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## Book Review: The Prison Library Primer: A Program for the Twenty-First Century

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Vogel, Brenda. *The Prison Library Primer: A Program for the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009. 272p. \$60.

*Reviewed by Carol A. Watson*

Brenda Vogel's *The Prison Library Primer: A Program for the Twenty-First Century* is a well-organized, thorough, and practical guide to administering libraries in correctional facilities. Vogel, a veteran librarian with more than twenty-five years of first-hand experience as the coordinator for the Maryland Correctional Education Libraries, has written extensively on the topic of prison libraries. While her knowledge and experience lend credence to *The Prison Library Primer's* content, Vogel's unwavering commitment to an often-overlooked community of library patrons makes the book truly inspiring: "How should library service to people living in prisons and jails differ from library service to people who are not convicted of a crime and do not live in restricted confinement? Let me count the ways. There aren't any!" (p.18).

*The Prison Library Primer* covers a range of diverse topics relating to the delivery of basic library services in a penal institution, ranging from collection development to technology, contraband, and library facilities. The book begins with background on the history of library outreach to prisoners since the end of the eighteenth century, and segues into a general discussion on how to deliver library service within an institution designed primarily to deprive and isolate its inhabitants. Throughout *The Primer*, Vogel emphasizes that good library service is often at odds with the punitive goals of the correctional facility. In a chapter entitled "Learning to Become a Correctional Librarian," she describes in some detail the two opposing worlds found in prisons—the prison authority versus inmate society—and provides sage advice on how to operate a successful library within an environment containing cultures in such stark

conflict. Vogel warns that the librarian's position sandwiched within this clash of cultures can lead to feelings of isolation. To combat this isolation and foster resolve, she recommends that prison librarians network locally and nationally with other professionals, organizations, and community groups. Elsewhere, Vogel offers examples of how librarians can provide critical information for prisoners without compromising the safety and security concerns that form the top priorities for the prison authority. For instance, she describes how to prepare re-entry manuals and offers an example information skills training curriculum, both of which are designed to help inmates transition back into the community.

Law library topics provide the specific focus for two chapters in *The Prison Library Primer*. The first, "A Prisoner's Locus Sanctum: The Law Library," reviews current legislation and judicial decisions bearing on prisoners' access to legal materials. Vogel suggests techniques that can help correctional librarians, even those with no legal training, establish legal reference services and select legal materials. She describes strategies and resources that correctional librarians can use to enhance their legal reference expertise, and she proposes creative solutions for assisting prisoners with legal research needs. One interesting solution calls for the preparation of legal information packets that contain an overview of a selected topic—such as search and seizure, self-incrimination, or eyewitness identification—as well as the full text of relevant cases, code sections, and other primary legal materials. A sample legal information packet can be found in Appendix B of the *Primer*.

The second chapter related to law librarianship is a reprint of an article written by

Evan R. Seamone and originally published in the *Yale Law and Policy Review*.<sup>1</sup> In the article, Seamone advocates establishing a formal process to certify jailhouse lawyers. More immediately relevant, perhaps, is the insight that his article provides into one of the most frequent users of the correctional library—the jailhouse lawyer. Seamone describes both the characteristics of a jailhouse lawyer and the useful services such a lawyer performs.

*The Prison Library Primer* offers numerous resources for obtaining further information about prison libraries and librarianship. Each chapter is annotated with ample endnotes, and an entire chapter is devoted to lists of recommended readings, both in print and online, that address jail libraries, federal prisons, prisoners' rights, prisoner reentry, and technology, among other topics. A separate chapter identifies various advocacy resources for non-correctional librarians, highlighting Vogel's strong belief that all librarians, not just prison librarians, should advocate for prisoners' rights.

The potential audience for this book will consist primarily of on-the-job correctional librarians and librarians contemplating work in a prison library, but correctional administrators will find Vogel's advice to be useful as well. In addition, all librarians with an interest in human rights will benefit from reading this text. *The Prison Library Primer* is recommended for those libraries maintaining either criminal justice or information science collections.

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<sup>1</sup> Evan R. Seamone, *Fahrenheit 451 on Cell Block D: A Bar Examination to Safeguard America's Jailhouse Lawyers from the Post-Lewis Blaze Consuming Their Law Libraries*, 24 YALE L. & POL'Y REV. 91 (2006).