

BOOK REVIEWS

Exiled Voices: Portals of Discovery

by Susan Nagelsen (ed.)

Henniker: New England College Press (2008), 272 pp.

Reviewed by Gordon Groulx

Set against the backdrop of punitive crime-control policies and mass incarceration, *Exiled Voices* showcases the creative works of thirteen prisoners from across the United States. The objective of this collection of poems, short stories and drama is twofold: 1) it strives to give a voice to the many men and women who have been silenced by virtue of their incarceration; and 2) it serves as a tool of enlightenment and a source of change by providing first-hand accounts of the harrowing realities of imprisonment. While the featured writings are the focal point of this book, they are complemented by an Introduction written by Robert Johnson and an Afterword by Susan Nagelsen, both of which provide telling descriptions of the problem of imprisonment in the United States. Nagelsen also provides a preamble to each writer's work, which, in most cases, includes autobiographical information and a photograph.

The writings in this book are as diverse as the writers themselves. Some pieces focus on childhood experiences of abuse, such as Yvette Louisell's short story, "Size". Others, including a poem by Philip Horner, entitled "Stumpy", speak of the resilience and strength of the human spirit, even under conditions of confinement. The central theme of this collection, however, is the anguish that goes along with a life behind bars. In "Diary of a Lifetime in Blue", Laos Chuman reflects on the reality of sexual assault in prison, whereas William Van Poyck's "Fake Identity" describes, from a very interesting perspective, the suffering, abuse and neglect routinely experienced by mentally-ill prisoners. Also remarkable are works by Charles Huckelbury and Tracy Atkins. In his short story "Riding the Tiger", Huckelbury speaks to the experience of being exposed to pepper gas and conveys what it means to lose a friend to a prison system that begets violence. In her piece "The Funeral", written in a time of immense pain, Atkins refers to her prison sentence as a metaphor for death and reflects on how her experience of incarceration has made her feel forgotten and hollow.

The nature of this collection is such that it is suitable for any reader. The featured pieces are relatively short, yet in no way lack vivid detail or

eloquence. The Introduction and Afterword are also straightforward and free of academic jargon, serving only to provide context and closure to the various writings. Although the book contains political overtones, reflecting on the *problem* of the prison from the point of view of those who are incarcerated, the featured works are also creative representations in their own right. This allows the book to be educational for those interested in issues of imprisonment, and also enjoyable for anyone with an open mind and an appreciation for the art of written word.

Exiled Voices exposes the reader to first-hand accounts of prison life and to a different kind of prisoner than is typically portrayed in the media. In doing so, it questions our use of incarceration as a response to crime and challenges many taken-for-granted assumptions about imprisonment. Regardless of how one reads this book, they should see in it a reflection of the many problems associated with the prison. They should also discover behind each piece not a ‘criminal’, but a fellow human being with a voice, an undeniable gift for writing and a story to tell.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Gordon Groulx is currently a doctoral student in Sociology at York University (Canada). His research interests include discourses and practices of imprisonment, as well as the intersection between science, technology and criminal justice. His MA thesis examined the changes to Canada’s prison system that were recently proposed in the Ministry of Public Safety’s Review Panel Report. His PhD research will explore issues of imprisonment and technology in Canada.