

FORMER STUDENT RESPONSES TO “BOOKS BEHIND BARS”

“This has been perhaps the most exciting and revealing class I’ve had at Uva. I feel like I’ve come away a new person, one firmly attached to the school of thought that believes community interaction is the best way to reach troubled or isolated kids and adults. I’m lucky enough to have found a place that hired me to do exactly that.”

“It was definitely my favorite class out of the entire year. And I feel like I learned the most out of all of my classes here. It was an incredible experience, very eye-opening. I’m kind of bummed that I now have three years ahead of me and I’ve already taken the best course UVA has to offer.”

“This has been the best class I’ve ever taken. For once, I was actually able to take literature and apply it to a situation. I had almost forgotten that was possible. (Funny how classrooms can do that.) For me, literature had stopped being practical. I read a book, then analyzed it in class. I didn’t stop to think about its real life applications, or how it could affect anyone other than critics.”

“It was that very human element of this class that differentiated it from nearly all other courses I have taken. It asks students for more than an intellectual interest, but requires a human interest in creating connections and relationships.”

“We impacted those kids. It’s exhilarating to say it, but we did. During one conversation, [a resident] turned to me and said ‘You know, I’ve told you things I haven’t told anyone. Not even my social worker.’”

“One of the first things that struck me was that the word ‘discussion’ was not a mere code word for ‘impress the teacher with my incredible wit.’ In this class we really do *discuss*, and these actual, real-life conversations have forced me into different ways of thinking.”

“In other classes, I’ve always felt responsible for *myself*. However, now that discussions are actual discussions (and I have to provide a provocative question/activity/etc.), I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to my classmates *and* to the residents.”

“In other classes my main motivation is graduation. Motivation in this class was not to let these guys down. I had to be here to make sure they understand how much I care. I had to be here so they understand how dedicated I am to this program, and to make sure I make a difference, and take away as much as I possibly can from this. And I can’t say that’s how I feel about other classes at all.”

“I would consider a profession in teaching much more seriously now...Perhaps this is the most serious and intense transformation I’ve experienced—I do think literature can change people and that words hold a tremendous, awe-inspiring power.”

“This class is not just academic, you’re also adding a service component. You’re taking it out into the real world. You’re not just learning about literature anymore, you’re learning about life. You’re learning about parts of your community. You’re learning about how the system works. You’re learning about these different perspectives.”

“I laugh about this, but one of the things that I wrote about in my journal was that I actually got tricked into understanding the literature. Because I didn’t feel like it was an English class where you are sitting down and analyzing the literature. Then after we had these discussions...I came out going, ‘Heck, I actually understand that story better than any others. We’ve exhausted that story.’ It was like, Wow, I got tricked into understanding it without thinking I was doing any analysis.”

“From the very first day I realized that if anyone was a student, it was *me*. The second I put my foot through the door, I felt utterly displaced from any preconceptions I might have had about the residents. Far from a bunch of rag-tag ruffians and bloodthirsty cutthroats, these adolescents were highly feeling, emotive, complex, and even humorous.”

“Perhaps the most challenging—and relieving—part of this course is balancing the tasks of thinking emotionally, creatively, and intellectually. In most literature classes, the class is encouraged to think only academically, to remove ourselves emotionally from the text. This method is effective for textual analysis, but it seems an ineffective means to truly grasping any real personal meaning from literature. In this class, however, I appreciate how we are afforded the time, space, and encouragement to react emotionally and personally, to debate whether or not we personally pity Akaky and Pechorin, because it allows for a greater connection to the texts, and for me, this has allowed the stories and poems we have read to affect and challenge me more deeply.”

“I’ve genuinely valued the interplay between the academic and the non-academic, between the University and the Community and the blurring between those lessons we can learn in a classroom or from a text and those we take from life. More often should UVA be pioneering courses such as this one in which we step outside the boundaries of the campus and beyond our self-oriented pursuit of knowledge.”

BOOKS BEHIND BARS ALUMNI ADVISORS

These past *Books Behind Bars* students have offered to act as advisors and consultants to future and prospective students. Feel free to contact them with any questions you have about the course or their experience.

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