, believes, "Art releases unconscious tensions and purges the soul."*



**A non-fiction writer and avid photographer for 40 years, Julie H. Ferguson is the author of 17 books, including four on Canadian history, and articles in national and international markets. She is a proud member of the BC Association of Travel Writers and Photoclub Vancouver. Julie can be reached at [info@beaconlit.com](mailto:info@beaconlit.com) and invites you to visit her website at [www.beaconlit.com](http://www.beaconlit.com)**

## FROM TYPEWRITERS TO MULTI-MEDIA: FREELANCE WRITING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Story & Photos by Julie H. Ferguson

When I began my writing career, I used a beat-up portable typewriter, carbon paper, and many cuss words. Today I move paragraphs and chapters around with ease, I configure my word processing program to make corrections automatically, and I can reach global markets instantly. No more cussing! In 1971, magazine editors only bought the text of my articles; in 2010, they want more than words to delight their readers.

Over the last decade, freelance writers have become content providers in a **fast-paced, visual, and connected world**. Now, at a minimum, I offer periodicals two versions of the article — one for print and another for the small screens of smartphones — and always a selection of photographs. Periodicals use many value-added items from writers to push readers to and from their print magazine and website, as well as provide a more satisfying customer experience. Whether you are breaking into freelancing or you have been writing for years, you have no choice but to embrace this new reality to get more articles accepted.

First task: learn what added incentives a freelancer can offer editors by checking magazine websites. You'll be surprised how many publications use content other than articles to lure and retain readers, and it's writers who provide these enticements. Some subjects scream for images, such as travel and food, for example, while others beg for action videos, such as sports and recreation. Once you know the array of content magazines use regularly, you can offer the right mix. Here are some offerings that freelancers should consider:

- A variety of article lengths — feature (2000+ words), department (700-1200), short (300-400).
- A print version and an edgier, online version for small screens.
- A choice of sidebars.
- Images, preferably your own, that tell the story.
- A guest blog post.
- A blog interview.
- Short video clips (I use [www.animoto.com](http://www.animoto.com) to transform still images into simple 30-second clips at no cost and longer clips at \$3.00 each). See two examples at [www.beaconlit.com/PitchingCold.htm](http://www.beaconlit.com/PitchingCold.htm).
- A podcast that augments your text with interviews and sound effects, for example.

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