

Among The Thugs

A federal prisoner offers his view of America's correctional system.

INSIDE

Life Behind Bars in America.

By Michael G. Santos.

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By TARA MCKELVEY

MICHAEL G. SANTOS hardly seems like a reliable narrator. As a middle-class kid in Seattle, he was “a mediocre student” in high school, and then, three years after graduation, he chose drug trafficking as a profession. He lived “arrogantly,” driving Porsches and wearing Cartier diamonds, and he owned an offshore race boat called the Outlaw. He was eventually charged with distributing cocaine and, in 1987, sentenced to 45 years in prison. In his book, he presents accounts of the sex, violence and drugs found behind bars. Yet he knows that a man like him — “a long-term prisoner” — is seen as “prone to prevarication or exaggeration.” Few would have believed the Abu Ghraib stories if they’d come from the prisoners, he points out. It was the pictures that made them real.

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Santos deserves a hearing. More than 6 percent of Americans will find themselves behind bars at some point in their lives, according to the Justice Department. Nobody knows better than he does what it's like. “Inside” is a quasi-sociological treatise, with sections on the prison economy (it features smuggling and prostitution), educational system (one library specializes in “westerns and romance novels”) and labor conditions (prisoners work in a dairy, a slaughterhouse and “a rock patch,” raking “parallel lines”). Marx and Maxim both make an appearance.

Mainly, though, it's a diary of “a gladiator school,” “a walled city of madness.” Guards act savagely — a natural outcome in a culture where “the only thing lower than an inmate is an ‘inmate lover,’ a ‘hug-a-thug.’” They can also be infuriatingly petty. “Guards are the only people I see throwing cigarettes on the ground,” one prisoner says. “They walk across lawns and then order inmates to rake up behind them.” Meanwhile, prisoners stab and rape one another and make weapons out of everything from a heavy pipe to a tube sock filled with combination locks. Violence, or the threat of it, permeates Santos's life. When he runs into an old buddy, “a hard-core gang leader” named Crip Tank, he calls out a friendly greeting: “The last time I saw you, you were leaving a guy's guts hanging out of his stomach in the corridor.” Santos survives among the thugs by acting as a jailhouse lawyer for Crip Tank's friend and others, and he backs up stories of brutality by citing federal cases.

His writing is stilted (he's no Jean Genet), and the narrative jumps, jarringly, from prison to prison (he's been held in at least six). With all the blood and gore, it's hard to know where we are. Also, the book hits some false notes. Santos shows only a crude understanding of female psychology. His spicy accounts of encounters between prisoners and hot women — including an educator, a business manager



Ray Bartkus

and a lawyer, all with their skirts hiked up — seem based more on prison-porn fantasy than on empirical evidence: “Wendy cannot help herself,” he writes, unconvincingly.

Nevertheless, he lays out a strong case for prison reform. Most inmates focus on survival, not rehabilitation. And the flaws in the system seem to create a steady stream of prisoners — namely, those who are released and then end up back behind bars. Even worse, “neither those in corrections, nor those benefiting from the enormous capital disbursements — like prison towns, suppliers, contractors, etc. — want to see material changes. Why would they? Doing so would be akin to those in Las Vegas making a call for an end to gambling.” Despite a breathless style, Santos provides more than just a seamy look at prison life. He also offers a chilling, timely portrayal of a place where, as one man says, all you need to survive is “a steel ball of hate and a knife.” □