

Prison Stories

by Seth Ferranti

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276 pp.

Reviewed by Kevin Walby

P*rison Stories* by Seth “Soul Man” Ferranti is a gripping tale about the hardships of prison life and the ironies of the War on Drugs in America. A young suburban white kid nicknamed Guero, the main character, is in prison serving a lengthy sentence for pushing drugs on the outside. In prison Guero gets swept into pushing again, for kicks, money and respect. He works his way up the ranks of a Latino drug gang. Initially the drugs are supplied by a guard. Then someone drops a note on Dave, the front man who has the whole pound “on lock”, bringing down the network, including Leonardo who is orchestrating the whole operation from behind the scenes.

It becomes known that Roberto the Cuban was tapped by the DEA to infiltrate the network. Opportunities open for Guero to rise to prominence moving weed. Drugs get in - through swallowed or keistered balloons. Sometimes Guero is living “Big Willie style”, other times he is “hustling backwards”. Most of Guero’s *carnalitos*, including Vance and Travieso who are deep in with La Raza, end up transferred or back on *la calle*. Guero takes up work in a UNICOR prison factory, which he laments as controlling. *Prison Stories* ends when Guero is shuffled to a new BOP stop and has a chance to knife Roberto, the known snitch. When Guero approaches Roberto in the final scene, shank in hand, he must decide whether to vindicate those whom Roberto wronged through the DEA scam or steer straight and endure with plans to end up back on the outside.

The book’s main story is broken up by several shorter vignettes. Interludes pertain to big fights, cell extractions, prejudice against “gumps” (men who have sex with men in prison), and despised prison guards like Shakedown Billy. Refusing to sensationalize prison life as popular culture representations tend to do, these little tales provide context, and allow Ferranti to weave in additional attention grabbing narratives and prison slangs.

Ferranti’s book reflects academic writings that document how snitches who violate codes of honour are targeted for retribution (Rosenfeld et al., 2003) and how prison officials use inmate snitch reports for control (Marquart and Roebuck, 1985). Scott’s (2004) research touches on one of

Ferranti's major theses: gangs are a double-edge sword enabling but also impeding reintegration after release. Ethnographic research (Crewe, 2005) substantiates Ferranti's account of how prisoners' lives are deeply marked by the pervasiveness of drugs inside.

Prison Stories offers an in-depth look at the gritty politics of loyalty and violence that govern life and death on the floor of American prisons. When Ferranti writes about gang-based and ethno-racial tension, *Prison Stories* is as powerful as the 1993 film "Blood In, Blood Out" at conveying the realities of prison violence and brotherhood (without the melodrama). Loosely autobiographical, *Prison Stories* will appeal to other prison writers as well as fellow travelers interested in prisoner masculinities and the politics of imprisonment. Overall, Ferranti's *Prison Stories* is a fantastic read, a real feather in the cap of Gorilla Convict Publications.

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