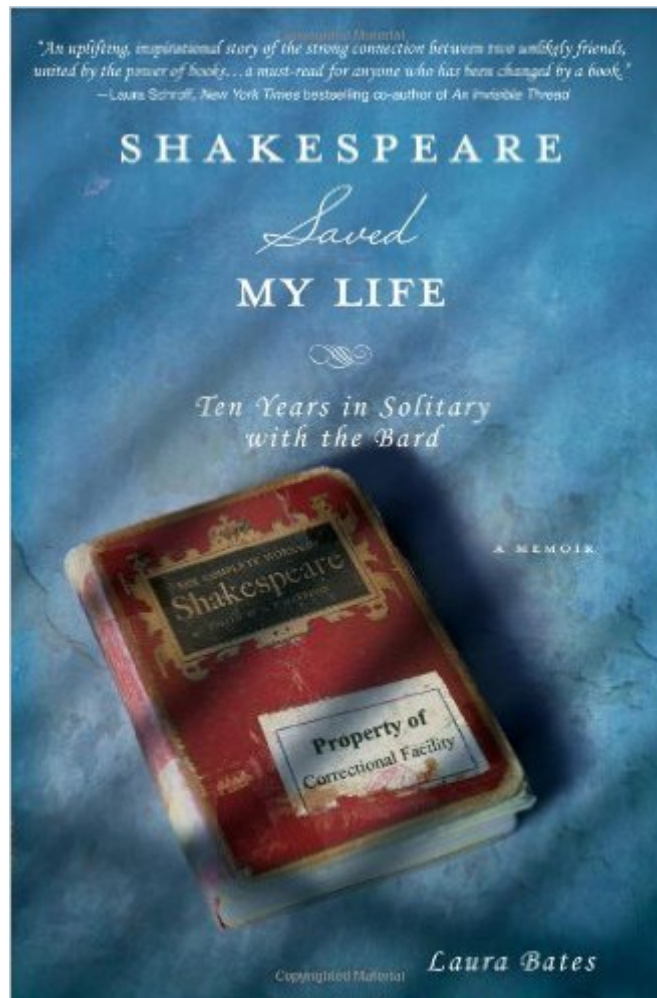


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Shakespeare Saved My Life



Synopsis

A female professor, a super maximum security prisoner, and how Shakespeare saved them both Shakespeare professor and prison volunteer Laura Bates thought she had seen it all. That is, until she decided to teach Shakespeare in a place the bard had never been before - supermax solitary confinement. In this unwelcoming place, surrounded by inmates known as the worst of the worst, is Larry Newton. A convicted murderer with several escape attempts under his belt and a brilliantly agile mind on his shoulders, Larry was trying to break out of prison at the same time Laura was fighting to get her program started behind bars. A testament to the power of literature, Shakespeare Saved My Life is a remarkable memoir. Fans of Orange Is the New Black (Piper Kerman), A Place to Stand (Jimmy Baca) and I Couldn't Help Myself (Wally Lamb) will be inspired by the story of the most unlikely friendship, one bonded by Shakespeare and lasting years—a friendship that would, in the end, save more than one life. What readers are saying about Shakespeare Saved My Life "I was tremendously moved by both the potential impact of Shakespeare and learning on human beings and the story of this one man." "This is one of the most extraordinary books I've ever read." "I have never read a book that touched me as much as this memoir." "It is a challenging and remarkable story." "I loved this book so much. It changed my life." What reviewers are saying about Shakespeare Saved My Life "You don't have to be a William Shakespeare fan, a prisoner, or a prison reformer to appreciate this uplifting book. "Shakespeare Saved My Life" also reveals many important truths ... about the meaning of empathy in our dealings with others"-Finger Lake Times "Shakespeare Saved My Life touches on the search for meaning in life, the struggles that complicate the path to triumph and the salvation that can be found in literature's great works ... An inspiring account."-Shelf Awareness "Opening the mind's prison proves enormously gratifying, not to mention effective ... brave, groundbreaking work" •Publishers Weekly "An eye-opening study reiterating the perennial power of books, self-discipline, and the Bard of Avon."-Kirkus "A powerful testament to how Shakespeare continues to speak to contemporary readers in all sorts of circumstances."-Booklist

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Customer Reviews

My first reaction when I saw this book was, "Great, EVERYONE is reading Shakespeare before I do. Even people in solitary confinement!" I'd recently decided to read all of Shakespeare's plays in a year and I was finding it slow going. But the prisoners that Laura Bates described in this book seemed to breeze through the plays, even if they had limited education and no previous knowledge of the bard. If they could do it, what the hell was my excuse? Once I got past my petty jealousy, this book spoke to me on a lot of levels. Laura Bates is an English professor who has been teaching Shakespeare for years, both in colleges and in prisons. This book recounts her experiences with the latter, particularly in a supermax--or solitary confinement--unit. A great number of my family members work in corrections, including in prisons, and I myself had helped start a writing and spoken word program at a women's prison here in Nova Scotia. So I didn't need to be convinced of the value of prisoner education. And, as I mentioned, I'd recently started a Shakespeare in a Year project in which I was attempting to read the Complete Works of Shakespeare (or at the very least the plays) before the end of the year. So I didn't need to be convinced of the value of Shakespeare. Still, this book surprised me in a lot of ways. The thing that struck me most about Laura Bates' experiences teaching Shakespeare in prison was the way the inmates interpreted certain passages. Dr. Bates deliberately chose plays she thought might speak to them, plays about crime (Macbeth) or imprisonment (Richard III) or loss of power (King Lear) or violence and revenge (Titus Andronicus). Even so, the inmates' reactions to them often changed the way I myself was reading the material.

Larry Newton is a convicted murderer serving a life sentence with no possibility of parole. He is also, according to the distinguished scholar David Bevington, "a serious person, gracious, good-humored, [and] alive with intellectual curiosity." Laura Bates is an English professor who earned her PhD from the University of Chicago. "Shakespeare Saved My Life" is Bates's remarkable account of her

volunteer work in various correctional facilities, where she used the plays of William Shakespeare as a vehicle to broaden the convicts' understanding of themselves and the world. The impact of Shakespeare's works on Larry Newton was so powerful that he became an influential teacher, prepared detailed workbooks to help inmates study Shakespeare, and helped create videos to inform other inmates about the relevance of the Bard to their lives. Shakespeare's grasp of the nuances of human nature still resonates more than four hundred years after his plays were written and performed. Jealousy, ambition, and the desire for revenge can poison a person's soul; guilt has the power to corrode a person's mind. As Newton wisely points out in the quotation preceding this review, many of us unwittingly create our own prisons. Those who end up serving long sentences gave in to negative peer pressure, acted impulsively, and allowed ugly emotions to guide their actions. As a result, they forfeited their freedom and their chance to becoming productive members of society. In brief and lively chapters, Bates describes how she taught Shakespeare's works in "supermax," a long-term solitary confinement unit in Indiana. She also addresses controversial questions: Should the state pay for educational programs to rehabilitate criminals?

As a retired English teacher and HS principal, I am conflicted about this book. On one hand, you can consider it a well-written piece of congratulatory non-fiction, detailing how college professor Dr. Bates brought her Shakespeare classes to Indiana prisons, including a supermax SHU (Segregated Housing Unit) to help rehabilitate the worst of the worst, most violent murderers, rapists and other felons through her efforts. Her star pupil is a 30-year-old killer named Larry Newton, who murdered a college student in an alley by shooting him in cold blood thirteen years ago, as the student was walking his girlfriend home from a party. Newton, who had gone through many forms of abuse as a child and spent large amounts of time in various juvenile detention systems for many offenses prior to the murder, pled guilty in exchange for a life sentence with no possibility of parole. He is in SHU due to several escape attempts including stabbing a guard, but Dr. Bates is able to reach the very bright Newton through detailed study of Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedies: Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello. Newton comes to see his own actions through a new light, and in turn reaches out to other prisoners and young offenders by writing student workbooks, leading discussion groups, and participating in prisoner-made video interpretations of the works. Following positive media coverage, Newton rises through the prison system, eventually returning to the general inmate population, all the while forming a strong emotional bond with the professor. At book's end, both seemingly are better people for knowing each other and being able to overcome their own individual "prisons" of the mind.

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