
HUCK'S PICKS

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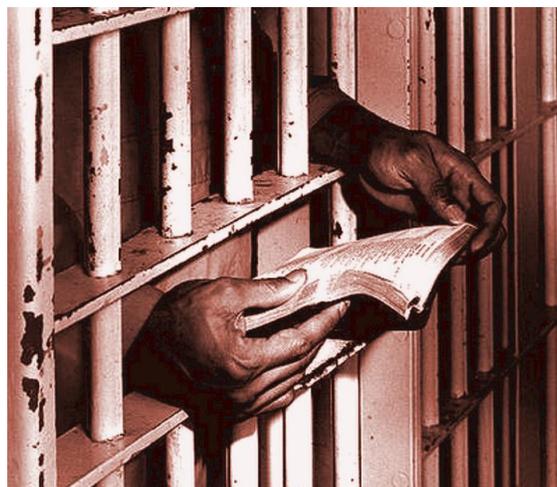
TELLING IT LIKE IT REALLY IS

Mark Nixon's "Memoir of a Street Thug" is a reality check for anyone who thinks prison is a walk in the park, complete with color TV to watch and weights to lift. Poems such as "I Walk Alone" and "Betrayal" reinforce the common themes of isolation and false friends, one of whom, Nixon tells us in a prologue, snitched on him. With no visits or phone calls from family, the poems' speaker reveals a whiff of resentment, moderated by the obvious love he has for his children, especially the baby daughter he left behind.

At the same time, Nixon breathes fresh air into the works by having his speaker take full responsibility for his current plight. In "Who's to Blame," the speaker tells us that "no one made me do anything." Along with this observation is the poignant "Cry of an Old Angel," in which the speaker confronts his guardian angel, with ripped and torn wings, who is exhausted from her constant efforts to keep him safe from the life he has chosen.

Nixon also provides a standard Marxist critique of the prison-industrial complex, followed by a sense of wonder that the country elected an African American president. Add to that wonder Nixon's philosophical insight that the tragedy of life does not consist of never reaching one's goals but having no goals at all. In all, the power of this collection transcends what many would expect from a "street thug."

Interspersed among his poems are various quotes from historical figures Nixon deems influential, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Marcus Garvey, and Shakespeare. They combine to reinforce the overarching theme of all life being a struggle, which requires us to stay strong, trust no one, and keep our backs to the wall. It is a harsh lesson but part of the world Nixon and others must endure, because as the poet assures us in a poem by the same name, "you can't break me." After reading this collection, you have to believe it.



"A Day of Thanks" by Leroy Reed takes us on a rollercoaster ride of emotion, fraught with turmoil but tempered by hope just before another plunge. Locked away, the poems' speaker realizes the futility of the lifestyle that put him where he is and desperately wants something else, something permanent, with his role solidified as a father and a husband. But has he lost the capacity to trust? That is subject for more psychological and emotional explorations, all of which culminate in the last poem's heartfelt lines and the evidence that yes, he can still love and trust. And he proposes to prove it.

Danny Garrison's self-titled collection of poetry is more than the standard meditation on loss. It is also a tribute to his family, especially his mother, combined with a powerful religious testimony and the necessity for surrendering one's ego to a higher power. As the poet reminds us, if we keep doing what we've always done, we'll keep getting what we've always gotten. "Dan's Poetry" is therefore a timely reminder that changes can happen in "the house of pain." But they come with a cost, one the poet is ready and able to pay.

*Going to prison is like
dying with your eyes open.
Bernard Kerik*