



Prison poetry: Local author chronicles history of Auburn Correctional



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Much has been written of the history of Auburn Correctional Facility — but not in the form of poetry.

Waterloo author Patricia Roth Schwartz, a longtime volunteer writing teacher at the prison, recounts its well-known stories, famous inmates and more in "The Crows of Copper John: A History of Auburn Prison in Poems."

She'll read from the anthology April 26 at the Auburn Public Theater. The book, published by Olive Trees, will also be available for sale, and Schwartz will also sign copies.

The Citizen recently spoke with Schwartz about the publication of "The Crows of Copper John":

Q. Where'd you get the idea for the book?

A. I have been volunteering to go into the prison for almost 12 years and do a poetry workshop with a group of inmates every Monday night. That's a long time. And we've had four books published of the inmates' work (those will also be available at the APT signing). As I was going into the prison, I became more interested in the history, because it's a very old building and it goes way, way back in the history of Auburn itself. One of the female prison guards recommended I read a book called "New Jack," and it's a memoir about a journalist who posed as a guard to learn all about what prisons are like. In the beginning of the book was a whole section about the history of Auburn Prison going back to the 1820s.

Then the next thing that came up was the Cayuga Museum. It owns an enormous collection of archival photos of the history of the prison, an amazing permanent collection. Quite a few years ago, they put on an exhibit of all those photographs, and I went to it and I was just completely astonished. I went back twice to see it. I've been a writer since I was a teenager, and have a number of books published, and I began to feel like the stories that were in these photographs had to be told in creative writing, and my form would be to write poems. I'm not writing little writing verses, in the book I use imagery, symbolism and different voices. I'm usually writing about myself, nature and so forth. But I felt compelled to write the stories of the people in this place that I was going into every week. I began to use these photographs to write poems.

I wrote these poems over 10 years ago. The voices just started coming to me. I would read the write-up (accompanying the Cayuga Museum exhibit) or look at my notes, and I just started thinking about what it'd be like to be that person, what thoughts are in that person's head. We don't know a lot about the inmates that were there, so I made up fictional voices. And in other cases, I'm using historical figures who really existed. I did additional research on my own. I had a lot of fun with it, even though the history of the prison is pretty grim, and just getting into that space of imagination.

The other thing I've been really intrigued about in terms of Auburn is the crows who roost around the prison. Ever since I started volunteering, the crows would be there every fall. For a couple years they were driven away, but they are back in smaller numbers. And I got the idea that the crows should be symbolic in the book. They should, in a sense, be a Greek chorus, which would appear in Greek theater to echo the sentiments and emotions of the play. I posit that the crows have come back generation after generation, and they have witnessed everything that has gone on in the prison, and they're speaking up for how they feel about it — and saying that crows would not treat each other the way humans do. They keep a watch, or a vigil, keeping an eye on what's going on there. In one of the stories from the prison's past, there's a belief that one of the first inmates held there flung himself over the wall into (the Owasco River). The prisoners who were initially incarcerated in Auburn were kept under solitary confinement and in complete silence, and Auburn was famous for this plan — it was believed this was more humane. So when the doors were open, the first 81 prisoners marched in were all insane from being treated this way. I had no information about the actual individuals; I posit that the character I created, because he is insane, he thinks the crows are dark angels coming to rescue him.

I worked on these poems for several years, and I wanted to publish them in book form. The whole manuscript has been performed twice as a theater piece, and it's created to be used in that way, as well. It's done as a readers' theater — they use a script to refer to. It was one of the first things ever performed at APT.

Q. Who are some of the characters in the book?

A. Some of the different characters that I cover are the inventor of the electric chair, Alfred P. Southwick — he came from Buffalo; he was a dentist. The first usage of it was set to be Auburn, because Buffalo didn't want the publicity. Of course it was called "Old Sparky," and it was used in Auburn to execute 55 men and women. I wanted to put him in as a character. I don't see him as very favorable.

In late 1800s there was an attempt to have things be more humane for prisoners, and to provide them entertainment, so Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show performed inside those walls. The Cayuga Museum has photographs of this, so I researched what the show would have been. I wrote a poem in the voice of a young fictional inmate who gets to see this show and how crazy he was about it, and that he dreamed that Buffalo Bill comes to rescue him. The other famous entertainment was Tom Thumb's little people, so I wrote a poem in the voice of an imaginary little person. I made up someone who went in there for the performance, and what his reaction was.

Q. What would you like readers to take from the book?

A. I would like people to become more interested in history, including the history of where they come from. I hope that people all over the country would read this book and become

more interested in local history, and also be aware of how the prison system in the United States has developed. It's come a long way, but in some ways it hasn't because the feelings of the people who are incarcerated remains the same — it's not fun. This is a human experience, and people could become more aware of that experience. I would also like people to take away from it a sense of storytelling. Storytelling is who we are as human beings. The early humans would hunt for food and take care of their young, and then their main activity was storytelling — before TV, before the Internet. And I think that's still important for us today.

I think the poetry is meant to be read out loud, and that's the purest form of storytelling — and I hope they stick with the audience, that they drive by the prison or see crows in the trees, and they think about something. I tried to cover many different points of view — people who did things to try to help the prisoners, and people who tried to hurt them. And then the women who were walled off in a separate area — a lot of people don't know that. Also, the possibilities of poetry: I think lots of times, young people today or even older people don't understand what all of the possibilities of poetry as a literary form can be. It's not poetry that's rhyming, the poems tell stories, they create characters and they serve as dramatic monologues. Teachers could be using this method to have students become more interested in history, or they could also create plays.

If you go

WHAT: Patricia Roth Schwartz reads from "The Crows of Copper John: A History of Auburn Prison in Poems"

WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday, April 26

WHERE: Auburn Public Theater, 8 Exchange St., Auburn

COST: Free

INFO: Call 253-6669