

This Side of My Struggle: Prisoners on Suffering, Surrendering,
and Breaking Free, by Nandi S. Crosby (ed.)
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Book Review by Jon Marc Taylor*

Editor Nandi S. Crosby, Ph.D., full professor of sociology at California State University - Chico and founder of Soul.Journer Press, explains in her foreword "Stories We Tell" that "[s]eeking veracity and depth to one's existence is necessary when everything else has been wrested. Seemingly, those of us who have the most explicit biographies and the courage to share them are the 'wounded soldiers' who have been to hell and survived to tell about it." Of the 30 stories enclosed in this anthology from across the country and some of the most infamous prisons, an equally valid alternate title could have "Been to Hell and Survived (so far) to Tell About It."

And "tell it" they do. The only female writer and only three story enclosed author, Rachel Leatherman, metaphysically paints the bleak setting in her piece the "Meanness Among Warehoused Inmates" by pondering:

I try to come up with reasons for meanness and lack of empathy among warehoused humans who share the same predicament, and I wonder if people in the train cars during the Holocaust were mean to each other. What is it, exactly, that brings out such hate? Perhaps it is overcrowding or demeaning, dehumanizing treatment, lost confidence in the system, jealousy, mental illness, lack of stimulus, hormones, or frustration and separation from love, touch, and family. Maybe it is a combination of everything.

From there the multiple stories rise from the isolation, hopelessness and self-hatred, exampling the pervasive human spirit to not only endure, but evolve in the stark harshness of the American gulag archipelago. As Aaron Burris writes in his piece,

"The Hotel California," what he "desired was to be a man who could look into the mirror in the morning and see a human not ashamed of his deeds."

The other side of the wire, definitely the wrong side of America's tracks, is where two million citizens exist -- the most by number and on a per capita basis in any nation -- and by neglect, shame or hatred the rest of the society has averted its gaze and concern. These voices of struggle bring a vivid humanness to this forlorn and forgotten population of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. Or as Ray Sanchez, Jr. writes in "A Letter to No One," is that with the stoic resignation of a lifer he would like for "some normal person with normal 'outside' problems and a normal outside life to understand that I am not a complete monster. I just happen to have a slightly skewed sense of morality and a better developed emotional/psychological defense mechanism" than the average Joe. This is where the heart of the book lies. In its portrayal of the normalness of the humanity disposed of behind the bars of the nation's penitentiaries.

Perhaps what this anthology relates best is the other rationality, the Twilight Zoneness, of the existence where "logic is the enemy; truth is a meance." As explicitly conveyed in the "Hannibal Mammogram" in which Leatherman opines her view of State underwear being akin to adult diapers, but also that not wearing such "is a serious offense, a write-up, and time in the hole" for going pantyless in prison. (Only in the Twilight Zone of incarceration does that actually make sense.) Then reporting in her piece, "Fried Bologna," how a pregnant prisoner writhed in agony for an hour, while guards waited for an ambulance to transport her to the area hospital. Making her undress, don the requisite orange jumpsuit, shackling wrists and ankles, and then holding the ambulance in the sallyport for the too requisite compartment and undercarriage inspection, all before delivering the nonviolent felon to the emergency room. Where upon she and the baby were pronounced dead. "This," Rachel with succinct accusation writes, "is what the war on drugs looks like."

This Side of My Struggle is an excellent journey into the soul of the other America. The America of those livingly entombed in its nation's keeps. Of the humanity thrown away into the scrap heap of our punitively expensive prison-industrial complex. This anthology illuminates what I have discovered within myself and the thousands of others having crossed my path these decades of despair. No more well expressed than by Josef M. Jensen in "Becoming Human, Again" through his shared revelation that "[g]uilt brands me with a shame so deep that I have been reduced to a mere shadow of the man I could have been."

The shadow on the American soul, however, is its millions of ensconced prisoners. This anthology gives impassioned voice to that stark statistic like no other rational, and certainly no political, discussion ever would.

Robert M. Brandy in the essay of "Pain, Perseverance, and Me," asks the eternal question: "Does my life still have value?" From his and the twenty-nine other stories the unequivocal answer is yes, they do. If for nothing else to remind the rest of the world of the shard humanness of those we choose to throw away.

I have been reading prisoner writings for decades-of-too-many-years, and this is the most poignant single collection it has been my sad pleasure to contemplate. Dr. Crosby is to be commended for her compilation, but such should not be surprising. After all, Nandi is the founder of soul: Soul.Journer Press. I very much look forward to the next release.

* The reviewer has a piece published in the anthology.