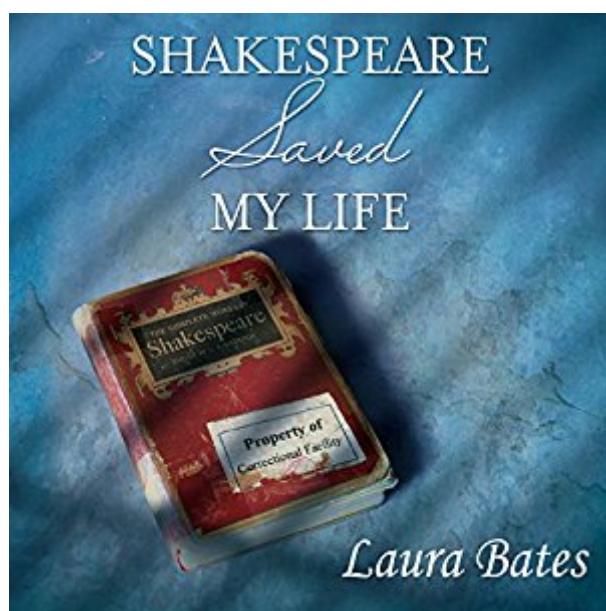


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# Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years In Solitary With The Bard



## **Synopsis**

Shakespeare professor and prison volunteer Laura Bates thought she had seen it all. That is until she decided to teach Shakespeare in a place the bard had never been before - supermax solitary confinement. In this unwelcoming place, surrounded by inmates known as the worst of the worst, is Larry Newton. A convicted murderer with several escape attempts under his belt and a brilliantly agile mind on his shoulders, Larry was trying to break out of prison at the same time Laura was fighting to get her program started behind bars. Thus begins the most unlikely of friendships, one bonded by Shakespeare and lasting years - a friendship that, in the end, would save more than one life.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

I learned more about prisons in the US and the reality of solitary confinement in this book than in any of book I have read about the system. The author follows one's reticular prisoner and details how he got to prison and his life there. He shows us how we should be careful about prejudging anyone. Larry demonstrates amazing insights into Shakespeare based on his life experiences. I read this for my book club and was pleasantly surprised at how interesting it was. I gave it four stars because I thought the focus jumped around more than necessary.

My first reaction when I saw this book was, "Great, EVERYONE is reading Shakespeare before I do. Even people in solitary confinement!" I'd recently decided to read all of Shakespeare's plays in a

year and I was finding it slow going. But the prisoners that Laura Bates described in this book seemed to breeze through the plays, even if they had limited education and no previous knowledge of the bard. If they could do it, what the hell was my excuse? Once I got past my petty jealousy, this book spoke to me on a lot of levels. Laura Bates is an English professor who has been teaching Shakespeare for years, both in colleges and in prisons. This book recounts her experiences with the latter, particularly in a supermax--or solitary confinement--unit. A great number of my family members work in corrections, including in prisons, and I myself had helped start a writing and spoken word program at a women's prison here in Nova Scotia. So I didn't need to be convinced of the value of prisoner education. And, as I mentioned, I'd recently started a Shakespeare in a Year project in which I was attempting to read the Complete Works of Shakespeare (or at the very least the plays) before the end of the year. So I didn't need to be convinced of the value of Shakespeare. Still, this book surprised me in a lot of ways. The thing that struck me most about Laura Bates' experiences teaching Shakespeare in prison was the way the inmates interpreted certain passages. Dr. Bates deliberately chose plays she thought might speak to them, plays about crime (Macbeth) or imprisonment (Richard III) or loss of power (King Lear) or violence and revenge (Titus Andronicus). Even so, the inmates' reactions to them often changed the way I myself was reading the material. As an example, when discussing the murder of King Duncan in Macbeth, one part that often stumps literary critics is why Macbeth is able to kill Duncan but cannot seem to complete the plan by planting the bloody daggers on the sleeping guards, implicating them. He balks at this and wanders off, forcing Lady Macbeth to complete the task. Why? I, like many critics, interpreted Macbeth's actions as evidence of doubt, of lack of conviction to the plan. Lady Macbeth, by contrast, seems like the pushier of the two in this scene ("Fine! I have to do everything myself, do I?"). But the inmates had a different interpretation: "'He needs for her to get her hands dirty too', said the new student in the group named Bentley... When Bentley made the observation about Macbeth's need for a partner in crime, the others, all serving time for murder convictions, agreed. It is easier to bear the burden of guilt, especially of such a heavy crime, my students said, with an accomplice. Genius. That not only changes how I feel about that scene, it changes how I feel about the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. Is Lady Macbeth really the mastermind who pushes her husband, unwillingly, into a series of murders? Or is Macbeth pulling his wife further into their crime spree so she shares his culpability? There are a lot of other examples of the inmates' interpretations of Shakespeare (the comparison of Titus Andronicus to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is worth the price of admission alone) and they're all fantastic. Even if you got nothing else out of the book, these insights are more than worth the read. Keep checking this blog for an upcoming

interview with the author and a chance to win a copy of the book! Disclaimer: I received a digital galley of this book free from the publisher from NetGalley. I was not obliged to write a favourable review, or even any review at all. The opinions expressed are strictly my own.

This was an insightful read about on the rehabilitation of supermax prison inmates through the reading of Shakespeare's plays. It narrows its focus on the Shakespeare professor (Laura Bates)'s experience teaching Shakespeare to prisoners, and in particular, delves deeply into the relationship her pupil, Larry Newton, develops with the work of the Bard. As an English major who studied the works of Shakespeare and as a long time fan of seeing the plays performed on stage, I don't know what compelled me to pick this one up. I found the idea intriguing of educating prisoners with this kind of academically rigorous programming. Personally, I recall struggling to make sense of some of the plays, some of the language. I remember how long it would take me to read one play (and we needed to read one a week) and yet I was surprised to find that some of the insights her students never would have crossed my mind. I never thought to approach the work in the ways they have. Instead, I mined the works of scholars and read over the hundreds of tiny print footnotes at the bottom of every page in my enormous Complete Works of William Shakespeare. But I never, not once, used the Bard's words as a way to examine my own life, and my own motivations. Larry Newton, a man convicted of murder and serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole, challenged all the stereotypes I carried in my head about prisoners. His experience is a testament to the power of Shakespeare's work and that of equipping all people, including the incarcerated, with education. Though I realize education--much like religion--may not impact everyone to the degree in which it inspired change for Newton, I think it can be very hard to engage with something so intimately and not walk away without having gained something valuable. Like those old TV commercials: the more you know... Some of the questions posed by the book, including 'should prisoners have access to education' and 'if so, who should pay for it' really invite opportunities for further reader engagement. I don't have any hard and fast answers, but I certainly find the question interesting! Guess you'll have to decide for yourself. As a cool sidenote: I did recognize the name of one of my own university professors in this book, and I was really excited to see that she's done some work within this field as well. I may go on to read her book someday, too.

Have already recommended this book to several friends and purchased another copy for family. I am not quite finished with it but am so glad it was one of my book club's selections. This is an amazing true story with poignant insight into the lives of prisoners who are "lifers". It has certainly

changed the way I think about those who are incarcerated for crimes committed. Who ever would have thought Shakespeare would generate so much discussion amongst those in solitary confinement!

This was a surprisingly good book. A story about a young man doing hard time in prison for murder who has the soul of a poet, or should I say, the soul of a bard. His insights into Shakespeare, partly due to his own life experiences and partly because of his native intelligence, make him an inspiration for those who have screwed up royally but still want to make a life for themselves. Of course, none of this would have been possible were it not for the remarkable courage and determination of his teacher, the author of this book, Laura Bates, who gives us clues to what is possible even in the most hopeless of situations. I want to make sure all my students are aware of these remarkable people.

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