

Doran Larson

WITNESS

In film and television, the inhabitants of American prisons are depicted as virtually another species: rape-hungry sociopaths who take pleasure only in the pain of others. These images are the horror show that the media feeds to white, middle-class Americans, few of whom will ever broach those distant walls and razor wire. So politicians and right-wing pundits can safely further their careers by exploiting such images and playing on white Americans' fears of that "other species."

Prisons are not happy or safe places. But they are the dwellings of 2.3 million American citizens who lead restricted, yet morally and emotionally complex lives—lives animated by conscience, guilt, shame, and fear. For every act of rape¹, for every act of cruelty that does indeed occur inside a prison, there are any number of inmates who bear the human weight of witnessing such acts. There are certainly men and women in our prisons who have become so hardened that the suffering of others is one of their few sources of pleasure. But these are not the whole of the prison population. And among the others—among men and women who feel and carry the burden of knowing they have damaged or ended others' lives—there are human beings who have been brought to a place of self-reflection, self-questioning, and self-awareness that few of us can imagine.

The essays that follow depict moments in the lives of two men who participate in a creative writing workshop that I teach inside a maximum-security New York State prison. These are men whose histories would make ready fodder for those right-wing pundits. They are also men who would thus be grossly misrepresented. These writers live in a place where a sense of right and wrong can be a liability, where turning away, from others and from one's own past acts, is always the safer path. Yet they have decided to write about what they have seen, what they have felt, and the toll that seeing and feeling have exacted.

1. The recently released Prison Rape Elimination Commission report documents that over half of the rape committed in American prisons and jails is perpetrated by staff. (http://nprec.us/publication/report/executive_summary.php)

America created the penitentiary. The Philadelphia Quakers who conceived the Walnut Street prison, as well as the engineers of New York's Auburn, imagined a life of virtual monasticism for the incarcerated. Things have not evolved as planned. But given the racial and economic profile of the American prison population, it would require a strident racist and classist to insist that at least some percentage of that 2.3 million could not prove able monastics—as writers, moral philosophers, or simply men and women who have taken their private fall from grace so deeply to heart as to wrest from it truths that we might all benefit from reading. In obvious ways, each of these essays confirms popular images of the prison: the cruelty, the neglect, the violence. Yet the very fact that the essays have been written, that these men have chosen to bear witness, tells us that the prison is also a place where very human conscience can and, with labor, does survive. ☞