

Three Strikes: On Prison Book Bans

by Jarvis Jay Masters

A few months ago, a friend sent me an [article](#) from the Washington Post about prison systems banning books by Black authors and it made me think. When I first came up within the walls at San Quentin, I was one of those young black men who had “arrived” where I felt I was meant to be. That was more than 40 years ago. And at the age of 19, I might’ve read eight books my whole life.

Since then, it may be in the hundreds. And the best of them were books that were not allowed, that were considered “contraband” by prison authorities. I read these books because I was sure to learn something that would show me how to grow out of the fearful noises I had in my head after being caged to suffer the consequence of crimes I had committed. When I got a hold of Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*—which proved that I wasn’t a very poor reader— I learned how to contend with the noise. Strike 1.

Then, when I was given Malcom X’s autobiography, it was very important that I kept it stashed. I had begun to learn how to think for myself, to stand up to people who— I know— had a mighty good time manipulating this 19-year-old youngster. It didn’t happen overnight, but reading Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and James Baldwin taught me how I could gain my self-respect. I was sure prison authorities didn’t like this “militant” attitude they affiliated me with. This was Strike 2.

When I became an avid reader, the censorship of certain books seemed outlandish. “What the hell’s wrong with you? Why Mark Twain? You come in my cell and now—” I had once asked a guard, “to tell me that Mark Twain has to be confiscated?!” *This book* [The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn] *is considered contraband?!* “Well...well,” he leafed through the book, “We don’t know what’s *in* this book. It could be *made* of contraband or something.”

It was at this time that I realized that *any book, at any time*, could be considered contraband by prison authorities. That censoring prisoners’ rights to books had no limits. There was a time that I felt like I was stripped down naked without something to read or to think about. When it became clear I had nothing else, I began to write my own story that eventually became my own book. Strike 3.

*Note: Jarvis endured over 21 years in solitary confinement at San Quentin, which is where he started writing **Finding Freedom** and **That Bird Has My Wings** with the prison-approved flimsy innards of ballpoint pens. The recently-released book **Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise** by Leigh Marz and Justin Talbot Zorn, features a chapter on Jarvis and his journey.*