

CAGED CREATIVITY

JOHN HOVEY[∞]

Hovey reflects on our shared humanity, the dehumanizing experience of incarceration, and how society's problems, like a pandemic, are prison problems. He explores his journey as an author and an artist and the "undesirable necessity" of "prison writing."

Why cartoons and comics? Why commentary? Why anything?

In discussions of Social Justice, or the Criminal Justice System, or the Prison Industrial Complex, a prisoner can be a convenient witness, a genuine literal insider as it were. Sometimes prison problems become society's problems, but more often, the issues that affect free society impact prisons as well...disease and epidemics for instance.

From the moment COVID-19 infected the American penal system, individuals and organizations were asking me to write about the pandemic experience within the prisons. I was hesitant, but I consented, since it was such an important subject that affected so many.

Like many people, I've been writing since I was a child. And I've been writing about injustice and incarceration ever since I myself was wrongfully convicted and imprisoned as a teenager, so very long ago, in the Orwellian year 1984. And yet, to me, "prison writing" has always been an undesirable necessity, a duty, whereas creative expression, fiction and art and cartooning for example, is a passion more closely aligned to my interests.

I often write that criminals are much more than just the worst five minutes of their lives, that no matter how heinous their behavior - or even a single anomalous action - has been, it is still only one facet of a complex human being with a lifetime of experiences good and bad...

Similarly, prisoners are more than just criminalized commodities in cages; they aren't an aberrant separate species or race, or abhorrent freak of nature, they are citizens who were incarcerated because of an action or accusation, something that can happen to anyone anywhere, whether guilty or innocent. Sometimes prisoners are well-rounded individuals, some even possess a wide range of skills and talents and interests beyond the criminal.

[∞] John Hovey is an author/artist doomed to a "life" sentence who has been continuously incarcerated since 1984 when he was sixteen. His articles, fiction and illustrations appear in numerous books, magazines, and other venues. He wrote Chapter 35 "Growing Up Incarcerated: A Prisoner's Perspective On The JHO Experience" of Routledge's new textbook "The International Handbook of Juvenile Homicide" (2024, Editor Kathleen M. Heide, PH.D.). The Harbinger previously featured his "Corona Drive-Through." He is currently caged in WA state and can be contacted by email via Securustech.net as John Hovey #878017.

A few prisoners are writers who became incarcerated, but there are many more prisoners who began to write once incarcerated, and often because of it. Until recent years, there weren't many forums inviting the prisoner perspective. Giving voice to prisoners (and to all marginalized disenfranchised communities) is both a noble goal and an absolute necessity, and yet...to believe prisoners can *ONLY* write about prison, or worse, to only allow prisoners to write about prison, is a different kind of oppression; it reduces them to mere stereotypes and declares their existence should be solely defined by incarceration. It ignores any uniqueness and memories and imagination they may possess, and helps assure they remain two-dimensional subhuman vilified victims, marginalization sometimes made more insidious by specious good intentions.

Personally, I've always preferred to express my thoughts and imagination in myriad ways, through articles or speeches, artwork or stories, novels or cartoons, sculpture or scripts – whatever I feel is the best project to convey a particular idea. But because I'm a prisoner – a status that renders me oppressed and ostracized – producing and sharing anything with the world has always been extremely difficult, and the majority of my creation over the decades has been disseminated under pseudonyms. I've never even seen the Internet. (I can almost hear the collective gasps of a billion Millennials.)

The accompanying corona-cartoons (drawn during the pandemic) can be viewed and interpreted as a quick throwaway laugh, or as social commentary about alienation and oppression (respectively), or both, or anything. Similarly, even the recent accompanying Godzilla cartoon was interpretive—is it simply representational of one imaginative child's enthusiasm watching monster movies on TV in the Seventies, or is it darkly allegorical, suggesting childhood innocence constantly threatened by the inexplicable monstrousness of modern life? One should never underestimate the importance of art; it can portray complicated truths in a universally understood manner, sometimes in an accessibly fun or silly way.

When discussing social issues (including the coronavirus pandemic), I've written countless articles and essays and stories and more, and yes, sometimes created artwork and cartoons. As they say, a picture can be worth a thousand words...and a cartoon panel can express multifaceted issues both subtle and overt at a glance, as well as add a layer of emotion or artistry or entertainment to subjects that may otherwise be dry or grim.

An intellectual or creative person shouldn't be limited or lobotomized simply for being incarcerated, although this is precisely what happens. Penal systems are designed for regimented conformity – they destroy any hint of individuality, including intellectual/creative/artistic expression, they loathe talent and imagination, they fear empowerment and intelligence, they want prisoners to know their place, they hate when prisoners dare to hope and dream rather than remain despised,

exploited, abandoned, and forgotten. Meaningful Freedom of Expression (as well as most other basic rights) is often denied to prisoners. Unfortunately, these attitudes are not limited to penal employees; prisoners encounter prejudice and demonization from society all the time (even from the publishing and entertainment industries), after all, prisoners are the only minority everyone is allowed and encouraged to openly hate.

We must never forget, anyone on earth can become a prisoner, and many will, especially when uneducated and impoverished, but every prisoner is also still a real living complex human being and can be more than just the monster in the cage if only given the opportunity.

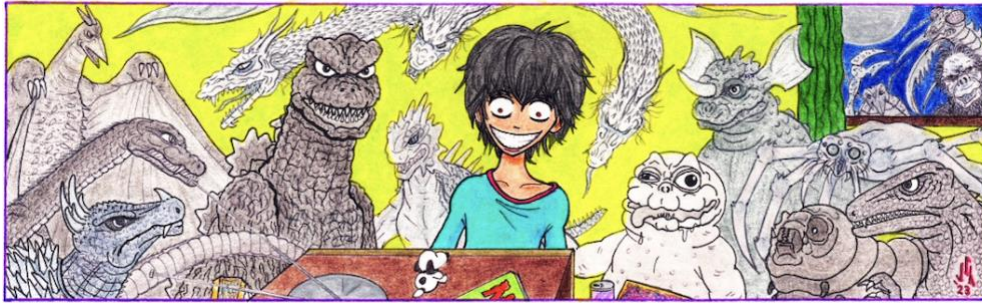


[Image ID: John Hovey's January 2024 article "Caged Creativity" includes two accompanying representative colorful cartoon-style illustrations drawn by the author himself. The First Illustration is a comic-strip feature entitled "Quarantine Comix," with two cartoon panels. The logo uses silly lettering, a gooey splash, a housecat wearing a medical mask, and a bat on a branch.

In Panel One, a pretty, young mother speaking on the phone in the home's hallway tells the listener: "'Social distancing'? My kids have already been doing that for years." Behind her in the den, a bespectacled teenage daughter sitting on a bean bag is absorbed in a tablet screen and music player, while her young brother is frantically playing a video game, and an older brother is outside the window in shorts enjoying the fresh air and warm sunshine. The apparent joke is that all the members of the family are self-absorbed and completely oblivious to each other, thus the common pandemic phrase "social distancing" becomes a pun with a double meaning.

In Panel Two, a mean schoolteacher, an older woman wearing a medical mask, addresses her small rowdy classroom of grade-schoolers: "Children! Ineffective

masks...inappropriate choices...'corona cartoons'...oh, how dare you students foster a sense of humor during the pandemic!" The apparent joke is that the mandated masks the kids are wearing are more akin to Halloween than for a medical purpose. The students' ridiculous costumes include: Spock the Vulcan from "Star Trek," Pennywise the evil clown from "It," a ghost in a form-fitted sheet, a cute girl in a cat outfit, hockey-masked Jason from "Friday the 13th," Batman, and a goofy kid with a bra and panties on his head. The children seemingly represent free-spirited fun, while the teacher symbolizes stern oppression.]



[Image ID: The Second Illustration contains no logo, text, or dialogue. It is a wide panoramic view of a living room featuring a skinny young boy with bushy dark hair excitedly sitting too close to a television, he has a wide toothy exuberant smile. Surrounding him in the room are ghostly images of giant movie monsters, products of his overactive imagination as he watches a movie. The most recognizable monsters are Godzilla, nearby to his side, and Godzilla's silly child, close to his other side. Eleven more monsters lurk around these four. Godzilla and the others are all scaly Japanese movie monsters specifically from Japan's 1960s era of fantasy films, suggesting the scene is set in the early Seventies. There is also a certain unsettling difference between the bright vibrant boy and the grey faded monsters, as well as the expressions, which seemingly demonstrates the apparent contrast between youthful innocence and worldly monstrosity.]