



Inside Rikers: Stories from the World's Largest Penal Colony

By Jennifer Wynn

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Jennifer Wynn, the director of the Fresh Start program at Rikers, takes readers into the jails and then back out-to the communities where her students were born and raised. She chronicles their journeys as they struggle to "go straight" and find respect in a city that fears and rejects them.

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Inside Rikers: Stories from the World's Largest Penal Colony By Jennifer Wynn Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Rikers Island penal colony is a world unto itself, with its own power plant, schools, hospital, even a tailor. But the 16,000 people forced to live there, unlike free worlders, are "usually known by their single worst deed." So writes Jennifer Wynn, who has spent the last decade getting beyond those deeds and helping inmates turn their untapped talents into new lives. Wynn first entered Rikers Island as a reporter, returned to teach in a rehabilitation program called Fresh Start, and ultimately became the program's director. Though she has left journalism as a career, this powerful debut puts her in the best tradition of activist journalism. Unlike most criminologists, she understands that the best way to make a point is to show rather than tell. By interlacing statistics with moving stories of Rikers' inmates, she makes clear the arguments for prison--and social--reform.

Though compassionate, Wynn is also a realist who takes a measured approach to the challenges confronted by both inmates and correctional workers. She shares success stories--say, the guy who had been in and out of Rikers for eight years, but finally, with the help of Fresh Start, graduated from the New York Restaurant School--but she is also forthright about the failures. Two questions resound: How can New York City, home to some of the sharpest business minds in the country, spend \$860 million a year on inmates and have 75 percent of them return to prison after release? On the flip side, one of her "failures" asks, "I live in the best ... country in the world and I keep asking myself, Why can't I make it?" Wynn is persuasive when she discusses why incarceration increases crime and deepens dependency, how income inequality affects crime, and why--the most bitter irony of all--for many inmates, living on the outside is even harder than jail. This humane examination of America's greatest social problem redefines what it is to be a free worlder and holds a torch to those who make their lives--whether by choice or by law--within its jails. --*Lesley Reed*

From Publishers Weekly

Wynn presents a penetrating exploration of inmates' lives in New York's "vast penal colony," Rikers Island. She directs the Correctional Association of New York's Prison Visiting Project at Rikers, a formidable, sprawling jail; there, she teaches writing and edits the Rikers Review. Wynn claims working at Rikers has turned her "from a dispassionate journalist into a... compassionate" advocate for prison reform. Her bright, optimistic style seems incongruous with the institutionalized darkness she depicts, however. Her deep commitment to viewing prisoners as the downtrodden among us is supported by the jail's own stark statistics, which indicate that most of the inmates are impoverished minority residents of the city's "dead zones," areas with the highest murder rates, and that many are stuck in the hard cycle of drug addiction and drug-related crime. Wynn uses firsthand narratives of prisoners she's worked with to illustrate the Kafka-esque difficulties convicts face on the road to rehabilitation. Her lively prose, with its refreshing lack of "street" pretensions and her emphasis on the forlorn dignity in humanity subjugated by large-scale imprisonment, make this an unusually stirring example of the "teacher in prison" subgenre and a worthwhile companion to books like Ted Conover's NBCC Award-winning *Newjack* and Joseph T. Hallinan's *Going Up the River*, released earlier this year. Her portrait of Rikers as a miniature, punitive Gotham is colorful and complex; moreover, it forces us to acknowledge the inequalities and intricacies of life behind bars, which those ex-convicts continue to face once they step off this island, headed for either prison upstate or to freedom. Agent, Noah Lukeman.

From Library Journal

Wynn first became acquainted with Rikers Prison in 1991 as a journalist interviewing one of its inmates. She returned as a participant in a rehabilitation program, Fresh Start, to teach writing classes for male prisoners and eventually became editor of their in-house Rikers Review, director of the Prison Visiting Project, and a supporter of criminal justice reform. Here she tells moving stories of inmates' experiences in and outside prison, detailing the drug-associated offenses that led to imprisonment; their experiences with dysfunctional families and inadequate schools, housing, and social services; and a public mentality that supports the "lock up" response as an appropriate "correction" for aberrant behavior. The book clearly shows that rather than infusing communities and prisons themselves with energy and, more importantly, funding to support potentially constructive and reformatory resources, American society prefers a "make disappear" approach to criminal behavior. Wynn provides an addendum on resources and a selected bibliography, but bibliographic source notes would have been welcome in this otherwise well-structured and thoughtful work.

Recommended for public and professional attention. Suzanne W. Wood, formerly with SUNY Coll. of Technology at Alfred

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