

5 Remarkable 20th Century Books Penned Behind Bars

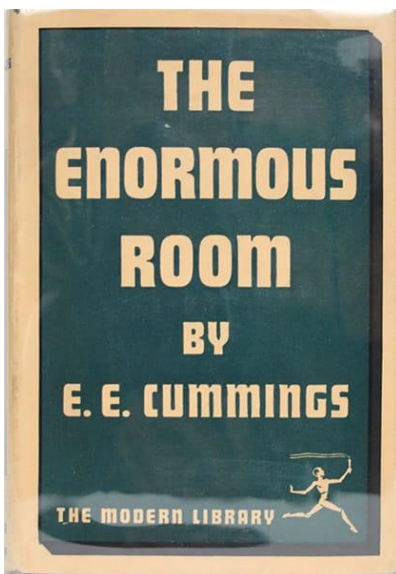


Susannah Fullerton
<https://susannahfullerton.com.au/>



Books written while an author is in gaol can offer a unique reading experience. Prison forces introspection and provides fertile ground for creative honesty, with works often featuring personal struggle, societal injustice, or political defiance. These books frequently carry a raw sense of urgency, and become not only literary achievements but historical reflections of resilience.

The books created connect readers to the minds of the authors and the moments in which they lived and are not only literary accomplishments but also historical artifacts that document resilience and resistance. What do you think of these titles?



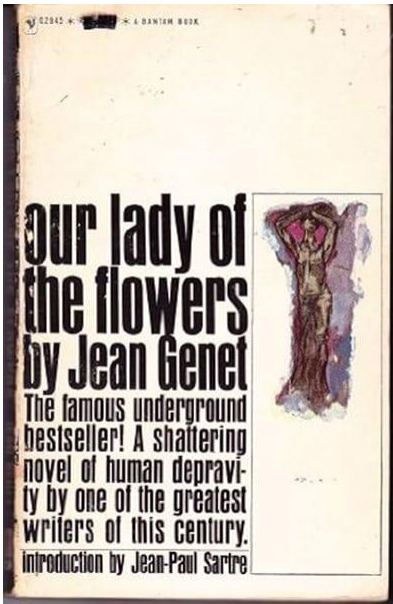
***The Enormous Room* by E.E. Cummings (1922)**

The Enormous Room, published in 1922, is a novel that recounts the author's experience in a French detention camp during World War I. Cummings finds himself confined in a large, barren room along with a variety of eccentric fellow prisoners. Rather than focusing on the hardships of imprisonment, he writes with sharp wit and modernist style to explore the strange, diverse personalities he encounters, blending dark humour with reflections on human nature.

What makes this book unique is its modernist approach, with free-form structure and experimental language and it stands as both a personal meditation on his experiences and a critique of the absurdities of war and confinement. He went on to write many poems, plays and short stories and died in 1962.

[*The Enormous Room* by E.E. Cummings](#)

[*The Enormous Room* by E.E. Cummings](#)



***Our Lady of the Flowers* by Jean Genet (1943)**

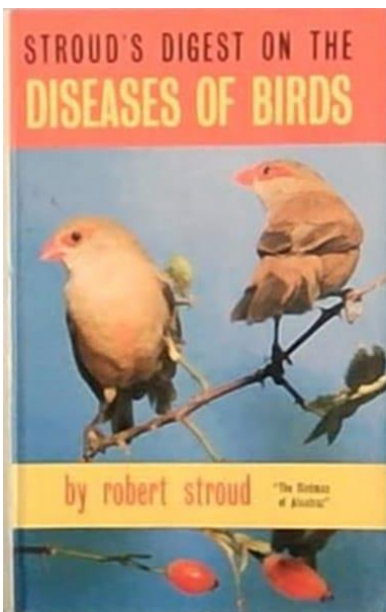
[*Our Lady of the Flowers*](#) is the debut novel of French writer Jean Genet. Written during his time in prison for burglary, this 1943 novel draws heavily from the author's life as a criminal and outsider. Genet's prose challenges conventional beauty and morality, celebrating the lives of those society often deems unworthy, and presenting them in a manner that is both reverent and provocative.

The story unfolds through the eyes of a fictional narrator who recalls the experiences of a cast of characters including criminals, drag queens, and prostitutes in the outcasts in Paris. Its highly erotic, often sexual structure mirrors the chaotic lives of its characters and explores themes of identity, sexuality, and gender fluidity.

Genet later became a writer and playwright, publishing five novels, three plays, and numerous poems and died in Paris in 1986.

[*Our Lady of the Flowers* by Jean Genet](#)

[*Our Lady of the Flowers* by Jean Genet](#)



***Digest of the Diseases of Birds* by Robert Franklin Stroud (1943)**

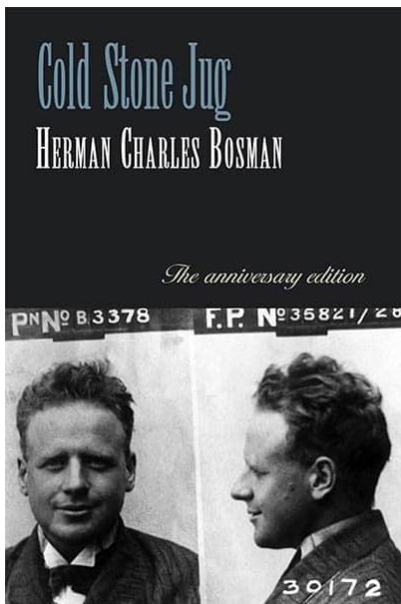
[*Digest of the Diseases of Birds*](#), by Robert Franklin Stroud, was written while the author served a life sentence in solitude for his violent unruly behaviour at Leavenworth Penitentiary.

Stroud, known for his expertise as a biologist and ornithologist, had many years of experience caring for birds, and the prison thought it would be a "productive use of his time."

Stroud's meticulous and extensive research provides detailed insights into various diseases affecting birds, including symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment options. It is over 500 pages long, including illustrations by Stroud himself and was an astounding success when it was published in 1943. Stroud was transferred to Alcatraz in 1942, where he was allowed to continue his research gaining the title, "The Birdman of Alcatraz." He was denied further right of publication and he died in 1963.

[*Digest on the Diseases of Birds* by Robert Stroud](#)

[*Digest of the Diseases of Birds* by Robert Stroud](#)



***Cold Stone Jug* by Herman Charles Bosman (1949)**

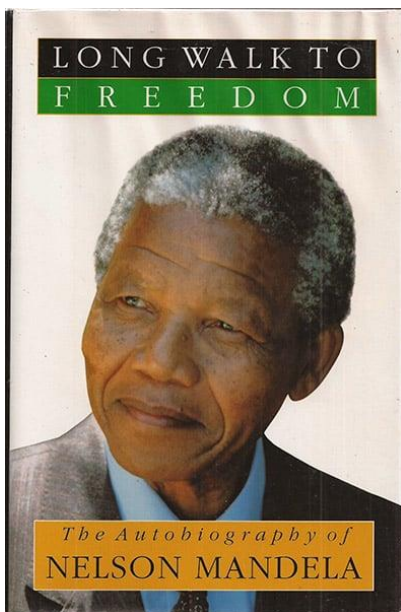
In 1926, South Africa's renowned short story writer, Herman Charles Bosman, found his life forever altered when, in the heat of an argument, he shot and killed his step-brother. Sentenced to death, his story truly begins there. He was granted parole for good behaviour after serving about four years. [*Cold Stone Jug*](#) is Bosman's gripping account of his years behind bars in the infamous Pretoria Central Prison during the late 1920s.

Amidst the brutal and bleak conditions, Bosman's sharp wit and masterful storytelling illuminate the lives of fellow prisoners and the grim reality of prison life. By turns poignant, darkly humorous, and deeply moving, *Cold Stone Jug* offers a rare glimpse into a forgotten world, with Bosman's dry humour serving as a lifeline through the horrors of his captivity. Ultimately, it is his personal journey, layered with reflection and resilience, that lingers long after the final page is turned.

Bosman was released on parole in 1930 after serving half of his sentence. He took up a career as a journalist and was part of the literary set in Johannesburg, publishing six books during his lifetime with many more works published posthumously. He died in 1951.

[Cold Stone Jug by Herman Bosman](#)

[Cold Stone Jug by Herman Bosman](#)



***Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela (1970)**

Nelson Mandela started writing his autobiography [*Long Walk to Freedom*](#) in the 1970s, during his incarceration on Robben Island, in Table Bay, near Cape Town, South Africa, but prison authorities confiscated the manuscript so the book itself was not completed until much later. However, much of the material and memories he gathered during his time in prison became the foundation for the book.

After his release in 1990, Mandela resumed work on the autobiography, and it was published in 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom* chronicles Mandela's life, including his early years, political involvement, the struggle against apartheid, and his 27 years of imprisonment. The book won the Alan Paton Award in 1995 and has been published in many languages, including Afrikaans. In 2013 it was adapted into a film titled *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. Nelson Mandela died in 1999.

[Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandella](#)

[Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela](#)

Further Reading

[Alcatraz History: Robert Stroud](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: Writers in Prison](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: The Mount Nelson Hotel](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Movie Adaptations of Novels](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite TV Adaptations of Novels](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Short Stories](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Family Sagas](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Christmas Scenes](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Unpopular 19th Century Novels that Became Classics](#)

I provide these links for convenience only and do not endorse or assume liability for the content or quality of these third-party sites. I only recommend books I have read and know. Some of these links may be affiliate links. If you buy a product by clicking on one of these links I may receive a small commission. It doesn't cost you anything extra, but does help cover the cost of producing my free newsletter. The sale of my products really does help cover the cost of producing my free newsletter [Notes From A Book Addict](#) every month.

All my products are **100% guaranteed**. If you don't feel that this item is great value for money please [let me know why](#) and I will refund your purchase price.

Please scan to [sign up here](#) to receive *Notes From A Book Addict* once per month.

