

Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today.

Victor Hassine AM 4737.

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and R.A. Wright (1999) (Second Edition)***

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Reviewed by Chris Bruckert

Victor Hassine's *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* is an important and timely contribution to prison literature, providing us with an insightful ethnographic account of modern prisons.

Life Without Parole is divided into three substantive sections. In the first, and arguably the strongest section, "Prison Life", Hassine escorts us through the physical and emotional process of prisonization. Framed in terms of his own experience at Graterford State Prison in Pennsylvania, he offers an discerning exploration of prison dynamics, including race relations, violence, the underground economy and prison politics. Hassine, middle class and with a degree in law, is not a typical prisoner and it is perhaps his particular location as 'outsider within' that allows him perceptions that might escape more acculturized individuals. The result is a rich and detailed account punctuated with illustrative stories and enlivened with people that allow us to vicariously share Hassine's journey of discovery as he seeks to survive and make sense of his new environment.

The second section, "Interviews" is a deeply disturbing series of interviews with fellow prisoners that serve to exemplify how particular situational dynamics (AIDS, sexual victimization, solitary confinement) function to shape the experience of incarceration. By allowing other voices to speak, the diversity of prison life is made real for the reader and, more importantly, we begin to appreciate the multiple levels of pain that operate in this most unnatural of settings.

Hassine's final "Op Ed" section is a series of essays on prison conditions, which in various ways deal with the implications of overcrowding. Perhaps because these submissions are styled as opinion pieces, Hassine allows himself more licence than in the earlier material. Unfortunately the result is a presentation punctuated with stereotypes that are not only inconsistent with his approach throughout but function to distract from an otherwise valuable analysis.

Unlike some other texts of the genre (cf. Caron 1978; Abbott, 1982) Hassine does not engage in self pity or self glorification, nor does he focus on his 'criminal career'. Nonetheless, *Life Without Parole* is more than just a book about prison. It is also about Hassine and his relation to the institution as he, often with superb self deprecating humour, takes us on his personal journey from victim to survivor and ultimately to agent. It is simultaneously the story of one of the most oppressive regimes imaginable and man's ability to resist and conquer the walls that contain the body, but obviously not the soul. This inspirational and affirmative dynamic is what really sets *Life Without Parole* apart from most criminological work.

Ultimately *Life without Parole* is a compelling indictment of prison and an excellent exploration of the ways emerging social problems and right wing criminal justice policies have transformed the prison. Shifting effectively and smoothly between analytic and discursive levels, the text is an accessible and useful pedagogical tool.