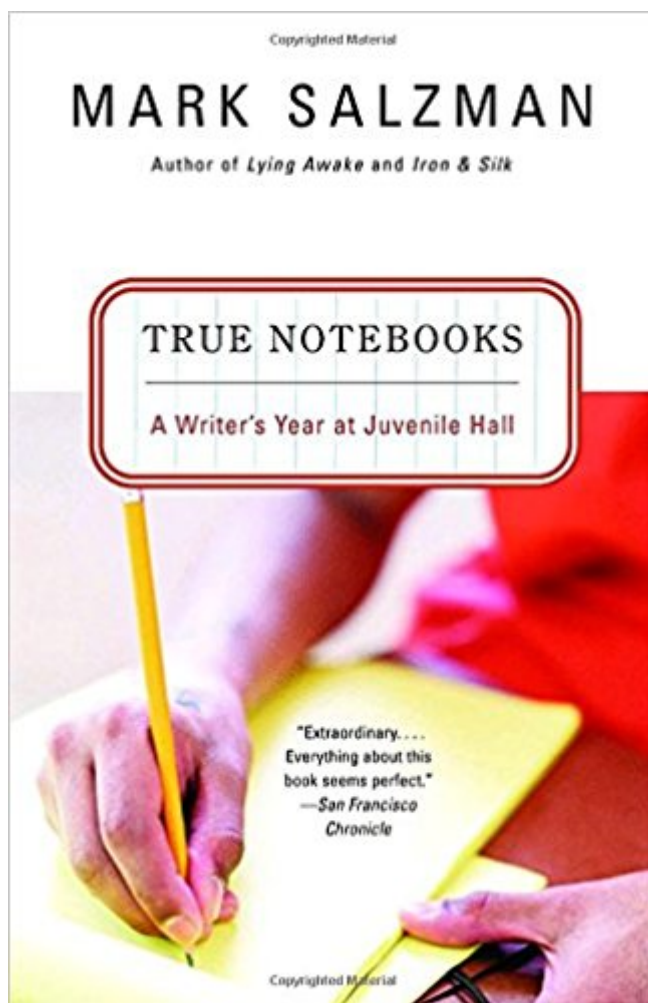


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# True Notebooks: A Writer's Year At Juvenile Hall



## Synopsis

In 1997 Mark Salzman, bestselling author *Iron and Silk* and *Lying Awake*, paid a reluctant visit to a writing class at L.A.'s Central Juvenile Hall, a lockup for violent teenage offenders, many of them charged with murder. What he found so moved and astonished him that he began to teach there regularly. In voices of indelible emotional presence, the boys write about what led them to crime and about the lives that stretch ahead of them behind bars. We see them coming to terms with their crime-ridden pasts and searching for a reason to believe in their future selves. Insightful, comic, honest and tragic, *True Notebooks* is an object lesson in the redemptive power of writing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Salzman (*Lying Awake*; *Iron & Silk*) volunteered to teach creative writing at Central Juvenile Hall, a Los Angeles County detention facility for "high-risk" juvenile offenders. Most of these under-18 youths had been charged with murder or other serious crimes, and after trial and sentencing many would end up in a penitentiary, some for life. Sister Janet Harris, of the Inside Out Writers program, convinced Salzman that in spite of his reservations-about teaching writing, about being a white liberal offering "art" to darker-skinned ghetto boys-these children needed to be encouraged to express themselves in writing instead of acting out, needed to feel they mattered to someone. So Salzman started coming twice a week to meet with three boys, although their number quickly grew. He tried to structure each session with a half hour for writing followed by each boy reading his work aloud, although after a lockdown or a class member's trial, he had to loosen the routine. While their writing themes are somewhat predictable-their anger and violent impulses, their relationships with

parents and gangs, plus a tedious dose of "pussy, bullets, and beer"-the discussions these essays provoked were personal and often explosive. As productive as these classes were, everyone was always aware of the painful truth that students would soon be shipped out to more brutal facilities. Salzman doesn't dwell on that, concluding that "a little good has got to be better than no good at all." Indeed, his account's power comes from keeping its focus squarely on these boys, their writing and their coming-to-terms with the mess their lives had become. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Wanting to add life to a cardboard juvenile delinquent character in the novel he was trying to finish, Salzman (Iron & Silk; Lying Awake) visited a juvie lockup for high-risk offenders where his friend taught a writing class. Despite entering the facility wishing "we could tilt L.A. County and shake it until everybody with a shaved head and tattoos falls into the ocean," Salzman ended up teaching a class himself. The remarkable results are detailed in this wonderful book. Salzman found students who took writing more seriously than the college kids he'd taught. He also found clowns, of course, who just wanted to goof off or antagonize him, but even the manipulative kids Salzman introduces us to are stunningly human. Both selections from the boys' writing and Salzman's taut storytelling give us multidimensional images of teenagers thrown into a justice system concerned only with punishment. Early in the book, a friend of Salzman's complains that there are no good books about juvenile delinquents. Well, there's one now--one that examines a broken system with grace, wit, and gripping storytelling. John Green Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I had very little expectations or enthusiasm to read this book, as it was assigned for my juvenile justice class. However, it was a fantastic book and well written. Mark Salzman is to be commended for his efforts with Juvenile Offenders. If more people were to show the compassion and thought process that he does, the world would become a better place. I will keep this book in my collection as it really was a great and inspiring read! Highly recommended.

True Notebooks is an insightful account of Salzman's volunteer experience as a writing instructor for juvenile offenders. It soon becomes apparent that he is as skillful as a teacher (although his instruction methodology for his students is not revealed) as he is a writer. The penetrating essays of his students are riveted with emotions of anxiety, guilt, revenge, remorse and love. Neither Salzman nor his students make excuses for their actions, but they too are challenged with their search for an

explanation of their criminal behavior. The nature of the beast is self-analyzed, then exorcised through the newfound elixir of writing. Interestingly, the spoken language of the inmates is loaded with expletives; every response has one. Yet, expletives do not appear in their written essays! Salzman writes with such straight-forward, digestible language; it is hard to accept his revealing admission that he struggles greatly as a writer. His struggle is rewarded in the final product.

I had zero expectations reading this book and it took me by storm. Partially for research on juvenile offenders and partially for philanthropic reasons, author Mark Salzman taught a writing class at a juvenile detention center in LA where most of the teenaged boys were awaiting trial for murder. What follows is in equal terms alarming, hilarious, and sad. What's alarming: the reader gets to know these boys well and even sympathize with them, but the bottom line is that they are killers. In a few cases details about their crimes are provided. Are they deserving of our sympathies? Yes and no. Salzman seems aware of the pitfalls himself, providing perspective occasionally by offering asides about society's point of view (as well as the victims' points of view). What's hilarious: the badinage between the boys. The profanity-laced ribbing they deliver at each other, typical of teenaged boys everywhere, is realistic and merciless. Every weakness is attacked; every mistake is magnified; and yet, they give each other his due when it comes to letting the defenses down to write about feelings. What's sad: the fate of these boys. Almost all are convicted with the maximum sentences with little if any serious defense on the part of their appointed legal representatives. As you hear the stories of their misspent, abused, and neglected youths, you see that the picture is bigger and more complicated than you'd expect. Keep your eye on Mr. Sills, a corrections officer who is hard as nails on the outside, but caring on the inside. He's one of those "sleeper" minor characters that can really make a book, and he offers the boys the tough, structured guidance that many of them lacked at home. I'm going to miss this book now that I'm done, but at least I have a bunch of other Mark Salzman titles to check out now. If you care about humanity, reading, writing, teaching, crime, rehabilitation, and overcrowded prisons, this is your book. And if you don't, this may well be your book anyway. Check it out.

I fully understand the pull to intervene in no matter how small or large a way with the boys. Having been involved in Epiphany juvenile prison ministry since 1995, I am so glad to be present to the young inmates. We have completed 48 weekends at Western Youth Institution in NC and were back to have 'reunions' with them twice a month from 1998 until October of 2013 when the state closed

the prison. Kudos to Mark for drawing out their creative side and being there with the boys to encourage them.a

Mark Salzman deserves kudos for the honest portrait he has drawn of his time teaching creative writing to inmates in L.A. County's juvenile hall. What I appreciated most about the book is the way it exposes our country's failings toward at-risk youth without being preachy or overbearing. It presents individual situations and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions about what is wrong with the juvenile correction system in America. I am a voracious reader of both fiction and non-fiction, as well as an emotional person, but very, very few books have moved me to tears and laughter, sometimes within a few moments of each other. This one did: it reminded me of how important human connection is to each of us, as well as the power of caring to heal damaged souls. Mr. Salzman was clearly moved by his time with the kids in his class, and it shows in his spare, clean writing about his experiences, as well as his descriptions of the inmates' relationships and methods of communication and self-protection. Included are examples of the writing done by his students; some of them will make you laugh, and some will break your heart. I highly recommend this book.

This memoir is something else. I was a TA in a freshman English class that was assigned this book. It is a true store. My favorite part is that the boys' work is in the book unedited and their language is unedited. It adds so much to the story. You end up really caring for the boys and wishing the best for them. Strong characters. Well written. Great detail. Plus it's an easy book to read so you fly right through.

This is a great story about how writing can be an outlet for troubled students and how it helped them to gain a better life.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough! Mark Salzman is as non-judgmental and evocative as a writer can be, and reading this book is a very moving experience. A true blessing to have come across this book.

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