

Reading as a Prison Oasis and Proof of Innocence: Anne Carroll Moore's Steadfast Belief in Leo Frank

In *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845* (2014), Jodi Schorb establishes the groundwork for the contemporary, progressive belief in reading as a healing and reformative act for incarcerated individuals. In the correspondence between Anne Carroll Moore and Leo Frank, reading is shown to be not only an oasis in the midst of prison life but also proof of Frank's innocence. Frank, a Jewish factory manager and a newcomer to Atlanta, Georgia, was convicted in 1913 of the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan. He maintained his innocence throughout his trial and the ensuing 2-year legal battle that was brought to an abrupt close when Frank was lynched in 1915. Before Moore achieved renown as, in the words of Jacalyn Eddy, a "bookwoman," one of six women who changed the modern children's book industry (Eddy 3), she oversaw the Children's Room at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, where Frank was a frequent young visitor. Years later, after his conviction, they began a correspondence that lasted until his death. Moore's letters to Frank, his family, and his friends can be found in several different archives, and they attest to her belief in his innocence, her conviction that he would be freed, and her devastation at his lynching.

Moore risked her newly founded professional reputation through her championship of Frank, and her letters suggest that at the heart of her belief in him was her conviction that a person who had loved books as much as Frank had as a child could not commit murder. In letters to Frank and his wife and in an essay commemorating his mother, Moore reminisced about Frank as a young library patron devoted to books and the ideals he found in them. She also wrote to him about an American Library Association conference she attended and offered to discuss literature with him, reminding him of its comfort. This presentation will analyze Moore's letters to and about Frank, situating them within Moore's influential ideas about childhood reading, as well as popular, long-held beliefs about the humanizing and rehabilitative possibilities of reading within prisons.