

LETHAL REJECTION

LETHAL REJECTION

STORIES ON CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Edited By
Robert Johnson

✧
Sonia Tabriz



Preface By
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Afterword By
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In memory of a writer



In honor of a life



This book is dedicated to **Victor Hassine**,
for sharing his world with ours



He will be missed

A Dedication to Dedication

Though I never met you
I know you through your words

Tales of mere existence
For no one can truly live under such constraint

I understand the mistakes you have made
Frown upon them, as I should

Yet I acknowledge your potential to change
To grow and persevere, transform for the better

I mourn the loss of your voice
Speaking for those who have been stripped of their own
Your life, halted too soon by a system drowning in denial
Denial of hope

A hope that somehow lingers in the face of adversity
A hope that dwindles but endures

In the words of those on the outside
Tearing down the barrier and demanding reform

In the tales of those trapped within
Relaying but a glimpse of an underground world,
Neglected and shunned by society

Amidst it all, you found your way out
Your soul bravely escaped the walls that restrained your physical being

You never lost hope, this I believe
You merely realized your contribution was complete

And that contribution will be treasured
A peephole into the world I hope to uncover

As I work through your words
And add my own

Sonia Tabriz

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Poetic Justice

Build prisons
Not day-care
Lock 'em up
What do we care?

Hire cops, not counselors
Staff courts, not clinics
Wage warfare
Not welfare

Invest in felons
Ripen 'em like melons
Eat 'em raw, then
Ask for more

More poverty
More crime

More men in prison
More fear in the street

More ex-cons among us
Poetic justice

Robert Johnson

Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House, and the American Way of Justice. Northwoods Press; Conservatory of American Letters (2004:1).
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Preface

by Joycelyn M. Pollock
Professor of Criminal Justice
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Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction. Sometimes fiction is truer than fact. Allegories, parodies, myths and fables have been used from time immemorial to teach us about other places, other people, and ourselves. Myths were created to explain the beginning of the world. Greek tragedies warned of the “fatal flaws” of heroes. Aesop’s fables wrapped moral truths in simple stories. Tribal storytelling was a way to teach important lessons to the young. Shakespeare’s ability to open a window to the suffering, joy and passion of his characters has withstood the passage of centuries. Before the electronic age, people told each other stories to entertain and instruct. We continue to hand down our stories, only now we are more likely to use celluloid. In short, humans have always used fiction to instruct, enlighten and communicate. Stories take us to places we haven’t been; they help us to understand people who are not like us. In this book, the authors use fiction to convey the reality of prison.

There are now over two million souls incarcerated in this nation’s prisons and jails. Dozens of books are available that slice-and-dice the facts. There are journalistic exposés on the rise of the prison industrial complex. There are also academic treatises that offer the facts and figures on prisons, including their history, staff and management issues. One can also find biographies of prisoners and of wardens. These books offer the authors’ visions of the reality of prison and, through them, we can see that truth is like a prism—changing, depending on the perspective of the viewer: prisoner, guard, victim, or family member (see below for recommended reading).

We know the facts. The rate of imprisonment has skyrocketed in this country from roughly 100 per 100,000 in the early 1970s to closer to 700 per 100,000 today. Even this rate doesn’t tell the whole story; the rate for men is much higher than for women and the rate for minority men is much higher than for any other group. The rate of imprisonment continued to rise in the last decade, even while the crime rate showed a dramatic decline. These new prisoners are not necessarily violent—in fact, a good portion of them are simple drug offenders. Although the percentage of violent criminals in prison has increased, it is because of increasingly long sentences that keep these offenders in prison for decades, sometimes for the rest of their lives. The politicians’ zeal to incarcerate has drained the public purse, drawing funds away from social serv-

ices, education, and public infrastructure expenses. The portion of state and federal budgets allocated to criminal justice and corrections has increased exponentially and the trend shows little sign of slowing. The “war on crime” of the 1970s and the “war on drugs” of the 1980-1990s has been supplanted recently by the “war on terrorism,” but one suspects that the target of these “wars” will always pretty much be the same people—the disenfranchised, the poor, the minority groups, and those for whom the “American Dream” has turned into the “American Nightmare.”

It is well known how damaging prison is to those who literally grow up in juvenile and adult facilities. Individuals are lucky if they are “no worse” than when they went in; but, all too often, they are “worse,” meaning that they have learned to adapt to a world where violence gains power and kindness is perceived as weakness. No one seriously questions the existence of prison rape and violent guards (albeit they are less and less the norm and more the exception today than in the past). Prison managers themselves wearily admit the lack of programming that has characterized prisons for the last 20 years. We also know that crime is intergenerational and it is a sad fact that prisoners’ children are six times as likely as their peers to end up in prison.

In this book, the authors (prisoners, academics and students) use poetry, prose and plays to take the reader into the “reality” of prison and the justice system—not through facts and figures, but through the tears and screams, blood and pain of the people chewed up by it. Robert Johnson is the primary editor and contributes the majority of the offerings. His biting humor is evident in whatever medium he chooses, whether it be poetry—such as “Poetic Justice,” which opens the book, and “Dreamscape,” which closes the book—short story, or play. “Settling Scores,” which he wrote with Hassine and Dobrzanska, is a play that illustrates the “name game” of plea bargaining in the drug wars where defendants can earn their freedom by condemning others to prison. In fact, some of the pieces are both poetry and prose, such as “Yard Sale,” where the descriptions of prison, as observed by a warden, practically call for music, albeit it would be a sick, sad song. Johnson’s verse become actual song lyrics in “Songs for Aging Convicts” and in this incredible piece, the reader can literally sing along. Four stories present different slants on the death penalty - “The Practice of Killing” offers an O. Henry ending to the main character’s trip to his execution, “Convicts in the Attic” is the reminiscing of a guard about what it’s like to guard men about to die, “Lethal Rejection” takes the reader into the multi-layered reveries of a man about to die, and, in the satirical “Brave New Prison,” Johnson pushes the reader to look at current practices with a jaundiced eye and wicked humor. Johnson views the system as made up of actors

who play their part, whether they be thug, sadistic guard, or hapless victim. In his perspective, these characters aren't really the way they are portrayed; rather, they play a role—either willingly or unwillingly—in order to keep the wheels of the massive machine of justice moving. In “Bad Actor,” the offender understands the game to keep the civilian population focused on fearing “thugs” rather than those in suits who sometimes are the real offenders. In “Saint Burnout” the guard-character is first an idealist living a dream who then becomes a disillusioned, burned out goon. In “Wheel of Torture,” “Mister Rogers Prison” and “Death House Barbie,” Johnson’s satire explodes full blown and takes the reader into a world of absurdity but with a message that remains after the story ends. Johnson is able to shift to the female perspective and his “Cell Buddy” offers an empathetic but unsentimental analysis of intimate violence as experienced and perpetrated by a female offender. In “Darwin’s Point,” Johnson (with co-author, Miller) uses prison as a figurative and literal last refuge for survivors from the world blown apart by hate. In this final piece, there is the birth of hope purchased with a terribly cold sacrifice. In this story, that exchange could be considered the theme of the book, we save ourselves and protect our future by literally throwing a few of our warped and damaged members to the wolves who lurk outside the post-apocalyptic prison gates.

Victor Hassine is the author of many of the pieces in this volume. His prison is an unremittingly violent, hopeless hell where individuals struggle to survive by ignoring and avoiding the pervasive evil that emanates from the very walls of the prison itself. The story “The Beast” is the clearest presentation of his vision. In this piece, the evil is animate; it creates and then feeds on the violent aggression of those trapped within the prison walls. Hassine argues persuasively that it is society that produces the conditions that spawn criminals. Then, those who succumb are blamed for their weakness and banished to prison. When they emerge even more damaged, it is only a surprise to those who will not see these obvious truths. In some of the pieces, Hassine is subtle, letting the reader make the connections, such as in “The Farmer and the Fly.” In others, he is much more direct, such as in the play, “Circles of Nod,” where his characters talk directly to the audience. In all of Hassine’s pieces, i.e. “Three Boys and a Dog” and “The Hole,” prison staff are portrayed as brutal, sadistic, or, at best, uncaring. However, Hassine has an equally dark view of prisoners themselves, as in “The Prison Man,” and in “The Crying Wall,” where it is clear that prisoners have more to fear from each other than they do the guards. “The Jail Bird” is a type of allegory where the prison is portrayed as a garden of evil (instead of Eden) and a tree of knowledge brings prisoners humanity (rather than removing them from grace). In a thought-

provoking ending, Hassine indicates that the keepers can't really ever wish for prisons to rehabilitate because they would then be out of business. Hassine's vision of prison is so dark that in his story "Final Discharge," the cruel option offered to the prisoner instead of his life sentence seems almost reasonable. In a truly tragic footnote to Hassine's writing, the reader should be aware that he took his own life on April 27, 2008.

Huckelbury is another prisoner-writer and his perspective is understandably just as dark as Hassine's. In his offerings there is no redemption, no happy ending. In "Gumbo" and "Going Nowhere" (which he wrote with Nagelsen), death is offered as the only solution to life's challenges. However dark his view, the characters that populate his stories are extremely real. In "Unavoidable Annie," (the title taken from an Emily Dickinson poem), which Huckelbury wrote with Nagelsen, the devastation that drug use has on inner-city families and the meaninglessness of prison as a response to the scourge is told to us through the tragedy of real people at the margins of society, who harbor few illusions. In a different story by Cupelo, we are reminded that the escape drugs provide appeals to lost souls of all income levels. For those who are bound by hate, loneliness, and lost hope, drugs provide an insidiously simple solution. Cupelo's story illustrates that not all criminals end up behind bars, not all bars are made of steel, and not all redemptions occur without cost.

The other contributors all offer unique views of the world populated by offenders, system actors, and victims. Soering is another prisoner-author who offers a generally dark view of prisoners and officers alike in a description of the "future jailbirds of America" (prisoners' children) in reminiscences of prison visiting rooms at Christmas. Ania Dobrzanska's contribution, "Dances with Dragons," is more poem than prose. Her dark portrayal of the suffering of one anonymous man in a prison is a siren song of empathy. Tabriz gives us an obviously honest and introspective remembrance of her first entry into the prison world. Surely, for those who have let the abnormality of the environment become routine, her vivid description will bring back memories of their first look inside the walls. Likewise, Tabriz's collaboration with Hassine (the subtle and imaginative tale, "The Prison Librarian") awakens in us the real and deeply felt hope, dormant of late, that genuine reform can be found behind prison walls. Dum's story of a prison guard's interaction with an old, sick prisoner in "The Monument" may be fiction, but it also rings very true and provides a welcome counterpart to Hassine's portrayal of guards as representations of banal evil. Miller's "The Price is Wrong" presents an intriguing double-play where a "real" family struggles with the fear engendered by a constant diet of crime and punishment on television. I was also honored to be included in this volume with

a story about female prisoners and their children, first published in *Morality Stories* (Carolina Academic Press).

We can learn the number of prison rapes; but only when we hear the screams of rape victims do we begin to understand. We can read the studies that link childhood abuse to adult violence, but only when we see the world through the eyes of a cold-blooded or deranged killer can we begin to fathom the possibilities. Some of these contributions are subtle, some use a baseball bat to hit us over the head—all of them have a message. In the end, what we know is what we feel; and what we feel has more to do with emotion than statistics. Thus, this book is fiction; but it is also a book about prison that can offer a type of truth that numbers can't. Enjoy your reading—if you can.

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