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Review of *Prison Noir*

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Many of Joyce Carol Oates's works have featured the complexity and malformations of the American legal system, most notably her novels *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) and *The Falls* (2004). Moreover, it seems fitting that Oates has taken on the project of editing an anthology of prison fiction as her own writing has been recently engaged with the hidden reality of America's prison system, particularly in her latest novel *Carthage* (2014). Here the wayward protagonist Cressida becomes an assistant to a loquacious and idealistic character dubbed the "Investigator" who is assembling material for a journalistic exposé about the prison system. In a particularly vivid scene Cressida enters a prison execution chamber while undercover and experiences a psychological crisis. No doubt Oates's interest in representing the reality of prison life has, in part, stemmed from her time teaching at San Quentin State Prison in California. *Prison Noir* marks Oates's continuing engagement and fictional exploration of such significant American institutions.

Akashic Books has to date published over sixty titles in its "Noir Series," each of which revolve around a particular geographical location and feature dramatic stories about crime and betrayal. Joyce Carol Oates previously edited *New Jersey Noir* (2011), but *Prison Noir* marks a departure for the series. Though some of the stories in the anthology have been produced by experienced, published writers, it is singular that all of the authors have been incarcerated in prisons across the United States. We know from the biographical information at the end of the book (which makes emotionally-riveting reading in itself) that many of these writers still live in the prison system. The author of one story has since been executed by the State of Florida. Inevitably, this knowledge affects how we read these vividly written stories: we are aware that, as Oates so aptly describes in her introduction, these fictional creations are a "*cris de coeur*."

Many of the stories included in this anthology impressively capture the reality of prison life including the physical confinement of being limited to a "seven-by-ten prison cell." The period of confinement represented spans from the

sensory shock of being incarcerated for the first time as described in Eric Boyd's "Trap" to entire lifetimes spent in prison as in Kenneth R. Brydon's dark tale "Rat's Ass" where the protagonist first entered prison as a young father and is now nearing parole as a grandfather. In the startling story "Immigrant Song" by Marco Verdoni, the Mexican immigrant protagonist doesn't speak English and only discovers that he has a twenty-two year minimum sentence after he's been swiftly brought through the judicial system and locked in prison. With skillfully-judged narrative tension, he conveys the agonizing reality of the protagonist who misses the opportunity to defend himself and the wrenching realization that the majority of his adult life will be spent behind bars.

One thing that is made abundantly clear by the spectrum of racial groups which populate the prisons described in these stories is that racial minorities make up the majority of prisoners. From Hispanics to Native Americans to African Americans to Middle Eastern men and women, the color of a prisoner's skin plays a decisive role in the way social groups are formed and interact with one another. In "Foxhole" by B.M. Dolarman, the narrator states that "While the place was diverse, it was also very segregated, cliqued up." In "Angel Eyes" by Andre White, the narrator feels protective over a mixed-race new inmate of whom he observes "I could see that this boy had something else other than Massa's genes behind those baby blues." The boy is made into a target for rape by a man nicknamed "Gorilla Black" and the consequence is horrifying.

Many stories powerfully represent the way in which routine and regimen dominate prison life. In Scott Gutches's "Bardos," announcements marking times for prison activities like gym, library, "chow" or Bible study abruptly interrupt the narrative in a way which mimics the audible reality of living in prison. The experience of time itself is modulated by the inmates' inability to control what they do throughout each day. In Sin Soracco's "I Saw an Angel," she describes how "The day was built on broken trivialities." Even if it feels for some prisoners like their time is being wasted by impersonal prison routines, others hoard them as the only things that they now truly possess, as described by Linda Michelle Marquardt in her achingly brutal and beautifully written "Milk and Tea," "Time is not real, but it is the only real thing I know, the only real thing I have that is mine." There is a sense throughout the stories that belongings are anathema to prisoners, as described in the story "Bardos," "Possession is such an absurd idea to me now, like the feeling of driving past a house you once lived in long ago."

Other than their bodies or the occasional smuggled-in items, the only possession that most prisoners have left to barter with is their lives. "A Message in the Breath of Allah" by Ali F. Sareini describes how some prisoners continue to live only so that they may remain a financial burden: "Most older prisoners, after decades of imprisonment, have lost the will to live. The only reason they don't take their own lives is to spite, by the high cost of imprisonment, the

citizens of their state.” The economy involved in the prison system is a persistent theme particularly in Bryan K. Palmer’s “3 Block From Hell” which is unusually narrated from the perspective of a self-righteous prison guard who horrifically sees it as his duty to deal out justice where the judicial process has failed. He believes that by killing prisoners he’s saving the government money and protecting the general population from the criminals being released back into society after parole. Death within the prisons occurs all too frequently and easily. As “Immigrant Song” notes, “death was routine.”

That unnatural deaths become such a familiar, barely-worth-mentioning occurrence to the inmates and staff in prisons is shocking in itself. One of the most powerful and philosophically-probing stories in the collection, “The Investigation” by William Van Poyck, has a protagonist named Cotton ask of himself “What did it say about him, he wondered, that he could watch a man be killed and then not be able to remember it?” The suggestion is raised in “A Message in the Breath of Allah” that the governing bodies frequently turn a blind eye to the all too common deaths of prisoners because “the state never asks questions when you save it money.” There is also a mounting frustration with a breakdown in the system’s ability to rehabilitate as expressed in “3 Block From Hell” where Palmer writes, “Prison has become a joke, a business where money and head counts take precedence over making inmates better so they don’t victimize innocent people again.” Only occasionally are there moments when prisoners experience a transcendence of circumstances. In Stephen Geez’s story “Tune-up” the narrator touchingly describes how the protagonist’s music creates “poetry in the images it conjured, grace in the notes . . . the longing of a damaged man whose melody can’t be constrained by the razor-wired electric fences.”

The ebook edition of *Prison Noir* contains “bonus materials” including the Joyce Carol Oates short story “Run Kiss Daddy” from *New Jersey Noir*. This is a dark tale about a man’s abrupt installment as the new father in a family that includes two young children. Oates skillfully mirrors the families so that the protagonist Reno, having broken ties with his previous family where he fathered two children (now adults) of his own, egotistically believes he can supplant this previous family—who are, in his mind, now tarnished—with a fresh family. His attitude is alarmingly dismissive: “Eleven years invested in the former marriage! It made him sick—just faintly, mildly sick—to think of so much energy and emotion, lost.” The remains of a human child he discovers during renovations he’s carrying out beneath the holiday home he has procured for his new family are a chilling reminder of the opportunities for familial connections he has blocked by cutting off ties with his biological children. There is also a delicately-written haunting ambiguity that he himself might have been a perpetrator in this long-buried crime.

Perhaps this volume of collected stories makes a fitting rebuttal to an old question frequently asked of Oates in interviews: “Why is your writing so violent?” None of the authors included in *Prison Noir* are writing about violence in order to indulge in the lurid detail of it; in using artistically-rendered prose fiction they bear witness to the experience of what happens immediately around them and around all of us—the experiences we choose to see and not see. A map at the beginning of this volume plots the locations of the prisons where these stories originated; add the statistic which Oates cites in her introduction that “the United States incarcerates more than 2.2 million individuals, a far higher rate per capita than any other nation,” and we’re made startlingly aware that crime, or incarceration, is an epidemic in America. Rather than locking more and more prisoners away and, in some cases, not allowing them the means to express themselves (Oates writes that “some institutions don’t allow prisoners to write, while in others, they are allowed to write but not, perversely, about crime or prisons!”), perhaps it’s time we tried to understand why prison is such big business in America. The thoughtful and creative stories in this anthology build a bridge to understanding the emotional and physical reality of prison life. What a tragedy that so many of the writers in this volume can only foresee futures ending in further crime or death. It is noble that these authors have put such care into creating powerful stories, and that this anthology has allowed their voices to be heard.

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