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Book Review: Inside this Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women’s Prisons

Reviewed by Marella Pinto

In Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons, Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman dive into the world of women’s prisons and the hazardous lifestyle the women in the system are forced to submit to. Levi and Waldman present a compilation of individual stories of women inmates. Out of seventy interviews conducted by thirty different individuals, a group of stories were chosen and supported with court records, human rights reports, medical records, and other external sources. Olivia, Sheri, Maria, Francesca, and Taisie are just a few of the names out of the thirteen women whose stories are included. Each chapter addresses one of the women: their life before, what drove them to end up there, their experiences in prison, and for those who completed their sentence, their goals and achievements after incarceration. All thirteen women come from different backgrounds and have different felony convictions ranging from white-collar crime in the form of embezzlement to murder.

Each chapter of the text is named after the woman whose story is being shared. This conveys the significance of the individual, through an acknowledgment of their particular identity. Many stories evoke a sense of injustice and indignation, giving insight and knowledge into the penal system and its lack of protection and several women’s experience of being seen as less than human.

To juxtapose how the system treated each woman in an inhumane way, the book humanizes each one of the women and protects them against lifelong stereotyping by defending them. Levi and Waldman write that their book, “attempts to solve social ills and improve the lives of our most vulnerable rather than sweeping them behind bars,” which articulates their good intentions and ambition for the book to have a positive effect on its subjects. Thus, all the stories have a common theme: resilience. The women all show great strength, and hope of pursuing their goals, turning around their lives, and helping those close to them, as well as advocating for and helping other women who are in the same position they were in once.

Levi and Waldman’s writing is both approachable and empathetic, encouraging the reader to be empathetic as well. This is reinforced in the forward contributed by Michelle Alexander in which she addresses how the subject matter could evoke feelings of fear and discomfort. This foreword is then followed by an introduction provided by Levi and Waldman. They provide an overview of their journey to the prisons, the anxiety they felt from the “metal detectors, barbed wires, and pat-downs.” They prepare the reader for the potential emotional impact of the curated stories. In addition, Levi and Waldman critique the prison system by acknowledging the lack of access to education, healthcare, and protection, once again bringing the reader back to the inhumane core of the system itself.

Closing the book are a glossary and a timeline with detailed descriptions of the concepts in the book and resources to better understand the injustices that the system allows. The volume ends with an appendix filled with facts that provide credibility and reassurance that the stories read were

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not an art or fiction, once again highlighting the injustices faced and being faced by the incarcerated.

When thinking of a word to describe the reaction attributable to the reader of Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons, shock fits perfectly. That is why it is so important, before reading the book, to take into consideration Michelle Alexander’s advice, as these stories will stick to you and possibly haunt you. This powerful and overall eye-opening exploration of the atrocities and injustices experienced inside the system are real. This book is a welcome addition to the reading list of students, advocates, and the general public from the standpoint of increasing interest and understanding of the carceral system through a lens of humanity.