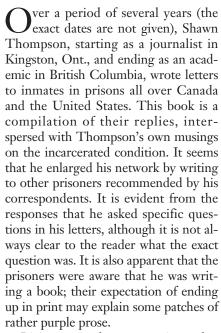


Writing from inside

Letters from prison: felons write about the struggle for life and sanity behind bars

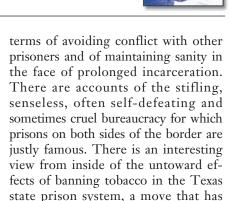
Shawn Thompson

Toronto: HarperCollins; 2002 266 pp \$32 ISBN 0-00-200086-5



Living, as we do, on a continent that imprisons a greater proportion of its citizenry than most parts of the world, it is important that we hear from incarcerated people from time to time, if only to remind us of Winston Churchill's dictum that "The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country." To judge from the contents of this book and from numerous other sources, it is a test that finds us wanting.

This book tells us much about life in prison: the constant daytime noise, the smell, the lack of privacy, the heat in summer, the overcrowding and the fear. It also conveys a sense of the profound and persistent boredom that is a feature of life inside. We hear of strategies for dealing with prison life, both in



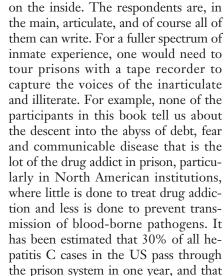
been contemplated for Canadian penitentiaries. A number of respondents had spent time in both US and Canadian prisons, and one who had been in maximum-security

prisons in both countries observes that in the US institution he was *surprised* to get out alive, but in Canada he *expected* to.

From US correspondents there are accounts of dangerous racial tensions — but, lest Canadian readers feel smug, there is also an account of what it is like to be an English-speaking prisoner in a Quebec

maximum security penitentiary. And I know from French-speaking patients in prison that the converse is no different. Readers of this journal will be interested to hear that when issues of health care arise it is not the quality that is commented on, but rather the difficulties experienced in gaining access to health care.

This book suffers somewhat from presenting an incomplete picture of life



as many as 25% of all inmates will in-

ject drugs (usually with shared equip-

ment) during their sentence. The cor-

respondents in this book rarely mention

drugs and do not talk about injection.

The only mentions of hepatitis are in the context of food or airborne spread.

Thompson has a tendency to wander into abstractions that, on the whole, do not add much to the messages from inside. These messages are telling us not only that North American prisons are grim and often dangerous places, but that they are in large part failing in their responsibility to rehabilitate. It is a book that should be widely read if only to make us all a little less inclined to cast human beings into

these often dreadful institutions for the sort of crimes that should be dealt with by noncustodial measures.



Peter M. Ford

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