

**Mississippi Prison Writing**  
**Edited by Louis Bourgeois (2021)**  
**Oxford (MS): VOX Press, 256 pp.**  
*Reviewed by Christopher Santiago*

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Much has been written of late by experts on prisons in the United States, yet we hardly hear anything from the over two million people incarcerated there. *Mississippi Prison Writing*, the third release from VOX's Prison Writes Initiative, means to break that silence by presenting the personal essays, journal entries, poetry, and vignettes of 26 prisoners in the Mississippi Department of Corrections. This much-needed collection is the product of an 18-week creative writing course taught behind bars by editor Louis Bourgeois, which includes writing by prisoners young and old from men's and women's institutions across the state. Without a preface or afterward, the book is entirely devoted to amplifying incarcerated voices.

Many of those voices speak of growing up in poverty, struggling with mental health issues and following various pathways to crime. Thong Le recalls his childhood in East Biloxi's crime prone Vietnamese housing projects. Edward Carroll writes of traumatic events in his teenage years and of the deviant peers who led him to the streets of downtown New Orleans. Some, like Tyler Graham, express remorse for the harm they have caused, while others blame their convictions on rotten circumstances and an unjust legal system. These writers are more than their mistakes and the numbers on their uniforms. They are complex human beings, each tasked with navigating the oppressive maze of prison life.

Through their personal diaries, we get an idea of their day-to-day existence. The raw, unfiltered prose, which appears to be typed directly from the prisoners' notebooks, likely will not win any awards – unless there is an award for genuineness. Nobody but a convict could write so honestly about the homesickness that follows a prison visit from relatives, on the value of seasoning packets for the tasteless cafeteria food or of the culinary talents of microwave chefs preparing dinner for a prison Super Bowl party. Perhaps the most entertaining anecdote is Lori Griffith's account of prison guards tearing down the prisoners' Christmas decorations in Grinch-like fashion:

...the tree was chopped down and dissected limb from limb with all its trimmings, while Santa was dismembered and his remains were thrown to the floor in shattered pieces. It looked like a grotesque murder scene. Santa lay slain on the floor... (p. 90).

Though the writing veers in many directions and lacks overall unity, several subjects, such as education, family, and faith, pop up again and again. Several contributors such as schoolteacher Carla Hughes, profess their love of learning or show pride in having earned a GED or college degree while incarcerated. Jennifer Thomas, a mother of five, reflects on her family roles and has learned from her time in prison not to take another day with family for granted. For this lesson, she considers her prison sentence “a true blessing in disguise” (p. 266). However, prison is less of a blessing for Roger Ewing, who explains the challenges of being the only Jewish prisoner in the State Penitentiary at Parchman.

Ewing is also one of several prisoners at Parchman who complained of appalling conditions there. “Toilets overflow because they won’t flush, and windows will not close”, he writes. “Many of the roofs have deteriorated so badly that it rains inside the building just as much as it does outside” (p. 12). Another contributor, Arthur Gendry, writes of witnessing stabbings and rapes. And a prison riot is recorded in the journal of Stephen Combs, who goes on to describe “rampant gang violence with deaths and stabbings, food, lack of mental and medical care, long term segregation, staff corruption, short staffing, drugs, and gangs actually running the prison” (p. 185). He also mentions “mold... no lights, heat, and lack of bedding” (p. 186). Fortunately, conditions of confinement at Parchman have somewhat improved since the book was published (Ankey, 2023).

The missing piece in this anthology is a work of abstract art created by Michael Orrell. After reading almost three pages of commentary on the meaning of his artwork “Trapped”, I was disappointed that an image of the work was not included.

I do not love *Mississippi Prison Writing* – I respect it. Knowing the sense of accomplishment that comes with seeing one’s own writing in print, it saddens me whenever I hear that a prisoner has abandoned their creative endeavors due to a perceived lack of publishing opportunities. Kudos to the Prison Writes Initiative not only for teaching prisoners to express themselves creatively through the written word, but also for publishing their work in this collection. I appreciate the gift of their stories and recommend this important book to anyone curious about what goes on behind prison walls.

## REFERENCE

Ankey, Douglas (2023) "Citing improvements at Mississippi State Prison at Parchman, Rappers drop suit", *Prison Legal News*, 34(10): 48-49.

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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