



The Maximum Security Book Club: Reading Literature in a Men's Prison

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A riveting account of the two years literary scholar Mikita Brottman spent reading literature with criminals in a maximum-security men's prison outside Baltimore, and what she learned from them—*Orange Is the New Black* meets *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

On sabbatical from teaching literature to undergraduates, and wanting to educate a different kind of student, Mikita Brottman starts a book club with a group of convicts from the Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland. She assigns them ten dark, challenging classics—including Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Poe's "The Black Cat," and Nabokov's *Lolita*—books that don't flinch from evoking the isolation of the human struggle, the pain of conflict, and the cost of transgression. Although Brottman is already familiar with these works, the convicts open them up in completely new ways. Their discussions may "only" be about literature, but for the prisoners, everything is at stake.

Gradually, the inmates open up about their lives and families, their disastrous choices, their guilt and loss. Brottman also discovers that life in prison, while monotonous, is never without incident. The book club members struggle with their assigned reading through solitary confinement; on lockdown; in between factory shifts; in the hospital; and in the middle of the chaos of blasting televisions, incessant chatter, and the constant banging of metal doors.

Though *The Maximum Security Book Club* never loses sight of the moral issues raised in the selected reading, it refuses to back away from the unexpected insights offered by the company of these complex, difficult men. A compelling, thoughtful analysis of literature—and prison life—like nothing you've ever read before.

The Maximum Security Book Club: Reading Literature in a Men's Prison Details

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Megan says

I'm giving this four stars even though I had some problems with it. This is because I love and will read almost anything about prison and people's lives in prison. I think more people should be educated and concerned about how prisons are run, what function they truly serve, and what 'kind' (for lack of a better word) of people are in prison and why. Even if the only reason for this concern is that this is *your* tax dollars at work. We can start there and maybe hope for some empathy later.

America imprisons more people than any other country in the WORLD (<http://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-...>). I don't want to take away from the fact that many of these people have committed horrible crimes and *should* serve time. But it doesn't take much reading and research to be completely appalled at the justice system, the amount of time you can be locked for a relatively minor offense (there are people serving **DECADES** for minor drug offenses), how mentally challenged and minority people are exploited by the system, and the general shunning of and disgust American society has for criminals. Most people are more than happy to lock them up and throw away the key without any reflection on why these crimes are committed, how the prisons are run, etc.

It is nearly impossible for criminals to successfully re-enter society--which, in my mind, unless they are extremely dangerous or not reformed (murderers, sex offenders, etc) re-entry should be the ultimate goal. If they are felons, in many states they are barred from voting for LIFE. If they want to get a job, most places ask immediately on the application and obviously discriminate based on that. There are many fees that have to pay once they are out---which, how if they can't get a job? If they don't pay these fees, they wind up back in jail. Some go back to a life of crime solely to pay these fees---essentially, committing crimes to stay out of jail.

Anyways, this book doesn't actually deal much with any of those aspects, so I'll get off my soapbox. I've just been reading a lot about the prison system in the last year or so. If you want to learn more about those aspects of the criminal justice system PLEASE read: Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, and Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World. All AMAZING reads that should be required reading for any American or person, period. Oh, also The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League. While Robert Peace never actually goes to prison, he is heavily involved in selling drugs and it gives insight into how someone's background and peers can affect their life and choices.

This book is more about one woman's experience teaching and building relationships with inmates (which, surprisingly, is a word many of the men have a problem with. As one man put it "Don't act like you have respect for me in one aspect and call me 'sir' and 'inmate' but then not even allow me the privacy to use the bathroom on my own.") I give it four stars because it is absolutely fascinating and heartbreaking to be inside their lives and experiences. That was the part I loved. Brottman has good intentions, but she really irritated me sometimes. While I would never want to imply that all prisoners are uneducated or illiterate, most of the books she picks (Heart of Darkness, Macbeth), would be challenging and/or boring for *many* average high school or college students. Instead of altering her picks or asking what they want to read, she keeps bemoaning the fact they aren't as into the books as she is, or fall asleep during the films she shows. Even though she openly admits many of these books took **her** a few reads to get into! To get someone more "into" reading, I firmly believe you have to meet someone where they are and she only does that once or twice (she

selects a prison novel, On The Yard). You may be rolling their eyes at someone loving Twilight, but all books can be gateway drugs to the "better stuff". She also repeatedly complains that they constantly keep relating the books to their own lives and experiences instead of analyzing the story for what it is. Well, as an elementary teacher we are constantly telling our kids to "make connections"---and one we focus on is the "text to self" connection. Books are *here* for us to make sense of the world--and specifically, our own experiences in the world. It takes some **work** to get a reader to be thinking beyond personal connections and starting with books like Macbeth kind of doesn't lend itself to that.

I also didn't like that she automatically expected them to identify with Humbert Humbert, the pedophile in Lolita. I mean, yeah, they *are* criminals but that doesn't mean they don't have traits beyond that or that they automatically identify with **all** other criminals. Also, pedophiles are basically considered the worst of the worst, even by other criminals. Even the choice of Lolita itself seems problematic. No matter what kind of positive relationship she formed with them, I don't know how wise it is to choose a book so overtly sexual in theme....to discuss when you are alone with a group of men. I think women sadly have to think this way about men at times, whether they are convicts or not.

She also complains about the guards a lot. She needs to remember that she is much more focused on the emotions and education of the prisoner and they are likely on their best behavior for her. Meanwhile, the guards on the other hand, have to be constantly assessing situations for potential risks and dangers. The second they ease up on this or assume one prisoner or volunteer is "never" a problem are how contraband like weapons and drugs get in and people get hurt, among other possible issues.

She does some other irritating and naive stuff here and there that I can't think of at this second. Again, she has good intentions and truly cares about them, so I was able to overlook this all relatively easily.

Basically, don't come for her viewpoints, but definitely stay to hear from the men's experiences and insights. **AND EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT OUR PRISON SYSTEMS!** Interesting read.

Darlene says

When I began reading *The Maximum Security Book Club: Reading Literature in a Men's Prison* by Mikita Brottman, I thought I would be reading a book memoir of sorts, but it turns out that wasn't exactly what I found. This book IS a memoir but it is the story of Mikita Brottman and her experiences moderating a book club at Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) located outside Baltimore, Maryland. Mikita Brottman, an Oxford educated professor of literature, was on sabbatical from teaching undergraduates at the Maryland Institute College of Art and decided that she wanted to bring literature to the men in the prison. This book was the summary of her experiences and impressions of moderating the book club for two years.

The book ended up being a mixed bag for me. I loved Ms. Brottman's idea... the idea of taking part in a book club for prisoners is an interesting and fascinating one. My excitement quickly faded, however, when reading of the reality of this prison book club. The book club was comprised of 9 men, chosen by a 53-year-old prisoner named Vincent. Vincent had earned a GED and an undergraduate degree in political science and sociology during his incarceration. For years, he had been the overseer of the college program at JCI. Although college courses were still being taught at the prison, they were no longer for credit since Congress had eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, effectively ending higher education in prisons. The nine men chosen by Vincent for the book club were selected because of their literacy and absence of behavioral problems.

From the beginning, I realized that the terms 'book club' or 'reading group' was a misnomer. Ms. Brottman stated that she "wanted to teach a different kind of student.. a student that was immersed in the type of human struggle that resulted in conflict and often serious consequences." Her statement left me wondering if, from the beginning, she and the men in her group were approaching the literature and the subsequent discussions with two very different sets of expectations... and it didn't take long to answer this question. Although the literature group was NOT for college credit, I believe Ms. Brottman approached the group as if she was teaching her typical undergraduates and was set on teaching them an appreciation for and the ability to think critically about works of literature. I'm not so certain that the men who joined her group saw the group in the same way and ultimately, I think this created different expectations on both sides, which often led to annoyance and frustration.

Ms. Brottman chose ten dark, challenging classics, filled with moral conflicts and struggles and she wondered if the prisoners would recognize themselves in any of the characters. She chose Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'; Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'; Edgar Allan Poe's story, 'The Black Cat'; Vladimir Nabokov's 'Lolita'; Charles Bukowski's 'Ham on Rye' and William S. Burroughs's 'Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict'.... among other titles. Ms. Brottman quickly recognized that the men were not exactly enjoying most of her book choices. Many of the men found the books boring and pointless and it was obvious that the men were struggling with the language. Ms. Brottman realized that although she had taken to reading at a young age and had enjoyed reading her entire life, the men she was interacting with came from different backgrounds and reading was not an activity the men had engaged in for enjoyment. To be clear, not all of the men in the group disliked every book. As in any book group, some enjoyed some books but not others. Two of the book choices seemed particularly popular... 'Ham on Rye' by Charles Bukowski and 'Junkie' by William S. Burroughs. The men found these stories entertaining and relatable and these books generated lively discussions.

Often, I was painfully aware of a kind of defiant stand-off or battle of wills that was playing out between Ms. Brottman and the prison book group. The more bored and frustrated the men seemed to become with the chosen books, the more Ms. Brottman seemed to push them into trying to identify with a character or consequences of a moral quandary... to no avail. And I have to admit that as the book went on, I was becoming amazed by her seeming lack of insight into these men and their lives. Although she claimed to be aware of the conditions in the prison... constant surveillance and observation, noisy and chaotic.. she didn't seem to REALLY understand that prison life was perhaps not conducive to self-examination and the development of deep self-awareness. She commented to the men that she enjoyed settling into a comfortable chair with a book and a glass of wine or cup of tea and reading for hours. Did she really not comprehend that there ARE no comfortable chairs or even the ability to sit quietly and read for hours in the prison?

Amazingly, just as I was tempted to give up on this book entirely, Mikita Brottman was struck by a dawning dawning recognition and awareness. This flash of insight occurred as they were wrapping up their discussion of 'Lolita' by Vladimir Nabokov. The reading and discussion of this novel had been particularly contentious. The prisoners despised the main character Humbert Humbert and would only refer to him as a pedophile. Ms. Brottman, feeling annoyed with their inability to view the story and the character in any positive way finally exploded... she told them that she was shocked at their inability to feel sympathy for Humbert Humbert as she believed that "anyone who engages with 'Lolita' has to understand that a story of what is technically termed sexual molestation can also be a deeply moving love story." Charles, one of the group members was equally eloquent and vehement in his response... "This isn't a love story. Get rid of all the fancy language, bring it down to the lowest common denominator and it's a grown man molesting a little girl....."

This emotional and honest exchange between Ms. Brottman and Charles ended up rescuing this book for me.

Finally... on her way home from the prison that day, Ms. Brottman realized what the men had been trying to tell her.... "...and I, with my weakness for a fancy prose style, had fallen into Nabokov's trap and could see Lolita only through Humbert's eyes, as his invention, his nymphet. I could not make sense of or see her, as the prisoners did, as a little girl in her won right.. all the time this was leading me further and further away from the main fact of the matter: Lolita's pain."

I believe that what Ms. Brottman realized that day was that the prisoners in her reading group were not skilled at or impressed with the language or lofty themes of the literature she had chosen. They were not and would never be her typical class of undergraduates. They were men who had been convicted of serious crimes and had lost their ability to make the simplest choices for themselves who simply wanted to read stories that entertained or distracted them from the monotony of their lives. I had a lot of sympathy for Mikita Brottman. I believed she approached organizing this book group with only the best of intentions. I also believe that what she wanted for this group of men was to give them a way to experience comfort and perhaps redemption through great works of literature; but as someone who has volunteered for many groups and organizations over my lifetime, I have realized that volunteering can seem an awful lot like parenting.... give it your all and do your best but most of all, keep expectations in check.

Ultimately, I think Mikita Brottman did come to a more comfortable acceptance of her role and the the role of literature in the prisoners' lives. Two of the prisoners... Vincent and Steven.. were released from prison and she had the opportunity to meet up with both men. Although she felt disappointed, she realized "My Vincent and my Steven existed only in a certain time and space. They were phantoms that disappeared upon exposure to daylight Once back amidst the practical concerns of daily life, neither had the slightest interest in reading or talking about books. This, I now knew, would be equally true for all the men who were released. I was not turning them into readers. They were just men who attended the prison book club."

Kathrina says

I don't have the time to give this review what I should, but suffice it to say, this is a book about an English teacher, not a book about a prison book group. While she does struggle through some issues I can identify with (as a prison book group facilitator myself), this book privileges her and her relationship with literature, not her students or their collective experience. She makes some "well-duh" revelations that, had she done her own homework, might have been more obvious to her, but at least I respect her willingness to honestly document her mistakes. As she identifies as an academic, I'd like to see her take the next step in analyzing what her experience has taught her and how it might be useful toward changing the narrative of the incarcerated identity.

Phyllis says

The idea behind the book club and hearing stories about each of the men who participated are what qualify this book to receive two stars, in my opinion.

However, the author, despite having a PH.D. and years of teaching experience, is the absolute wrong person to be running a book club for prisoners.

A good leader Mikita Brottman is not, not just for being completely unaware (and unwilling to learn) about

the conditions in which her book club members live, waiting nearly 3 years to tour the prison.

Her selections are outrageously insensitive; every selection is about being imprisoned literally or figuratively from "On the Yard" to "The Metamorphosis" to "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Sure, have a selection or two with that theme, but one after the other? A good leader would switch up the themes or types of selections.

A good leader would understand that each member relates to the material differently and certainly from personal frames of reference. Some of the book club members weren't voracious readers, but bravely took up each challenge.

A good leader wouldn't expect other book club members to struggle with material that the leader disliked at first and/or also struggles with. Hitting the group with "Heart of Darkness" right out of the gate is crazy; despite being short, it's densely packed and rather difficult.

A good leader from outside the prison would understand that there are boundaries that must be set and maintained, particularly as a psychoanalyst. Ms. Brottman spends some time talking about how she objectifies the men's bodies and projects certain expectations on them, then expects the men to conform to her wishes. How about maintaining boundaries after the prisoners have completed their sentences?!?

A good leader would not act put upon because she cannot bring her dog to prison.

A good leader would not expect a book club to change members' lives when part of the appeal is that the club is lead by a woman and another part is trying something different. The author ends the book feeling sorry for herself and whining that all she has is literature.

Laura says

If you want to know how the author feels about the books she reads with these men, and how they disappointed her by having lives that didn't fully revolve around the books she loved, then read this book. The last paragraph in the afterword made me want to throw this book across the room it was so self absorbed. What a letdown.

Amy says

I'm not entirely sure why she'd be disappointed when they didn't share her love for some of these, when she, who loves literature, took more than one reading to get into them.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Well I was interested in a prison book club but this is more of a white savior narrative and I just can't stomach it ever but especially right now.

The professor is from the UK but teaching in an American prison, and seems completely perplexed as to why the prisoners can't appreciate her picks like Bartleby the Scrivener and Heart of Darkness. She gets annoyed

when they talk, in their book club, about how their lives connect with the book. I'm not sure what she was hoping for, maybe an "Oh Captain, My Captain" experience? But I'm not going to finish this one.

Karen Lausa says

This was a tough book to get through, because I also facilitate book discussion groups in a maximum security prison. It was potentially intimidating to me that the author, an "Oxford educated scholar and Ph.D." was doing the same thing as me- with an MLS degree, a lifelong love of reading and a whole lot of passion. That's not the only difference between us, though.

I found the book to be flat, forced and written by someone who seems unable to understand prison culture, healthy boundaries and the difference between her privileged background and the life that preceded the men's incarceration. Her selection of books made me laugh, such poor choices for the group! She wonders why they struggle, never actually connecting the possibility that the selections are so inappropriate and far too difficult, lacking a fast-paced story, relatable characters, plot and perspective. I was impressed that she insisted the group read her choices, (Heart of Darkness, blech) but not surprised that by the Afterword, she is feeling sorry for herself because she ponders the likelihood that she's made no permanent effect on the men once released. Worse still, she has a relationship with them, "outside," a total taboo in every volunteer prison rule book- dangerous too. How could she be so oblivious, so focused on her ego, her role in this program, instead of the deep transformative shift that comes from books the men would really relate to, fall in love with, reconsider their lives because of... Nope, this book is devoid of any such outcome, and frankly, I'm amazed that the author continues her efforts.

JoAnn says

I absolutely loved this book, *The Maximum Security Book Club, Reading Literature in a Men's Prison*, by Mikita Brottman, an Oxford educated scholar who teaches humanities at Maryland Institute of the Arts (MICA). With my passion for literature and my background of teaching Literature and Language Arts in high schools with a high at-risk population, I was able to really connect with the author and what she was trying to accomplish. Dr. Mikita Brottman presents a completely candid approach to teaching literature with all of its ups, downs, distractions, protocols and sense of humanity. However, her class room is in Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland, and her students are inmates. Brottman does this on a voluntary base. With a group of convicts, once a week, she reads, what many may say is highbrow Literature with disheartening, complicated themes, and while I don't completely agree with all of her choices, I believe she chooses novels with rich challenging human experiences to foster thought and conversation with the men. For the most part, the men rose to the occasion, although maybe not completely as Brottman would have liked, and she is quick to admit where she could have done something different/better, as she reflects back on her actions for each novel.

The book ultimately ends with a bittersweet reflection on how Brottman doesn't create the impact she had hoped in her students, something a teacher, perhaps, particular of literate, may relate to, as I certainly did. I don't want to give too much away; however, over all, I truly admire Brottman for giving these men the opportunity to challenge themselves, to step out of their stereotype, to discuss, to think, to broaden their experiences. Although especially at the end, Brottman is hard on herself because she believes she, "lost them" and because "literature was all [she] had," I imagine, in some ways, she made a bigger impact on these men than she realizes.

I hope that Dr. Brottman continues this program and doesn't get too discouraged by focusing on the end result of sharing literature as a means of "saving" the inmates. Yes the men committed horrible crimes, but they are human and if nothing else, Brottman is connecting to their humanity: gather, read, discuss, talk, enjoy. Take it for what is worth in the moment, Dr. Brottman. In my years of teaching, often when a meaningful conversation about literature takes place, although it may not be life saving, the essences of that conversation, the lesson/theme learn is recalled when needed. I have has some students tell me so.

I don't think this book is for everyone, but I couldn't put it down. Each chapter is set up according to which novel is being read, and I couldn't wait to read about the next. I found The Maximum Security Book Club, Reading Literature in a Men's Prison interesting, engaging, even inspiring, as I of lately have been very interested in teaching at a prison. I can also highly recommend Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard

Joan Hawkins says

Mikita Brottman is a horror scholar, lit professor and psychoanalyst who used her sabbatical one year to start a bookclub at a men's maximum security prison, near her home in Baltimore. They read everything from Heart of Darkness, to Lolita, to Lear. And the book moves in and out- weaving together Brottman's impressions of the men, her accounts of their responses to the books and her experiences of the prison itself. It's very good and much of it is fascinating. If I have a criticism, it's that I wanted more-- of everything.

Biblio Curious says

Leaky pipes & re-arranging the house to prevent water damage paired with "may as well do some spring cleaning" is great for audiobooks. Listening to this insightful author constantly misjudge the inmates is every bit as wonderful as seeing a clean house come together. She's intelligent with a literary background. She begins her narrative with her own experiences teaching college students about the classics. When she decides to volunteer at this prison, her program limits the attendees to only 9 & they study books together for about 2 years.

The narrator for this audiobook has a British accent that compliments the author's background, so the audiobook is being told by a wise older lady who's sharing her life story & insights gleaned with us. Hearing the author so readily share her intelligent misjudgements are what make this book so great. I'm guessing one take away from this book is for teachers to occasionally drop their syllabus and let the students to the teaching especially when they add value to the conversation.

The men give their insights on such books as Kafka's Metamorphosis, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, Junkie, Lolita and their amazing conversations about Macbeth. The teacher shares with us the personal lives of the men & she clearly states they have all read this book before she published it.

I would happily recommend this for anyone who works with at risk youth, people who are in conflict with the law, teachers of literature classes at all levels of education and anyone interested in what the 'uneducated' have to say because their life experiences can be insightful & even comical.

Holly says

Oh boy. Before I started reading this I saw the other GR reviews by several readers who were irritated with the author and disappointed with the book. I just assumed that I would have a different reaction: I've read most of the works selected for this prison book club, and I'll understand Brottman's role, and I'm not put off by troubling material. But I too had all the trouble with the author and the book-club project that the rest of you did. Sorry this is not succinct:

Brottman is a white British-born academic who volunteers to coordinate and lead a weekly book club at a maximum-security men's prison in Maryland. The 9-10 members of the group were chosen by a fellow prisoner (note: the incarcerated men do not like the term "inmate"), who gave no apparent consideration to the men's prior education levels or minimal reading abilities. Some fall asleep in book group, many don't complete that week's reading. The only thing this book club shares with the rigorous college-in-prison programs I recently read about is the long waiting list to join. But each of the men has a distinctive point of view, and Brottman is successful at drawing them as individuals.

The group gets off to a rocky start when she asks them to read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the men find it bleak, boring, and difficult to read. She regrets the decision to ask them to read a novella that she, too, had found difficult the first time she read it. Then she goes on to select works such as *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a Bukowski (*Ham on Rye*), William S. Burroughs's *Junkie* about heroin addiction, a Poe story about animal cruelty and obsession, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and prison novel (Brady's *On the Yard*). She comes to regret every one for one reason or another. And so did I: these choices made me cringe; they were terrible for this group and this setting. It's not that I wished she had chosen "safer" books, or morally uplifting literature, but that these are difficult and bleak, sometimes without hope, and sadistic reading for men already required to stare at brick walls all day. And why no female authors or even a challenging female character or two? I might have added some Flannery O'Connor short stories, or Carson McCuller's *Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, or Grace Paley stories, Andre Dubus's "A Father's Story" - I can think of so many. And I would re-read them before making a final selection, which Brottman did not do.

The problem is that Brottman is tone-deaf. She chose these works because SHE loves them and because she is fascinated with the dark side in these stories. She didn't consider the men's daily routines and bleakness of their lives, but she's curious about what the prisoners might make of the books, because she wants to understand THEIR dark sides. She's also tone deaf in her lack of insight into their reading abilities, and I think that is rotten teaching: she gets irritated with how slowly they read aloud - sounding out words, stumbling over pronunciation and syntax. And irritated with their tendencies to over-identify with narrators, with not grasping the larger points, and with reading for plot and character alone, but without appreciation of the language.

So, I was uneasy while reading most of the book, suspecting that the next book she introduced would finally be the one that was so inappropriate that something irrevocably sad or painful for the men would occur. I was concerned for them.

And then she selected *LOLITA*.

Dear god. When the men become immediately hostile to Humbert Humbert and sympathize with the young Dolores against this predator, Brottman is actually angry. No, no - she insists to the men's faces - "you

don't understand! It's a love story." But the men won't have it. They say HH is a liar and they claim to see through him - (I thought we all recognized this by now - I don't hear that crap about it being "a love story" anymore. Did Brottman never get the message? The novel is genius but part of what makes it genius is the moral challenge of falling under the spell of the unreliable narrator's brilliance. And that all that astonishing language is being used by a character who is sick. And it is about pedophilia.) Here again Brottman was painfully tone-deaf and myopic. This is a men's prison, where pedophiles are the most hated subgroup, and many of the men are fathers of daughters, and as she knows by this point, they read everything as personal.

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I think the thing to recognize about *Maximum Security Book Club* is that this is a book about the author herself, not about the incarcerated men or the prison system or even really, the books discussed. And it's a compelling but exasperating and frustrating read.

Leigh says

If the author had confined herself to descriptions of the discussions of literature among the men who are incarcerated and her observations about the prison, I would have loved this book. But I found myself disliking the author herself and becoming irritated whenever she wrote about herself, her reactions, her life. Perhaps that's a function of her honesty, but my annoyance with her (and her continual insistence, over a two year period of time, that the men needed to see the works they discussed the way that she did, and that she JUST NEEDED SOMEHOW TO MAKE THEM SEE) detracted from the book a great deal.

Erin Boyington says

This was a book I was curious to read the moment I heard of it, and at the same time hesitant to get into. Fortunately, getting it through interlibrary loan and having a time limit really helps with my motivation. I work in a prison library, and I make an effort to separate myself from anything work-related in my regular life. (That's why after all these years I still haven't gotten into *Orange is the New Black* or bothered to watch *Shawshank Redemption*. Too much prison!)

But I did choose to read *Maximum Security Book Club* by Mikita Brottman. It felt like a professional obligation.

First, the good: I love any book about books, about discussions about books, etc. And I am truly grateful to the people who give up their time to enter a prison to provide programming. Volunteers can be like a breath of fresh air, giving an outside perspective into a difficult environment. They provide pro-social opportunities for men who sometimes have trouble with polite interaction with others. They show people who have been sent "away" by society that someone still cares for their well-being. They give opportunities for people with few options to learn and grow.

And now the caveats. Brottman has very few good things to say about prison staff, and that offends me as a corrections professional. (Full disclosure: I am proud to work in an extremely well-run prison.) Volunteers come in once a week, a month, or a year and often hear the complaints of the incarcerated. What they don't get to see is the dailiness of life in a prison - the 24/7/365 cycle.

There is no such thing as a prison snow day, or a holiday, or any day when everything shuts down. That is

never an option. Letting down your guard and overlooking security procedures, which often feel pointless and burdensome (I hear management staff say "good security is not convenient"), is also not an option. Corrections staff deal with incarcerated people who are frequently unlikable, rude, and self-absorbed - not to mention violent, manipulative, and litigious. But no volunteer gets to see that side of the people they deal with - they will see an offender on his or her best behavior. In short, please cut corrections professionals some slack. In a single day their job may go from boring to frustrating to dangerous and back, and they truly don't get enough credit for what they do in dealing with people that society has decreed need to "go away." (Just look at rates of divorce and early death among corrections professionals to gauge the level of stress that is part of the profession.)

Brottman has a Ph.D. in English from Oxford, and brings in books for her group that are very challenging. She doesn't mention using questionnaires or other methods to assess the education level or reading tastes of the men she works with. Many in prison have not even finished grade school, much less high school. Reading *Heart of Darkness* may not have been the best choice. Though I am a believer in not underestimating what texts people are capable of dealing with, a little more research and preparation on Brottman's part may have netted her better conversations in her reading group.

Then there is using *Lolita* as a text. This is an area where more research and better judgment definitely would have helped her. The stigma against child molesters ("cho-mos") and sex offenders ("SOs") in prison is a daily source of conflict. SOs are often targets for violent retribution, extortion, and daily bullying. A book like *Lolita* (though it is a work of genius, and beautifully written), brings up issues that are taboo in a correctional setting for very good reason.

Finally, Brottman commits an error so great I am amazed that she is still able to continue her group: she has personal contact with the men after their release. In a book group it is natural to feel close to people you are sharing time and ideas with, but every man in a prison is a convicted criminal. It is unprofessional and potentially dangerous to put yourself into compromising situation with an ex-con if you are still volunteering at a prison.

Brottman does get many details of prison life right, and think that she comes into some great insights on human nature. I just think that she could have approached her group differently and gotten greater results.

All this to say: if you are looking for an extraordinary memoir about leading a book club in a repressive setting, try *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. If you want one that is only average, settle for *Maximum Security Book Club*.

Quotable:

"Prisoners aren't supposed to have any secrets. Everything is supposed to be open and transparent. Private tastes and preferences are a luxury of the free." - 83

"Over time, however, what was once mysterious and alluring became difficult and confusing, and while I continued to sympathize instinctively with the men, their suffering began to exhaust me, and I realized that rather than learning more about them, I was simply learning how little I'm able to know." - 217

Julie says

Never trust a person who insists Lolita is a love story.
