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Reading revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island

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Ashwin Desai's *Reading revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* comes crucially at a time when textbooks and libraries are being destroyed in South Africa.¹ Political circumstances can inspire reading cultures just as much as they can inhibit them, demonstrating their contradictions. By the time that apartheid was unravelling, political prisoners had turned Robben Island prison into a university and a library. Many arrived as illiterates and left as book collectors, often leaving behind some of their prized literary possessions to fuel the reading revolution they had started.

¹ For the destruction of textbooks, see: Public protector looking into destruction of Limpopo textbooks (available at: <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/Content.aspx?id=177135>), as accessed 30 July 2012; for the burning of libraries, see: Burning of the Ratanda Library (available at: <http://www.liasa.org.za/node/767>), as accessed 30 July 2012.

Desai samples prisoners who signed off on favourite passages from Sonny Venkatrathnam's disguised copy of *William Shakespeare: The complete works* before he was released. He weaves a compelling narrative about Shakespeare's reception and audiences on the island, and about reading more generally in apartheid's most forbidding jail. An attractive feature is the range of Shakespeare's genres, forms and themes, as well as the range of political organizations represented.

"Revolution" is probably not an inappropriate description when its achievements are weighed - from absolute denial of reading material in the early 1960s to access to functioning libraries by the 1980s; from illiterate and semi-literate arrivals to sophisticated high school matriculants and university graduates; from political sectarianism to organized collaboration and open debates; from spiteful censorship by prison guards to assisting them with their own studies. Some of these developments were certainly radical, but there was no inevitability about all of this. Unexpected reverses, obstructive attitudes of some commanding officers, internal political disputes, and personal differences stalled and sometimes threatened to undo hard-earned gains.

Nor would the reading revolution have been possible without external pressure on the prison authorities by international organizations, sympathetic politicians, family, friends, or even fate. Venkatrathnam's book itself became the source of the signatures and widely read by prisoners after a relative or friend sent it to him as a gift and, when it was confiscated, returned to him as a result of fortunate circumstances surrounding a priest's visit.

The selected Shakespearian passages provide the springboard for each prisoner's personal journey as a reader, and they encapsulate an aspect of his character or his individual experiences and political outlook. Desai follows some of the readers after their release from Robben Island prison and into their post-1994 lives. It is indeed this feature that gives the book its special significance. Inequalities in the new South Africa's education system, which Desai attributes to poor economic choices and political compromises, have left some of the reading revolutionaries disillusioned. Others seek to re-ignite the revolutionary spark of Robben Island through reading programmes in poverty-stricken townships.

Desai calls on familiar Shakespearian themes to remind erstwhile political prisoners now in power that a new generation of South Africans is tragically as illiterate as they once were. South Africa, he laments, was the worst performer

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in a recent forty-country literacy study, and in 2011 only between two and eight percent of the county's schools had libraries. In these circumstances, the wanton destruction of textbooks and libraries are grave and ominous signs. The vision of Robben Island's reading revolutionaries has not materialized.

This book is richly illustrated and its coffee-table format and readable text make it suitable both for the general public and for more serious scholars, although an index would have been a valuable addition.