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Teaching Shakespeare in a Maximum Security Prison

By Michel Martin
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In this National Public Radio interview hosted by Michel Martin, Professor Laura Bates discusses her decision to teach Shakespeare in a maximum security prison as a way of educating inmates—and discovering new insights into the Bard's drama. As you read, take notes on the perspective behind Bates' approach to teaching Shakespeare in this setting and other central ideas in the text.

- [1] Many people thought Laura Bates was out of her mind when she offered to teach Shakespeare in the maximum security wing of an Indiana prison. But the prisoners found a deep connection with the playwright's words. Laura Bates talks about her experience in her new book *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*.¹ She speaks with host Michel Martin.



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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST: I'm Michel Martin and this is "TELL ME MORE" from NPR News. We want to talk about Shakespeare now, so quick: what does that bring to mind? Maybe you think about struggling to get through sophomore English. Maybe you think about well-trained actors performing in beautifully appointed theaters, but what probably does not come to mind are convicted murderers in some of the most restrictive circumstances in the country. But that's actually where Laura Bates chose to teach when she volunteered to teach English in Indiana's Wabash Valley Correctional Facility. And not just there, but in the super max facility where some of the most notorious² prisoners were held.

How she came to teach Shakespeare there and what she learned herself from that experience is the subject of her new book, *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*. And Laura Bates is with us now.

Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

- [5] **LAURA BATES:** Thank you for having me, Michel.

MARTIN: I think we should answer the question that most people are going to have, which is, what gave you the idea to teach Shakespeare, not just to people who are in prison, but people who are considered the worst of the worst, the people who are in the most restrictive circumstances?

1. "The Bard" is a nickname for Shakespeare. In medieval Gaelic and British culture, it means a professional poet or story teller.
2. **Notorious (adjective):** famous or well known, typically for some bad quality or deed

BATES: Exactly. And that is the phrase that is often used, the worst of the worst. Here in the state of Indiana, we have a few super max units and they do house what are considered to be the most violent offenders throughout the state of Indiana, and I didn't even know there was such a unit. It was a shock and a learning experience to me when I discovered this unit even existed.

And briefly, what happened was I was teaching freshman English classes at the facility, Wabash Valley, for prisoners in the general population. I was a part-time professor at the time at Indiana State University. In those days, we had a college degree granting program for prisoners, and one of my students got in trouble and he was taken out of class and I started to ask around. You know, where's Don? What happened to him? Where'd he go? And my prisoner-students told me about this unit, this highly restricted unit, super max, and that's where my student, Don, had been sent.

So I was told at the time, well, there's no education in this unit. No teacher has ever gone into this unit. So, of course, that made me want to get into that unit. I asked for permission from the administration and the warden³ at the time knew me and knew me to be, you know, a good college professor for many years. He literally opened that door for me and ended up inviting me to begin a voluntary program based on Shakespeare, which is my specialty, for these inmates that not only are the worst of the worst, at least in the eyes of the public, but more importantly, in my own eyes, they were the ones that needed education the most. They had the greatest need for education and for really any kind of programming and, ironically, they had the least available to them.

- [10] So these are the prisoners who, over and over and over, have been told that they are not capable, that they are certainly not intelligent, that they are not able to take on these kinds of, you know, intellectual challenges and so here comes somebody from the street knocking on their cell door and saying, hi, would you like to read some Shakespeare?

So, initially, that gets their attention.

(LAUGHTER)

Who are you and what do you want? And that confused a lot of them and, really, what happened was a wonderful word of mouth within the prison setting itself. I kept telling my husband, if only I can get one. I just want one prisoner, you know, who's willing to take this on and, if I can, you know, demonstrate to both the prisoner population and the administration itself that this is successful, then it's going to grow. And, goodness, it grew. It grew to where we had 50 people on the waiting list at one point.

MARTIN: Well, you know, what got me is that people—I thought it was hilarious—is that—well, I thought it was funny because it didn't happen to me. But you describe how people, like, literally slammed doors in your face. You know, you kind of have this idea that, you know, people would be hungry for something to do, but when you raise this, you literally went knocking on the steel doors...

- [15] **BATES:** Yeah, yeah.

3. **Warden** (*noun*): the head official in charge of a prison

MARTIN: ...asking if anybody wanted to read. And there—a couple of people literally slammed the door in your face, but a few people did give it a shot and you started with *Macbeth*.⁴ What do you think it was about this play? And from almost instantly, the people who did agree to study the work immediately got it and had some really powerful insights and you were saying, gosh, some of their insights were beyond those of students who you'd been teaching for years. What is it about that play you think just grabbed people right off the bat?

BATES: And I have to say some of their insights were beyond those of world-renowned professors I've studied with—from whom I've learned a great deal. But these prisoners were able to make sense of some passages that professional Shakespeare scholars have struggled with for 400 years.

Well, the play *Macbeth*, I chose it partly because it does have a subject matter that these prisoners I felt would relate to. It is a story of a good man, Macbeth is a good man, a good honorable general at the beginning of the story, but he is tempted by a number of outside influences. We might call them peer pressure. There are these weird women he encounters, the witches, that kind of fill his head with some ideas. And then that's reinforced by the nagging wife, all of this kind of urging him on to kill the king in order to become king himself. But throughout the play, what's wonderful about this play is that there are so many moments where Macbeth himself recognizes this is wrong, I might be tempted, I might have ambitions, but to kill a good man is not the right way to go. And so what happened was the prisoners on the one hand got caught up in the story. It is an action-packed drama. But ultimately they found themselves relating not only to the characters' actions but to that inner struggle, and as they analyzed Macbeth's motives, why he's giving in to do something that he knows that he doesn't want to do, it made them question their own motive. And one of the prisoners said in so many words, the more insight you get into Shakespeare's characters, the more insight you get into your own character.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, I'm speaking with English professor Laura Bates. We're talking about her new book *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*.

[20] You focus a lot of the book on—and I think the title comes from here too—is your friendship with one of the prison's, you know, again, we're using this kind of loaded language, but notorious prisoner, somebody named Larry Newton. And you weren't sure that even you could reach him when you first met. But he turned out to be a remarkable student. He impressed you as soon as you started talking to him about *Richard II*.⁵ And he eventually wrote a number of workbooks...

BATES: Yes.

MARTIN: ...that you then used in the program and that other people can use in other programs too. Could you talk a little bit about him?

4. *Macbeth* is a Shakespearian tragedy about a Scottish general, Macbeth, whose ambition to be king eventually leads to his downfall.

5. *King Richard II* is one of Shakespeare's historical plays, based on the life of King Richard II of England (ruled 1377–1399).

BATES: Absolutely. In fact, one of the results of publishing this book I hope will be that we get some of these other materials—these workbooks that Larry and I created together. I hope we get those out into a wider audience because I am using them, not only in the other prisons that I'm working with now throughout the state of Indiana, and I'm even working now in the Federal Bureau Of Prisons, I'm using his workbooks even with college students on campus and with area high school students. So it has a wide, wide range of appeal. What Larry's basic approach was exactly that idea, that getting insight into Shakespeare's characters, providing insight into your own characters. So he and I together created full length workbooks to 13 of Shakespeare's plays. And in each of those workbooks there is a day by day what he calls considerations, a point to consider in the play that involves examining the motives of the character and always bringing it right back to your own motives and your own choices.

And one of the most remarkable projects actually dealt with the play of *Romeo and Juliet*.⁶ In the introduction you mentioned struggling through sophomore English classes and most of your listeners I'm sure can remember a similar experience. And too often in high school the approach that is taken to a play like *Romeo and Juliet* is sort of the what I call the lovey-dovey stuff, the love story, the idealized, you know, suicide of these teenage lovers. But through my work with the prisoners I really found that a part that is so often overlooked is the violent society in which a teenager like Romeo ends up becoming actually a serial killer. He kills more than once throughout that play and he's a good kid, he's a good young man, and yet by looking at the kind of society that he grows up in, I think could really be a powerful opportunity for high school teachers across the country to use the play of *Romeo and Juliet* to discuss this extremely important issue of teenage violence.

[25] **MARTIN:** Do you mind if I ask—why is Larry in prison?

BATES: Well, from the ages of 10, you know, he was in a super max situation at age 10, actually. He was locked in a concrete closet in the dark as a juvenile and I went to seek out that facility which, thank goodness, is no longer functioning. But back in the '80s, there was actually this kind of hard-core environment for kids. So between the ages of 10 and 17 he was in and out of juvenile facilities, so he had quite a long extensive record. A lot of things like runaways and vandalism and, you know, shoplifting, that sort of thing. Then at the age of 17 he and three other peers were arrested for a murder. Larry pled guilty 'cause he was at that time facing a death penalty. And evidence suggests that it may not have been him who was the actual person who pulled the trigger, it's uncertain, but he is doing a life without parole sentence. And he did also at the age of 17 waive his right to ever appeal the sentence. So he's going to be there forever, that's why he's in prison. Now, why he was a record 10 and a half years in segregation, solitary confinement, is because he did have quite an extensive history within the prison of violent behaviors.

MARTIN: Larry told you that Shakespeare saved his life. What did he mean by that? Can you tell us?

BATES: Sure. Absolutely. In fact, when I first heard that expression, I thought he was joking.

(LAUGHTER)

6. *Romeo and Juliet* is a Shakespearian tragedy about two star-crossed lovers from feuding families.

[30] He has a good sense of humor so I thought, oh, he's just being silly, being flippant. It wasn't until a few years after he made that comment that I was able to ask you him, you know, what did you really mean by that? To sum up briefly, he says that he meant it both ways, both figuratively as well as literally. And what I was not aware of the day that I came knocking on his cell door, his life had been so desperate, so bleak for so many years that he was literally at the point of suicide. And so in that sense by Shakespeare coming along, presenting something positive in his life for maybe the first time, giving him a new direction, it did literally keep him from taking his own life.

And you know, as I work with other prisoners, you know, if I feel that I've been able to turn their own lives around—remember, these are some of the most violent offenders in particular, I feel like it's not only saved the prisoner's life but it may very well save the future victim's life. So on a literal level we have Shakespeare saving lives. And then beyond that, Larry spoke about the more figurative, metaphorical way that Shakespeare just unlocked his mind in a sense, gave him a new positive way of looking at life. And as he said, in a figurative way Shakespeare generally freed him, so both literally and figuratively saved his life.

MARTIN: You do kind of get new respect for Shakespeare and his understanding of human behavior, right?

BATES: Yeah.

MARTIN: Because he really did seem to get it, like why it is that people behave the way they behave and the things that people do when they're guilty, and the things that people do when they're in a rage.

[35] **BATES:** Right.

MARTIN: And why people can have such poisonous feelings about other people and then regret it. You know, on the other hand, it really does, it sounds to me like you were able to see a lot of these men in—kind of in a three dimensional way, that they were more than just a jacket, you know, more than just a rap sheet of things that they had done.

BATES: Exactly.

MARTIN: That's interesting. But why do you think you were able to do this? I mean you don't brag on yourself in the book, I'll just say this, but you clearly were able to have a rapport.⁷ It did not faze you being there. You can see a lot of, you can understand why a lot of people would not be able to teach in that environment and certainly wouldn't have persisted to the degree that you did—because you really did. Why do you think you did?

7. **Rapport** (*noun*): relation; especially: a relationship marked by harmony or affinity

BATES: Well, I think part of it is due to my own background because actually I feel more comfortable in prison than on a college campus, because I grew up in, you know, in inner-city Chicago. The whole college atmosphere is something I was not familiar with, you know, my parents were not college educated, and my peers, you know, more of them spent time in prison than in college. So I think that was just a very comfortable environment for me, I guess, sad to say, whereas the typical college professor, you know, probably would feel more, you know, uncomfortable, I guess less familiar with that kind of a setting. And so I think from the get-go that establishes a bit of a rapport. But honestly, any volunteer that comes into a prison setting immediately has a good rapport from the beginning right there because the prisoners do recognize that, you know, you came here because you wanted to, nobody's paying you, you're not required and that's a huge start toward establishing a good rapport.

[40] **MARTIN:** I understand that Shakespeare's birthday is upon us.

BATES: Yes, it is.

MARTIN: April 23. How shall we celebrate knowing what we know now about how Shakespeare changed so many lives?

BATES: I think that's an excellent question. A wonderful thing to do on Shakespeare's birthday, I think, would be to take a look at any passage from Shakespeare from any play and maybe read it with someone who has not been introduced to Shakespeare before. Your own children, possibly a youngster in the family, or if you have access to prison, of course, to go in and maybe introduce it to someone who hasn't read it there, or maybe just a student, just to find some way that Shakespeare can relate to each of us, really, today.

MARTIN: Laura Bates is an assistant professor at Indiana State University. Her new book, *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*, is out now. She joined us from member station WFIU in Bloomington, Indiana.

[45] Professor Bates, thank you so much for speaking with us.

BATES: Thank you for having me.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Summarize the central ideas of the interview on the lines below.

2. PART A: Reread paragraph 2. What is the host's likely purpose for beginning the interview segment in this way?
- A. By using rhetorical questions, the host is highlighting the ubiquity of Shakespeare.
 - B. By asking listeners to recall their associations with Shakespeare, the host is making the interview seem more relevant to the audience.
 - C. By bringing to mind more common associations with Shakespeare, the host is emphasizing the remarkableness of Bates' story.
 - D. By asking Bates about her own memories of Shakespeare, the host is attempting to learn more about the origins of her interest in Shakespeare.
3. PART B: Which quotation best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "a deep connection with the playwright's words"
 - B. "Maybe you think about struggling to get through sophomore English"
 - C. "well-trained actors performing in beautifully appointed theaters"
 - D. "what probably does not come to mind are convicted murderers"
4. PART A: Which statement best explains why Bates teaches maximum-security prisoners?
- A. She strongly believes all people deserve a quality education.
 - B. She felt a personal connection to the prisoners.
 - C. She felt a sense of duty to take on the challenge despite reservations.
 - D. She enjoys learning about and exposing herself to dangerous and risky environments.

5. PART B: Which piece of evidence provides the best support for the answer to Part A?
- A. "...one of my students got in trouble and he was taken out of class and I started to ask around... And my prisoner-students told me about this unit" (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "No teacher has ever gone into this unit. So, of course, that made me want to get into that unit." (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "these inmates that not only are the worst of the worst, at least in the eyes of the public, but more importantly, in my own eyes..." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "so here comes somebody from the street knocking on their cell door and saying, hi, would you like to read some Shakespeare?" (Paragraph 10)
6. Which statement best describes what Bates' work with the inmates helped reveal about the play *Romeo and Juliet*?
- A. It is often considered to be about romance, but can also be examined as a story about the impact of violent environments on youth.
 - B. It is often read as a play about teenage melodrama, but the focus should be shifted to the older generations in conflict.
 - C. It is often considered to be a play about teenage violence, but can also be read for its themes related to suicide.
 - D. It is often analyzed in an Elizabethan context, but should be analyzed for its modern application as well.
7. PART A: What does the word "jacket" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 36?
- A. Appearance
 - B. Label
 - C. Disguise
 - D. Bad reputation
8. PART B: Which antonym for the meaning of the word "jacket," as it is used in paragraph 36, best helps the reader identify the answer to Part A?
- A. "poisonous feelings"
 - B. "three dimensional"
 - C. "rap sheet"
 - D. "things that they had done"

9. How did Shakespeare save the life of an inmate, literally and figuratively?

10. What do Martin's questions reveal about her point of view toward Bates' work?
