

10-Jodi Schorb Ep-Final.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:17] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. In this episode, it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Jodi Schorb. Professor Schorb contributed a 19th-century prison narrative to Hidden Literacies that offers significance for its own time and our own. To begin. I've asked Jodi to introduce herself.

Jodi Schorb [00:00:59] I'm Jodi Schorb. I'm an associate professor of English at the University of Florida.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:04] I asked Jodi to describe how she found the text she contributed to Hidden Literacies.

Jodi Schorb [00:01:09] I found this document at the Andover Harvard Theological Library, and they have the only extant copy that I know of. And they were very generous to partner and help make this available through the project. And I found it as I was researching for my book, *Reading Prisoners*, which was a study of how and when prisoners enter print culture in early America.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:31] If you browse newly released biographies and memoirs at a bookstore today, you might notice that most titles are relatively brief. This was never an inclination that troubled 19th-century writers or readers. As evidence of that, listen to the title of the memoir Jodi studied for Hidden Literacies.

Jodi Schorb [00:01:50] John Maroney's *Narrative of the Imprisonment of John Maroney in the prisons of New York and Auburn from 1821 until 1831*, written by himself. That's one of the longer documents in the project. It was a 38 page sewn pamphlet. It was published by Charles Cushman, who owned the local newspaper in Newburgh, New York, after a career in religious publishing. And it seemed to have a small circulation locally in the 1830s, says a print document.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:22] I've asked Jodi to share the meaning of the text, its background, and what we can learn from it.

Jodi Schorb [00:02:28] Well, John Maroney was a white farmer and he was a business proprietor, and he was sentenced at age 40 to 10 years hard labor in the state penitentiary of New York at Greenwich. And he was sentenced for what he calls an unprovoked assault on an unnamed victim after a drinking binge. And his narrative describes his experience in two of the most formative prisons at the time. They were both at the center of early prison debates. Newgate, where he first was sentenced, and then he was transferred to Auburn Penitentiary, which was one of the most debated and controversial experiments in prison design in the early national era. So it's very, very rare that you have any accounts whatsoever of individuals that were formerly incarcerated, having access after the release to the means and privilege of print to tell about their experiences and to narrate their

experience in some kind of legible print form. So I was only able to locate maybe up to 10 accounts that were published by ex-inmates before 1840. And this is one of them.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:46] As Jodi explains, this narrative is important because it reveals John Maroney's sense of his own experience. It also says a lot about the realities of prisoner life in this era.

Jodi Schorb [00:03:58] Here we have an inmate that was interested in thinking about what reading and writing and education mean to someone on the inside that was directly feeling, would, at that time, but it's still very present now, were extreme restrictions on what inmates could read, whether inmates could write. So this was a subject that reformers and authorities had taken up in many of the pamphlets and endless newspaper articles and published government reports and inspectors report each year. What is the role and purpose of inmate education? Should inmates read? What should they read? Should inmates be allowed to write? If so, should they be allowed to communicate with anybody in the outside world? And generally, the dominant response was inmates need extreme restrictions, extreme restrictions on writing, extreme restrictions on reading. And in the places where Maroney was held, especially Auburn, the inmates were not allowed even access to pens, pencils, tablets, anything. So this was a hotly debated topic, but you don't have inmates saying this is what it meant. Now, he can't share his transparent feelings. He speaks through the kind of the allowed genre religious conversion. But he has a lot to say throughout this whole narrative about the meaning of reading, in the meaning of writing practice for someone on the inside. And this was certainly not a perspective or an opinion that was seen as valued or shared. And I think that might be one reason why he was driven upon his release within one year to come and publish this account.

Mary Mahoney [00:05:33] Maroney himself reflected on the dire restrictions on literacy in prison in a quotation Jodi shares with us.

Jodi Schorb [00:05:40] One of the things that you can see as you read through this text is the ways that Maroney discusses the impact of prison discipline that refuses inmates to talk or to write or to speak. And he says, I shall now proceed to the strictest rules and regulations of the prison as they are strictly enforced. The strictest rules are there shall be no talking, no laughing. We're not allowed to write or receive communications from any of their friends or any articles or any kind, not even chalk or pencils. They cut off all intercourse and made us solitary beans in the midst of more than 500 persons. And you can hear very different sentiment there about what it means to feel like a silenced island in the midst of so many others. And he says later, as in the latter prison, no paper was allowed and I could not make notes or memorandums of my thoughts or feelings, let alone keeping of a journal of the experience.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:37] Jodi points us to the significance of this kind of reflection.

Jodi Schorb [00:06:41] And what I hear in that is he's saying, listen, the stated theory is you want inmates to reflect on their life. And yet there's nothing -- you've got to allow us to communicate. You've got to allow us to talk like we don't know. You've got to give me a piece of pencil or teach me the way to teach inmates to read and write if you want them to piece out their feelings and thoughts. So for him, writing was really crucial to memory-making. And without writing, he felt that he couldn't reflect. He felt that he couldn't even transform. And not everybody's going to feel that same way. But for someone that came with some degree of literacy, this was really crippling to him. So one of the reasons why I wanted this included in the hidden literacy volume was he comes up with other ways to

navigate that terrain. He starts composing poems as a way to create personal memory for himself. They're not like liberatory poems for say they're like they result from the fact that there were all these restrictions in place. And so the texture of that, like I said, the texture of what it means to be denied an access to pen, paper, books leaves its mark in surprising ways in this text.

Mary Mahoney [00:07:57] Maroney knew what it was to be denied reading and writing in prison. But as Jodi describes, he also knew the power a prisoner narrative could have if smuggled into the hands of other prisoners.

Jodi Schorb [00:08:09] One of the most significant things that I discovered in this text was that Maroney and fellow inmates knew of one of the other very rare texts that an inmate had published some years ago, and someone smuggled a copy of this text by the other inmate in. And that's one of the aspects of hidden literacy I take up in this project, is he describes how they kept a copy of this text, it was called Inside Out an interior view of the New York State Prison. They kept this in their bunks and they read from this and they also had newspapers that were smuggled in. So even though in this particular prison, they were only allowed Bibles, this was in Newgate. They also had all these smuggled documents and he saw the way that this inmate had published something. And he and he cited it and he talks about its influence over him and his fate in this and I thought that was really, really neat because we don't even know about that right now. Both of those documents have forgotten, but they were, the first was very formative to Maroney.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:10] By Maroney's own account the restriction on literacy hindered his ability to complete the kind of reflection and rehabilitation prison reformers imagined. Discipline positioned prisoners as, quote, a silenced island in the midst of so many others, as Jodi describes. As she explains, the ideas of literacy and discipline her work explores in the past has real resonance today.

Jodi Schorb [00:09:33] 1820, like 2020, the voices and perspectives of prisoners are suppressed. They're heavily controlled. What they read is controlled, whether they can communicate with family, friends, the free world, controlled. The U.S. produces more prisoners than any other nation and incarcerates a higher percentage of individuals than any other nation. And prisoner voices I think are the word hidden does work. I mean, it's not, it's by design. They are devalued and they are seen as unreliable and or not insightful sources of information about how even to reduce recidivism or to make better prisons. And so these inmates then we're thinking about that.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:20] These ideas drive her work as a scholar.

Jodi Schorb [00:10:23] This item, I think, is really central to my work, which is interested in life writing as a genre and how various individuals that we don't necessarily think of having a large archive, we're able to work and think through what existing forms were out there and to try to make themselves legible. So as a scholar in early American literature who's interested in thinking about the importance of life writing, this kind of document really I think is so valuable to spend some time with and to think about what could it instruct us on. Why should we read it now?

Mary Mahoney [00:11:00] By way of closing, Jodi poses further questions. They may help us think with Maroney's text and what it can tell us about the past and the present.

Jodi Schorb [00:11:10] How did those that were imprisoned imagine a future beyond those walls? How did those that were sentenced to 10 years in a cell with no access to other people, were there any ways or forms of meaning that they have to think about a future without a prison? Can we look to any writing across the antebellum in early years as foundational to thinking now about contemporary debates, about not just mass incarceration, but prison abolition? Can we think of the very first inmates as theorists in any kind of way for critical prison studies now?

Mary Mahoney [00:11:46] Jodi Schorb is associate professor of English at the University of Florida and listeners can get more information on her research by checking out her book, *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700 to 1845*.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:08] *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies* for more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.hiddenliteracies.org.