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# HUCK'S PICKS

New Books Published on [www.PrisonsFoundation.org](http://www.PrisonsFoundation.org) as reported by Charles Huckelbury

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Sean Riker's *On the Run Having Fun* is a rollicking trip through his juvenile criminal career of burglaries and meth, culminating with his arrest for stealing a car that belonged to a cop's son. Bad choice there. He lands a 2-year sentence in California's Youth Authority, gets assigned to a detail fighting fires, and subsequently runs off during a training drill. The rest of the book is primarily a recitation of the 50 days he spent in a vacation cabin he discovered.

After breaking into the fully furnished cabin, he makes himself at home, exchanging his prison clothes for some he finds in a closet. He cooks meals, watches TV, and explores the neighborhood while carrying various weapons he has also appropriated from the family who owns the cabin. The cabin obviously hasn't been used in a long time, and the longer Riker stays, the more comfortable he feels. He explores each room, opening boxes and discovering private videos and pictures that make him homesick. He watches the local news for anything pertaining to him but seems disappointed when he doesn't rate even a passing mention.

Finally overcome by his solitude, he calls his mother, who urges him to turn himself in. He decides otherwise, cleans the house and tries to repair any damage, and then sets out with only the clothes on his back. He finds another cabin, steals a truck, money and driver's license and eventually makes it to his girlfriend's house. After a brief reunion, Riker and a friend hang out, do more meth, and embark on a larcenous spree, during which they find a cache of guns. And the familiar ending approaches. The friend gets busted, gives up Riker, and off he goes to jail again. Apparently, the only thing the cops want is to know how the hell he eluded them for so long. In exchange for no more time, he takes them through the 50 days in the cabin but has to serve his remaining "eight long months" in an adult prison. Riker is an entertaining writer with a talent for description, and his story will no doubt ring some familiar bells with a lot of people. (nonfictvv)

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While reading through Larry "Rocky" Harris's *Never Ending Nightmare*, I kept shaking my head. The poor guy is an ex-con trying to square up and do the right thing. Sure, his tale has the usual string of sex, cheating, and stealing, but through it all, he starts his own business and tries to raise his kids with a succession of wives and girlfriends. Still, Rocky is a little rough around the edges and finds himself in jail for a fight and meets the guy who would eventually rat him out.

Rocky's downfall will be familiar to many readers: he trusts the wrong people. The guy from the jail? He takes him in, gives him a job, but then learns he's trying to involve Rocky's son in some burglaries. Rocky fires him, and the rest is standard operating procedure for any snitch. Of course, he gets jammed up on another case and throws Rocky under the bus to save his butt.

And it gets worse. Busted for two armed robberies, even his son rolls over on him with a statement orchestrated by a cop in juvenile hall, where the kid is taking a break. Never mind that Rocky is innocent, he blows through a series of public defenders (pretenders?), none of whom are interested in either his defense or a trial. And, in a humorous touch, Rocky relates the statement by his last appointed lawyer, who didn't believe cops would get on the

witness stand and lie! Please. I thought that was a course in the first year of law school. Apparently Rocky is, however, something of a jailhouse lawyer himself, because he presents some cogent legal arguments that none of his lawyers used, some of which might have at least made the jury have a reasonable doubt. I mean, they were out only 4-1/2 hours, so it couldn't have been much worse.

Rocky's got 20 in on 65, and I still can't help wondering why he would trust two rats in county jail, especially after he's had a beef with both of them and one has already snitched on him. Go figure. Even the newest guy knows not to talk to anyone in jail. But I guess that's just Rocky's humanitarian instincts rising to the surface again. Yeah, the same ones that got him 65 years. In the end, Rocky quotes the Bible, John 8:32, insisting that the truth will set you free. OK, he told the truth and still has another 45 to do. So much for that theory. (nonfictvv)

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George Martorano demonstrates a natural talent for descriptive narrative in *The Heartfelt Row*. He takes us to south Philadelphia and creates an admixture of scenes that capture both the flavor and essence of the neighborhood. Lou runs a bar and rents a room to Sam, but that is only the beginning. Martorano also gives us a sweatshop that exploits Guatemalan refugees, most of whom were guerrilla fighters. Sarah is such a fighter and, of course, meets Sam. From there, the various lives, including the irrepressible Jomedeline, intersect in ways that move the story briskly and keep the reader wanting more.

Sam's fundamental nature is one without any "horizons pulling his soul." That is, until he meets Sarah. Attempting to manage two love affairs simultaneously, he must make a choice. And make it he does, which involves him in arms dealing, bank robbery, and a brief stint as a freedom fighter with a new daughter to complicate things. It's a good thing Sam is so self-sufficient, because he quickly learns that his basic mistrust of people is something he needs to remember. Contrary to what many writers insist, life is not about story-book endings, and Martorano brings his work to a conclusion in a more realistic fashion. He has obviously honed his story-telling skills somewhere, which means we might be lucky enough to read more from him. (fictvv)

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*Sharecropper's Son* is Ernest Jack's four-part novel that features Pfc. Troy Jackson's experiences in the US Army while stationed in Germany. Keeping in mind that the story unfolds beginning with Troy's induction in 1966 when the Vietnam War was escalating. Readers for whom Vietnam is ancient history might not be aware of the racist attitudes encountered in the military during that time. If so, Jack's work will quickly disabuse anyone of that misconception.

Troy Jackson is from Louisiana, which by its very nature should tell us what to expect, but Jackson is surprised when even his uniform doesn't inoculate him from the state's endemic racism. Unfortunately, even outside the state, the military's advertised meritocracy doesn't live up to its billing, and Jackson has to fight many battles with white soldiers in his unit, especially when they discover his German girlfriend. Jackson himself is not entirely free from racial attitudes, for example, when he offers the opinion that "whites bleed more than blacks," but the redneck attitudes he encounters all ring true to an ear that came of age during the same time. Jackson eventually becomes the suspect in the homicide of a racist white GI until his friend Delano Hall solves the case. Having had enough of the Army, Jackson does not reenlist and flies home to Louisiana, where things unfortunately continue to slide downhill.

Ernest Jack's source material for this story is obviously his personal experiences. Even without the similarity in names (Jack and Jackson), the author inadvertently lapses into a first-person narrator, referring to "our" group and a driver pointing to "me." These small slips do not, however, diminish the power of the overall narrative and promise

more drama in the following segments. This is a work that both saddens and angers rational minds but also serves as a healthy reminder of how pernicious racism can be, even when it goes unacknowledged by the government or one of its agencies. (fictvv)

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We've all heard the story of the young farm boy or girl who breaks away from the family tradition, dares the challenges of the big city, and makes good, usually by paying a price. *The Life and Times of Lily Marlow* by R. Dean Morris reprises the plot, beginning with Lily's rural life in Alma, Kansas. She learns to play guitar and sing, and demonstrates a natural talent for song writing as well, all with the help and encouragement of her family. Word soon gets around, and a Nashville executive, Kiko Van Slyke (no kidding), shows up in the local club where she is playing. He is smitten, as we expect, and offers Lily a lucrative contract. Grandpa is suspicious, but Lily takes the leap. It beats sorting mail in the post office

and playing to a group of drunks twice a week.

Lily gets off the bus in Music City and is driven to an antebellum mansion, Kiko's lavish home and her temporary lodging, complete with hand-picked wardrobe. But, and there's always a but, Lily needs to be independent, irrespective of the opportunities Kiko has provided. In a grossly misinformed decision, she moves in with Darryl, a studio drummer, and her dreams and hopes rapidly disintegrate. Darryl is the typical abuser, beating her one day, apologizing the next, and then beating her again. He's a piece of garbage from the get-go, but for some pathological reason Lily is determined to stick it out. Darryl's beatings cause her to miscarry twice, and finally, in a drunken rage, he beats her nearly to death before the situation resolves itself in Lily's favor and Darryl wakes up dead.

Finally, like Dorothy in Oz, she realizes that there's no place like home. Back to Kansas she goes and meets Blake, Kiko's cousin and a nice guy, who eventually overcomes her resistance and convinces her to marry him. At this point, it looks like everyone will live happily ever after. Not on your life. Morris, in a Shakespearean turn, brings down a tornado, a heart attack, and a plane crash that rivals the last act of *Hamlet* for death and destruction.

Life rarely offers simplistic solutions to complex problems, which means happy endings are generally fictional creations of hopeful authors. Morris is faithful to a more realistic view of how we live and die.(fictvv)

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Robert Vaughn's tale, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, offer us a salutary comment on race relations and the often blinkered approach taken by law enforcement when trying to solve a crime, or, in this case, a series of crimes. We meet Ruth Snyder, whose neighborhood thrift store and Good Samaritan habits make us shudder even more than usual when she is brutally attacked 16 months after her husband was killed in an unsolved homicide. Matthew Fisher immediately becomes a suspect, based primarily on Ruth's hazy description. The rest of the story details Matt's efforts to prove his innocence, not only of the attack on Ruth but on five other people as well.

That proves to be no easy task when the cops discover several murder weapons and forensic evidence in Matt's home. Once Matt's history comes to light, an obvious motive attaches. It seems that Matt, although appearing white, is half black, which produced the expected racial responses when he was in school, most memorably, the name "Zebra boy." Apparently all the victims except Ruth were guilty of teasing Matt about being biracial. Supporting that assumption are two investigators who encounter a book detailing revenge attacks by other mixed race men on their



tormentors. The book also contains allegations of government conspiracy to target black populations by introducing drugs and money into the 'hood and suppressing a cure for HIV, all of which explain the vigorous prosecution of an African American man who dares challenge stereotypes.

It begins to look bad for Matt, despite the unwavering belief in his innocence expressed by his girlfriend Robin and even Ruth, who never believed Matt attacked her. Lengthy exchanges in court eventually lead to a Perry Mason ending. Never mind an obviously sympathetic judge, outré courtroom procedures, a working-class guy who makes a two million dollar bail, and the DA's actions and comments that are clearly reversible error, the tension mounts until just before the defense is about to produce its first witness. As the title suggests, appearances can indeed be deceiving. (fictvv)

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*The Plot* by Patricia Pruitt. People who have never had the misfortune to do time will read *The Plot* and perhaps smile, believing that Ms. Pruitt's imagination has conjured a situation so far removed from reality that humor is the only response. For those of us who have been there and done that, the scenario is disturbingly real.

The one-act play casts a female prisoner (Prewitt) and her caseworker in a scene that quickly captures the alarm when anyone is called to *any* administrative office. As Prewitt points out, the news is rarely good, generally running to deaths in the family. In this case, however, the caseworker solicits the prisoner's advice on bridesmaids' gowns for her daughter's upcoming wedding. From there, the scene segues into an innovative approach for landscaping the prison grounds by adding a cemetery to accommodate the remains of the lifers, including Prewitt, who will die behind the walls.

Prewitt runs with the idea, playing opposite her caseworker and contributing suggestions, whose absurdities are completely lost on the caseworker. Between the two of them, they add stone masons to carve headstones (flat, of course, to enable easy maintenance), building trades to make the coffins, cosmetology to prepare the bodies, and even an embalming class to eliminate the necessity for "transporting the cadavers." Adding insult to injury, the caseworker offers hackneyed puns to showcase a specious camaraderie with the prisoner.

Prewitt handles the juxtaposition of simultaneously preparing for a marriage and a host of funerals, especially with someone whose funeral will be one of those planned, with a deft skill that includes allowing the prisoner to address the audience in explanatory asides while she tolerates the insulting and unconscious prattle of the caseworker. Rarely have I encountered so successful a demonstration of how morally and intellectually comatose certain prison staff members are with respect to the men and women whose mental and physical health are entrusted to them. Bravo, Ms. Prewitt. (dramavv)

## POETS' CORNER

*A Solitary State of Mind* is both a figurative and literal description of Shane Barnett's collection of poems, all written from his cell in administrative segregation. One would expect the poems to reflect the loss, deprivation, and pain such conditions engender, as well the anger and frustration that traditionally accompanies isolation. Barnett's poems follow this pattern, beginning with the demons that haunt his cell when darkness comes and continuing through an unabated anger. But there is more here.

Barnett recognizes his culpability in being in prison for the third--and what might be the terminal--time after surrendering to a profligate life of dope and not giving a damn. He laments lost lives and lost loves. We learn of his brother's death from cancer and commiserate with him when reading of hopes that will never be



realized. At the end, however, Barnett's poetic mood swings upward, devoted to someone who makes life, even in prison, worth living. Recognizing his own history, he reminds us that "She has a halo and I have horns." Still, his determination to be there for her as she has been there for him brings this collection "Full Circle," as the poem of that name indicates. Let's hope Barnett has finally closed that circle. (poemvv)

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The title of Jonathan Holeman's work, *Poetry as Art*, is a bit of a puzzle. What else would poetry be but art? Certainly it is a form of expression, as Holeman demonstrates, and he uses traditional metaphors that validate his title's thesis. For example, he evokes the deep and constantly moving sea in both "Memories" and "Adrift." He uses natural phenomena such as snow as a cleansing agent, cold but only temporary as sun and light reappear. He masterfully illustrates the cyclical nature of existence and the persistence of hope, even in the worst conditions. His statement that "Poetry is freedom, freedom in words" therefore reveals a poignant truth with which any incarcerated poet is on intimate terms.

As such, it comes as no surprise that prison inescapably appears in this book, as in "Trials" and "Prison Life." For many, that confers an air of hopelessness, and, as Holeman points out, "When you're already dead/There's nothing,/nothing at all." The "false hope" of one's fate improving brings the reader unavoidably to Camus' famous observation regarding suicide. The question is not *if* one should commit suicide but *when*. Jonathan Holeman has indeed shown that poetry is art, but then we never really doubted it was. (poemvv)

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*The Pollen of a Lone Flower* by Samuel Chapman opens with a Wordsworthian account of lying in the grass and contemplating a flower. The lesson the poet offers is one of the hazards of ignoring the bliss of existence and reaching for something better: "don't worry about what you want/be thankful for what you have." Chapman then goes on to mix the existential with the philosophical, particularly in his poem "Truth" in which he states, "truth floats effortlessly/on a sea of lies." Chapman's choice of metaphor to describe the human condition is also impressive, for example, when he states that "I am the raindrop that once was a lonely tear."

Throughout these poems runs the tension between good and evil, framed in the standard dichotomy between God and Satan in the struggle for the human soul. Explicit in Chapman's work is the necessity to attend to classroom Earth and glean life's lessons to prevent "stumb[ing] over the same stone twice." Even without the religious overtones, that's good advice. (poemvv)